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CONFERENCE REPORT

Military and the Media

Confidence Building between Armed Forces and the Civil Society

Co-organised by
the Geneva Centre for the **Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF)**
and **medienhilfe**

Skopje, January 24/25, 2003

An International conference entitled The Military and the Media: Confidence Building between Armed Forces and the Civil Society was organized by the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF) and Medienhilfe, Zurich AS part of the two organizations' long-term engagement and commitment in South Eastern Europe and particularly in the Republic of Macedonia.

The main goal of the conference was to address the gap between the security structures and the civil society, with special emphasis on the intermediary role of the media in possible over-bridging or deepening the gap. The event offered a forum for interaction and exchange of ideas and experiences of the representatives of the armed forces/state bodies and of the media, representatives of universities, NGOs, and expert organisations. The two-day conference was attended by some 50 senior representatives from these institutions and organisations. The gathering aimed at improving the knowledge and awareness of the sides involved about their respective roles in a democratic society. It was also expected to raise confidence as well as to incite broader interest in the democratic control of the security structures through better media reporting.

The conference included an opening, four panel discussions and a wrap up session. The **opening addresses were delivered by Dr. Vlado Buchkovski, Minister of Defence of the Republic of Macedonia, Mr. Stephan Nellen, Ambassador of Switzerland to Macedonia, Dr. Theodor Winkler for DCAF and Mr. Roland Brunner for Medienhilfe.** The opening helped setting up the framework of the conference and evidenced a positive and co-operative atmosphere between the domestic actors and the international organisations offering assistance in the reform processes. The representatives of DCAF and Medienhilfe emphasised strongly their willingness to facilitate an open dialogue concerning confidence building measures between the military and the civil society through media. The Defence Minister welcomed the initiative that is in line with the new Government's policy in this sphere.

The Introductory panel, aimed at setting the problem, consisted of two presentations. The first one by **Prof. Biljana Vankovska, University of Skopje**, positioned the problem in more general, comparative and theoretical terms. **Mr. Marjan Gjurovski, the spokesman of the Macedonian Ministry of Defence**, centred on spelling out the problem within the Macedonian context. The discussions from the floor that followed, indeed, confirmed that the time had been ripe for finally opening this sensitive and under-explored issue in the post-conflict period. The participants

pointed out that the Macedonian situation calls for the reform of both the armed structures and the media and not merely through the democratic prism. As many underlined, Macedonia's problems are mostly related to the behaviour and interaction of the two spheres in a (post)conflict period.

The first thematic panel on „International standards“ was devoted to the international broadly democratic standards when it comes to transparency-building and democratic control of the armed forces through media reporting. Two presentations made a good match taking positions on the democratic governance standards and the (internationalised) armed forces' standpoints, respectively, which resulted in a comprehensive picture of the problem defined on a broader international level. The first presenter, **Mr. Henry Bolton from the OSCE mission in Macedonia**, took into account the experiences of mature democracies and of international organisations promoting democracy and transparency in security affairs, especially the ones that could be useful and applicable for the Macedonian case. **Mr. Mark Laity, NATO spokesperson** with over two decades long experience as a BBC reporter, shed more light on international patterns of democratic interaction between the armed forces (and alliances) and the public, especially during conflict time. The lively debate that followed turned the attention to the role of the international media and the attitude/actions of the representatives of international military missions in the conflict-driven countries, i.e. to stages of their operations. The panel also provided a channel for expressing some frustration of the local journalists when communicating with the representatives of the international military missions deployed in the country. The other important aspect, however, shed more light on inconsistencies of the military-media relationship in developed democracies. The notion of a never-ending story of democracy and democratic control of the security structures was challenged on concrete examples.

The second panel on „Regional practice and experience“ tried to point to similarities and differences in regard of the state of affairs in the media-military relationship in the regional context. The two case studies pictured the developments in the only success story on the territory of former Yugoslavia (Slovenia) and the rather poor performance in the FR Yugoslavia. The moderator, **Dr. Bisera Turkovic from Sarajevo**, also contributed an input with remarks about the role of the media in the Bosnian conflict and the healing of the wounds aftermath. The first presenter, **Mr. Igor Mekina, journalist at Mladina magazine**, one of the more controversial magazines on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, especially when it comes to disclosing military affairs and opening taboos, gave a presentation with surprising findings. It showed clearly that even the 'success story' in the region still copes with some old problems as concerns the

relationship between the military and the media. **Dr. Jovanka Matic from the Belgrade Centre for Civil-Military Relations** presented the (lack of positive) experiences from FR Yugoslavia. Unlike Slovenia where many tensions arise from the self-aware and quite knowledgeable public when it comes to security matters, in Yugoslavia there is a very positive public perception of the Army, which lost all wars in the last decade, based mainly on false (symbolic) meaning of the Army and the lack of information. As the discussion proved, the regional experiences, regardless whether good or bad, have a specific value and comparative weight. It shows positive and negative examples, shared problems and inherited legacies, as well as possible solutions for Macedonia.

The third thematic panel on „Practice and experience in Macedonia“ focused on ‘local’, i.e. Macedonian plights and problems. Understandably, that was the liveliest and most dynamic panel discussion, with exchanges between the presenters and the audience, between the presenters themselves and among the members of the audience. The first presentation given by **Mr. Stevo Pendarovski, the President’s National Security Adviser**, raised the temperature immediately. His points were made on the basis of his personal experience and insight acquired during the 2001 conflict in Macedonia, when he served as a spokesperson. The second panellist, **Mr. Saso Ordanovski, editor-in-chief of the FORUM magazine**, continued in the same provocative style, directly opposing some statements of the previous speaker. He quoted ethical and professional standards of war reporting in function of avoiding hate speech and promoting the peace-building agenda. The main dilemma appeared to be whether Macedonia lost or won the media war in 2001, what evaluation the media deserved regarding the investigative and peace-advocacy journalism and war reporting. A deeper insight, however, proved that the problem of media reporting about conflict issues just mirrors the general societal dilemma: what really happened in 2001? The last presenter, **Mr. Roberto Belichanec, executive director at the Media Development Institute**, gave more concrete proposals on the need for a consistent legal basis concerning the status of independent media, which would protect them from possible state repression. He also insisted on a special protection for journalists in war/conflict by the norms of the still insufficient international legal provisions.

The wrap-up session on „Recommendations and follow-up ideas“ began with a call to the participants to focus on concrete problems and, through brainstorming, help the organisers sum up the conclusions and propose follow-up in accordance with the local actors’ needs and demands. The participants were invited to fill the evaluation forms, which should provide for a better insight into their perception, judgement and expectations from this conference and eventual follow-up.

Not too many concrete proposals were spelled out. Yet some of them pointed to the most painful question: how to secure media's independence and high quality investigative journalism without sufficient funding? The most direct request to the possible donors was if they could assist in acquiring books and journals for libraries on security issues. The best indicator about the conference's usefulness was the lively discussion from the floor. Unfortunately, the debate had to stop as time was running out.

The conference, however, introduced at the very end a novelty: the closing session was a practical exercise for everything that had been said or suggested in the previous days. **The finale was a press conference** of the MoD's spokesperson Gjurovski, the representative of the journalist community Belichanec, and, on behalf of the organizers - Roland Brunner and Biljana Vankovska. The press-conference was well-attended. The whole media coverage of the conference was substantial.

The overall impression was that the media community showed great interest in the topic, which is still quite a novelty for the Macedonian security sector community. The participation of the state representatives could be better. Invited members of Parliament did not attend and sometimes the participation of the Army's representatives could be more active. This will be a challenge for the follow-up as it points to the lack of habit to attend such meetings and take active part by spelling out suggestions and proposals. It reflects the taboo the society and the state authorities still feel when talking about security issues and structures.

The lack of experience is also visible with the journalist and NGO part of the audience. It was obvious as to how big the need still is to discuss issues of the past, assess the questions of responsibility during the past crisis etc. There is a lack of thinking about what could and should be done in the future. Sometimes the debate turned into mutual disqualification without proposals on how to improve the situation and address the challenges for the future. However, the informal gatherings during the breaks and meal times provided a more relaxed atmosphere, which was obviously well used by the pro-active journalists taking the advantage of being together with some state officials.

The review of the evaluation forms as well as the numerous informal talks with the state/military officials and journalists indicated several things:

- 1) there has been an evident limbo in regard to the military-media relationship, transparency and confidence-building in the Macedonian society;
- 2) the time is ripe for launching projects that would help overcome this situation;
- 3) the journalists, and particularly state officials, lack the experience of attending seminars, workshops or training courses on similar topics;
- 4) the journalist community from outside the capital is in a more disadvantaged position;
- 5) the same applies even more to the media of minorities (particularly the smaller ones, such as Roma's, Vlach's, Serb's, etc.).

GENERAL CONFERENCE CONCLUSIONS

Having had the intention to raise the question of confidence building between the security structures and the media in Macedonia for the first time since 1991, the Conference fulfilled the basic expectations and provided thoughtful recommendations for future activities and projects, such as:

- Macedonia lacks practice and professionalism in terms of spokespersonship in general and, in particular, with regard to the government security institutions. Thus, there were strong opinions about an overwhelming need to get to know more about other countries' best practices and professional standards in this field;
- The MoD officials confirmed the strong political will and commitment to reforming the whole system of public relations, and particularly in decentralizing it and establishing mechanisms of transparency and public accountability. However, in order to achieve that, the authorities need expert help from the international donor and security sector community;
- Macedonia needs not only a national security strategy but also a media strategy for NATO/EU association; in other words, the media should learn more about its ability to set a democratization/reform public agenda;
- The journalist community unanimously expressed its desire for education and training courses on security matters in general, and on the democratic control of the security structures, in particular;
- Some of the participants felt a bigger urge to tackle a more specific problems of the quite troublesome relationship between the media and the police structures;
- The journalists and the military agreed that they did not know much about each other; many stereotypes exist, thus the idea appeared of exchanges of visits and knowledge about each others' professional challenges;

- Macedonia needs legal reforms in terms of protection of independent journalism, guarantee of free access of information, freedom of speech, protection of the source of information – and most of all, a definition what is of “national interest”, what is a “state/military secret”, and what is not;
- Journalists need to get to the point of creating self-regulating rules of professionalism, and engage in promoting global values and non-violent conflict transformation which is of utmost importance for a post-conflict society;
- In lack of true and reliable information, the ‘free media space’ is easily filled in with speculations, misinformation and propaganda. In order to avoid this, it is in the best interest of the media and the security structures to co-operate. Instead of the reactive approach that dominated till now, the participants suggested a pro-active one, mainly by better use of IT, updating of web sites, using of email communication between PR offices of state institutions and the journalists, etc.
- Confidence building measures are necessary in all relevant dimensions, most of all in bridging the gap in the ethnically and politically divided media space. Access of all minority media to relevant information, including on the security sector, is crucial.

POSSIBLE FOLLOW-UP

1. Creating a Working Group of media representatives, military officers, spokespersons, security and legal experts, NGO representatives, and international experts.
2. Organizing ‘getting to know each other’ visits of media and military people in the field and on the job in order to better understand each others’ work, mechanisms and pressures;
3. Courses on investigative reporting and security matters, particularly the role of media in promoting and exercising the democratic control;
4. Regular professional media monitoring of security issues and public opinion.
5. Training/education of spokespersons, people working at PR offices, using best practices;
6. Continued round-tables on more specific aspects of the role of the media in the security sector reform process;
7. Consideration of revision of military and civilian schools curricula by introducing relevant topics on security structures, media and civil society relationships
8. Organizing a regional conference to compare the practices and experiences
