



medienhilfe

PO Box, CH 8031 Zürich
Tel: +41/(0)1/272 46 37
Fax: +41/(0)1/272 46 82,
info@medienhilfe.ch
www.medienhilfe.ch

Geneva Centre for the
**Democratic Control of
Armed Forces (DCAF)**
CH 1211 Geneva
Tel. +41/22/741 77 00
info@dcaf.ch
www.dcaf.ch



Military and the Media: To Love and To Hate

Presented by
by Saso Ordanoski
Editor-in-Chief Forum Magazine
(sordan@forum.com.mk)

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Military and the Media

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The Democratic Dilemma

Every year on May 3 the international *Committee to Protect Journalists* (CPJ) marks the World Press Freedom Day by listing the world's worst places to be a journalist. It makes a list of 10 places which dangers and restrictions represent a full range of current threats to the press freedom.

For the year 2002, among the bunch of "usual suspects" (Colombia, Eritrea, Belarus, Burma, Zimbabwe, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, and Cuba), two distinguished democracies took prominent places: at the top of the list is Israel, because of the situation it maintains in the West Bank, and on a very high third place on this "ugliness contest", right after Colombia, is Afghanistan, not only because eight journalists were killed there in the line of duty in late 2001, but also because the "U.S. government actions have hindered independent reporting on the war."¹

The worst places for the press freedom for 2003 have not been announced, yet. But it is almost certain that Israelis are still very strongly holding the top position on this infamous list, and that the U.S., preparing its last stages for the war with Iraq, is most likely, opening space for itself, robustly pushing Colombia off the second place in the chart.

This is a very odd situation. It clearly shows that equally Israel and the U.S.--both elaborated democracies to the finest meanings of the words--when it comes to the "national security interests" and military operations believe that these are too serious things to be left to the findings and judgments of free press and journalists' reports. When fighting starts, it is a time for extraordinary measures: censorship, restriction of movements, no filming, no taping, and "No comment"...

But the freedom of press today is not (only) about the free movement and no censors in the newsrooms. It is more and more about the chances of the media to compete with highly developed systems for propaganda on the side of a democratic state.

Let's take the American model, as the most powerful and the most inspirational example both for the democrats and for the not-so much-democrats of the world.

What are the chances of a journalist/media versus the state apparatus of military/war propaganda? This dilemma is not only limited to a debate over the quality of information - very often it is about the quantity of it, too. For instance, what do you do as an editor with the mass of one-sided information in the case of Iraq/U.S. confrontation? Clearly, enormous and sophisticated American propagandistic machinery produces more negative information on Iraq daily than most of the media can digest for a week; on the other side, you have useless Saddam's ideological speeches as another evidence of his dictatorial regime - but his ugly dictatorship is not the issue in this controversy because it is not in the center of the probable international war and humanitarian calamity that follows. It is difficult to make balance even in a simple regard to the number of facts and figures available.

¹ Press Release on the Press Freedom Day, May 3, 2002,
http://www.cpj.org/enemies/worst_places_02/worst_places_02.html

However, premeditated message proliferated through this avalanche of information is that "America is under attack" and that that's why, in a mere act of "self defense", it is legitimate for the States to attack back the enemy, "while carefully concealing the broad strategic and economic objectives of the war."²

This strategy of "pre-emptive actions to counter a sufficient threat to [American] national security", described and developed in the current National Security Strategy of the U.S., heavily relies on the propaganda throughout the media.

In this context, as some authors are reminding us these days,³ it is worth mentioning that after the tragedy on 9/11 and an announcement that a worldwide war on terrorism was about to begin, in the structures of the American Department of Defense an Office of Strategic Influence (OSI) was created. It was quickly labeled as "Office of Disinformation" because of its sole purpose to manipulate with the public in order "to advance American interests." As a reaction to the bad publicity, OSI was disbanded in February 2002. But, who knows what is the new name of this special propagation unit because it is hard to believe that Pentagon has given up its efforts to manipulate the public through a systematic propaganda.⁴

Other manufacturers of the so-called "strategic communication"--which is an elegant label for pure propaganda of Bush's government--are spread in the current American administration, both for domestic and for foreign purposes. For instance, at the State Department's Public Affairs section there is an organized structure that works on "advancing U.S. interests and security and to provide the moral basis for U.S. leadership in the world."⁵

This process of strengthening the military/security propaganda in the most democratic country in the world goes parallel with another worrying development - wide restrictions of what can and what cannot be published in the media and to the general public. According to the American media, U.S. defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld in mid January, 2003, directed the armed service to "strip military Web sites of information that could benefit adversaries, citing a terrorist training manual and a year-long review of the Department of Defense's 700-gigabyte Web presence."⁶

Using the pretext of the broad "anti-terrorist policies," while on one side widening *personal transparency* of each one (not only U.S. citizens) legally present on the American soil with the Total Information Awareness project, and extending the areas under certain censorship measures with the USA Patriot Act

² "War Propaganda - Fabricating an Enemy", Michel Chossudovsky, <http://globalresearch.ca/articles/CHO301A.html>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Later that year, on November 16, 2002, on his route to Chile, American Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, was available for the media making comments on various public attacks on his Department's policy, and said: "And then there was the office of strategic influence. You may recall that. And 'oh my goodness gracious isn't that terrible, Henny Penny the sky is going to fall.' I went down that next day and said fine, if you want to savage this thing fine I'll give you the corpse. There's the name. You can have the name, but I'm gonna keep doing every single thing that needs to be done and I have." (Source:http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Nov2002/t11212002_t1118sd2.html)

⁵ <http://www.state.gov/r/>

⁶ Security Focus, January 16, 2003 (<http://online.securityfocus.com/news/2062>)

and the Homeland Security Act - on the other side, the current American administration is gradually closing down its own transparency.

What about the importance of public access to information? Steven Aftergood, director of the Project on Government Secrecy at the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) says, "Almost any information could be useful to an adversary in some context." "If that standard is followed, it would lead to a wholesale withdrawal of information from defense Web sites... This is a broad brush approach that's not the right way to go," says Aftergood.⁷

That this shutdown of a traditional American culture of openness is not only a mere impression, prove published records concerning the issue. According to recent reports in American media, no American president since Richard Nixon has been as secretive or as combative about leaks as George W. Bush. "Actions to classify documents in fiscal 2001 increased by 44% over the previous year, to an astounding 33,020,887," writes *Los Angeles Times*, quoting the data from the Information Security Oversight Office, a little-known agency that keeps track of security classification in both government and industry. "At the same time, crackdowns on the unauthorized disclosure of classified information have been the most aggressive in decades, especially since Sept. 11 and the confrontation with Iraq," writes *L.A. Times*.⁸

Whoever thought that traditional "freedom of the speech" fight belongs to history and that other freedom fights are now more important fights to be won, have to reconsider his/her position.

But let's shift the emphasis away from the international media perspectives (and our dearly loved subject of *How-America-damages-the-rest-of-the-world*) and let's take a more local approach to the indigenous media/military relations.

The Macedonian experiences

The Army of Macedonia (ARM) and the police are one of the least reformed state structures. A formal constitution of the independent Macedonian state at the beginning of the nineties was not done by revolutionary methods or by annihilation of previous state structures and institutions. As a result, most of the old structures, both in regard to personnel and structurally, survived a turbulent decade of political and economic transition in the country. Reforms aimed to these structures have been slow, superficial, and with unsatisfactory results.

In the *Strategy of the Defense of the Republic of Macedonia*,⁹ adopted in September 1998, the reform of the Macedonian Army was scheduled for the next 10 years, in two phases of five years each. In this strategic paper, a clear orientation towards open relations with the public and media is envisioned:

"The improvement of informing the public about the situation and the tendencies in the development of the Macedonian defense has an important position in achieving democratic control of the armed forces and the

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ "What Leaks Are Good Leaks", by Jack Nelson, *Los Angeles Times*, January 5.

⁹ The English version of the Strategy can be find at http://www.morm.gov.mk/eng/mo_e.htm

whole defense. It should be achieved especially by regular and annual publishing of a White Paper on the defense of the Republic of Macedonia, availability of the information on INTERNET, as well as regular contacts of the Minister of Defense and the defense public relations services with the domestic and the foreign media."¹⁰

However, in the second chapter of this document ("B. About the reforms in the Army"¹¹) there is no mentioning on how, when and who should re-organize the public outreach policy of the Macedonian defense sector.

"Republic of Macedonia, in accordance with its development in a modern and democratic state, considers the civil and the democratic control of the armed forces as one of the biggest gains of the developed western democracies. All the important conditions have been created for a true and realistic civil and democratic control," states the *White Paper of the Defense of the Republic of Macedonia*,¹² a strategic document issued by the Ministry of Defense in Skopje, in August 1998. In this document there is a separate chapter on public relations of the Ministry of Defense and of the Army of Macedonia,¹³ which is a detailed one-page accounting on activities necessary for improvements in the area.

Three years later the new Defense Law of Macedonia¹⁴ was adopted with a consensus of all participating political parties in the Parliament. Allegedly, it is a modern legal document, a central regulator of all relations and responsibilities in the defense sphere in the state. Chapter II of the Defense Law stipulates management in the defense, where government's, president's, ministry's, and other government's agencies obligations are separately stipulated in more than 100 areas and subjects of activities. However, not a single word in this chapter or in any other of the 17 chapters and 174 articles is mentioned on the need, responsibility, or duty of the military and any other defense structure to communicate with the public. If my reading is correct, words *transparency*, *transparent* or *public* are not mentioned in any meaningful public relation way either, and *information* is only treated in the chain of command and operational connotation.

Concerning the "availability of the information on INTERNET" cited in the Strategy of the Defense, it should be said that Macedonia's Ministry of Defense web site--according to my most recent check on January 20, 2002--was last updated on December 18, 2002. However, most of the documents available on this site, and most of the photographs too, are 4-5 years old. For instance, there is no actual picture of the current Commander in Chief of the Army, President Boris Trajkovski, although he was elected in office in year 1999. There are pictures of the previous President Kiro Gligorov saluting soldiers. Obviously, the internal public relation/information in the Ministry and in the Army is not functioning very well since the web administrator of their official web page does not know that they have a new Commander in Chief!

¹⁰ Chapter III of the Strategy, Paragraph A on Defense, point 5, at http://www.morm.gov.mk/eng/mo_e.htm

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² The English version of the Paper can be find at http://www.morm.gov.mk/eng/mo_e.htm

¹³ Ibid., Chapter No. 6: Public Relation.

¹⁴ The English version of the Law can be find at http://www.morm.gov.mk/eng/mo_e.htm

But it also means that Internet, as an efficient modern communication tool, is not used for informational purposes, but rather as an archive storage space.

The Army and the Ministry are publishing periodical supplements in the daily newspapers, but they look poorly socialistic and are almost useless for meaningful communication with the public. They also have official monthly publications *Odbrana (Defense)* and *Armiski zbor (Army's word)*, and a 45 minutes TV program on the state TV.

In the area of their relations with the media and public in general, the visible part of the "reform" was substantiated only in the fact that they've got official spokespersons, both the Ministry and the Army. According to the official sources at the Ministry,¹⁵ a seven people unit is working in the framework of the Cabinet of the Minister for Defense as a PR division. An office of five people is attached to the General Staff of the Army. However, their work is not regulated by any written manual, regulation, or instructional guide publicly available. (Sources are saying that it is not available because it does not exist.) Probably that is the reason why these useful, but very archaic public outreach instances are mostly used for simple comments and basic information. Also, sometimes they are used for political cover up of professional failures and malfunctions of the institution.

It is safe to say that military's overall institutional transparency is virtually inexistent. Their approach to the media is still primarily guided by an effort to hide rather than to inform. Our institutions are full with people who misjudge *information* with *wisdom*, so that's why they do not consider information flow important.

But the most astonishing fact in this matter is a total absence of any methodical and meaningful campaign for ARM's integration and relations with NATO. Although it should be the most important thing that the Army is supposedly doing, there are no organized efforts for publicizing and informing domestic and foreign media and general public for the events and matters in this strategic orientation of the Army of Macedonia.

Manipulations and Secrecy vs. Media in General

Generally speaking, Macedonian--and Balkan--politics is heavily driven by security/military/secret information and attached propaganda to it. Various Macedonian security and secret service' structures, both official and unofficial, and both civil and military, have a long tradition in manipulating politicians and the general public. Journalists and media are the main tools in the center of these efforts. They work methodically and steadily. They use old and well functioning structures from the times of ex-Yugoslav

¹⁵ Interview with Mr. Marjan Gjurovski, spokesperson of the Ministry of Defense.

UDBA¹⁶ and KOS¹⁷ (and their institutional successors), but also newly established or controlled political, business, media, and other arrangements.

Key products from these "smog-factories" are various kinds of conspiracies, domestic and foreign. Domestic conspiracies are mostly used for party and political purposes and it is mostly personally directed: to defame or slander a personal or a "party" enemy or a competing security structure. Since few years ago some of these domestically oriented plots have had a strong business component in their formats.

Concerning the foreign conspiracies they are mostly oriented around two principal guidelines: anti-Western (especially anti-American) feelings, and anti-Albanian feelings in all forms and shapes. Very often these two platforms are combined.¹⁸

In the last decade a strong characteristic of some of the most powerful ploys was to undermine and subvert a consolidation of Macedonian state. The pick of these efforts was the assassination attempt over the Macedonian President Kiro Gligorov in 1995. The assassination was carefully planned and carried out by professionals, and it is a pure luck that Gligorov was not killed: the remote controller of the bomb was activated a second earlier than desired, so the main blast went off directed to the front tire, and not to the front door of Gligorov's Mercedes.

But even after this "extreme measure" was used, clandestine resources and propagandistic campaigns continued to be devoted to keep Macedonia in a state of a so-called "controlled instability." In its last consequence this "concept" is directed to keep the future of this state and a very discussion over the foundations of the country constantly "open", waiting to be determined by some other regional interests and actions. Most of these attempts are encouraged or assisted by various neighboring secret services, to certain extend and in some cases even purely as an inertia effect of those services' activities, not necessarily as a part of a planed strategy by the neighboring governments. The Balkan military and civil secret services live a life of a state in a state, regardless of *who* is the democratic governing power in the country.

The effect of this "controlled instability" is indirectly helped by the ignorance and superficiality of the Western intelligence and their other analytical capacities.

Key elements and objects in these strategies are Macedonian politicians and media. I know intelligent politicians who were totally deprived from common sense assumptions as a result of "preparations" resulting from a steadily injected flow of well-dozed and manipulative information given by some faction of our secret services community. Furthermore, the biggest Macedonian political parties, Social-democratic Alliance of Macedonia (SDSM) and Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization - Democratic Party

¹⁶ UDB-a - *Uprava za drzavna bezbednost* (State Security Bureau), formally disbanded in the mid- sixties, after the so-called Brioni Summit of the Yugoslav Communist Party, which consequence was a stronger element of military co-ordination in the state security system

¹⁷ KOS - *Kontra obavestajna sluzba* (Counter-intelligence Agency), located in the military, close to the ex-Yugoslav National Army's general staff.

¹⁸ "Macedonia is a victim of a globally designed scenario", believed more than 60% of polled ethnic Macedonians in a survey done in November 2001, immediately after the end of the crisis in Macedonia, by the Institute for Sociological, Political and Juridical Studies in Skopje.

of Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE), have specially designed party security structures and services, filled with current or ex-spies, military, police and other security specialists. The governing Albanian Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) was formed as a political offspring of the guerrilla from the National Liberation Army (NLA) and is, by definition, "security aware."

I had an opportunity to be one of the invited members at the Commission for Reform of the State Security and Intelligence Bureau at the Macedonian Ministry of Interior in 2001,¹⁹ as part of the efforts done by Minister Dosta Dimovska to reform this state institution. Due to political and security turbulences during the work of this Commission,²⁰ its final report was never published, nor were the findings--to the best of my knowledge--ever discussed in or outside the Ministry.

Because of obvious reasons I cannot go into details about the findings and recommendations stated in the Report, but some of them, related to our subject, were staggering: on the whole, not only the functioning of this institution was an official secret for the outside world, but it was mostly a secret for the internal structures of the organization. As a result, investigations were duplicated, results were not internally shared, co-ordination on mid and high level was poor, co-operation with other security structures in the state, especially military capacities, was virtually nonexistent (or, even worse, based on mutual manipulation and rivalry), resources of all kinds were unnecessarily spent, and procedures were not clear or respected by most of the participants in the process.

However, the worst thing was that the label of "security interest"²¹ was unreservedly assigned to people and cases of no obvious secret security significance. As a result, among other things, the State Security Bureau had only operative capabilities (efficient to certain extent), but no planning or analytical capacities. The anticipation of events was poor, and the strategic assessments almost nonexistent.

I do not have any good reason to believe that the organization and operating practices of the military and its services were/are any different. That partly explains why the crisis of 2001 came as a big surprise to most of the participants in the political and professional elite in this country.

Crisis and the Press

The real functioning of systems is checked during the times of crisis. Media issues surrounding crisis coverage--which is a typical love and hate relation--challenges in using experts and NGOs to help explain a given crisis, and balancing the responsibilities of media and citizenship during a time of crisis are, indeed, very serious ones. To understand options at hand and challenges confronting modern media in the time of modern crisis is a complex endeavor.

¹⁹ This Commission was established at the beginning of March and worked till the end of April 2001, issuing an internal Report of around 40 pages designed to help the Minister for Interior to reform the State Security Service.

²⁰ Minister Dosta Dimovska left the Ministry in April 2001, in the midst of the security crisis that started in Macedonia in February/March 2001. The succeeding minister Ljube Boskovski showed no apparent interest for any of the work of the Commission.

²¹ "Security interest" is an official label ascribed to a person or operation that is sponsored or under protection of the secret service and has an aura of being *untouchable* for the ordinary criminal police or judiciary.

On the one side, there is a control-freak military apparatus: as a result of technological and democratic progress, increased number of expert and information's sources, but also of possibilities of how to convey messages, there is no efficient method or practice of how to control information spread. On the other side, commercialization of media and competitive markets has brought down most of the healthy hesitations and sensitivity of how vulnerable security information is treated.

Wars and armed conflicts in general--opposite to a broad public opinion believes faced with grave and grisly everyday consequences of such events--are products of finest professional minds and ranks in the society. Politicians, military people, members of the intelligence community and other individuals in charge or responsible for the security in the society are trained and experienced individuals in producing or solving crisis. A key element in their training is how to manipulate the public.

In dealing with each other, our media and military are both fascinated and trapped, as some Russian authors would say, "by their incompetence, vested interests and censorship."²²

So, because of the complexity of crisis coverage in the media and complications that media/military relations turns into extraordinary times, I would like to mention a set of rules recently adopted at a meeting I attended.

On October 18-19, 2002, the international Commission on Radio and Television Policy - of which I am a member - met in Vienna to discuss how the press understands and reports on crises. This Committee meets each year in Vienna discussing a different subject relevant to the work of journalists and operation of modern media. It was established in the last decade by Terry Sanford Institute of Public Policy at the Duke University in North Carolina, USA, and its DeWitt Wallace Center for Communications and Journalism. Supported by the Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe from Vienna, Austria, and by the Austrian public broadcaster ORF, this Commission includes several dozens of prominent European and American journalists and other media professionals.

Last October the Commission elaborated on a very tangible issue: *Crisis and the Press: Balancing Civil Liberty, Press Freedom, and Security*. The Commission recommended²³:

- Journalists should remember that crisis is the most important test of their professional standards.
- During a crisis, the primary duty of journalists is to inform the public of developments, identifying sources as clearly as possible.
- In times of crisis it is particularly vital that journalists provide updates and corrections of error as frequently as possible.
- Adequate coverage of a crisis should include in-depth reporting about the roots of the crisis, the context of events and the consequences of the crisis.

²² "Contemporary Russian Military Journalism: Experience, problems, perspectives" (Gandalf, 2002), Pogorelyi, Mikhail and Safranchuk, eds.

²³ Recommendations by the Commission on Radio and Television Policy, as quoted in the conclusions of the conference *Crisis and the Press: Balancing Civil Liberty, Press Freedom, and Security* held in Vienna on October 18-19, 2002.

- Under conditions of increasing competition and shortened news cycles, the drama of crisis has acquired significant commercial value. Exploiting that value can have potentially grave consequences. Journalists should resist the pressure to inflate and sensationalize stories about a crisis. Journalists are in a unique position to identify the existence of a crisis, and should be judicious before using language and imagery that signals a crisis to the public.
- When authorities impose limitations on coverage of a story, journalists should inform the public about them as soon as practicable.
- Given the proliferation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and their increased role as news sources and actors, journalists should identify NGOs' goals, funding, and their political and economic interests in the stories where they are mentioned. Journalists should subject NGOs' activities to the same standards of newsworthiness as they do other institutions.
- When interviewing experts journalists should employ the same probing professionalism as they would when interviewing political figures. Journalists should ask experts to disclose any financial or other connection to any of the actors in the story.
- It is advisable that news organizations develop internal guidelines on the coverage of crisis, unless they have done so already.

Following these instructions may not necessarily going to improve the quality of journalistic work. But these self-regulating measures can certainly prevent some intended or unintended manipulations of the media to happen. Because most of the crisis probably cannot be avoided anyway, but we can prepare better for the next coming around the corner.

(end)
