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SERBIAN MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE SECURITY SECTOR REFORM

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Security Sector Reform and the Media

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In transition societies in particular the media are expected to operate as an active factor of democratization of social relations. The ability of the media to perform this role depends to a great extent on their professional autonomy but also on professional knowledge of journalists and their understanding of social needs in the changing social environment.

In accordance to its mission on democratization of civil-military relations, the Belgrade Center for Civil-Military Relations has initiated a research project about the media presentation of the security sector reform in Serbia and Montenegro. The project wants to emphasize the legitimacy of the interest of the public for the optimal arrangement of the defence system and the right of the public to get a reliable insight into the current situation in the security sector, strategic aims of its reform, measures taken to achieve them, their results, as well as challenges meet in the process. The project therefore aims to analyze the ways in which the most influential media mediate the process of the security sector reform. A specific aim of the project is to provide a systematic and impartial insight in the professional practices of the media to journalists in order for them to improve their professional standards.

The research project was designed to answer the following questions: what is the general perception of the security sector and its reform produced by the media; how much importance the media assign to security issues and the reform process in particular; what are the information sources for covering the security domain; what is the issues context in which the media place their stories about the military reform; which actors are given the opportunity to express their views on the relevant topics to the public.

The first round of the analysis of the media presentation of the security issues was done in May 2002, and the second in October 2002. The analysis sample included prime-time news programs of four major TV stations in Serbia and Montenegro and four major Serbian and Montenegrin daily newspapers.

The general conclusion of the first research round is that the major media have produced a simplified, incomplete, unbalanced and optimistic picture of the security sector reform. They acted more as a channel for the promotion of official information and views on the security issues than as an independent investigative tool that critically accesses and evaluates decisions and policy of the relevant government bodies. The media marginalized the opponent opinions about controversial issues and failed to promote a public debate on the controversies of the public interest.

The analysis included all the media stories talking about the military and defence. The research indicated that the media structure these stories in a very similar way and that they have the following common characteristics:

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1. Media stories concerning the military and defence are more often short than medium or long.

As a rule, short stories are event or personality-centered rather than issue-centered. They provide basic information about some event or inform about statements by certain actors concerning topical events but rarely deal with issues briefly inform about that are relevant for the security sector reform. The imperatives of fast and concise reporting often work against the informativeness of the media coverage in this domain. This especially applies to the news on statements of some relevant officials that do not provide any information where, when, to whom and why the statement was delivered. Without the relevant contextual information these short stories often appear senseless.

The analysis of the media coverage in May showed that 51% of newspaper stories about the military were short, while long texts were quite rare – 15% (medium – 34%). On television, in October, 62% of all the stories were up to 60 seconds long. In May, more frequent were TV stories of 30 seconds or less than the stories over 30 seconds.

2. Media stories concerning the military and defence are more often the news produced by news agencies than pieces produced by their own journalists.

In comparison to agency dispatches and stories produced by general-type or political reporters, the stories by journalists who are specialized defence reporters or by other defence specialists are least frequent. A strong reliance on news agencies makes the media coverage of the security sector in different media very similar. The media carry a lot of the same information concerning the same events, actors and topics. This reduces the pluralism of voices heard on the public scene. In the Serbian media, a strong presence of the agency news in newspapers and on TV is specifically the result of the lack of journalists-specialists in defence reporting. This lack of journalistic expertise significantly diminishes the quality of media information.

On television, only RTS and BK have journalists who specialize in the coverage of the security sector. In newspapers, specialized journalists are also rare and they often cover other topics beside defence. The stories on security and defence are written more often by journalists V.L., R.D., Z.M., N.D., S.P. than by recognizable authors. These names often stand by slightly edited news agency reports than by their own reports.

In particular, the journalists covering security issues – even when they have some knowledge about the military - lack the knowledge of civil-military relations. In order to follow the reform process in this domain, this is specifically the expertise they need. The lack of this expertise was obvious in some stories that never used the term “the civilian control” of armed forces while reporting that the Supreme Military Council placed the General Staff as an organizational unit

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within the Ministry of Defence or in those that defined this act as going back to an old situation, comparing it with the communist practice while forgetting that the civilian control in the old regime equalled with a Communist Party control of the military.

In the October TV sample, journalists were authors of 49% of all the stories, while in 51% they used the news dispatched by the news agencies or other sources. In May, the share of journalistic versus news-agency stories was similar, although reversed - 51%:49%.

3. Media stories concerning the military and defence more often cover pseudo-events than actual events.

A domination of reports on pseudo-events enables their organizers to put in the public domain the messages they consider appropriate, at the time they choose and about topics of their own choice. In this way, some topics are given great prominence and some others are never dealt with unless journalists launch them by focusing their stories on these issues. On the other hand, the coverage of pseudo-events is of a problematic relevance to the public.

A usual content of the media stories concerning the military and defence is the following: The Chief of the General Staff Branko Krga met with KFOR commander Kamerholf in that place at that time. After the meeting Krga said this and Kamerholf said that. In addition, they probably agreed on something or emphasized this or that.

A great deal of these stories comes from press releases. However, a considerable number of stories of a type "Defence Minister Boris Tadic said today (or yesterday)..." come from journalists present on the spot of the event where the reported statement was delivered. Very often these journalists do not provide any relevant information about the event itself even if it is of a potential interest to the public. Instead, they report about the officials' speeches, addresses and other ritual kinds of talk or protocolar aspects of events even they have no informative value for the audience.

The coverage of statements delivered by high-ranking officials of a low relevance to the general public is the heritage of the media culture of the communist regime which valued more who said something than what was said. This practice is not present any more in some other areas of reporting – for example, in political coverage, but is still quite widespread in the coverage of defence and military issues.

For example, in October 2003, the Military Academy organized a traditional opening ceremony involving new students. Several TV journalists were present at the event. They all reported – more or less expensively - the same part of the greeting speech by Defence Minister who said that in the future, after the reform, the military would be the military that all the population would be proud of and everyone would be willing to cooperate with it. None of these journalists used

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this opportunity to make a story about the education of the military staff, about the interest of young people for the military profession, about a profile of new Academy students who are traditionally known by their good education results, or any other related topic, all of which are very rarely discussed in the media.

4. Media stories concerning the military and defence are predominantly factographic and very rarely interpretative and analytical.

A domination of factual information is normal and expected in daily newspapers and TV news programs. However, a dominant form of the fact-based coverage in both newspapers and TV news program is the very simple news focused on one event, one topic and one source, or it is the report presenting a single actor's views on several topics or several actors dealing with the same topic at the same event. These factual stories rather avoid than tend to place different viewpoints next to each other and rather neglect than focus on a potential controversy. They very rarely carry the interpretative information.

All of the analyzed media in October provided the following stories: NATO General Secretary said that Serbia and Montenegro could join the Partnership for Peace pretty soon on the condition Ratko Mladic was extradited to the Hague Tribunal; Ministry of Defence announced that 20.000 pieces of unusable small arms would be destroyed in cooperation with a NATO agency; Minister of Defence said that the Ministry still negotiated about the participation of the Serbia-Montenegro forces in international peace operations and the final decision had to be made by the Parliament. In these stories there was no story. They were just introductions to potential stories. These pieces did not provide any context for understanding what was new in them and why these events or statements were important.

More significant is a great lack of analytical approach in the coverage of the security issues. The analytical coverage in this area is strongly needed because the reform of the security sector is a new transition process, bringing a lot of novelties that should be explained to the public, and second, because it is a process that cannot be fully presented only by focusing on single events. The analytical approach implies explaining events, interpreting events in the context of other process and events, pointing out controversial issues and problems and indicating their solutions. These kind of stories are rarely found in the daily media.

In the May sample of the Centre's research, the simple factual news and reports appeared in 80% of newspaper items. The four analyzed dailies produced two interviews during three weeks and 12 analytical articles out of 227 items.

Television especially lacks interviews, analysis and commentary. In October, 81% of items about the military topics was news and reports. Among analytical pieces, most frequent form

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was a story informing about several statements delivered by different actors on the same topic, all agreeing with each other, with a few connecting journalists' sentences put between them. In numerous items concerning the new indictments by the Hague Tribunal against two military generals, none of the four TV stations analyzed produced a serious analytical story on any of the relevant topics – potential arrest and extradition of the indicted generals, trials before domestic courts, command responsibility as a basis for indictments, government policy to the Tribunal or the Tribunal's policy to the government. They only reported what a great range of actors said about these topics.

5. Media stories concerning the military and defence are mostly stories from the official viewpoint.

The voices heard on the public scene talking about the military-related issues are predominantly the voices of state officials. They belong to the very top of the official hierarchy – minister of defence, prime minister, foreign affairs minister, home affairs minister and other government officials. These issues are extremely rarely discussed by experts out of government and military structures.

The May round research showed that the increased openness of state sources was not followed by the journalists' attempt to balance the official information and views on relevant topics either by their own analytical stories or by initiating the presentation of opinions of other actors or independent experts on the reported topics. The resulting picture of the security sector promoted non-problematic aspects of the security situation and affirmed the official interpretation frameworks. Being incomplete and rather one-sided, this picture is neither useful for the public nor for the military.

In the May media sample, the views of the state officials were presented in 46% of TV contents and 40% of the newspapers contents. Individually, the most frequent source of information and opinions was the Ministry of Defence and the Defence Minister Boris Tadic. International actors, also coming from the state and security structures, appeared in 19% of all the contents on TV and 12% in newspapers. Domestic experts and non-governmental organizations were given chance to state their opinions on the security issues in 5%, i.e. 7% of all the contents, respectively. Journalists appeared as autonomous sources of information and opinions in 9, i.e. 14% of the contents.

In the October TV sample, the list of sources was more diverse. Party leaders and experts in particular appeared more often on the screen to present their views. However, these actors talked only about the new Hague Tribunal indictments involving two military generals. On other

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military topics, the predominance of state officials was absolute (52%), while expert opinions were not reported or referred to even once.

6. Media stories about the military and defence very rarely deal with the views of the members of the military on these issues.

Although the security sector issues, the reform of the military in particular, concern the military most of all, the views on the military on these issues are exceptionally rare. If the military people appear in the media at all, these are usually the top people of the military hierarchy. The Chief of the General Staff speaks on behalf of the military most often. Other speakers usually involve generals, admirals, and lieutenants, while lower ranks of the army appear very rarely.

In newspapers, the standpoints of the military appeared in 4% of the contents and in 7% of TV contents. In 50% of the cases, the military views were represented by the chief of the General Staff Branko Krga. The May research recorded only one TV story with a soldier speaking to the camera, out of 98 analyzed stories. The soldier pictured talked about the action of the border patrol that confiscated smuggled heroin. In October, some newspapers printed stories about the everyday life of soldiers, which appeared as a great novelty in the usual pattern of the coverage. These stories featured several soldiers who talked openly about favourable and unfavourable aspects of the life in the military barracks.

7. Media stories about the military and defence focus on a small range of topics but neglect the key aspects of the most important issues in the security sector reform.

Despite a great diversity of coverage, the media coverage of the security sector covered extensively only three or four topics. In the May research round, the security sector reform was given a prominent place – it was the most frequent topic dealt with in the newspapers (28% of all the topics) and the second most frequent reported on television (15%). In October, half of TV stories were devoted to only one topic – trials of war crimes involving military members, while the reform of the military was third, with much less time devoted to it than few months earlier (8% of all the topics covered). All TV stations gave more attention the question of Serbia-Montenegro forces participating in international peace operations than to many aspects of the reform. These two issues – participation in international missions and reform of the military were never considered together; the first was not examined in the context of the other, but perceived rather as anachronism in regard to the reform process.

Other topics, like the socio-economic position of the Army, current situation in the Army and military activities, regional security, the attitude of the youth towards the Army were discussed in 2-4% of the contents each. Most of the content spoke about projects for the future (reform of the military, potential joining to the Partnership for Peace and to international peace missions) or

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about the burden of the past and the war heritage of the military expressed by the Hag Tribunal trials against former military members, while the media dealt least with the current situation in the defence system and challenges for the reform. The financial aspect of the reform, the priorities in activities, dynamics of the reform activities as well as problems and obstacles to the reform were barely touched in the media stories. The media presented the security sector reform as desirable, well-going process that was positively evaluated by many actors, failing to point out the major problems in the process, points of disagreements and their potential solutions.

8. Media stories are selective in promoting public debates about options for solving controversial issues

Free and independent media should act a forum and a tool for a public debate on controversies of public interest. This is one of the indispensable functions of the media in a democratic society.

The Serbian media did not perform this role on the issue of Serbia and Montenegro becoming a member of Partnership for Peace and potentially of NATO. While the opinion polls show that there is a significant division in the public on these issues, the media ignored this dissent and treated these issues as non-controversial, ignoring and marginalizing the opponent views. In this way they failed to enable a rational exchange of arguments that could help forming the dominant public opinion.

On the other hand, the issue of domestic forces participating in international peace missions was treated as controversial. The media presented a range of views on this issue, either readily available or by initiating opinions of actors of their own choice. The daily *Vecernje novosti*, marking 50 years of its existence, for example, initiated a series of interviews with prominent public figures and asked their opinion about the topic.

The latest Hague Tribunal indictments involving two top military generals as well provoked a political and public debate. While some newspapers actively participated in this debate by printing commentaries and inviting a set of actors to express their views, TV stations acted more as a passive channel for transferring official views on this issue than a promoter of a serious dialogue on potential options and their consequences.

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