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# New "Watchdog" Software

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## **Security Sector Reform and the Media**

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Due to traditional conservatism, isolationism and specific corporativism, but also political confusion and split within the new democratic government in the aftermath of the toppling of Milosevic, the changes in the security sector have not been deep enough, a fact which can hardly satisfy anyone. Nevertheless, there are those who think that in the past seven months much more was done in reforming the army than in the last two and a half years. However, in spite of everything I think, or I hope at least the continuation of reforms in this area to be irreversible and imminent. This process can only be faster or slower. That pace depends on various factors, one of them being the widespread myth that joining the Partnership for Peace Program or NATO costs a lot of money and involves the obligation to buy costly weaponry from Western countries, namely the United States. In an economically wrecked Serbia, in which memories of the NATO bombing are still strong and fresh, this can be a persuasive argument to postpone or even reject the dismantling and the reform of key institutions. This state of affairs is partially the result of the attempts of various backroom dealers and agents of the military industry to convince ministers and governments of former communist states to buy their weapons in return for lobbying services for NATO accession. This was, for instance, the reason why neighbouring Romania has seriously engaged in the process of ordering 96 American helicopters worth between 1,4 and 3 billion Dollars in order to renew its fleet. The recommendation from NATO was not to buy those helicopters or at least to opt for Russian ones, which are far more adequate to Romania's needs and capabilities. This is something that the Serbian media did not tell their citizens. A fact few people, even among journalists, are acquainted with are the recommendations made on June 11, 1998 at the session of the NATO Planning Committee to the then NATO candidates Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Those countries and the Western Military Industrial Complex were explicitly told that in the foreseeable future they would not spend billions of Dollars on expensive military gear. In the planning process the Alliance has put an emphasis on personnel training and interoperability with NATO forces. The priority has not been the creation of battalions and brigades with an equal level of equipment with NATO forces. It was rather, as described by Advisor to the NATO Secretary General Chris Donnelly, a change in the thinking pattern of the armed forces.

A renewal of the "mental" weaponry is needed in both the armed forces and the media. It seems that there lie the main problems and challenges for the media and investigative journalism.

With no intention of flattering anyone, I can say out of my personal experience that the Ministry, but also the army have been considerably more open to journalists. The problem arises when you have free access without yourself exactly knowing what you are looking for. You can get information, but you are not sure what to compare it with, with which country, where to find additional data, who to call up to comment you on this information... One of the key problems is the lack of knowledge as to the new way of thinking and reporting about the overall security

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sector. So, the media needs new "equipment", new "weaponry" and new training and prequalification in order to become interoperable with the requirements of the new era and new democratic standards.

But the newly trained and armed journalists also need people from the Defence Ministry and the army who understand the needs and the modus operandi of the media and who also have new knowledge. To date, the media have been covering the army from a sensationalistic, barroom gossip aspect. In this country the best are still the very unsavoury but "reliable" sources from the army and the police, which appear to be an irresistible bait for young reporters. Nevertheless, those "reliable" sources are again most often a mere disguise for the daily-political wheeling and dealing that is far from the genuine state of affairs and key issues of the extremely complex reform process of the security sector.

Changing the way of thinking about the army, police and the overall security sector should be the main process in the security institutions themselves as well as in the journalistic approach to this tremendously important and sensitive topic.

In the recent wars in which it was defeated, the Serbian army was for the whole time under civilian control, but this control was exercised by an authoritarian government. Maybe it is because of this that it has a strong need and a great opportunity transform itself faster than expected. The Serbian army is the proof that civilian control without a democratic trait can be fatal for the army, police, secret services and ultimately, the state. It can be a serious warning for the army itself that the national interest and also its own is to establish and maintain democracy. Intelligent countries learn from defeats and integrate those lessons into future planning. After all, civilian control was never brought into question in the former Yugoslavia, but the army was then under one-party i.e. non-democratic control. The Party made a fetish out of the army, the successor of the liberation struggle of all the peoples of Yugoslavia who as resistance fighters contributed to the fight against fascism. The army was ideologized, but also idealized. The Party control of the media meant that only positive texts and reportages about the army were allowed. The state nurtured and trained entire generations of journalists and editors with whom any critical approach or stance on society was suppressed or even punished. The army was particularly taboo. Less we forget that Tito was constitutionally appointed President for Life but also Marshall of the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA). Journalists, editors and the media were more or less docile. In the army, that docility was absolute. No one dared to point out to problems or irregularities and if there were any, you could hardly read about them in tomorrow's newspapers or see it in the news.

The appearance of multiparty politics did not bring democracy, but at least we had media that were not under the control of Milosevic's government. Unfortunately, the institution of multiparty

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politics as the first step to democracy coincided with the beginning of the war. That is why today many people do not see democratization as something positive, but rather as a phenomenon that caused ethnic and political conflicts evolve into civil war. The communist period and Tito's rule is glorified in Serbia, and I believe it is also the case in other former Yugoslav republics. People had money, they were free as compared as to other communist countries and most importantly, there was no war and destruction. In other former Yugoslav republics, this longing for the past was compensated by the realization of national ideals, above all by the creation of new states. Among the Serbs, this desire to have a state of their own was perhaps already fulfilled. Furthermore, the Serbs as a nation were heavily defeated in Croatia and Bosnia and ultimately in Kosovo and with the bombing. It seems to me that the new democratic government, as well as the media in this country have an even tougher task than in other republics – to promote certain values the common man deems to have brought him only loss and misery.

Similar is the situation with the army. The new multiparty system brought only confusion to the then JNA. The army was rejected by some nations and usurped by the political elites of others. The army could have taken the things in its own hands – which was desired by many on the eve of the break-up of the country – or to yield to the one who wanted it. We know what the choice of the top brass has been, and the consequences of it were to be felt by soldiers on all levels, from general to non-commissioned officer inclusive. They continue to suffer those consequences to this day, which are likely to plague the army in the future.

Liberated from the burden of one-party monopoly, the media started to critically examine reality, individuals and key institutions of society, such as the army. But the media are the mirror of society. Even if we had ideal media, top professional journalists - and the situation is quite the opposite - they couldn't change much on their own. In military words, it would be like expecting from the reconnaissance patrol to win the battle. Therefore we must have institutions and political parties that are up to the task in order for the problems and irregularities pointed out by the media to be taken care of and remedied.

Without the proper knowledge to check budget items allocated for the army, police and secret services, without clear insight into what are democratic standards in the armed forces, without expert journalist know-how in this subject, it would be illusory to expect an improved watchdog role of the media in the reform of the security sector.

I must say that it seems to me that Serbia suffers from an acute lack of journalists that seriously deal with security matters. There are enthusiasts the field of expertise of whom is weaponry and its technical and tactical characteristics. However, there are almost no true investigative journalists-analysts in this field. The reasons for such a state of affairs mostly lie in the past and the inherited approach to the army as a faultless and untouchable entity, but also the media's

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lack of feel for directing certain journalists toward serious coverage of security matters. The problem also lies with the modern concept of security which, apart from the army, the police and intelligence services, involves covering events in foreign policy, social, economic and interethnic, multicultural, scientific and technological domains. Without acquaintance of developments in these fields, there can be no serious media oversight of these extremely important and delicate institutions of each country.

Since it is not my first participation in conferences like this one, I will feel free to propose that DCAF and Mediahilfe, together with other organizations, put up a plan for media exchange and expert improving in this field. I think that, besides Ex cathedra lectures, it is also very important to send journalists on learning trips to media that seriously deal with these matters in Europe and America, and particularly in transition countries that have quite a lead on us in this domain.

Without new knowledge for journalists and editors, without practical insight in the new security concept and reforms of this sector, without a network for information exchange between colleagues in the region and beyond, without new people with new knowledge in politics, the defense ministry and the army itself, without the proper legislative framework – and Serbia is still to adopt a Freedom of Information Act – it is impossible to expect the media to have a serious role in the oversight of the armed forces. Even the freedoms earned to date in the process of democratization of the media remain unexploited due to an essential lack of knowledge in this field. One must also recognize that in this sense some efforts have been invested thanks to the coordinators of this event – the Center for Civilian-Military Relations, which has on several occasions organized journalist training. However, such events must be more frequent and much more work must be put in. Let me use the new terminology and say that Serbian media and all those who deal with the security sector in one way or the other can use people as hardware, but they badly need assistance in acquiring new knowledge. In a nutshell, we need a new licensed software. Without it, the media will not be a watchdog but rather a stray dog.

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