

Comment: Shooting Won't Silence Brave Kosovo Reporter

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Drive-by shooting of Fatmire Terdevci will not deter her from fearlessly exposing wrongdoing.

The name Fatmire in Albanian literally means “the one with good luck”. It is due to her good luck that I am in the happy position of writing a tribute, rather than an obituary, to Fatmire Terdevci, the Kosovo investigative journalist wounded in a drive-by shooting last week.

Of the five people who were in the car at the time, only Fatmire – who is eight months pregnant – was wounded. The police have not yet charged anyone, nor do they know what weapon was used.

But it seems likely that Fatmire was targeted because of her investigative work. In the five years since the war ended in Kosovo, she has broken numerous stories on controversial themes, from features on rape and incest to probes into nepotism in the finance ministry. Her reporting has also exposed biased judges and the use of missing persons’ bones for scientific research.

I can well imagine Fatmire’s would-be killer as a character straight out of one of her many ground-breaking investigations, clenching his teeth and playing with the trigger as he trailed the journalist and her brother all day.

After first following and then slowly overtaking the vehicle she was in, Fatmire’s assailant sprayed the car with bullets as they passed through the Drenica village of Terdevc.

A small woman, who wears her long brown hair tied back in a ponytail, Fatmire is well acquainted with the pressures facing investigative journalists in Kosovo, in particular women.

When she started out as a cub reporter and was given the assignment of looking into cigarette and petrol smuggling in the Kosovo-Montenegro border, some of her male colleagues said would not be able to do it because as a woman she “didn’t have the balls”.

Weeks later, she broke a front-page exclusive in the newspaper *Koha Ditore*, detailing the existence of pipes - used for smuggling petrol - running across the frontier, right under the noses of KFOR.

Unlike many successful reporters, Fatmire does not much like the sound of her own voice. She usually leaves the other side to do the talking. Those who engage her in conversation know their words are being weighed and filtered for any sign of nonsense. She spends more time asking for opinions than giving them.

Aside from her plans concerning the baby son she is expecting next month, Fatmire had in mind several ideas for new investigations when I last saw her in late August at an IWPR journalism workshop in Pristina.

During a coffee break we discussed her idea to start an investigative journalism television show, modelled on the Tirana-based *Fiks Fare* programme. Highly popular all over the Albanian-speaking world, *Fiks Fare* has revealed on television the corruption and irresponsibility of numerous government institutions in Albania. Tellingly, the show’s presenters have had to hire bodyguards to deter the threats they have received.

Like the reporters of Fiks Fare, Fatmire knows about the risks journalists can pay for breaking a controversial story. When she revealed the existence of a girl who had been raped and kept hidden in a house in rural Kosovo, the alleged rapist came to the Koha Ditore offices threatening to kill her.

Fatmire also wrote a story about the number of relatives an official employed, and how his family was also apparently favoured when it came to distributing tenders for contracts.

On another occasion, a judge threatened to sue her newspaper if she dared to write anything concerning a case in which the chief suspect had been released without charge, even though evidence submitted to the court by the police strongly suggested he had a case to answer.

A series of very supportive editors gave Fatmire the chance to press on and get each of her difficult stories published. It all proved that she had as much, if not more, of the famous “balls” she was once teased about.

It is not unusual for investigative journalists to pay dearly for their exposures of wrongdoing. Many people still remember the tragedy of Veronica Guerin, the crusading Irish journalist shot dead in the 1990s after shining too bright a torch on Dublin’s dark underworld.

At this stage, no one has any way of knowing which of Fatmire’s many stories may have triggered the attack on her car a few days ago. Whoever it was probably belongs to the ranks of those who feel more comfortable in a backward Kosovo, with Fatmire Terdevci out of the picture.

Judging from the powerful-sounding voice I heard in an interview she gave following the shooting, she is staying in the frame and is as determined as ever to push on with investigating uncomfortable subjects – even if some would rather “kill the messenger” than see such topics exposed, explained and published.

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