

Croatia: The 'Dissident' Reporter

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IWPR journalist opens his secret police file to discover that the Tudjman regime considered him an enemy of the state.

When the call came, my lingering suspicions were finally confirmed. I had long suspected that former president Franjo Tudjman's secret police had watched me for years. Now a clerk from the Ministry of Internal Affairs was on the line, enquiring if I would like to go and look at my police file.

I was one of those journalists who were considered "enemies of the state" by the regime. Surrounded by informers, our mail was regularly opened and our telephones bugged. Soon after Tudjman's party, the Croatian Democratic Union, lost the elections in January 2000, the incoming internal affairs minister Sime Lucin promised to open the police files on all those journalists who had been unjustly spied on.

Last month, Lucin gave a press conference at which he revealed that during the Tudjman era the entire editorial offices of certain weekly magazines had been under constant surveillance. Exactly three weeks later, along with 125 other journalists, I was invited to examine the material the security services had gathered on me during that period.

My appointment was for November 30. When I arrived at the large ugly Ministry of Internal Affairs building, two young women from the police were there to greet me. One of them was carrying a large bluish cardboard box and they led me through a labyrinth of corridors to a small, poorly furnished room.

"This is your file," one of them said. "Before you can see it, you must sign a statement that you won't use any information in the file against a third person, nor publicise any compromising information on a third person."

As they started removing large stacks of paper from a huge cardboard box with my file number on it, I felt confused to say the least. I was about to see myself cast as an "enemy of the state", which is how the Tudjman regime regarded me.

The two police clerks explained that I was not allowed to take any notes. They positioned themselves where they could see my every move. One read a book, the other a newspaper, but they kept a close eye on me.

The very first document, dated March 16, 1995, and marked as "top secret" astounded me. The basis for their interest in me was recorded as "extremism: Serbian and Croatian". They claimed - wrongly - that I had spent time in Ireland, where I contacted Amnesty International representative Paul Miller. I did meet Paul, but in London, where I conducted an interview later published in *Feral Tribune*. I have never set foot in Ireland.

The file says that we discussed human and political rights in Croatia, especially the position of the Serbian minority. They could have read that in the published interview, or by listening to my conversations with colleagues at the *Feral* editorial office in Split. In fact, I spent the latter half of 1995 and first half of 1996 working at the Institute for War and Peace Reports in London, but I often spoke with my colleagues in Split and occasionally sent them my articles.

The police were also interested by my contacts with Christopher Bennet, whom they say I met in Osijek. Bennet is described as an IWPR journalist and the "top secret" report says we spoke of internal political affairs in Croatia, the state of the local opposition and human rights.

Then came a summary of my telephone conversations with Viktor Ivancic and Heni Erceg, both Feral editors. The police notes record that I proposed an article about Croats wanted by Interpol. Then there was an interview I gave to the Belgrade magazine Duga in Vukovar in 1997. They quote my answers extensively, especially those parts about what I thought would happen in Croatia "after Tudjman has gone".

Interestingly, at the end of 1996 the reason for tailing me changes from "extremism: Serbian and Croatian" to "extremism: Yugoslav, communist" and "abuse of civil organizations".

They list my contacts with Helsinki Watch and describe my cooperation with the George Soros foundation in Croatia. They became particularly attentive when I was considered for membership of the executive board of Soros' Open Society Fund. Telephone discussions between my editor and the organisation's representative in New York Aryeh Neier were noted down in great detail.

I wondered how many people had listened to these phone calls, analysed them and summarised them. Leafing through the secret police reports, I couldn't find a signed document authorising my surveillance. Could that mean that along with the entire editorial staff of Feral - that persistent thorn in the side of the Tudjman regime - I was watched without ministerial approval, on the say-so of someone from the highest echelons of power?

I'll probably never know.

I was surprised to find that my file didn't cover personal affairs. Other journalists who chose to read their files were astonished to find police notes on personal, even intimate details. Jasna Babic, a journalist working for the Zagreb magazine Nacional told Croatian television that her file even contained results of gynaecological examinations. Globus journalist Djurdjica Klancir's file included police assessments of her marriage, while chief editor Damir Butkovic found the transcript of a telephone conversation in which his mother gave him a recipe for pasta with mushrooms.

Tudjman's secret police also drew up psychological portraits of all monitored journalists, which together with written analyses of various media, constituted much of the material collected. Some journalists' files contain such portraits, others - like mine - don't.

Once I had read everything the secret police had amassed about me during my five years as an "enemy of the state", the police clerks asked if I wanted to have my file destroyed or preserved. I chose preservation - it would be a terrible waste to destroy such direct evidence of the nature of Tudjman's regime.

Also, it can be used as an exhibit in the court case which journalists who were spied on plan to bring. Compensation is not our main objective, rather we wish to remove those responsible for such political surveillance from political life in Croatia, notably Tudjman's last two ministers for internal affairs, Ivan Jamjak and Ivan Penic. At the time of writing, both - remarkably - are members of the Croatian parliament.

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