

A Dangerous Profession

Author: [Merdijana Sadović](#)

Journalists reporting on crimes committed during the Yugoslav conflict continue to be threatened, attacked and sometimes even killed.

In the middle of the night of April 14, unknown assailants threw a hand grenade at the bedroom window of the prominent Belgrade journalist Dejan Anastasijevic, who often spoke openly about the atrocities committed by Serb forces in the wars following the breakup of the former Yugoslavia.

He recently criticised Serbia's war crimes court for its verdict in the case of five Serb members of the Scorpions paramilitary unit, who were filmed on tape as they shot dead six Bosnian Muslims captured after the fall off Srebrenica in 1995.

Anastasijevic believes the attack was related to his publicly expressed disappointment with the sentences - which he thought were inadequate - and the wording of the judgment.

Just a day later, on April 15, Croatian columnist Ivan Zvonimir Cicak said he had received a death threat from a close relative of Croatian army general Ante Gotovina charged with the crimes forces under his command allegedly committed during 1995 Operation Storm.

According to Cicak, the threat was a result of a column he wrote a day before, in which he harshly criticised general and his defence strategy.

These two seemingly unrelated events are a grim reminder that years after the wars in former Yugoslavia, journalists reporting on crimes committed during the conflict are still being threatened, attacked and sometimes even killed.

"Being a journalist always involves some risk," Anastasijevic told IWPR. "But being a journalist who lives in the Balkans and reports on war crimes committed here is not just risky, it's very dangerous."

It seems that the attacks are the most vicious when journalists choose to speak about crimes committed by members of their own ethnic groups.

The most infamous example of the latter was the murder of a prominent Serbian journalist and newspaper publisher Slavko Curuvija, who was killed in April 1999 in Belgrade by two masked gunmen. The 50-year-old newsman was well known for his fierce criticism of the former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic's regime, especially his crackdown on ethnic Albanians in Kosovo in 1998, which led to NATO bombing of Serbia the following spring.

Only five months later, in October 1999, a bomb exploded under the car of Zeljko Kopanja, the Bosnian Serb editor of the Banja Luka liberal daily *Nezavisne Novine*. Kopanja, who lost both his legs, believes he was targeted for his newspaper's documentation of war crimes committed against Bosnian Muslims by Bosnian Serb authorities during the 1992-1995 conflict.

Journalists in Bosnia's Federation reporting on war crimes committed against Serbs were also subjected to threats and intimidation.

In last week's issue of the Sarajevo-based weekly Dani, the magazine's director Senad Pecanin recalls problems he and his staff encountered when in 1997 they started revealing evidence of crimes committed by some Bosnian Muslims during the war.

"We incurred [public] wrath ...it was not easy to be a reporter with Dani in Sarajevo in those days," Pecanin wrote.

Journalists in Croatia are regularly targeted, too.

In December 2005, Drago Hedl, editor of the Croatian weekly Feral Tribune, received a death threat, which, as he said, came in response to a series of articles he published in Feral Tribune on the torture and killing of Serb civilians in Osijek in 1991.

Hedl was later subjected to more such threats, and in May 2006, the police arrested two suspects in the case and provided 24-hour police protection for the journalist. Two weeks ago, one of those detained, local politician Davor Boras, was found guilty by the Osijek municipal court and sentenced to six months imprisonment for issuing death threats against Hedl.

According to the Croatian media, Boras was unhappy with Hedl's reports about the so-called Homeland War and war veterans.

There is no doubt that war crimes are still a very sensitive issue for the media in the Balkans, and the more journalists are talking about them, the more pressure and threats they face.

"War crimes are still not a subject that can be openly discussed, " said Stjepan Malovic , a professor of journalism at the University of Zagreb. "The fact is that many of those who were directly or indirectly involved in the atrocities are still in power and they naturally become very nervous when someone raises that issue."

Malovic told IWPR that the most difficult challenge for the reporters in the Balkans is to point directly at the responsible members of their own community, because they automatically become labeled as traitors.

Anastasijevic agrees and says there is a big difference between reporting on war crimes trials taking place before the Hague tribunal and the cases tried in local courts.

"War crimes suspects in The Hague are at least behind the bars - those in the Balkans are prominent citizens and pillars of the society, and in many cases they walk the streets of Belgrade, Zagreb, or Pristina, freely."

Most journalists reporting on war crimes are aware of the risks involved. But some, like Sarajevo based journalist Nidzara Ahmetasevic, say they don't think about it too much, because "that's all part of the job".

Ahmetasevic, currently the editor of the online publication Justice Report, admits she too was subjected to threats few years ago, but that didn't discourage her.

"Those who report on war crimes know about risks from the moment they take on this job. But this career is our choice, and so are the risks that come with it," she said.

It's not just journalists who are attacked for expressing their opinion or raising sensitive issues, such as war crimes responsibly. In Serbia alone, there have been more than 100 politically-motivated assaults over the last three months. As well as journalists, the targets included human rights activists and moderate politicians.

However, there are some indications that the authorities are prepared to take this problem more seriously.

Anastasijevic - who is still recovering from the shock caused by last week's attack on his Belgrade home - says he was very pleased by the reactions of the Serbian authorities.

President Boris Tadic, who personally visited the journalist shortly after the incident, said the attack on Anastasijevic put the state on red alert. He pointed out that "the attempted murder of a journalist is comparable to an attack on the state itself".

The Serbian police also claim finding the perpetrators is their utmost priority.

In Croatia, three police officers were posted in front of Cicak's house soon after he reported his death threat, which he apparently received on his mobile phone.

It is expected that tensions in Croatia will only increase with several upcoming high-profile war crimes cases - some will be tried in The Hague, and some in Zagreb, but they all involve army generals who are still widely perceived in this country as wartime heroes.

This will certainly be a challenge for the local journalists reporting on these cases. However, Professor Malovic is optimistic.

"There have always been journalists in this region willing to talk openly about war crimes issues and they've done it very professionally," he said.

"I don't think they'll succumb to threats now. After all, they know their job is not to keep quiet, but to tell the truth, however unpleasant it may be."

Merdijana Sadovic is IWPR's Hague programme manager.

Location: Balkans
Macedonia

Albania
Serbia

Focus: International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/dangerous-profession>