

The Media War Continues

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Belgrade maintains its firm grip on information within Serbia, shutting down independent media and pumping out such propaganda even Seselj has complained.

The war is over, but brainwashing in Serbia through the media continues. With nearly all independent media shut down during the NATO bombing, and draconian anti-press legislation still in place, the government maintains a firm grip on information.

Pumping out a steady diet of reports on reconstruction and war heroes, and on opposition politicians as anti-Serbian traitors, the Belgrade has allowed no opening for fresh debate after the Kosovo debacle. There is no information about the shortage of petrol, the absence of salaries and pensions, or prospects (as yet lacking) for rebuilding the destroyed bridges.

Instead, State Radio Television Serbia (RTS) and the regime press appeal blindly for national unity. The demonstrations being held throughout the country are hardly covered, so that citizens sometimes find out about them only when going out into the streets. Even ultra-nationalist leader Vojislav Seselj has accused the state news agency Tanjug and the daily Politika of distorting statements from his Serbian Radical Party.

The media remains a central pillar of government power and the situation is desperate. Those few independent media that survived the war are facing extreme financial pressures, and staff are working largely for commitment rather than compensation. There is little money to pay anyone.

According to a recent report by Nebojsa Spaic of the Media Center in Belgrade, "Around 600 journalists from the independent media . . . are jobless and have nothing to live on. The surviving media have had either to reduce salaries to their staff or fire a number of journalists."

Of 33 independent radio and television stations linked before the war in the Association of the Independent Electronic Media (ANEM), only 20 have survived the war. For most of the unfortunate ones, local authorities used the state of war to shut them down. Many stations have been shut down on the pretext of lacking frequencies, even where their paperwork has been in order, or fined. Other media have had to close because they ran out of money.

Financial pressures are of course part of the regime strategy. While regime radio and televisions have been exempted from many fees and taxes for their help "in defending the nation," extortionate charges are levelled against independent media. Radio Pancevo, the independent station in a suburb outside Belgrade which continued throughout the war and helped to a degree to make up for the absence of independent broadcasting in the capital, has just received an invoice for its frequency tax of 400,000 dinars (40,000 German Marks)-an amount it would be extremely hard-pressed to pay even at the best of times.

Still other media faced more crude forms of suppression. Nebojsa Ristic, editor of TV Soko from Sokobanja, in southern Serbia, was sentenced to one-year's imprisonment for hanging a poster "Free Press-Made in Serbia" in the newsroom during the NATO bombing. Ivan Novkovic, a TV producer in Leskovac, was sentenced to thirty days' imprisonment for airing a message, during a basketball match July 1, on the anti-regime demonstrations in the town.

The fate of Belgrade-based Radio B-92 which has for years been a favourite radio of Belgraders is a drastic example. From the first days of the bombing, the entire staff--journalists, directors and editors--were replaced with a new "patriotic" staff, which converted this usually lively alternative culture and politics station into a standard government-run organ. Sasa Mirkovic, director of the original group has announced

that the "free B-92" station will return to the air, but plans remain uncertain.

The other key electronic media in Belgrade, Studio B, has been greatly compromised by the role of Vuk Draskovic and his Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO), which owns the station. With both Draskovic and the SPO flirting from one day to the next with Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic, its output has been seen as unreliable.

The situation in the press is similar. The two regime dailies, Politika and Politika Ekspres compete alongside the pro-regime Vecernje Novosti in displaying their "patriotism"-which means support for the regime. Dvenvi Telegraph, the controversial daily, has not restarted publication since its editor-in-chief Slavko Curuvija was gunned down in the early days of the bombing as he was entering his home with his wife.

Meantime, several independent papers, such as Blic and Danas dailies, and the weeklies Vreme and NIN remain bright stars in the Serbian media scene, even if some of their sparkle has also been dimmed through the months of bombing.

Yet Serbia's Law on Information, imposed last autumn, remains in place as a constant threat to editors-holding out the risk of massive and immediate personal fines against any editor or publisher on the slightest of pretexts. On June 23, the independent newspaper Parliament in Novi Pazar was fined 135,000 dinar (13,500 German marks) for not printing the name of the editor in its masthead.

Before the war, Blic, the largest selling Serbian independent daily, which is in a tabloid format, was fined 220,000 dinars (22,000 German marks) under the law of information. Now, says editor-in-chief Veselin Simonovic, the risk is even greater. "We can be affected by that law any time, but I don't know how could we pay. That only means that regime can stifle us whenever it wants," he says.

During the bombing campaign, no censorship law was imposed but all media submitted their printed pages in advance to a state censor. That process has stopped, and some parliamentarians from Milosevic's Socialist Party

suggested even during the war that they would push for a relaxation of the media laws, claiming to have prepared a draft of new legislation. Yet recent discussions in parliament about wartime laws has focused on enshrining the key components into regular legislation, rather than lifting the repressive aspects. Blic's Simonovic warns that once the government consolidates itself, it will unleash an even firmer clampdown on media freedoms.

Dragoljub Zarkovic, editor of the independent weekly Vreme, holds the Serbian opposition partly responsible for the lack of media openness in Yugoslavia, for agreeing to participate in elections without proper conditions.

"Whoever has hopes [for free media] in Serbia is crazy," he asserts. "That chance was missed in 1990, and the Serbian opposition is the only in Eastern Europe that agreed to take part in the elections without an equal treatment in the media."

Yet the distance between the Serbia presented in the media and the everyday reality as experienced is so glaring that this time even Belgrade's best efforts to control people's minds may not succeed. Some people are trying to obtain reliable information. During the bombing, those with money bought satellite antennas so they could watch CNN, BBC World and other international channels, while others listened to Radio Free Europe, Voice of America and other Serbian-language short-wave radio broadcasts.

But as one worker in Belgrade put it, the best source of information is his wallet. "When I work all day and it is still empty, you tell me which newspaper or television station can convince me that the regime is all right," he says.

As a result, opposition figures believe the regime's media strategy will ultimately backfire. "The state media are in the service of the regime to such an extent that they are causing a counter-effect," says Slobodan Vuksanovic, vice-president of the Democratic Party, which is a member of the Alliance for Changes. "Travelling around Serbia, I see that people don't believe RTS even when it reports something that is true."

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