

The Noose Tightens On Serbia's Independent Media

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One year on from the introduction of the Law on Public Information, the Serbian government has stepped up pressure on the independent media yet further, calling for a "decontamination" of the press.

The Yugoslav United Left party, run by president Slobodan Milosevic's wife Mirjana Markovic, has issued a stern warning to journalists who try to claim the right of free speech when writing critical articles about the government.

"No one," the party warns, "has the right to declare himself neutral in the defence of his country or to jeopardise its capacity to survive by invoking the right to making objective public criticisms..."

It was time, it said, to 'decontaminate' the media, "especially the journalistic profession, which should become an important element of the defence of the right of people and a nation to have their own state, which they should govern by themselves in a democratic way, without foreign tutors and occupiers".

The chilling message follows a year of intimidation against the independent media, under Serbia's October 1998 Law on Public Information, bulldozed through the Serbian parliament by Milosevic's ruling Socialist Party and his coalition partners, his wife's JUL party and the nationalist Serbian Radical Party.

The media can be accused of libel, defamation and spreading lies, with limited opportunity for regular court proceedings or for a thorough defence of the charges. The speedy and arbitrary procedure invariably results in a guilty verdict and a heavy fine ranging from 50,000 to 800,000 dinars (1,500-20,000 dollars).

Such heavy financial penalties have forced several enterprises to the wall. During the last twelve months three independent newspapers and about ten radio and TV stations have closed down.

The Deputy Director of the Committee for the Protection of Journalists, Joel Simon, recently wrote to Yugoslav Minister of Information, Goran Matic, denouncing the 1.6 million dollars in fines imposed in the last year.

"As an Information Minister, it is your duty to ensure journalists in Yugoslavia can freely pursue their profession, as guaranteed by the Constitution of our country and international law. We once again appeal to you to fulfill this important duty," Simon said.

The dailies Nasa Borba, Dnevni Telegraph, NT Plus and the weekly Evropljanin have disappeared from newsstands.

The owner of the Dnevni Telegraph and Evropljanin, Slavko Curuvija was gunned down on April 11. The killers are still at large and police refuse to comment on the investigation. Curuvija had fought for months to save his papers following several prosecutions under the new law. In total he was fined over four million Dinars (200,000 dollars).

Nasa Borba, the most prominent independent daily in Serbia, ceased publication even before the new law was introduced. Under the terms of the 'Decree on the Conduct of the Media in a Situation of Immediate War Danger' - enacted on October 8, before a 'Situation of Immediate War Danger' had actually been

declared - Nasa Borba was fined and forced to close. This decree also closed the doors of Dnevni Telegraph and Danas temporarily.

It is not just the Milosevic regime, however, that is exploiting the current legal climate to attack the independent media. Three Belgrade dailies - Blic, Danas and Glas Javnosti - were convicted on March 13 on charges brought by Ljiljana Blagojevic, an actress and Culture Secretary in the Belgrade City Assembly run by Vuk Draskovic's opposition Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO).

Small, provincial media enterprises, the Albanian media in Kosovo and newspapers catering for minorities have all come under attack. Cacanski Glas was fined 350,000 dinars (20,000 DM), the weekly Parlament in Sandzak 60,000 dinars (2,000 dollars), while the Pristina daily Koha Ditore was fined 520,000 dinars (16,500 dollars) just prior to the NATO intervention.

Radio Boom from Pozarevac, Radio City from Nis, Radio Senta, Radio VK from Kikinda, TV Cacak, TV Pirot, TV Negotin and TV Barajevo, as well as Pristina-based Radio Kontakt, the only multi-ethnic radio station in Kosovo, ceased broadcasting.

On the eve of the NATO air strikes, March 23, the popular Belgrade radio station B 92 was closed down. The Youth Alliance of Belgrade, a pro-Milosevic organisation, occupied the offices and took over broadcasting, turning the station into a regime mouthpiece.

At the same time, the offices of the Association of Independent Electronic Media (ANEM), also owned by B 92, were seized as well. It was not the Law on Public Information that was applied here, but a purely political decision to silence B 92 at a time when air strikes were certain and the decision had been made to sever all diplomatic relations with NATO countries.

Several months later B 92 managed to re-launch a somewhat reduced service, using the frequency and the offices of the Belgrade Radio and TV station Studio B, under the new title B2 92.

The state media and the authorities claim that all who are not involved in the reconstruction of the country are traitors, servants of the West.

This autumn, the Information Ministry brought 52 charges against the Printing House ABC Glas, 26 against the director, Slavoljub Kacarevic. The Ministry charges that ABC is in violation of the law for printing Promene (Changes) - a political leaflet for the Alliance for Change - which is not listed on the register of public media.

ABC's defence - that Promene is a party publication, one of many produced by the printers - was dismissed by the court. So far ABC and Kacarevic have been convicted on 21 of the 52 charges and fined 1.65 million dinars. At the end of the October, Deputy Prime Minister, Vojislav Seselj, filed charges against senior staff at the Belgrade daily Danas. The trial lasted just over an hour and resulted in a fine for the paper of 280,000 dinars Narodne Novine from Nis was fined 200,000 Dinars. In Kikinda, Kikindske Novine was fined the same amount after an official from the local Socialist Party filed charges.

All the above were the victims of charges based on allegations of libel. And not once did the court investigate the accuracy of the 'libelous' words printed in the papers. Only one case has ever been dismissed. Financial fines leveled against the media are exceptionally high by local standards and are often crippling for publications that enjoy only small circulation. The fines also provide a useful source of revenue for the Serbian national treasury.

But fines are not the only punishment meted out, prison terms have also been handed down. Nebojsa Ristic, editor of television and radio station Soko from Sokobanja, is currently serving a one-year prison term in Zajecar for displaying a poster saying "Free press / Made in Serbia" in his office window.

Srdjan Jankovic and Zoran Lukovic, journalists of Dnevni Telegraph have been sentenced to five months' imprisonment each after Milovan Bojic, a Deputy Prime Minister, filed criminal charges against them under Article 3 of the Criminal Code, alleging they spread false information and caused public disturbance. Journalist Zoja Jovanov is also facing prosecution under the same law for an article she wrote in 1997, which predicted devaluation in the currency two months before the event.

Nikola Djuric, owner of Radio City in Nis, is serving a two-month prison sentence under Article 219 of the same code for the 'unauthorised possession of a radio station'.

But the intimidation goes further than the heavy hand of the law. On October 28, ABC director, Kacarevic's found his car in flames outside a restaurant he often visits. The police investigation concluded an electrical fault was to blame, but Kacarevic is not convinced.

In Cacak, a car belonging to the editor-in-chief of the Radio Globus, Andrej Rakocevic, was completely destroyed by a fire on November 11. Rakocevic said he is afraid to even think this was an assassination attempt, but that he cannot believe a car that was working fine would just suddenly burst into flames.

A Danas correspondent in Valjevo, Nebojsa Andric, was rudely awoken just before 4.00 am one Saturday, when an explosion outside his house destroyed his front door and shattered all the windows in his house. Fortunately his heavily pregnant wife and three-year-old son were uninjured.

Police found no trace of explosives. Andric is also a correspondent for Radio Free Europe and president of the local branch of the Democratic Party. He has led demonstrations in Belgrade and helped organise the first Alliance for Change demonstrations in Cacak this year.

"The aim of this system of terror towards the public media is to intimidate public opinion in general," Jaksic concluded, adding that all this causes insecurity and frustration for ordinary people.

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