

Press Accused of 'Dirty' Tactics

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Bosnia's print media has reached a new low in the build-up to polling day, accused of openly siding with political parties and laying into their opponents.

Newspapers throughout Bosnia-Herzegovina have been condemned for what many say is the dirtiest election campaign in the country's history.

While the electronic media, monitored by the independent Communications Regulatory Agency, CRA, has to maintain basic professional standards or face penalties and even closure, most print media have chosen openly to back one political party or another and have sought to undermine their rivals.

The situation is at its worst in the Federation. In Republika Srpska, the bias is subtler and has thus drawn less attention.

Titles have published a range of so-called "scoops" - often based on unchecked facts, suppositions and insinuations - targeting political enemies. Politicians they dislike have been accused of various criminal activities - including theft, corruption and secret agreements - and dismissed as "mad" or even "insane".

It has all added fuel to already heated political debates, creating an overall pre-election atmosphere of chaos and heightening voters' feelings of confusion and frustration. It helps explain why surveys show that a growing number of voters are undecided or not intending to vote.

The group Elections, a coalition of non-governmental organisations, NGOs, that monitor pre-election campaigns, complained on September 8 about biased and unprofessional behaviour among the print media. The NGO's head, Srdjan Dizdarevic, said many had dropped all pretence at objectivity.

Several small opposition parties have drawn attention to the misuse of the media in the campaign for the October 5 poll.

The Republican Party demanded that the government and international organisations ensure equal access to the press by all election participants. Ilija Simic, heading the Croat Peasants' Party in the elections for parliament, said several reporters had been paid to promote parties in the campaign. He would not disclose their names, however, citing fears of a media blockade of his own party and a campaign against himself. Simic said money had clearly played an important role in the run-up to the election.

The Sarajevo daily Dnevni Avaz is widely thought to have played the dirtiest game. It has openly supported the Party for Bosnia-Herzegovina, SZBiH, and waged a ruthless campaign against the Social Democrats, SDP, led by Zlatko Lagumdžija.

On August 27, Dnevni Avaz typically boasted that Lagumdžija would "soon find himself before a court". Only lower down the unsigned article was it explained that a local businessman was merely considering suing Lagumdžija over a statement he had made to a local television station.

The weeklies Walter and Dani have joined the anti-SDP campaign. Dani claimed on August 30 that the

Office of the High Representative, OHR, and other international organisations were investigating Lagumdžija for corruption and misuse of office. The OHR strongly denied this, adding that Dani had never even asked them to comment before publishing the claim.

This editorial policy triggered a revolt among Dani's staff, after which the magazine moderated its tone. Many people are convinced these campaigns are not just the result of personal animosity or political opposition on the part of the owners and editors of the newspapers. They believe financial gain is involved.

Sarajevo's second biggest daily *Oslobodjenje* has opened its pages to Lagumdžija in his defense. The title has defended the move claiming that social democracy is at stake and must be supported. The paper's columnist and foreign editor Mirko Sagolj wrote on August 10 that the SDP was "the only party which can prevent the disappearance of Bosnia" and as such should be backed.

The *Slobodna Bosna* weekly has also joined the polemics on the side of the SDP and Lagumdžija, attacking the SZBiH and its leader Haris Silajdžić with similar methods to those used by Avaz.

Some political parties are thought to have raised the stakes further by pressuring and threatening editorial boards and reporters. Such intimidation has probably succeeded in frightening journalists off stories that do not suit the party concerned. Research by the Bosnian media-monitoring group Internews suggests numerous reporters received threats in the first month of the campaign.

The group reported a total of 85 cases of this type over the whole of Bosnia. Twenty concerned the Serbian Democratic Party, SDS, which thus topped the list as the party most responsible for issuing threats of blackmail and other types of political pressures. The Party of Democratic Action, SDA, and the Party of Democratic Development, PDR, came second equal, held responsible for 13 incidents each. The SDP was accused of exerting pressure on the media nine times.

The Party for Bosnia-Herzegovina's members and its sympathisers and Party of Democratic Progress, PDP, used non-violent pressure on eight and three occasions respectively. In two cases, politicians or political parties tried to limit journalists' freedom of movement to prevent them from reporting an event. The SDS was blamed for both incidents.

The study also noted cases of political parties lobbying the management of television and radio stations. The Mostar daily *Dnevni List* was the target of an unidentified person who broke into the office and threatened reporters on September 15. The owner Mirjana Skoko blamed "retrograde" political elements, an apparent reference to the Bosnian branch of the Croatian Democratic Union, HDZ.

The Federation Television, FTV, and the Public Broadcasting Service, PBS, meanwhile have been at the centre of a political row concerning the Miss Bosnia beauty contest. In violation of the show's protocol, the Pro-European People's Party, ProENS, leader Jadranko Prlić appeared at the event as a leading "patron". The episode was criticised as a political advertisement for ProENS and Prlić.

Oslobodjenje's editor Amra Kebo says there is nothing disreputable about media organisations supporting political favorites, "What is debatable is the way some politicians are being discredited, when entire media organisations serve the purpose of disqualifying one particular politician."

The international community has tried to stay out of the affray. It appears to be turning a blind eye to most of the pre-election rhetoric, however, tinged as it is with bitter accusations and invocations to national and religious hatred.

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Location: Bosnia and
Herzegovina

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