

Prison Awaits 'Real' Journalists

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Following the Filipovic verdict, anyone involved in real journalism could overnight find themselves in prison

The circle of violence against the Serbian media has been fully drawn. Precisely two months before presidential elections, the regime of Slobodan Milosevic has again demonstrated its force, sentencing journalist Miroslav Filipovic to seven years in prison for espionage and "spreading false information".

For the first time in Serbia, a journalist has received a ferocious sentence for merely doing his job: gathering information, writing articles and publishing them in foreign newspapers and on the Internet. (Filipovic contributed regularly to the Institute for War & Peace Reporting and Agence France-Presse, as well as the Belgrade daily Danas.) And in a very un-spy-like manner - signing his pieces openly with his own name.

But his imprisonment has a logic. It continues state repression against the media begun a decade ago. The first phase in the media war was the sacking, in the late 1980s, of whole swathes of independent-minded staff from Serbian state radio and television, as well as journalists in the state press. This was in fact the opening salvo in the destruction of Yugoslavia itself, and included direct harassment of uncooperative reporters and producers. The means were now in place for the mind-numbing regime propaganda and hate speech that would so devastate the region.

The campaign against the free-thinking media itself soon followed. In 1990, members of ultranationalist paramilitary organisation the 'White Eagles' - lead by Dragoslav Bokan, a potential candidate for the Hague court festival - broke into the premises of the non-nationalist Yutel TV station and smashed the equipment with baseball bats. It has been clear since then that independent journalism could exist only in shards.

The chronology of attacks is long. Key moments include a ruling by the federal government at the end of 1995, enabling it to seize control of the daily Borba from its editors and journalists. A new independent paper took up the banner, under the title Nasa Borba, but it too would succumb, in late 1998, to another government ruling, this time the infamous Law on Information.

Radio B-92 has been banned on several occasions. In December 1996, as a consequence of, according to the regime, "humidity in the coaxial cable", it went off air for several days - until western pressure caused Milosevic to relent. The humidity disappeared, and broadcasts resumed.

At the start of the NATO bombing campaign in March 1999, B-92 was taken over by the regime - an appropriation justified by the sudden appearance of the station's supposed real founders (read, young members of Milosevic's Socialists). They confiscated the technical equipment, CDs, books, furniture - everything they could lay their hands on.

In August 1999, re-named B2-92, the station resumed broadcasting under the wing of the local TV station Studio B. But its work ceased again in May 2000 when an armed and camouflaged unit of the anti-terrorist squad of the Serbian Ministry of Internal Affairs raided the premises overnight - seizing Studio B, shutting down Radio B2-92 and 'liberating' Belgrade from the independent electronic media.

Other means, less violent but no less skilful, have been deployed to handle other sectors of the independent media. Newsprint has been restricted or withheld outright - running one's fingers over the pages of the Belgrade daily, Glas Javnosti, recalls nothing less than centuries' old papyrus, otherwise thought long extinct in the modern publishing world.

The authorities did not shrink from occasional arrests and other forms of harassment. Journalist, Nebojsa Ristic, from Sokobanja's local radio station was jailed for a year merely for pasting up a "Free B-92" poster during the NATO bombing. (Ironically, the very poster he was unfurling was of the independent media itself figuratively behind bars.) Propaganda against the allegedly pro-western media has been heavy: they are all traitors, CIA conspirators, running dogs of the "New World Order".

Financial police, also armed, have spent months combing through the books of various media, searching for the least evidence of support from the criminal international community. Major newspaper distributors have also been threatened with closure should they be caught selling Danas, Blic or (while it survived) Nasa Borba at their kiosks.

The most important milestone in finally abolishing Serbian free media was the Law on Information, proclaimed October 1998. In a country where the average monthly salary is now £23 (70 DM), it allows crippling financial fines of up to £60,000 (180,000 DM) for so much as annoying a government minister. One paper, Blic, was even fined for publishing statements from a press conference by a government minister. Based on a presumption of guilt, rather than innocence, judgements can be rammed through court within 24 hours, and long prison sentences are threatened for non-payment of fines.

Early casualties of the law included the dailies, Dnevni Telegraf, and the weekly, Evropljanin, all of whom collapsed after receiving heavy fines. Knowing what was about to happen, Nasa Borba stopped publishing: the demise of the best daily newspaper in FRY signalled the end of free journalism. More important, the law achieved its real psychological triumph by imposing the ruling principle of fear. Minute self-censorship was legitimised, as journalists tried to balance the instinct for honest reporting with the need to remain ambiguous if not downright allegorical to avoid heavy penalties.

Journalism was effectively ruined. Many reporters, editors and media which had until that point been outstandingly brave stopped producing journalism worthy of the name. Vreme, which had been so muck-raking during the Bosnian war (and of which I am a former editor), is perhaps the most disappointing case in point. But the trend may also have served as something of a relief for other members of the media community, whose penchant for obedience to power, nationalism and most of all anti-Albanianism needed only the most minimal encouragement.

But the regime was not done yet. At last it made good on the ultimate threat: that the disobedient would pay with their heads. In April 1999, in the midst of the NATO bombing, with national euphoria at its height and media censorship total (including pre-publication review of all texts), Dnevni Telegraf owner, Slavko Curuvija, was assassinated - gunned down in front of his house, on orthodox Easter Sunday. Even then it was clear the killers would never be apprehended (they are still at large). even then it was clear that the murder was the perfect final warning for all journalist to mind what they write.

The rest is history. As we know - or at least as the state media inform us - the Yugoslav Army went on to score a triumphant victory over the greatest military force in the world. It successfully defended Kosovo from NATO, and confirmed the province's integration into the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. In "last year's scuffle," as it is known, the army achieved what it has historically always prepared for, the ultimate defence of the sovereignty of the state.

This has left the few remaining independent media in an even worse position. The Law on Information is regularly used to take as much money from the newspapers as the state requires. Foreign donors and other mentors continue patiently to help the media, occasionally questioning out loud what is the sense in forwarding precious development funds directly into the regime's coffers?

The increasingly harsh political situation added to the independent media's truly frightening position. Its modest output is overwhelmed by the regime's relentless, unprecedented propaganda, boasting of its victory over the West, the patriotic renewal, the heroic repair of every bridge, factory and pothole. Indeed,

far from isolation, the state media proclaim the country's ever-widening circle of international friends: Vietnam, North Korea, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Cuba, Libya, Belarus, Peru.

Penniless, with the Law on Information hanging like a sword of Damocles overhead, the only Belgrade's media to survive were a few daily newspapers (Danas, Glas, Blic) and two weeklies inclined to compromise, Vreme and NIN.

Outside of Belgrade, the situation in cities under local control of democratic opposition is better: in towns like Novi Sad, Nis and Kragujevac it is still possible to find local newspapers and quite brave radio-stations.

Meanwhile, the Yugoslav Army has obtained a near untouchable position. As if it is the most natural thing in the world, generals visit factories and companies, open new bridges, partake in regime celebrations, threaten the opposition and the "enemy within", and basically behave as if the country is under military dictatorship (is it not?). The army is not only above everyone, it has a special financial, social, moral and especially political status.

Its core concept is that all of the recent wars fought by the Yugoslav Army have been defensive. The army is obsessed with this pathological idea. Serbian generals and the politicians linked to them have completely shut their eyes to the bloodshed of Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo. Civilian killings, paramilitary operations, mass shootings, executions and liquidations, together with robbery and ethnic cleansing - all of this simply did not happen. They are taboo subjects.

Any notion, much less testimony, that Yugoslav Army troops were at any time involved in war crimes is by definition denied for an obvious reason: THERE WERE NO CRIMES.

Serbs could not have committed crimes because they were just defending themselves. Therefore, all the western presumptions - propounded by the "international community" and swallowed whole by the independent media and other traitors - are lies and propaganda.

This includes the "illegitimate" and "anti-Serb" Hague Tribunal and its indictments against the state president, a top general and other leading figures. All of this is nothing more than a desperate attempt to soil the work and figure of Slobodan Milosevic, who has eternally struggled for peace and equality.

Thus begins the story of Miroslav Filipovic, who dared to do what the Serbian media did not and could not do all these years: raise the question of war crimes.

It is not that the facts are completely unknown. We have been referring to such things tacitly for a long time, and the bloody details of Srebrenica, Prijedor, Bratunac, Slavonija, Dubrovnik, Vukovar could be found by anyone who really wants to know. But never of course in the official media, and only in the most discrete way in the independent press.

While Croatia's Feral Tribune and Bosnia's Dani have washed their respective countries' dirtiest laundry, in Serbia the war criminals remain divinities, with Milosevic, his wife Mira Markovic and Vojislav Seselj, first among them. As Col. Veselin Sljivancanin, the Serbian butcher of Vukovar - whom Milosevic has refused to extradite - has bragged, "We were demolishing [the town] . . . and it was the right thing to do."

Published on-line in a series of articles, Filipovic's interviews with witnesses, the testimony and the data, demolish the cheap propaganda image of the Yugoslav Army as a respecter of the Geneva Convention. His pieces are about evil, about a pre-arranged plan clean territory of the enemy population. They illustrate people's terrible dilemmas, the horror, the completion of the national project.

This is why Miroslav Filipovic was dangerous: because he showed - proved - that Kosovo was just a sequel to the anti-Croatian, anti-Bosnian, anti-civilisational politics of Belgrade. He debunked the myth of those who are protected and secure merely because they are in uniform.

The fact that Filipovic's pieces were not and cannot be published in Serbia speaks for itself. No such paper would, this minute, be ready to present Filipovic's stories as a sign of protest, support or solidarity. The decade of attacks has ensured that no local editor would take that risk.

So Serbia, alas, is now a country in which Filipovic is a perfect symbol for the coming elections, the most suitable warning of what can happen to any of us if we are not careful, patriotic, obedient.

In the state supremely ruled by Milosevic, revolt, protests, announcements, statements and demands on behalf of Filipovic are limited at the moment to the few at least partly free media still surviving. Several political parties, including the Democratic Party and the Civic Alliance, have issued statements, and many journalists have signed an open letter to Milosevic calling for a pardon for Filipovic.

These faint voices of protest from non-government organisations, guild associations and individuals are encouraging. But it is still a sad, sad fact that all this had to happen for us to realise that media freedom in Serbia is forever abolished. After Filipovic's verdict, anyone involved in real journalism - in-depth reporting and investigation, gathering statements, collecting information - could overnight find themselves in one of the numerous military prisons - which are, by the way, being renovated ahead of schedule.

The state TV media have not uttered a word about the case, and Milosevic's Politika daily explained to its retarded readers that it is a straightforward case of espionage - and we all know how spies are treated. So major protests and gatherings are out. The Filipovic verdict is the trump card for a regime that has put all its cards into the elections.

So the voters' choice is clear: vote for seven years in prison like Miroslav, or the rest of our lives with Milosevic.

Petar Lukovic is a long-time reporter, columnist and editor in Belgrade. Godine raspada, a collection of his war-year journalism, has recently been published by Feral Tribune, in Croatia.

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