

Serbia Media Protests

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Journalists accuse government of curbing media as more members of key broadcasting agency resign.

The Serbian government appears to be stepping up its campaign against critical independent media ahead of a parliamentary election expected next year.

Critics say the situation has been exacerbated by the international community's reluctance to tackle the government on the issue.

Serbian journalists this week launched a protest against what they say are attempts by the authorities to curb freedom of the press.

A group of 18 leading editors and representatives of journalist associations signed a document, *Media in Serbia*, expressing dissatisfaction with the government's role in drafting new press legislation. The document, which also contained a list of recommendations, was sent on June 9 to top Serbian officials and international organisations.

It accused the authorities of failing to make "an irrevocable break with the practice of direct influence on the media".

One of the document's signatories, Radio and TV B92 chief editor Veran Matic, told IWPR that the situation is more difficult now than at any time since the democratic opposition came to power.

"The polarisation between the government and the media is very intense. This is the most complicated period for the Serbian media since Milosevic was ousted in October 2000," he said.

The journalists are outraged at the government's handling of the new Public Information Act, which is supposed to guarantee media freedom. The legislation was adopted during the state of emergency imposed after the March 12 assassination of Serbian prime minister Zoran Djindjic.

The journalists say the act was adopted without public consultation and includes nine completely new articles. One of them, dealing with the distribution of information, is perceived as an attempt to introduce censorship.

Such provisions, the document says, "demonstrate the government's fear of the media and its distrust of their role in society".

The journalists also called for the dismissal of three of the nine members of the Broadcasting Council, an agency which the government has set up to allocate frequencies for radio and TV channels. They claim that there were irregularities in the election of these three council members.

It is not just journalists who are questioning these appointments. Broadcasting Council member Snjezana Milivojevic raised the issue during the agency's opening meeting, held on June 4. But she resigned after

she failed to persuade the other members to hold a session open to the public, and to ask the Serbian parliament to review the extent to which the council was legally elected.

“Apparent breaches in the legal guidelines would undermine public confidence in the council even before it started its far-reaching work,” Milivojevic told IWPR. “The shadow of illegality is damaging to the council’s integrity and would undermine the whole process of broadcasting reform.”

A second Broadcasting Council member, law professor Vladimir Vodelinic, resigned on June 11 in protest over what he says were irregularities in the nomination of Kosovo candidate Goran Radenovic. Vodelinic has called into question the future of a council that was conceived as an independent body but is now dominated solely by government candidates.

B-92’s Matic said that the two resignations were “yet another sign that the government is not ready to embark on democratisation of the media or create favourable conditions for press freedom”.

A third council member, Belgrade professor Miroljub Radojkovic, has now threatened to resign.

All this is taking place against a backdrop of intensified government action against the press. Belgrade media analysts say that one of the reasons why the government is so focused on bringing journalists to heel is that its popularity has dropped since Djindjic’s murder, and elections are on the horizon.

On June 3, the Svedok weekly was prevented from distributing its last issue, with unclear legal justification. The magazine had republished an interview in the Macedonian press which purported to be with Milorad “Legija” Lukovic, the prime suspect in Djindjic’s murder.

Svedok’s director and chief editor Vladan Dinic said the Borba publishing house had suspended distribution on the orders of an unidentified government official - without informing the weekly.

The ministry of culture and information issued a press release describing the Legija interview as “an attempt to agitate the public and diminish the importance of the police investigation, something which is absolutely unethical”.

The editor in chief of the weekly Blic News, Zeljko Cvijanovic, was fined 50,000 dinars for libel on May 30. The case had been brought by Vladimir Popovic, head of the government’s Information Bureau, who has often been linked to pressure on media. IWPR tried to contact Popovic on several occasions, but he was unavailable for comment.

The trial - which was a criminal rather than civil action - was problematic. Cvijanovic says he had trouble finding witnesses because people were too scared to come forward. He also told IWPR that he was not allowed to take witnesses to the stand - not even the ones that the court had approved at previous hearings.

Citing pressure by the police and some members of the government, Cvijanovic resigned as editor of Blic News on June 4.

At about the same time, Serbia’s interior ministry filed charges against Cvijanovic and another journalist, Jovica Krtinic, who had written a story alleging that an investigation into the murder of former police general Bosko Buha had been deliberately undermined.

In an extraordinary move, the next day the ministry asked parliament's committee for culture and information to look into media reporting that they say threatens the work of the police. It suggested that some critical articles had been written to order, and proposed publicly naming the financial backers of private media.

The independent press saw the move as another way of exerting pressure on them by depicting them as a danger to law enforcement.

One of the concerns that Belgrade editors put to IWPR was what they see as the lack of decisive action on the part of the international community.

"I don't understand why there hasn't been a clear reaction from the international organisations, since as time goes on the situation is getting more complicated," Matic told IWPR.

Since Djindjic's assassination, the international community has tended to praise the Serbian government for its fight against organised crime, and to express general political support for it. Media problems have been seen as a low priority.

The Council of Europe representative in Belgrade has criticised the government over its handling of the media, and the EU delegate to Serbia and Montenegro has said the objections raised by some in the Serbian media provide cause for concern.

But critics in Belgrade say the international community has failed to take a firm enough stand. Some are even calling into question the role played by internationals.

Vojin Dimitrijevic, a legal expert who heads the Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, told IWPR that the office of the OSCE in the capital has openly sided with the authorities.

As an example, he noted that the organisation had backed the legality of the government's position in the dispute over Broadcasting Council appointments. "The OSCE has openly supported the breaking of laws," he said.

When IWPR asked the OSCE about its position on the council appointments, its spokesman Rory Keane would not set out definitively what it was. All he would say was that there appeared to be some irregularities in the setting up of the council. "Aspects of the law were violated. We have appealed to the competent bodies to respond," he said.

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