

**Sasa Mirkovic**

**ATTACKS ON THE MEDIA IN SERBIA:  
RECENT AND NOT SO RECENT PAST**

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Although the history of the media pluralism of the local region is relatively short in time terms, it is necessary to take it into account if we want to interpret in the right manner everything that is currently taking place on this media scene.

This history is marked by constant battle for the expansion of the media freedoms and the freedom of expression. This is a continuous process full of interesting events, challenges, twists, developments and tragic events, the consequences of which one can feel even today.

### **Before the year 2000**

Historically speaking, the second half of the 1980's brought us the beginnings of the media pluralism in former Yugoslavia which coincided with the changes taking place in Eastern Europe that eventually led to the fall of the Berlin Wall.

At the beginning of the 1990's we were the witnesses of much larger possibilities for the setting up and functioning of different kinds of media. Controlled until then exclusively by the party, ideological committees and politicians, the media started to get free of these chains and to gain the freedom that had been unimaginable until then.

The acquired freedoms in this part of Europe were turned into strengthening democratic achievements, increasing the standard of living and further expansion of the gained freedoms in the media plan.

Unfortunately, albeit promising in the beginning, this trend did not last for long in our country.

The arrival of Milosevic to power and his gaining in strength had as their precondition the control of the media space. Like the domino, the governments that were not in line with the will of his regime fell down and the same destiny was shared by the media that were state or socially owned. Small and symbolic resistance of the real professionals was quickly suffocated by the will of the bureaucrats.

As the result of this, we had a really small number of media that managed to survive and overcome this first impact. It was only the beginning of a years-long and long-lasting battle.

During the time of the sanctions, the survival of the media that opposed the warmongering politics was difficult. In some way, they were under double sanctions, for few wanted to advertise through them since they risked major troubles that way. This made the financial exhaustion of the media easy and after a certain period of time they became an easy pray.

The media and the non-governmental sector had to turn to the donors' assistance without which they wouldn't be able to survive. In that way, they additionally exposed themselves to the attacks of the politicians through strictly controlled state media that were undisputed transmission of their positions.

The mystification of that donors' assistance had an influence at additional marking of some media and individuals as mercenaries which in turn made them easy targets for many attacks.

It was precisely the attacks of this kind that caused media workers to pay much more attention to their safety and the security of their colleagues during the turbulent 1990's. Constant threats to their safety and survival led to the situation in which the media workers from independent and professional media acquired a built-in "chip" for constant struggle with daily challenges..

Networking and establishing links among the media and journalists was the logical consequence which helped easier functioning under such difficult circumstances.

At the beginning of the 1990's, the Association of Independent Electronic Media (ANEM) was founded which at first comprised of six radio stations. Very soon after that, the Independent Association of the Journalists of Serbia (NUNS) was founded and it represented the interests of all those journalists who opposed to the one-sided politics of the strictly controlled regime Association of the Journalists of Serbia (UNS).

These were significant steps which showed the vitality of a part of the media scene that did not subscribe to the dictation of the ruling majority, but rather opposed by organising better, exchanging materials, helping each other and mutually protecting each other against different assaults. This was particularly prominent at the local level where it was important to protect the media and colleagues who were exposed to attacks of the local power-wielders.

The mass protests at the end of 1996/beginning of 1997 opened a new chapter of our media history. The closing of Radio B 92 proved then to be counterproductive, for the media blockade was overcome by using internet and satellites.

The result of those protests was the change of the local governments in many towns which led to a change in the editorial policy of many municipal media that started broadcasting the information programme of Radio B 92 on a mass scale.

A large number of media outlets joined the ANEM which in turn suddenly got stronger and which assisted the stations in the exchange of information, education, unification, renewal and procurement of equipment through donors' assistance. The links were established with the more significant organisations all over the world that operate in the field of the protection of the freedom of speech. These organisations were always ready to react with announcements and to exercise pressure on our authorities when the freedom of the media was jeopardised.

Numerous embassies of the countries that were interested in the position of independent media played a significant role. Their activities were used to help the media also during the visits of high-level European and American officials who used each their visit to Belgrade to show to Milosevic that it is necessary to respect the freedom of media.

The entering of the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) and the Yugoslav Associated Left (JUL) in the Government meant significant deterioration of the relations towards the independent media. The appointment of Aleksandar Vucic as the Minister of Information and the adoption of the Law on Public Information (better known as “Seselj’s Law”) in October 1998 marked the beginning of the darkest period which resulted in draconian measures towards some media and their owners.

The media were punished overnight, while media offices, editors and journalists were brought to the level of paupers through the verdicts of the justice of courts. The atmosphere was additionally sharpened before the bombing itself when several media workers were arrested.

The beginning of the bombing also marked an open introduction of censorship into the media which provided the authorities with additional manoeuvring space for the battle with those who were not their sympathisers.

Several media were closed or illegally taken over (such as, for instance, Radio B 92). The equipment of the independent media at the local level was destroyed and abducted which caused great level of dissatisfaction of the population. Unfortunately, the manoeuvring space for alternative ways of broadcasting was narrowed down due to bombardment and suspension of a large number of basic human rights during the state of emergency.

The pinnacle of the aggression was the beastly murder of our colleague Slavko Curuvija, the owner of the “Daily Telegraph” in April 1999. During the bombing innocent workers of the Radio and Television of Serbia were sacrificed while on their working duty.

The end of the bombing marked further strengthening of the solidarity through coordinated actions of printed and electronic media, organisations and associations. Extremely active donors with their activities further influenced significant getting together of the non-governmental sector, professional media and all other forces that were focused on bringing Milosevic’s regime down.

Owing to the abuse of the Law on Public Information there was an agreement among the independent media to boycott the activities of the Radicals and there was not a single mention of them in most of the media.

Along with many other independent media and non-governmental organisations, members of the ANEM significantly influenced the creation of the atmosphere that will lead to the democratic changes on 5th October, 2000.

Radio B 92 continued to broadcast their programme through transmitters that were installed in the surrounding countries. It was one of the most ambitious projects from that period entitled “Ring around Serbia” which was implemented through the cooperation of a large number of donors who mutually coordinated their activities and assistance in order not to have unnecessary overlapping.

Through a number of actions, concerts and events that were organised and advertised, the voters were encouraged to go to the elections and to fight to the end in order to have the election will respected. In those terms, the most radical demonstrators in the October events came precisely from the areas in which there was the highest number of ANEM’s stations that contributed to a better informing of the citizens during the times of the media darkness in the course of the last year of Milosevic’s reign.

### **After the year 2000**

There were great expectations after the democratic changes in October 2000. Unfortunately, there were also significant disappointments stemming from the idealistic hopes that everything in the media sphere would change overnight.

The enforcement of the 1998 Law on Public Information was suspended, the exiled media and journalists started to go back to their offices and to get hold of the equipment that was taken away from them. This process was neither easy nor simple.

The experts from the non-governmental sector, with the assistance of the media professionals, worked hurriedly at the preparation of the new legislative solutions for the media. A large number of those legislative models followed to a significant measure the European practice and standards. Unfortunately, in the course of the parliamentary procedures, there were frequent distortions of those laws. Many of them were changed through the will of the politicians to the point of being unrecognisable, thus becoming instruments for the benefit of some media power centres in order to ensure easier manipulation.

There were big problems when the Council of the Republic Broadcasting Agency was set up. Precious time was wasted on that occasion and on top of everything the reputation of this independent institution, which was frequently in the focus of public interest because of a number of decisions that had been taken during the previous years, was stained.

Finally, the distribution of the radio and television frequencies at the republic, regional and local levels was done. The licences were issued for the period of 8 years, which was the precondition for the normalisation and stability of the electronic media.

One of the big disappointments in the past almost eight years of transition is the absence of the privatisation process in the municipal media. Although inevitable, there are still quite different attempts aimed at slowing down or avoiding this process.

The transformation of the RTS into a public service did not go as quickly as expected. The number of viewers of the First Programme is still the highest one, but there is a big question if this transition of the national television towards entertainment is always appropriate, particularly when we know how big its influence is. The professionalism of the RTS is certainly at a higher level also, among other things, thanks to the donors and the BBC trainers through different training courses.

During all of these years, there has also been a noticeable change in the policy of the donors who turn more and more towards assisting specific projects linked to research journalism, education and contribution to the financial self-sustainability of the media. Such approach caused that almost all of the media generate their income in a highly competitive market where the budgets are defined on the basis of the ratings, that is, the number of viewers and listeners of a certain programme.

Media are under obligation to regularly pay their financial obligations that relate to the protection of intellectual and copy rights. These are all large commitments that lead to frequent commercialisation of the programmed aimed at increasing the revenues, since it is not possible to survive in the market which is on the other hand saturated by a large number of media.

In the last several years, a number of these issues have been considered and resolved with changeable luck with the assistance of the Ministry of Culture which incorporated the department in charge of the media. Further significant steps forward are certainly possible in this area which will prove that the media issues should not be dealt with bearing in mind daily political affairs, but rather in a systematic way and with a vision as to what, how and in which manner changes in the media sphere should be introduced by adopting a clear, unambiguous and comprehensive media policy.

During all of these years after the democratic changes, we have also been the witnesses to undesirable forms of violence aimed at the media workers.

Certainly, the most drastic example is the murder of journalist Milan Pantic in Jagodina which is still not resolved although committed more than five years ago. These are terrifying forms of violence which carry a warning for all of those who are trying to work in the sphere of research journalism and who to disclose unpleasant truths that contribute to the democratisation of a society.

Unfortunately, much more frequently we were witnesses of the creation of incendiary atmosphere aimed towards those individuals from the spheres of public life and media who are not like-minded persons. This language of hatred has been most frequently generated through high circulation tabloids that did not show respect for the basic professional norms and journalists' codes with this kind of journalism.

In such cases there has also frequently been lack of an appropriate reaction on the part of the state and judicial bodies, and it was precisely this that encouraged further attacks. At the same time, there were either no court proceedings or they lasted for inexplicably long.

There is a particularly problematic entry of the tycoons, who together with the politicians influence the editorial policy of certain influential media. A step outside this grey zone of financing is a significant precondition for the normalisation of the media environment and the creation of a healthier atmosphere.

## **Year 2008**

The first half of this year is considered to be by far the most difficult period for the work of the professional media which found themselves under attack not present since the last year of Milosevic's regime.

During that period we had election campaigns, first for the presidential elections and then for the parliamentary ones. In the atmosphere of constant election campaigns, it is very difficult to control the temperature that was constantly very high. This was particularly contributed to by the decision taken around mid-February on the declaration of the independence of Kosovo.

This was the signal for the battle with all those who didn't think the same from the media and the non-governmental sectors. Right-wing organisations and sport fans, who were obviously acting jointly with parts of the state apparatus, were used for this conflict.

During these destructive and obviously orchestrated demonstrations, some media – particularly B 92, which just barely avoided the faith of some of the attacked embassies – were the targets. There were frequent notifications of planted bombs which disrupted normal functioning in this media house, and almost on a daily basis threatening messages were sent through internet to the top ranking people of this company, while at some web pages there were video clips calling for execution of the journalists from this media company.

This horrifying trend reached its culmination on 21st February when the media company B 92 was defended by the arrival of the Minister of Defence, Dragan Sutanovac, and his several-hour long stay at the building until the attack had been prevented by the reaction of the elite police forces for breaking demonstrations.

The consequence of these attacks and threats is that for months now there has been day-and-night police duty in front of the building of the B 92, which has never happened in the history of this media company.

It is to be praised that the police reacted very quickly in the cases of attacks on the newspaper teams in Novi Pazar and Zajecar. The new Minister of the Interior, Ivica Dacic, gave an encouraging statement after the last attack in the east of Serbia. Only such



professional and quick reaction can prevent future attacks and discourage all of those who think that they can go unpunished assaulting the media workers.

Unfortunately, during demonstrations that were organized in Belgrade to protest against the arrest of Radovan Karadzic, media crews were again targets for hooligans' violence. The most serious injuries were suffered by Bosko Brankovic, a cameraman with B92, whose leg was broken and camera and equipment were broken and destroyed. Although present, police officers choose not to react in an appropriate way.

This brutal attack brought back to everyone's attention ideas about potential media boycott of all activities of the Serbian Radical Party members. Opinion that media organization should give up the idea of boycott prevailed, for fears that it could prove counterproductive. There was also the question of sincere readiness of Police to react in a professional and prompt way in future, in order to prevent attacks and discourage those who still think that they can use force against media professional with no legal or any other consequences at all.

## **The End**

An additional impulse to this trend would certainly be given by a concrete action and a new piece of information on those who ordered and executed the murders of Dada Vujasinovic, Slavko Curuvija and Milan Pantic. Each government so far had been promising during their election campaigns concrete results in this field. Unfortunately, this has not happened.

It is certain that journalists' organisations and media associations will not just simply accept the notion that it is impossible to disclose the motives and the perpetrators of such heinous crimes.

And the new Republic government will have to face this challenge – it will be particularly interesting to hear what concrete steps forward have been made in the area of disclosing the perpetrators who have planted a bomb under the window of the flat of our colleague, Dejan Anastasijevic, and almost killed him and his family.

The undisclosed of executors is always encouraging for possible future perpetrators and that is why the creation of the new pro-European Republic government is a new hope that there will be better conditions for the functioning of the media and journalists.

It is precisely epithet “pro-European” that represents the hope that there will be respect for the European standards for the freedom of speech and the independence of the media. In those terms, further getting closer to Brussels will be some kind of the guarantee for the adhering to the suggestions and recommendations of the European Union and the Council of Europe. We are hoping that in this way there will come the end to the period of euro-scepticism which has cost us significant legging behind in the implementation of

the recommendations that would among other improve the preconditions for the functioning of the media.

It is important to adopt as soon as possible the legal solutions that have been awaited for years and whose adoption would complement the legal framework that would create a better environment for the functioning and sustainability of the media. It is also necessary to have in the reasonable future the amendments to the legal regulations that have not stood the test of time and that do not keep up with the new technologies in the areas of importance for the further development of the media. In some cases, there are already prepared solutions for such action in the form of amendments. It is important that the procedure of proposing does not take a long time and that such amendments find themselves in front of the Government and the deputies at the parliament as soon as possible.

It is also necessary to have education of the responsible people in the judiciary system and the judges who frequently fail to understand all the specificities of the media functioning and work.

It is ideal that at each court there is at least one or more judges who have been educated in this field and who may, by the virtue of their education, influence that disputes last as briefly as possible with the view to protect the aggrieved party or the public interest.

The role of the Ombudsman and the Commissioner for public information should be strengthened, as they are independent bodies that have significantly contributed through their work so far to the creation of a better climate and transparency of the work of the state bodies and the respect for the rights of the citizens.

The economic strengthening of the media is the precondition of their independence and that is why it is important to have the privatisation of the remaining municipal radio and television stations which, through their existence, represent a disloyal competition to the private stations that have received eight-year licences for broadcasting their programmes.

This automatically means the creation of a better media atmosphere in which positive climate for investments in media is created based on the economic parameters. Such approach significantly reduces possible daily influences of the politicians and parties on the editorial concept of the media which are in that way also becoming more interesting for the foreign investors who primarily expect the stability and guarantees in order to be able to have the return on investment and earn profits.

This also leads to a better position of the journalists and managers in the media companies. Increased salaries and respect for their trade union rights, combined with permanent education and professional training are the key preconditions for the whole media sector to qualitatively move forward.

Then the preconditions are also created for the new forms of association of the existing media into new forums such as the Association of the National Private Television

Broadcasters, whose members is RTV B92 as well. This Association will help improve the position of private broadcasters, among other things, compared to the Public Service which must achieve significantly better results in its transformation towards a truly public service and in the sphere of collecting the subscription which is the precondition for the abolishment of broadcasting advertisements (such as the case has been with the BBC for decades).

The ANEM should remain as the association which is the central pillar of the professional electronic media throughout Serbia. It should continue to assist in the creation of the best possible conditions for a normal functioning of the electronic media and for the existence of a healthy competition.

It is necessary to support all forms of solidarity and joint projects among the media themselves. This sphere should also be extended to the non-governmental sector which both earlier and now is a true partner of the professional media. It is essential to exercise the influence on the overcoming of the existing divisions and to pacify the conflict between the NUNS and the UNS, which would in turn contribute to a better protection of journalists and their rights.

We are hoping that in the future period there will be less and less reasons for this kind of engagement. Especially if the new government and the ministers with their moves, activities and decision shift things in the right direction. Then it will not be necessary to have frequent interventions of the international organisations for the protection of media and the freedom of speech, as was the case in the past.

The lack of their reaction will be a clear proof that the things in the media world have significantly changed for the better.

*Sasa Mirkovic is one of the founders of the Radio B92 and the Association of Independent Electronic Media (ANEM), he holds university degree in law, he was for many years director of Radio Television station B92, and currently he is ANEM Chairman and B92's director for external communications.*



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