

THE SITUATION OF THE MEDIA IN SERBIA

Christiana Christova, Dirk Förger

After the break-up of what used to be Yugoslavia, the region was plagued by wars and secessions. Naturally enough, the political system changed as well. While Mr Milošević's regime had been authoritarian, Yugoslavia moved towards liberal democracy after 2000 under Mr Kostunica and Mr Đinđić, who was murdered later. Under the current incumbent, Mr Tadić, who was re-elected in May 2008, present-day Serbia is anxious to join the EU, even making accession one of its high-priority goals.

It goes without saying that these political changes affected Serbia's media landscape. While authoritarian control by government authorities that regularly overstepped their limits, strict censorship, and reprisals against journalists were common in the nineties, the transformation of 2000 changed many things. Moreover, the constitution of September 2000 created a legal framework, especially Article 50, which postulates the freedom of the media and the right to information about organs of the state.

Serbia still has no legal code dedicated to the press, and the press council envisaged in 2008 has not yet been established. However, media self-control is now enshrined in a code. The radio landscape has been re-arranged as well. It is regulated in the Radio Act, the Telecommunications Act, and the Public Information Act. A law that will regulate advertising is being prepared at the moment. In addition, a radio agency called RRA was established to deal with developing a strategy for the sector, specifying working conditions for journalists, and protecting the rights of juveniles.

Among the print media, Politika is Serbia's leading daily paper at present. With its circulation of 75,000, it is the mouthpiece of numerous intellectuals. The daily with the highest circulation in Serbia-Montenegro was Večernje Novosti which used to support Mr Milošević's nationalism but is now anxious to promote independence and pluralism. Generally regarded as a tabloid, Blic reported in 1996/97 that the Belgrade government had been overthrown but was later forced to recant by official pressure. To protest against this interference, Blic founded Glas Novosti which today is close to the country's Democratic party. Another paper with a high circulation is Kurir, which appeared for the first time in 2003. Sensationalist in style and nationalist in tone, it is the successor of the daily Nacional.

Founded as early as 1922, Borba, long regarded as Yugoslavia's most reputable paper, was the official organ of the ruling communists. In 1942, the German occupying forces created Slobodna Vojvodina. Published at Novi Sad, the paper changed its name to Dnevnik in 1953 and is now highly

popular among the multi-ethnic reading public of Vojvodina. Launched in 1997, *Danas* focusses on social democracy, European integration, ex-Yugoslavia, and human rights. The papers of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Patriarchate are *Glasnik SPC* and *Pravoslavlje – novine Srpske patrijaršije*, respectively. While the former is seen as liberal, the latter is dedicated to questions of faith, albeit not without a patriotic touch.

More than 150 papers are published in the languages spoken by ethnic minorities, i.e. Albanian, Hungarian, Slovakian, Rumanian, Turkish and Bulgarian. Despite the provocative nature of many of its articles, *Neues Serbisches Politisches Denken* is regarded as an important publication. Another paper of some relevance is *Republika* whose articles often appear in international media.

One of Serbia's oldest and most renowned journals is *Nedeljne Informativne Novine (NIN)* which awards its own literature prize every year. Both the extremely popular weekly *Politikin Zabavnik* and *Vreme*, a journal launched in 1990 and highly critical in political matters, are closely linked to the history of *Politika*. Launched in 1995, *Nezavisna Svetlost* is seen as having a democratic outlook. *Ekonomist* leads in the economic sector, while *Svet kompjutera* is a successful special-interest magazine focussing on PCs. The market for women's journals is dominated by *Blic žena*, closely followed by *Hello!*, a similarly-structured magazine which is the Serbian edition of the eponymous English journal.

Since 2007, five television stations have been holding a national, and 26 a regional license in Serbia, a process in which those stations that used to support Mr Milošević had to jump high hurdles. RTS, a public-service radio station, controls two television channels, RTS 1 and RTS 2, as well as a satellite channel, RTS SAT. Although television is financed by public license fees, it is far from fulfilling a public mission as it does in Germany, for instance. Airing mostly soaps, serials, and films, the most popular private station is RTV Pink, which also used to support Mr Milošević in his time. Founded in the run-up to the elections of October 2000, B92 became an icon of the fight against Mr Milošević. Ten years earlier, RTV Studio B began broadcasting, a studiously non-partisan channel popular in the Belgrade region which defended its liberal outlook even against the pressure of the government. In 2006, Fox was added to the list; focussing on entertainment, it mainly broadcasts telenovelas from Latin America.

In the radio sector, there are four public radio stations under the RTS roof, RTS Radio 1, RTS Radio 2, RTS Radio 3, and Radio Belgrade 202. Besides these, there are numerous private stations like Radio B92, Radio Pink, and Studio B, many of them subsidiaries of large TV stations. Radio Belgrade 1 broadcasts news as well as current-issue, entertainment, and cultural

programmes around the clock. Radio Belgrade 2 and 3 alternate between culture, documentaries, and classical music. Radio Belgrade 202 features news flashes, while B92 and Radio Pink broadcast programmes for young people and pop, folk, and rock music, respectively.

In the communist era, Tanjug was the country's only news agency. The leading agency among the non-aligned states, it maintained 48 correspondents worldwide who covered the crisis in Cuba, the invasion of Czechoslovakia by troops of the Warsaw Pact, and the overthrow of Ceausescu. The arrival of Vreme NDA rang in an era of private, independent agencies in Serbia. Since 1992, the Beta news agency has been offering summaries of major news, bulletins, and economic and security-policy affairs. The next agency to be established was Fonet in 2004.

Although the Radio Act bans concentration in media ownership, subsidiaries are employed to circumvent these regulations. The Act also prohibits parties, entities owned by parties, and state enterprises from establishing their own radio and print media. How little attention is being paid to such regulations is demonstrated by the practice of the Politika group. Founded around the Politika paper, the group was converted into a plc in the early nineties. Its shares were held by major state enterprises which placed their representatives on the board of management, thus curtailing the freedom of the media concerned.

Next to Politika plc, WAZ has been engaged on the Serbian market since 2001 as co-owner and –publisher of all print products offered by Politika plc. Mediaprint, a WAZ subsidiary, holds a license to publish the Serbian version of Autobild. In addition, the WAZ group holds a monopoly on customer journals and industrial publications. The NIN company publishes a journal under the same name. Also-rans include the Adria Medien Serbia GmbH, a joint venture between Gruner + Jahr and Sanoma Magazines International of the Netherlands, and the Austrian Styria Media International group. The takeover of Blic in 2004 gave the Swiss Ringier publishing company a foothold in Serbia. Novosti publishing, a joint venture between former employees of the Večernje Novosti paper and the state, operates two daily papers, ten journals, and a radio station.

The leader in the radio sector is RTV Pink International, a quickly-expanding spin-off of the multinational Pink group. The Pink media group is owned in its entirety by Zeljko Mitrovic. Another heavyweight is RTV B92 which has meanwhile morphed into Radio Broadcasting Company B92 plc. Its largest shareholder is Media Development Loan Fund, which is also represented in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Russia.

When, after the fall of Yugoslavia, life in the region was overshadowed by bloody ethnic conflicts and each and every problem was given an ethnic spin, many media turned into instruments of warfare among the ethnic groups. While those media that were obedient to the regime promoted an authoritarian political culture, the independent media fought for values like ethnic tolerance, peace, cooperation, and democracy. The turning point did not arrive until 2000, when the DOS alliance demanded the resignation of the RTS leadership and many papers announced their independence.

Even so, another setback followed after the murder of Zoran Đinđić: in 2005, numerous journalists were sentenced in proceedings which the organization Reporters without Frontiers described as 'unfounded persecution'. In 2007, the journalist Dejan Anastasijevic was assassinated for his research into war crimes in former Yugoslavia. A new wave of nationalist mobilization triggered the Kosovo's declaration of independence, and both RTS and Tanjug called upon all public broadcasting stations to stand up for Serbia's territorial integrity. And in 2008, there were reports about hidden bombs and appeals to murder journalists.

There is much that remains to be desired with regard to the situation of the media in Serbia: the democratic development that began in 2000 needs consolidating. Institutions and government officials should be motivated to speak more readily to others but a few selected media. Journalists should be given better legal options for in-service training, and the deployment of judges in media law should be promoted. It would also be desirable to establish a press council for the print media. Another urgent matter is to introduce a financing model capable of ensuring the independence of the public media and preventing potential interference. Privatizing many media is an option that should be considered to end the lack of resources which handicaps especially the quality media. Light should be thrown on the ownership situation in the media sector, and the influence of the old elites would have to be contained. Nor is that all, but still, it is a good thing that many Serbian media today define themselves by their opposition to the 'old regime'. The worth of such an avowal of democratic values cannot be overestimated.