

THE MEDIA IN THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA

Government Control over Serbia's Media

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Most of the major media in Serbia are currently under the control of the government, headed by President Slobodan Milosevic. State-run television—particularly Belgrade Television—continues to play an important role in shaping public opinion. There are independent media, but their effectiveness is impaired by their inability to reach the majority of the public and by the government's periodic harassment. As long as Milosevic remains in power, it is almost inconceivable that the domestic independent media will be allowed to grow into a force whose criticism could threaten the regime.

By virtue of the fact that it controls most of the influential media in the rump Yugoslavia, the government of Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic regulates almost all the information that reaches ordinary citizens there. When the regime originally established its control over the media, it was motivated in large part by a desire to gain public support for war against Croatia and for Serbian objectives in the Bosnian conflict. Today, control over the media continues to serve the Belgrade authorities by giving them access to the most important means of generating and sustaining public support for the Milosevic regime.

Through their control over such powerful outlets as Belgrade Television and Serbia Radio and Television, the government authorities retain the capacity to vet information that reaches the public and to shape public opinion. Moreover, what can be said of conditions in Serbia also holds true in the other republic of the rump Yugoslavia, Montenegro; the government in Cetinje, like its counterpart in

Belgrade, has absolute control over the media—particularly the major broadcasting stations, such as Montenegro Radio and Television—and exercises this influence to win public support for its policies.

To be sure, not all the media in Serbia are under the government's control, but independent sources are hampered in their ability to have their messages heard because they can reach only limited audiences; because they are harassed by the government; and because they simply cannot afford to compete with the state-run enterprises.

Background

The main broadcasting media, which include Serbia Radio and Television and the most-watched station in the capital, Belgrade Television, are controlled by the regime. There are independent broadcasting media—primarily, Radio B-92 and Television Studio B; but they can be received directly only in Belgrade. In addition, Belgrade exerts its influence over Tanjug, the state news agency,

which until November 1991 was independent but was then purged of those staff members perceived as being against Milosevic. Today, Tanjug's influence on the media is pervasive, as even independent organizations make use of its analyses. The news agency is notorious for its blurred factual reporting and biased commentary.

Since about the summer of 1992, when independent-minded editors and journalists managed to reassert their influence, the press has been largely out of Milosevic's hands. For example, the two well-established daily newspapers *Politika* (Serbia's oldest surviving daily, founded in 1904) and *Borba* (which during the socialist period was an official government publication), as well as the weekly *NIN*, are independent. Since Milosevic's rise to power the independent press has proliferated. Perhaps the most widely known independent journal launched under the Milosevic regime is the weekly *Vreme*. It was initially funded by the personal resources of the group of journalists that founded it, but it subsequently gained enough advertising support to ensure its survival.

The Serbian media began to come under tight government control in 1987, when Milosevic came to power. The first two casualties in his bid to seize total control over the media were the daily newspaper *Politika* and Belgrade Television. In 1987 *Politika* became slavishly supportive of Milosevic, and for at least three years it published articles extolling the vir-

tues of Serbian nationalism and praising Milosevic for what it termed his firm and enlightened leadership. Before Milosevic's rise to power, *Politika* had been renowned for maintaining high journalistic standards, even through most of the socialist period. While Josip Broz Tito, the leader of socialist Yugoslavia, was in power, *Politika* managed to elude direct state control by becoming a "socialized" firm—that is, one that was run by its employees. In fact, in socialist Yugoslavia most media enjoyed a large degree of autonomy, provided, of course, that they did nothing to undermine the influence of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia.

Milosevic's primary method of establishing control over the media was to force uncooperative staff out of work. This practice of purging those who do not agree with government policies continues. One source estimates that in January 1993 alone "Serbia Radio and Television was purged of more than 1,000 perceived Milosevic opponents."¹ Nevertheless, intimidation has not always guaranteed Milosevic success. In the case of *Politika*, the government's attempt to force recalcitrant journalists out of work backfired, as it provoked so much opposition that the regime was obliged to back down.

Hostilities erupted between *Politika's* staff and the government in July 1992, when Belgrade tried to enforce newly passed legislation that would have turned the daily into an organ of the state.² Under this law, the government would have had the power to hire and fire the newspaper's employees and to determine its editorial policy.³ (By the summer of 1992 *Politika* had adopted a critical position on Belgrade's involvement in the Bosnian war.⁴) The staff of *Politika* responded to the government's legislation by striking.

¹ *The Times*, 28 December 1993.

² *Vecernji list*, 25 July 1992.

³ *Tanjug*, 31 July 1992.

⁴ Reuters, 31 July 1992.

On 30 July an estimated 4,000 employees, including some who worked for the newspaper's affiliated television and radio stations, walked off the job in protest. It seems likely that the government's subsequent decision to let the newspaper remain independent was attributable not only to the strike but also to the fact that the journal did not pose a fundamental threat to the regime. That is, while at times *Politika* did publish articles critical of Serbia's role in Bosnia, it never really called into question the nationalism promoted by Milosevic; nor did it denounce the goal of a Greater Serbia—the incorporation of Bosnian lands into the rump Yugoslavia.

Coercive Measures against Opposition Media

The apparent defeat that the government experienced in its conflict with *Politika* has not, to be sure, discouraged it from using strong-arm tactics in its dealings with the independent media. In many cases, the government's repressive steps have gone well beyond the passage of legislation aimed at eradicating opposition. It has been reported, for example, that the state police have harassed and even abducted prominent journalists who have voiced their opposition to Milosevic.⁵ Moreover, journalists who ventured to criticize Milosevic's involvement in the Bosnian war have received threats from fervent nationalists who, it is speculated, may be acting at the government's behest. Even foreign journalists working in the rump Yugoslavia are not immune; some have been intimidated or assaulted.⁶

Repression against the independent media tends to increase when criticism of the government is perceived as being particularly pointed. For instance, the independent television station Studio B, which has been

⁵ *Politika*, 24 September 1993. See also *Borba*, 5 October 1993.

⁶ *The Times*, 28 December 1993.

a routine target of government harassment and even of bomb threats from pro-Milosevic nationalists, has been subjected to police raids precisely at those times when its programs have been most critical of government policy or when it has broadcast the message of opposition politicians. On the day Studio B was scheduled to air its first broadcast, in March 1990, it was raided by the police, and the station was kept off the air for about three months. A year later, in March 1991, it was raided during a broadcast about large antigovernment rallies; but that time the police did not succeed in interfering with the programming.⁷ Also, vital broadcasting equipment has been seized periodically from Studio B, allegedly by the police.⁸ The harassment of the station continues to this day. One of the most recent manifestations of government hostility occurred on 15 December 1993, when the state authorities tried to jam the station's live broadcast of a political rally attended by Vuk Draskovic, a major leader of the political opposition.

Perhaps what has prevented Milosevic's regime from completely muzzling the independent media is the fact that their ability to reach a wide audience is in any case severely restricted and they therefore do not pose a serious threat to the government. Furthermore, Milosevic, conscious that the international community is watching Serbia, may be hoping to make a favorable impression by leaving vestiges of a free, if ultimately powerless, press intact.

Independent Media Hampered by Economic Problems

The dire economic situation in Serbia has made it almost impossible for the press to reach a wide audience.⁹ In December 1993, according to conser-

⁷ See Reuters, 7 September 1993.

⁸ *Ibid.* See also *Borba*, 29 December 1992.

⁹ *Intervju*, 15 October 1993.

vative estimates, Serbia's monthly inflation rate hit a high of 50,000%.¹⁰ This development has reduced wages paid in the official currency, the dinar, to virtually nothing and has turned newspapers into luxury items that only the relatively affluent can afford. In addition, the sanctions imposed against the rump Yugoslavia by the international community have had a negative impact on all the media, and particularly the newspapers, which are suffering shortages of vital materials needed for production.

According to Nicolas Miletitch, a journalist working in the West, the UN-imposed sanctions have greatly restricted the flow of paper and newsprint to the rump Yugoslavia,¹¹ and this has contributed to a drop in circulation. During the course of 1993 many independent newspapers had to cut back production dramatically. *Borba*, for example, boasted a circulation of between 35,000 and 42,000 during the first half of 1993 but was reduced to a print run of about 7,500 by August. Other major papers also had to curtail their print runs. *Vecernje novosti* was producing 70,000 copies in August—that is, only about 20% of its circulation at the start of the year.¹²

The sanctions and the poor state of the economy have also taken their toll on independent television and radio. Ever since the sanctions have been in place advertising revenue has declined steadily. In addition, equipment needed for broadcasting has become prohibitively expensive. Since the independent Belgrade-based television stations cannot afford to purchase powerful transmission equipment, they are reduced to serving the Belgrade market. To be sure, some television equipment has been exempted from the embargo; for instance, in late 1992 the UN Security Council agreed to allow about \$238,000 worth of equipment, includ-

ing cameras and video monitors, to be delivered to Television Studio B.¹³ Nevertheless, the station, hampered by outdated equipment and without access to a transmitter capable of reaching the entire population, has a "range limited to a radius of about 40 miles, reaching a maximum of barely 2 million [out of an estimated 9 million] Serbs."¹⁴ Providing the station with the technical means to reach the whole of the rump Yugoslavia could require a capital outlay of some \$12–14 million.¹⁵

Controlling Hearts and Minds through Television

Since sanctions and economic conditions in general have priced newspapers beyond most citizens' means, it is increasingly common for the public to turn to television as the main source of information. According to polling data, some 64% of Serbs depend on television for their news, while only 12% listen to radio and 11% read newspapers.¹⁶

According to surveys taken by the Center for Political Research and Public Opinion of the Institute of Social Sciences at the University of Belgrade, Belgrade Television is watched by an estimated 66% of television viewers.¹⁷ The data gathered by the center were collected in face-to-face interviews with 1,904 residents of the rump Yugoslavia (excluding the province of Kosovo) and constitute perhaps the most thorough analysis of the public's media consumption habits.¹⁸ According to the

surveys, a third of the 1,904 respondents said they found Belgrade Television's reporting to be trustworthy, while 14% said they did not find any domestic television coverage to be reliable.¹⁹

If the data compiled at the University of Belgrade are accurate—that is, if a third of the country's population does trust the reporting of a television station that is securely under the government's control—then it should be possible for Milosevic to maintain a firm grip on power through media manipulation. There can be little doubt that the media have a significant influence on the formation of public opinion in Serbia. The University of Belgrade surveys show that support for the government is weakest in Belgrade, among people under thirty, and among the educated.²⁰ It is precisely in those parts of the country where the independent media have a chance of being heard, read, or seen that opposition to Milosevic is strongest. Conversely, in rural areas, where Milosevic's media enjoy a monopoly, support for the government is strongest. This is a clear indication that the media are a critical variable in the shaping of public opinion and the generation of support for Milosevic's nationalistic policies.

Assuming that Milosevic really has gained the full confidence of a third of the country's citizens (those reporting total trust in Belgrade Television), that 33% of the population would constitute a large enough base of support to keep his Socialist Party

conducted by the University of Belgrade were only the third such project undertaken by the center in as many years. Respondents were selected on the basis of quota sampling—that is, they were chosen in accordance with such demographic criteria as gender, age, level of education, and place of residence (urban versus rural). As the data come from a quota sample, it is not possible to calculate a margin of error.

¹⁹ MOR report 1,178/93.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³ *The New York Times*, 20 November 1992.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 19 November 1992.

¹⁵ *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 13 October 1992.

¹⁶ *The New York Times*, 24 July 1993.

¹⁷ These data were published in a report issued by the Media and Opinion Research Department of the RFE/RL Research Institute in September 1993; see MOR report 1,178/93.

¹⁸ There have been very few extensive surveys on the Serbian public's attitudes toward the media. The May 1993 surveys

¹⁰ *The European*, 17–23 December 1993.

¹¹ AFP, 14 August 1993.

¹² *Ibid.*

of Serbia (SPS) in power at the legislative level. It has been estimated that only about 40% of the vote would suffice to give the SPS an absolute majority in Serbia's parliament;²¹ and 33% would always at least ensure that the Socialists held the greatest share of the parliamentary seats, should they continue to face a fragmented opposition.

Furthermore, the results of other polls reveal the astonishing efficacy and speed with which Milosevic can shape public opinion through state-run television. One specific example should suffice to show how successful he continues to be in swaying, almost at whim, the bulk of public opinion. Throughout the first few months of 1993 the president repeatedly said for the record that he opposed all UN proposals to bring an end to the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Via state television, Milosevic hammered home this message to the Serbian public; and, according to polls published in the Belgrade press, it sided with the president in rejecting peace.²² In April, however, in an abrupt about-face after a falling-out with Bosnian Serbian leaders, Milosevic suddenly voiced his support for a UN-backed peace plan. Belgrade Television, taking its cue from Milosevic, abruptly tailored its coverage of events in Bosnia to accentuate the president's newly expressed desire for peace; while Milosevic, it stressed, was interested in bringing about a rapid end to hostilities, the recalcitrant leaders of Bosnia's Serbs were embarking on a plan to prolong the fighting. Only a few weeks after Belgrade Television had begun stressing this new line, surveys showed that public opinion

²¹ *NIN*, 29 October 1993.

²² See *Chicago Tribune*, 11 May 1993. *Borba* of 7 May 1993 reported that on 27 April 39.4% of respondents to a poll favored the Vance-Owen peace plan for Bosnia, while 37.5% did not and 23% said they did not know which stand to take. See also *Chicago Tribune*, 11 May 1993.

had completely swung around to support Milosevic's emphasis on the need for a Bosnian peace. According to one poll, roughly 61.7% of respondents favored the idea of a peace plan for Bosnia, while only 18.3% did not and 20% indicated that they did not know which stand to take.²³ The survey results, reported in *Borba*, were based on a telephone poll of 300 respondents taken on 6 May 1993.²⁴

The amount of public support Milosevic managed to drum up for the war in Bosnia and the one against Croatia during that former Yugoslav republic's bid for independence in 1991 serves as another stark example of the degree to which he has used the media to influence the public mood and generate wide acceptance of his regime's policies. In order to make war palatable to the public, Milosevic first used the media to create the image of an innocent Serbian nation victimized by hostile foreign powers, such as Germany, and by destructive elements in the former Yugoslavia, such as a revived Croatian anti-Serb and pro-

²³ *Chicago Tribune*, 11 May 1993.

²⁴ See *Borba*, 7 May 1993. People throughout Serbia, with the exception of the predominantly Albanian province of Kosovo, were polled, and data were collected on demographic variables such as age and gender. According to the *Borba* report, 46.7% of the respondents were male and 53.3% female. About 16.3% were between eighteen and twenty-nine years of age; 16% from thirty to thirty-nine; 21% from forty to forty-nine; 20% from fifty to fifty-nine; and 26.7% over sixty. It cannot be assumed that the data can be generalized to reflect the population, since—particularly in view of the soaring inflation—it is difficult to estimate what percentage of the population can afford to own a telephone. Nevertheless, if the polling sample was in fact a random survey reflective of the general population, the data dealing with support for the peace plan theoretically have a margin of error of $\pm 8\%$.

fascist, or Ustasha, movement. To this end, Serbs in Croatia and throughout the rump Yugoslavia were treated to a steady diet of media images depicting Croatian President Franjo Tudjman's regime as "a new Ustasha state"; the obvious implication was that if the Serbs did not defend themselves, they would be faced with a repeat of the genocide conducted by Ustasha-led Croatian nationalists during World War II. Once the Serbian public had assimilated the idea that it was the victim of hostile forces, it could then be conditioned to accept the premises that war against other peoples of the former Yugoslavia was morally justified and that a state based on the ideal of ethnic Serbian purity, created through ethnic cleansing, was not only a permissible but a laudable objective. It must be stressed, however, that the state-controlled media have not overtly supported ethnic cleansing.

Media Control and Political Campaigns

Milosevic has a history of using the media under his control as a tool to crush his political opposition. For example, on 20 December 1992 elections were held in the rump Yugoslavia for deputies to national, republican, and local governing bodies. Milosevic himself ran for the Serbian Presidency, and his most serious challenger was Milan Panic, a Serbian-born American businessman who served as prime minister of the rump Yugoslavia from July to December 1992. On polling day Milosevic garnered some 57% of the ballots cast, as against the roughly 34% that Panic received. Without question, the state-run media had to be credited at least in part with engineering Panic's defeat. Belgrade Television tended to avoid even alluding to his campaign; and whenever he was mentioned—almost invariably toward the very end of a newscast—he was shown in footage that highlighted a distinct American accent and suggested that

he had a poor command of the Serbian language. It was also implied that he was a disloyal Serb responsible for the UN's imposition of sanctions against the rump Yugoslavia. Meanwhile, Milosevic was extolled as one of the greatest Serbian leaders ever to have lived. In effect, Belgrade Television, particularly during political campaigns, has supported the SPS by nurturing a cult of personality around Milosevic and ignoring the political opposition.

On 19 December 1993 Serbs once again went to the polls to elect a government, but only seats for the Serbian republic's parliament were contested. During that campaign, as in the previous year, the state-run media reports consisted chiefly of positive remarks about the SPS; the opposition parties were, in the main, either ignored or denounced. At a press conference on 30 October the leader of the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DEPOS), Draskovic, expressed the opinion that the opposition parties were facing defeat at the polls on 19 December, because "state television is closed off to the opposition."²⁵ The government's control over the media, he said, made it difficult if not impossible for the opposition parties to communicate their platforms to the majority of the electorate. A careful monitoring of election coverage proved the validity of Draskovic's observations, showing that "state television had given 227 minutes of coverage to the Socialists . . . [while spending] just twelve minutes on Mr. Draskovic's party and even less on the other opposition parties."²⁶

The influence of television on the Serbian public was evidenced clearly in the December election returns. Despite the fact that Serbia's economy was in ruins, in no small measure owing to the policies endorsed by the SPS, more people opted to vote for the Socialists in

1993 than in 1992. The SPS received 37% of the ballots cast (an increase over the roughly 30% the party had won in December 1992) and gained 123 seats (twenty-two more than in the previous parliament). In the next parliamentary elections the Socialists will probably remain the largest party in the legislature and may secure a majority mandate in the 250-seat body. Perhaps voters will eventually turn away from the SPS, particularly if they can be convinced that they are enduring an abysmal standard of living because the Socialists are to blame for the deterioration in the economy. Nevertheless, it is more likely that a significant segment of the Serbian population will continue to vote in the foreseeable future for the SPS, having once again been persuaded to do so by the propaganda churned out by the state-run media.

The Socialists conducted their 1993 campaign in part on a platform that stressed that all Serbia's economic problems were the result of the Western world's strategy of choking off Serbia's economic development through the UN sanctions.²⁷ Many elderly voters, who constitute one of Milosevic's traditional support blocs, opted to vote for the SPS in great numbers because they had evidently accepted the SPS's interpretation—aggressively promoted in the state-run media—of the reasons for the country's economic problems.²⁸ One elderly voter, for example, alluded to official state media reports when explaining how he voted: "They [the Socialists] can't do anything if Europe imposes sanc-

tions. . . . They are not responsible."²⁹ Other voters had evidently been swayed by the state-run media's policy of depicting Milosevic as an infallible statesman. An elderly woman, upon leaving the polls, reportedly remarked that "I voted for my Slobodan. He is the best, the most intelligent."³⁰ Despite the fact that Milosevic was not running for office, the image of the infallible leader conjured up by Belgrade Television helped persuade voters to cast their ballots for the Socialists. As one voter responding to the exit poll observed, "We would be at war now if anyone else was in power. . . . [Milosevic is] the most stable candidate."³¹

The Future

It is highly unlikely—almost inconceivable—that at any point in the near future Milosevic will come to tolerate well-developed, independent media capable of reaching most citizens. He has been able to stay in office and shape public opinion precisely because he has controlled most of the influential media outlets. If exit polls taken during the recent parliamentary election are an accurate indication of how strongly voters have been swayed by the state-run media, Milosevic can attribute most of the votes in support of the SPS to the propaganda formulated by broadcasting media such as Belgrade Television, which has evidently convinced a significant number of people that the hardships caused by the UN sanctions are in no way connected with the policies developed and pursued by Milosevic and the SPS. Thus it seems that Milosevic will remain willing to put up with independent media only as long as they can be "tamed" or at least pose no threat to his hold on power.

²⁵ *Borba*, 17 December 1993.

²⁶ Reuters, 19 December 1993. On 3 January 1994 *Vreme*, in a postelection analysis, noted that Milosevic's Socialists had scored electoral gains in rural constituencies, where the state-run media have a monopoly, but failed to make headway in urban centers, particularly Belgrade, where the independent media have access to the public.

²⁹ Reuters, 19 December 1993.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Politika*, 31 October 1993.

²⁶ *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 December 1993.