

monitoring report

Elections B&H '96

bulletin of the institute for war & peace reporting & media plan

12 June 1996

number 2

The B&H Media Week in Review: 3-9 June

Confusion prevailed in much of the B&H media during the week. Had the election starting pistol been fired at the Geneva meeting of the signatories of the Dayton accords on 2 June, or had it merely been brought out, admired and possibly cleaned? Warren Christopher, speaking for a US administration that knows itself to be in the throes of an election campaign, apparently planned at least to load the gun himself, intending that it should be fired this week in Florence. For he was determined that Bosnians, too, must have their chance to vote, sooner rather than later, and notwithstanding such scruples as the OSCE might entertain about the conditions in which they would do so. Nor were the presidents (and official media) of Croatia and Serbia in any doubt that the race had effectively begun. They had done their bits to make sure.

Media in *Armi ja*-controlled parts of the Federation were not so sure. Some declared a mis-start, making heavy use of the despatches of *New York Times* reporter Chris Hedges. His assaults on US policy - and on the OSCE for kowtowing to Washington - seem to have encouraged second thoughts about both the desirability and inevitability of elections before 14 September.

President Izetbegović, freed from Christopher's Geneva embrace, appeared on TV

B&H's "Dnevnik" on 3 June to advise "Bosnian parties to boycott the elections in as much as conditions [for them] are not fulfilled." Yet the great 8 June gathering on Žuč hill, celebrating the fourth anniversary of the *Armi ja*'s first wartime victory, was mounted as an SDA election rally. TV B&H cooperated fully. "Dnevnik"'s presenter assessed the crowd as totalling between 90,000 and 100,000 persons. And although the film clip showed SDA flags and placards, featured a green flag with star and crescent moon and carried the rhythmic chants of "Alija! Alija!" as the president arrived, the camera failed to pan the assembled multitude in a manner which might have lent substance to the presenter's estimate of their number.

This may not be a campaign about which the president and his party are altogether happy, but it is a campaign nonetheless, and one in which Izetbegović seems determined to exact - and TV B&H to provide - all the advantages of incumbency.

Things were otherwise in Mostar, despite the fact that municipal and city elections there are definitely scheduled to take place within the next three weeks. Election coverage on local television was conspicuous by its absence on both banks of the Neretva. In its sole, 20-word report on the forthcoming poll,

TV (east) Mostar's evening news on 8 June mentioned only that the ruling SDA had adopted (unnamed) candidates. Croatian Television Mostar, for its part, broadcast no programmes of its own during the week owing to a power failure, substituting Croatian Television's "Dnevnik".

Radio Herceg Bosna, on the other hand, made up for this gap by conspicuous demonstrations of fealty to the HDZ, by disregarding the registration for the elections of the multinational "Association of Citizens for a United Mostar" and by regularly making disparaging references to events and conditions on "the Muslim side".

In Republika Srpska, of course, the campaign has been going on for weeks. The pursuit of Karadžić and Mladić by The Hague Tribunal - and the accompanying hue and cry inside and outside Bosnia - have given the SDS no end of opportunities to identify the fates of their leaders and party with those of their nation and "state". The media have played their assigned part, both in covering the frenzied meetings at which the populace declares its support for and devotion to the alleged war criminals, and in providing locally convincing explanations for the behaviour of a preternaturally hostile international community.

As Radio Republika Srpska's "Dnevnik" on 5 June reported SRNA's Paris correspondent as commenting, "The American Secretary of State Warren Christopher is not insisting on the arrest of Srpska President Radovan Karadžić and General Ratko Mladić because he thinks they are really criminals, but in order to get rid of persons for whom the majority of Srpska citizens would vote in any free and fair election." On the other hand, the same oracle also assured his listeners that, "The international community fears that further efforts to satanise the Serbs, and more demands that Srpska President Radovan Karadžić and Srpska Army Chief of Staff

Commander Colonel-General Ratko Mladić be arrested and delivered to The Hague Tribunal, could provoke a general national uprising."

But it is not only fear of Serb unity and might that characterises the west. Just as President Tuđman has of late been wont to explain Croatia's failure to gain admittance to the Council of Europe by referring to west Europeans' envy of Croatian democracy, so too do the leaders of Republika Srpska detect jealousy on the part of their tormentors. According to Dragan Mirić, speaking at a rally in defence of Karadžić and Mladić televised by TV Srpska on 4 June, "Having failed to defeat us militarily and exterminate us physically, they are now trying to do so treacherously, politically, stealthily, in the western way... When we were practicing democracy, they were warring with red Indians."

Fantasy, however, knows few bounds. In separate interviews on 11 June, Admiral Leighton Smith told the BBC World Service and Carl Bildt advised TV B&H of their shared faith that Bosnian Serbs would themselves turn out Karadžić and company. IFOR, according to Leighton Smith, would certainly not be going after The Hague's most wanted pair.

Media Manipulation in Tuzla

Even before an official polling date has been established, media abuses are beginning to poison the unofficial electoral contest in Tuzla, Bosnia's second city. Preferential treatment of political patrons and strategic omissions by rival broadcasters are clouding the political duel between Tuzla mayor Selim Bešliagić's UBSD (Union of Bosnian Social Democrats), and the SDA (Party for Democratic Action), which controls the cantonal government.

Last week's furore began following a candle-light vigil commemorating the 71 people killed in a Serb artillery attack one year ago. Soon after, a highly-charged commentary appeared in a local paper, *Zmaj od Bosne*, and was read on TV TPK, cantonal television, claiming that candles were alien to Islamic tradition and accusing mayor Bešliagić of injuring Muslims' religious sensitivities. Because both these news organisations are closely aligned with the cantonal SDA, the commentary quickly ignited passions in Tuzla's polarised political scene. The emotional riposte came two days later. With the help of the UBSD press centre, parents of the victims gathered to protest the commentary. They also issued a joint statement which was read in its entirety on TV Tuzla, the municipal station which is close to Bešliagić. Significantly, neither station was willing to broadcast the other side of the controversy.

Similar transgressions by Tuzla's broadcasting media were evident throughout the week of 5 - 10 June, with the rival stations engaging in preferential treatment of their political patrons. TV Tuzla gave blanket coverage to Mayor Bešliagić, who appeared no fewer than 15 times in six main news bulletins. The municipal station also failed to provide any coverage in its 5 June "Dnevnik" of a meeting of the district council of the SDA, at which electoral issues were discussed. This was in marked contrast to the station's coverage of two news conferences by the smaller MBO (Muslim-Bošnjak Organisation) and Stranka za B&H (Party for Bosnia).

For its part, TV TPK also employed the device of strategic omissions as well as outright character assassination. One clear example was TPK's coverage of an 8 June visit to Tuzla by a high-level OSCE delegation. Dropping all pretence of neutrality, TPK led

its evening news with the delegation's "protocol" meeting with the cantonal council of the SDA. What TPK failed to report was the fact that the OSCE representatives also held talks on the same day with Bešliagić, at which the forthcoming elections figured prominently. Indeed, Bešliagić appeared in TPK's "Dnevnik" only in negative contexts, such as in the aforementioned commentary. Another transgression occurred in TPK's coverage of a Bešliagić press conference on 10 June. Instead of elaborating the content of the press conference (in which Bešliagić re-iterated his criticism of alleged abuses in hiring practices by cantonal authorities), the TPK reporter gave space only to Bešliagić's SDA critics. At no point in the broadcast were viewers informed about the main issues in the controversy, nor were the positions of all the main players detailed.

Though these examples may seem innocuous in a broader context, they are disturbing evidence that some journalists are ready to abandon professional scruples for political fealty. Neither side was willing to present the position of political rivals in reasonable terms, and the consequence is a local news scene polarised across party lines. This bodes ill for Tuzla's media and citizens when the electoral contest heats up later in the summer.

Similar tactics were employed in RTV Zenica's prominent coverage of the city's SDA mayor. Though the mayor's political affiliation was not mentioned, the intensive reporting of his every move served as a political advertisement for the local SDA in much the same way as TV Tuzla's coverage of Mayor Bešliagić. Zenica's independent ZETEL was the only station to rise above the fray by offering equal time to each political party that was active in the week.

PRESS ARTICLES RELATING DIRECTLY OR INDIRECTLY TO THE 1996 ELECTIONS

Period of coverage:

- daily newspapers, 28 May - 9 June 1996
- weekly, fortnightly and monthly publications appearing in the same period.

Dailies: Oslobođenje, Večernje Novine, Dnevni Avaz

Weeklies: Svijet, Ljiljan, Hrvatska Riječ

Fortnightlies and monthlies: Slobodna Bosna, Focus, Dani.

title	issues	number of articles	number of articles per issue	most common formats
dailies				
Oslobođenje	11	35	2 - 5 articles	reports and brief news items
Večernje novine	11	33	1 - 5 articles	reports and brief news items
Dnevni Avaz	11	39	up to 6 articles	brief news items and reports
weeklies, fortnightlies and monthlies				
Svijet	3	3	1	commentaries
Ljiljan	3	6	0 - 3	commentaries
Focus	2	1	0 - 1	commentary
Slobodna Bosna	2	2 (indirect)	1	carricatures
Dani	1	3	3	brief notes, interview
Hrvatska riječ	2	2	2	commentaries

Media Briefs

Radio Studio 99, Sarajevo

"Hyde Park", the popular, twice-weekly phone-in programme had problems with its telephones last week. Lines into the studio were blocked on several occasions on 4 June (when the subject for discussion was the existence of two armies in the Federation) and cut off completely on 6 June, forcing the abandonment of the scheduled debate on plans to send an official B&H delegation to Belgrade for negotiations on the establishment of relations with Serbia. The host remarked on the latter date that the occurrence was hardly accidental, and that Studio 99 was disliked by the ruling clique.

The presenter of this show discourages his anonymous callers from engaging in party politics, but numerous complaints about the current political order are voiced. One caller on 4 June asked, "Where are we atheists supposed to go - to Albania?" Another exclaimed, "What sort of common army! We've got to kill all the Ustaše. If we could destroy the Četniks, then we can get rid of the Ustaše as well. I'm ready to be the first to take up my rifle." He was immediately answered by another caller: "I cannot agree with the previous listener who says all Ustaše should be killed. We must and we can live together."

Independent Television Studio 99, Sarajevo

Unlike "Hyde Park" on radio, Studio 99's principal television newscast, "Oko 22", shows no tendency either to challenge or slight the ruling SDA. President Izetbegović and other high officials receive full and uncritical coverage of their every ceremonial appearance and pronouncement, regardless of whether or not they are assuming state or party roles. Opposition parties and leaders, on the other hand, appear to receive adequate coverage of their press conferences and speeches.

TV B&H

State television began to air on 3 June its weekly, one-hour, prime-time election magazine. Parties are allowed 4.5 minutes to state their cases. Three minor parties (including that of Mrs Amila Omersoftić, the director of RTV B&H) and an independent candidate took part in the first programme. The broadcast also covers party press conferences. These, with one exception during the week under review (that of the Social Democrats on 5 June), are excluded from the 19.30 "Dnevnik".

Besides affording representatives of the ruling party abundant time on screen in their state roles, TV B&H reporters and presenters seemingly feel compelled to "correct" the statements and complaints even of the SDA's Federation partners. Thus, on 6 June, following a "Dnevnik" report on the Serb Civic Council's (SGV) allegation that government officials are permitting refugees to displace Serbs from their homes in the Sarajevo suburbs, the reporter asked, "How come they didn't say why these people are moving into Serb houses?"

An even clearer example of such practice was offered in the same newscast's coverage of Federation Defence Minister Vladimir Šoljić's press conference at which he accused the Bošnjak side of obstructing the passage of the new defence law. Using either voice-overs or taking the minister's actual words out of context, a false impression of Šoljić's statement was created, making it appear that his strictures were not in fact addressed to the SDA's parliamentary deputies.

Technical Note

Owing to communications difficulties, no monitoring report was received from Banja Luka this week.

