

monitoring report

Elections B&H '96

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The B&H Media Week in Review: 10-16 June

Democracy under Attack

The thugs who attacked Haris Silajdžić in Cazin on 15 June not only drew blood from the leader of the Party for B&H, they also provided government-aligned broadcasters with an unwelcome opportunity to inflict even more serious wounds upon their own reputations for competence and credibility. Their reports of the incident were late, confused and partial, indicating a failed attempt to manage and minimise the story.

TV B&H reported the assault on Silajdžić in the middle portion of its football-delayed "Dnevnik" on Saturday night. The Party for B&H's press release, alleging that Silajdžić's attackers had carried SDA flags and pictures of President Izetbegović, was, however, read in full. By Sunday night, the story had ascended the scale of newsworthiness, and an equally late "Dnevnik" was devoted almost entirely to the event. Coverage began with an account by the Federal Ministry of Interior of how the Cazin police had done all in their power to protect Silajdžić, defending him with their own bodies. This statement was reinforced by telephoned testimony by Edhem Veladžić, minister of police in the Unsko-Sanski canton. According to him, the police had indeed intervened in Cazin; but he excused the violence by alleging that "one person in the last row at the [Party for B&H's earlier] convention in Bihać had sworn at President Izetbegović and insulted Islam." Bihać is 25 km from Cazin.

The pictures of Silajdžić's wounds and damaged car which followed belied the insistence by the authorities that he had been fully protected. While the former premier, speaking by telephone from Zagreb, claimed that the confrontation had lasted for some four hours, during which time the police were nowhere to be seen. Next came an OSCE statement condemning the incident and supporting Silajdžić's version of events. OSCE observers had been present and had witnessed what took place.

Radio B&H's flagship newscast, the 15.00 "Dnevnik", generally avoids mention of opposition parties. On 15 June, however, it gave extensive coverage to the joint press conference of the five parties (UBSD, SDP, HSS, MBO and RS) seeking belated registration for their combined list to fight the Mostar elections. Yet any notion that this development might have augured a new policy of editorial openness towards the opposition was scotched the next day. News of the attack on Silajdžić was omitted from the headlines and relegated to fourth place on what was otherwise made to seem a thin news day. Without any on-the-spot report, Radio B&H relied on meagre agency despatches, fragmentary extracts from the Party for B&H's communique and longer citations from that of the SDA. "Dnevnik" listeners were left to ponder the meaning of President Izetbegović's statement, broadcast the previous afternoon, that "on the territory controlled by the legitimate B&H government there are no problems regarding access to the media."

Manipulation on the North-West Frontier

The Unsko-Sanski canton represents a virtual information desert so far as Federation-based media are concerned. Radio and television signals emanating from neighbouring Croatia and Republika Srpska dominate the airwaves. Radio Bihać relies upon Radio B&H for its reports of national and international events. When Radio B&H's signal cannot be heard, then Radio Bihać omits all but local news from its bulletins. These, however, appear designed to support the ruling SDA in the canton. Our Bihać monitor reports as follows on the media week leading up to the disturbances in Cazin:

The B&H Army's celebration of "The Days of June Resistance" served to publicise a religious leader - the Bihać mufti - who is also one of the SDA chieftains in the region. Radio Bihać's (21.00) "Hronika dana" on 12 June broadcast a part of his speech at the army gala that day. His basic message was clear: "Those who invented fascism cannot teach us democracy. We dare not allow anyone else to teach us democracy. What they want, when they teach us that democracy, is to break us and to finish off what our enemies started." The same army celebrations were used on 15 June to promote General Dudaković's SDA career.

Several times during the week Radio Bihać carried advertisements for the founding assembly of the Party for B&H which took place in the town on 15 June. That evening, at 21.15, it broadcast a recording of the proceedings as a supplement to "Hronika dana". In introducing the item, the chief editor explained, almost apologetically, that, "In compliance with the rules on the behaviour of the media in the course of the elections, we are broadcasting the convention in its entirety." This it did, without any sort of intervention.

Also on that evening's "Hronika dana", Radio Bihać aired a commentary by the journalist A. Daničić regarding the appearance in Cazin and Bihać on 14 and 15 June of Muslim Youth Alliance (MOS) posters. These explicitly attacked Silajdžić, his party and followers. The reporter described them as "a vulgar attempt to

discredit Mr Haris Silajdžić." Yet Radio Bihać provided no news whatsoever about the day's disorders in Cazin.

Its first report of the attack on Silajdžić was broadcast only on 16 June, in the 21.00 "Hronika dana", and as the fourth item in the newscast. It began, "According to a statement by the Party for B&H..." - yet proceeded to give a short account of the incident which bore no relation to the party's communique. The statement issued by the SDA headquarters in Sarajevo regarding the incident was, however, broadcast in full. There followed a report on the "regular meeting of the Cantonal Council of the SDA-Bihać, held on Sunday, 16 June, which discussed the formation of electoral lists, the release of certain members of the Council from their duties and the need to investigate events in Cazin."

Radio Bihać's presentation of the news about the incident in Cazin appears to have aimed to marginalise the event and to prepare listeners for the manipulative communique from the Bihać Centre of the Security Service (CSB) that followed. This presented the public with unsubstantiated allegations which were at odds both with eyewitness reports and this monitor's own observations, viz that there had been trouble during the Party for B&H's Bihać convention, that insults and obscenities had been hurled both at Izetbegović and Islam during the meeting, and that Silajdžić's followers had provoked the disorders. In fact, the CSB statement itself added to the tension in Bihać and Cazin by identifying those who attended the Party for B&H's Bihać meeting as "those who did nothing for the defence effort in the course of the war and among whom there were a large number of Fikret Abdić's followers."

Radio Bihać's coverage of this local story was totally unprofessional. It failed to report the statements of any party except the SDA. It made no mention of the OSCE communique. It sought the reactions of no notable persons nor even of any local representatives of the Party for B&H. In short, Radio Bihać demonstrated this week that it makes no pretense of possessing any independence.

Cazin in the Independent Media

Sarajevo's NTV Studio 99 devoted the bulk of its 16 June "Oko 22" to the attack on Silajdžić. In contrast to the coverage offered by the state-run media, this broadcast served as an exceptional promotional vehicle on behalf of the Party for B&H and its leader. Radio Studio 99, for its part, mounted a special edition of "Hyde Park" on Sunday in order to give callers an opportunity to discuss the issue.

Although they are unrelated, both NTV Hayat and Bosnian Muslim Radio Hayat gave preference on 16 June to the visit by Federation Interior Minister Avdo Hebib to Goražde. TV Hayat, in particular, sought to play down the significance of the violence in Cazin.

Reports from the Near Abroad

Justifiably intoxicated as they may have been by the Croatian football team's 3-0 victory over Denmark on Sunday evening, the journalists of HRT managed to provide a full and balanced account of the Cazin affray in their late-night edition of "Dnevnik". This was particularly interesting in view of recent assertions by Croatian reporters of their country's special relationship with the Bihać region.

Even more interesting, however, was the "Dnevnik" editor's decision to append an analytical report from Slovene TV to the end of the programme. The Slovene despatch argued that the attack on Silajdžić should not be treated as the mere incident the SDA pretended it to be. Rather, it was one of a series of similar cases, including SDA Vice-President Edhem Bičakčić's threat that the party would show no mercy to the opposition and the beating administered to USBD members in Tešanj. The report concluded that responsibility for the unhappy events in Cazin lay squarely at the door of the local authorities and the ruling party to which they belonged.

IN TV (aka Bildt Television) may wish to consider sub-contracting its news service to Radio-Television Slovenia.

Coverage from the Far Abroad

The foreign press showed far more interest on Sunday and Monday in the nomination of new ministers to the supposedly non-existent government of "the Croatian Republic of Herceg-Bosna" than it did in events in Cazin. Silajdžić's travail was mentioned only in passing. The B&H media, on the other hand, ignored the HDZ's challenge to the Federation almost totally. Even Herceg-Bosna's own broadcasters appear to have had little to say about the move. It seems that they, like the Sarajevo-based media, are awaiting instructions.

Fear and Loathing in Republika Srpska

A campaign of sorts is continuing in Republika Srpska, with the state media offering blanket coverage of mass rallies called in support of the indicted war criminals Ratko Mladić and Radovan Karadžić. The "mitinzi" have quickly assumed the flavour of SDS election rallies, with only the small, Belgrade-based Serbian National Renewal party (SNO) joining the festivities. In its main evening newscast, TV Srpska offered prominent coverage of rallies in Nevesinje, Brčko and Bijeljina. The Brčko rally was given extended play in the slot immediately following the 13 June news. With the exception of the SNO leader, Mirko Jović, all participating party representatives were from the SDS. In addition to unofficial campaign propaganda, the rallies appear to be part of a broad SDS effort to link the fate of the RS with that of Karadžić and Mladić. "The trial of Karadžić is the trial of the Serbian nation," read one placard displayed at the Brčko rally.

Despite initial hostility to the idea of elections, TV and Radio Srpska appear to have warmed to the poll in the aftermath of the Florence conference. Broadcasts were brimming with

optimistic assessments of the September vote, with one SDS official predicting it would mark the RS's final entry into statehood. Another SDS vice-president suggested the ruling party could surpass its performance in 1990, when it won the support of "95 percent of the Serbian nation in the former B&H." TV Srpska has yet to broadcast any detailed description of the 18 parties contesting the elections in the RS. So far, the vote is presented as a plebiscite on the RS's statehood. This is fully in line with SDS posters which portray the SDS as the only party committed to the defence of the RS.

Elsewhere in the RS, the only apparent exception to a week of programming devoted to the SDS and its semi-official partner, the Serbian Radical Party, was aired on Radio Prijedor's 12 June bulletin. In a commentary entitled "A prayer for my brother journalists," M. Mutić attacked the ruling SDS as a clique of cynical manipulators and corrupt warmongers who had a stranglehold on the RS media. Mutić bitterly protested against the lack of political freedoms in the RS, in particular free speech. The RS government treats journalists as "unpaid servants or animals for the hunt", said Mutić, adding that the moral and

professional dignity of journalists throughout the RS was under constant assault.

The Print Media

Election coverage by the Sarajevo press has expanded both quantitatively and qualitatively in the past week. Not only has the number of articles increased, but so too has the calibre of the journalism. The three, self-styled independent dailies are continuing to provide space for the election campaigns of the opposition parties. Their doors may not yet be wide open to the opposition, but they are certainly more than ajar.

The decision of the Florence conference that elections will indeed be held in September was reported by the papers as one of the results of the conclave, but without expressions of approval or praise. The press has also followed developments in Mostar attentively, including the attempt to form a united opposition, the stances of the Croatian parties and the policies of EU Administrator Perez Casado.

PRESS ARTICLES RELATING DIRECTLY OR INDIRECTLY TO THE 1996 ELECTIONS

Period of coverage:

Daily newspapers, 10 - 16 June 1996

Weekly, fortnightly and monthly publications appearing in the same period.

Dailies: Oslobođenje, Večernje Novine, Dnevni Avaz

Weeklies, fortnightly and monthlies: Svijet, Ljiljan, Hrvatska Riječ, Slobodna Bosna

title	issues	number of articles	number of articles per issue	most common formats
dailies				
Oslobođenje	7	48	2 - 11 articles	reports and brief news items
Večernje novine	6	36	1 - 11 articles	reports and brief news items
Dnevni Avaz	6	38	3 - 15 articles	reports
weeklies, fortnightly and monthlies				
Svijet	1	2		commentaries
Ljiljan	1	5		opinion poll, interview
Slobodna Bosna	1	4		commentaries
Hrvatska riječ	1	4		brief news items, commentaries

Media Briefs

RTV Mostar & Radio Herceg-Bosna

East Mostar's radio and television stations (which broadcast virtually identical news programmes) began last week to engage actively on the forthcoming local elections. TV Mostar is now carrying voter education items provided by OSCE and USAID before and after its evening news broadcasts. But lodged among these public service announcements there is one spot exhorting viewers to "Vote for the united Mostar list!" This, of course, is a party political advertisement pretending to be something else. Given the omnipresence of Mayor Safet Orucevic on TV Mostar's newscasts, however, the offence may be considered a trifling one.

Radio Herceg-Bosna, for its part, continues to report every manifestation of HDZ activity and to ignore all other parties. The attack on Haris Silajdžić offered it, however, a temptation it could not resist to disparage the concept of a common Bosnian statehood. According to the 21.00 news on 16 June, "The first settling of accounts has begun, and not just politically, but physically... Just think, they attacked the Party for B&H... when their mouths are full of their constant protestations about how they are for B&H and that is why they have fought and struggled."

TV B&H

The hour-long programme "B&H Elections" is, it seems, still being boycotted by the larger opposition parties. Only the small Civil Democratic Party (GDS) took up the offer of a four-minute slot in last week's broadcast (10 June). The rest of the programme was composed of reports about party press conferences and public statements. The programme is even-handed and professionally produced.

TV Tuzla

Why has TV Tuzla recently abandoned its evening broadcasts, and why does that mean that it cannot offer any election programming? Is it because of unpaid rent and utility bills to the owner of its premises, the Osiguravajuci zavod (Insurance Bureau), or is there some other reason? TV Tuzla's explanation is that its landlord has cut night portorage in the building, and that everyone must now leave the premises by 9 pm. Does that mean that no one guards TV Tuzla's equipment during the night? Is the problem that TV Tuzla cannot afford to pay a porter? Or are rumours of a party political vendetta against TV Tuzla to be credited? Even so, why can't an election programme go out earlier in the day?