

monitoring report

Elections B&H '96

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THE B&H MEDIA DURING THE ELECTIONS: 13-15 SEPTEMBER

"The media it was wot done it." This excuse for their defeats is already being offered by opposition party leaders. Figures as diverse as Mujo Kafedžić of the Associated List B&H (ZL B&H) and Goran Matić of the Alliance for Peace and Progress (SMP) this week blamed the media for the victories of the ruling parties in their respective entities.

Speaking at a ZL B&H news conference on 19 September, Kafedžić (vice-president of the MBO) singled out **RTV B&H** for having played a dishonourable role in giving precedence in its newscasts to reports on SDA rallies. His coalition colleague, Ivo Komšić (HSS), stressed that the victors' "lies" had prevented the ZL from making a greater impact at the polls. The coalition's continuing fight for the truth would not be possible without the establishment of a free media.

For his part, Matić (spokesman for the JUL) told a press conference on 19 September that the nationalist parties had won because the media created and fed people's fears of estrangement from "their original states".

Foreign observers, too, have cited the absence of open media as a principal reason for the decisive triumph of the ruling parties. In an interview published by *Politika* on 19 September, the French ambassador in Belgrade, Gabriel Keller, remarked that the B&H media failed to provide the necessary space for a genuinely democratic debate during the campaign.

Some of the winners, of course, have begged to differ. Alija Izetbegović told a press conference on 19 September that the opposition had only itself to blame for its electoral "debacle" in the Federation. Its strategy had been both flawed and false, equating the SDA with the SDS and alleging that democracy did not exist on territory controlled by the B&H Army. The facts were otherwise. Not only was there no censorship, but some 60 newspapers, 40 radio stations and 12 television broadcasters operated in areas under government rule. During the campaign, moreover, TV B&H had devoted nine-tenths of its prime time coverage to the opposition, leaving only one-tenth to the SDA.

This debate will run and run. *Monitoring Report* turns its attention this week, however, to the media's performance during the days of party silence, voting and expectation.

In general, the electronic media in both B&H entities acquitted themselves well. They observed the obligatory period of electoral silence and provided relatively professional coverage of election day and its aftermath. Croatian (**HRT**) and Serbian (**RTVS**) television, on the other hand, continued to promote their respective favourites - the HDZ and the SMP - after the official end of the campaign. Rehashing on 13 September their reports of rallies which had taken place the previous day, these broadcasters maintained their neighbourly interference in B&H affairs and provided OSCE with yet another headache.

Republika Srpska

Several instances of infringement of electoral silence have been reported from Republika Srpska. Besides **TV Serbia's** rebroadcast on 13 September of a four-minute report on the SMP's rally in Banja Luka the day before, the Belgrade daily *Politika*, which is distributed throughout RS, appeared on election day with a picture of the SMP's candidate for RS president, Živko Radišić, on its front page. The OSCE announced that the Electoral Appeals Sub-Commission would lodge a complaint because of this explicit violation of electoral silence from abroad.

The OSCE was itself responsible for what might be regarded as another infraction of the rule requiring party silence. This was the "apology" by Biljana Plavšić, broadcast three times by **TV Srpska** on 13 September, for her earlier insistence that the elections would ratify RS statehood.

Radio Krajina's phone-in programme, "Objektiv stavnosti", several times permitted callers to promote their chosen candidates on 13 September. The station's editor-in-chief, Colonel Milovan Milutinović, also broke the rule of silence by explaining to a caller which parties had paid to advertise on Radio Krajina (SPAS, SMP and the Democratic Patriotic Bloc).

The whole of election day was marked on TV Srpska by continuous coverage of events. Broadcasting from three studios and employing teams of presenters, reporters and film crews, the network provided reports from many cities and polling stations. The accent generally was on the good order of the vote, but also on the inadequacies of voter registration lists and the consequent disappointment of many would-be voters whose names did not appear on the lists.

TV Srpska reported that many fewer voters had arrived from the Federation than had been expected. Those that had come, however, were said to have encountered no problems. Nor did presenters miss numerous opportunities to note that the elections constituted a "certification" of Republika Srpska. Voters interviewed in various locations expressed themselves in similar terms.

The election night edition of "Novosti" adopted the same tone. Focusing on the remarks of party and government leaders as they emerged from the polls, the newscast provided Momčilo Krajišnik and Biljana Plavšić with opportunities to reiterate their interpretations of the elections' meaning. Krajišnik noted: "I want Republika Srpska to win in any case, and that peace wins, and that young people never more go to war... We hope the elections will bring stability to all of B&H and that they will establish and strengthen peace." Plavšić, for her part, announced:

"All of us today are casting our votes for Republika Srpska."

"Novosti" also gave extensive coverage to Plavšić's meeting during the day with Richard Holbrooke and a delegation of US congressmen. On this occasion Plavšić promised that, if victorious, the SDS would comply fully with the terms of the Dayton treaty, including those provisions relating to the "functioning of the common organs in the union of RS and the Muslim-Croat Federation."

Thus from midnight on 12 September **SRT** duly observed electoral silence. It substituted competent reporting of the voting process for agitation on behalf of the SDS. It emphasised the orderliness of the elections - including the safe passage to polling stations of voters from the Federation - and the very high turnout. On 15 September it continued to underline the absence both of untoward incidents and of the anticipated number of visiting voters. It noted in this regard, for example, that although some 2,000 voters from the Federation had been expected in Višegrad, only one had arrived. (This was not true. Between 50 and 60 persons crossed the IEBL to vote in the designated polling place on the outskirts of Višegrad.) SRT did not, however, speculate as to why so few from the Federation ventured into RS.

The Federation

RTV B&H also observed the requirement of electoral silence on 13 and 14 September. When TV B&H's New York correspondent mentioned the SDA and SDS in a neutral fashion in the course of a special election-eve programme, the presenter warned her off. Izetbegović appeared twice on Friday evening's "Dnevnik", but on both occasions in his presidential role: receiving Richard Holbrooke and a new mobile phone from PTT. Otherwise coverage of the election was restricted to news of the American congressmen who had arrived to observe the vote, the preparations for the poll and the mechanics of voting. All other programmes on the 13th were free of parties and their promotions.

Election day on TV B&H was given over entirely to special programming. Beginning at 06.30, TV B&H's cameras and reporters followed leading politicians to the polls, interviewed voters and members of local election commissions, covered (with simultaneous translation) announcements from the OSCE Press Centre and paid particular attention to would-be voters whose names did not appear on voters' registers. Musical numbers filled the intervals.

The election night edition of "Dnevnik" ran to four hours. Besides numerous despatches from correspondents in Bihać, Zenica, Tuzla and Mostar

(who had, in turn, stringers in most municipalities in these regions), reports were also broadcast from ad hoc reporters who had accompanied Bošnjaks travelling to vote in RS. In live interviews, both Interior Minister Avdo Hebib and Ambassador Michael Steiner expressed general satisfaction with the course of the day's voting. Holbrooke's press conference was also covered live. There were, in addition, many vox pops from citizens expressing hope for the future and/or complaints that their names had not been included on the voters' lists.

As the presenter of this special "Dnevnik" proudly announced at its outset, TV B&H's election coverage involved 20 cameras in the field, two mobile studios, three regular studios and many teams of reporters. In fact, TV B&H was putting out 17 hours of live broadcasts in the course of election day - a record for the network. However impressive this feat, it might have been more appropriate to lead "Dnevnik" with news of the election itself, and to have consigned the story the network's "heroism" to a supporting role.

In other respects, the performance of "Dnevnik" was highly creditable. All Federation territory under B&H Army control was covered. Reporters showed themselves to be politically neutral and objective. On the other hand, it did appear that their main aim - and that of their editor - was to ferret out and enumerate any and all irregularities. Thus virtually every reporter noted that many intending voters' names had been omitted from the lists and that there had been big jams at some polling stations. Reports on these problems were sometimes accompanied by suggestive questions. The fact that the Serbs had stopped a bus carrying voters from the Federation near Bosanska Krupa was mentioned several times.

News that the SDA had demanded that the UN Security Council should annul the vote in RS emerged, late in the broadcast, during live coverage of a news conference by Ambassador Robert Frowick. This had not been mentioned earlier for fear of contravening the rule of silence.

On 15 September, "Dnevnik" was naturally preoccupied with reactions to the poll. Aside from the SDA's castigation of the RS vote, these were generally positive. **Radio B&H** made more of the SDA's demand in its afternoon "Dnevnik", but did not mention that the likes of Frowick and Holbrooke had already dismissed it as baseless.

Elsewhere in the Federation, **Radio Bihać** maintained, for the most part, its recently established probity. Only in the repeated broadcast on election day of two songs associated with the SDA did it slip from the straight and narrow. As a source of information useful to voters, its performance was commendable.

Tuzla's **TV TPK** showed two faces in the period. On 12 September it made a shameless bid to solicit votes for its party, the SDA. The presenter of the evening news (otherwise an mc at SDA rallies and the party's local spokesperson) informed viewers as follows: "If you have still not decided, then we will help you." There followed pictures of a young woman in traditional Muslim costume who, according to the presenter, would be prevented from voting by bureaucratic rules. When you vote, the presenter suggested to Bošnjaks, "vote for her."

The next day, however, TV TPK faithfully observed electoral silence. On election day it demonstrated a new determination to cover everything of significance in the city and canton. Between 10.00 and 20.30, its cameras and reporters were everywhere, covering polling stations and OSCE press conferences - correctly and completely. Reactions to the vote broadcast on 15 September were largely favourable.

Radio Tuzla and **TV Tuzla** did not break electoral silence. Mayor Bešliagić and his deputy, Sead Avdić, were however the only politicians followed by reporters from TV Tuzla and providing them with statements about what they expected from the poll.

Radio Zenica and **TV Zenica** also observed electoral silence. Both media offered, too, extensive information to listeners and viewers on 13 September about the modalities of voting and the counting of ballots. Their programmes on election day were wholly given over to coverage of the elections. Much was made as well of names missing from the voters' lists.

As a member-station of the **TV IN** network, **NTV Zetel's** output over the election week-end was largely identical to that of TV IN.

Sarajevo's **NTV Studio 99** mounted an ambitious and impartial election programme which sought to cover events in RS as well as in the Federation. Its reach exceeded its grasp. Some of the station's reporters were not up to the task, demonstrating little knowledge of B&H politics.

HTV Mostar could not resist the opportunity to rebroadcast on the day of silence, 13 September, its report of an incident of near-conflict the previous day between Croatian police and a group of Bošnjaks who had come to the west side of the city to rebuild their houses. This scare story was followed by a pointed reminder: "voters whose earlier place of residence was in the Muslim municipality of Mostar need not go to that part of the city. They can vote instead at the closest polling place."

In the absence of serious incidents, HTV Mostar confined itself on election day to reports on the regular course of the voting. Ex-Mayor Mijo Brajković

was wheeled in, however, to expound his favourite thesis: "Our Mostar elections are not yet finished." He was alluding to the HDZ case against the June elections which will someday go before the Supreme Court of the Federation.

RTV Mostar (another TV IN station) both observed electoral silence and provided full voter information on 13 September. It retains in its own news output, however, a passion for the voice-over in place of actuality sound.

The Neighbours

HRT was guilty of a flagrant violation of electoral silence when it broadcast, on 13 September on its Third Programme, a film of the HDZ's final election rally in Mostar the previous day. This was not all. A commentary carried by the early evening "TV Dnevnik" the same day opined that the three ruling national parties were likely to win the B&H elections. They, however, had radically different visions of Bosnia's future. In reply to the "fanatical messages" of the SDA and SDS, the national party of the Croatian nation had offered "an invitation to peace, community and economic renewal."

Also on 13 September, HRT suddenly replaced its scheduled entertainment programme at 20.00 with a documentary entitled "The Jihad in America". This recounted the battle against Muslim terrorists in the USA. The sub-text was obvious.

Publication note

IWPR and Media Plan will issue a final report on the role of the B&H media in the election campaign within the next few weeks. We also expect to resume regular production of *Monitoring Report* with the start of the municipal election campaign.

TV Serbia also ignored Bosnia's electoral niceties. On 13 September the main newscast repeated the previous night's report on the big SMP rally in Banja Luka. This portentously-staged and well-attended event (attended, as well, by Socialist Party dignitaries from Belgrade) was obviously meant to create an impression of inevitable victory. Just as obviously, it failed.

The Press

Election coverage in the Sarajevo press assumed such proportions in the final days of the campaign that both the daily and weekly papers resembled nothing so much as election bulletins. The advent of electoral silence meant that the focus of the newspapers' attention shifted from the parties to the eve-of-poll atmosphere, to the views of the foreign media and to the statements of international statesmen and functionaries. The papers were still full of such stories on election day. They also carried reports of the mugging of SDP leader Zlatko Lagumdžija on a Sarajevo street, as well as the statement by the police that the attack had no political connotations.

Only *Dnevni Avaz* broke the decreed silence regarding parties by publishing an account on 13 September of the SDA's campaign-ending rally in Sarajevo on the 12th. Taxed by *Oslobođenje* on this score, *Avaz* offered an unconvincing defence. It remains for the OSCE to rule.

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