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## **THE INFLUENCE OF THE MEDIA DURING THE NATO BOMBING IN KOSOVO**

*In the Kosovo crisis and the Alliance's military commitment to solving it, information has played a paramount role for several reasons: first, because the public opinion was elaborated and persuaded by information and media, secondly, because the media was able to reach its users in a record time. Kosovo was part of the public awareness and information in the world for a long time. The beginnings of this process can be found with no disruption from 1981. Yugoslavia was then a relatively open country and tens of hundreds of reporters, journalists and analysts in the West had the opportunity to be present and witness the events in Kosovo. Thanks to this fact, the historical developments from 1981 up to date are generally reflected mainly truthfully and without the influence of anti Albanian fabrications and defamation propaganda.*

In the late 1980s, the Albanians drew the attention of the civilized world due to the unprecedented resistance to protect the autonomy of 1974. The strikes of miners and metallurgists in Stari Terz of Mitrovica, the marching of hundreds of thousands of Albanians protesting to protect their constitutional rights, successive protests and rallies of women, youth and students in defense of the freedom achieved with the Constitution of 1974, were the subject of media and information not only within former Yugoslavia, but in all Western countries.

Meanwhile, Serbia's nationalist stance and removal of Kosovo's autonomy in turn drew the attention of such media. Although under the shadow of a permanent conflict caused by Serbia, considering the successive wars in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo was often present on the agenda of the global media. The public attention became particularly sensitive to the inhuman act of poisoning primary and secondary school students in 1990, killing of the Albanian soldiers in the Yugoslav army and unique campaign to reconcile blood feuds, in which Albanians expressed the opinion that under no circumstances they would accept the Serbian rule in Kosovo.

After the Dayton Conference, domestic and international media stressed the fact that Kosovo would be the last act of the Yugoslav drama. However, the intensity of information for and about Kosovo increased significantly after 1997, with the appearance of the Kosovo Liberation Army. The peace movement represented by the leader Ibrahim Rugova had created uniformity and monotony in the news and information media, therefore the emergence of the KLA immediately drew the attention of world opinion. In the period from July 1998 until the summer of 1999, Kosovo remained the subject of world events of the time. The period of military intervention of NATO, constitutes the culmination of the media engagement with the crisis and conflict between Albanians and the Belgrade regime in Kosovo.

The dimension of media and information at the time of the crisis in Kosovo included information from the war front, which spread from reporters and journalists who were able to penetrate inside the theater of conflict development. These journalists belonged to two categories: the first category included the group of journalists invited by the Milosevic regime, coming mainly from his allied countries. However, among them, in addition to Russian, Belarusian and Greek journalists attending were also guests from Italy, France, Germany or other countries. Some of them were favored, as the countries they came from did not support NATO air strikes against Serbia. While the second category was made of a group of journalists who had secretly entered the territory of Serbia and from there provided news and information for multiple radios, television stations, newspapers and news agencies.

This group, limited in number, was the most just and unbiased part of public information. The other category was comprised of journalists who followed the events on the border with Kosovo and Serbia, from Albania, Macedonia or Montenegro, paying close attention to those who have acted and observed in the field. The fourth category belonged to announcements provided by the parties in conflict themselves, on the one hand NATO spokesman and, on the other hand, the spokesman of the Serbian Government. Meanwhile, the Kosovo Liberation Army was unable to create a genuine center of daily information on everything. The Kosovo Information Center, which was established by Rugova's Democratic League, would provide some type of information, but not to the extent of affecting public opinion.

The foreign journalists who remained in Pristina, kept in touch with President Rugova, his assistant Fehmi Agani, or with some local journalists of "Koha Ditore" and "Bujku" newspapers, but they were not able to find detailed information about the situation on the ground. However, in some cases foreign reporters were able to chase the events e.g. in Prekaz, Malisheva, or other conflict hotbeds.

There were two different approaches to information: that of the journalists and journalism of the Western democracies who were engaged in the real reflection of efforts to resolve conflict through the violence of the military action by air, on the one hand, and that of the camp of information structure coming from Serbia and its political, military and police structure or the media manipulated by its allies, on the other hand. However, in Macedonia, Montenegro, Greece and several other countries in the region, media and information was often influenced by the propaganda and falsifications of Belgrade. Thus, the Serbian TV station in Macedonia, KISS, repeatedly and falsely announced that “Albanians were fleeing Kosovo due to NATO bombing.” While a group of cameramen and reporters of Greece distorted reality, by filming and saying “Here look, women in Pristina in a calm and normal way perform their daily shopping”.<sup>1</sup> Information was processed differently in Albania. Our country, in this aspect, became a partner of the West, in support of NATO and its military actions to liberate Kosovo.

The Kosovo conflict and military intervention of NATO to resolve the crisis is estimated by experts and researchers as a new model in terms of the experience for providing information and dissemination of the news from the informative center of NATO in Brussels. Media content and effects of this conflict are considered as the most effective, to the extent that an American contributor to the Media Operations Centre in Brussels had stated that “The success of the media operation had finally led Milosevic to capitulation”.<sup>2</sup> In an American research, it is also stated that “Foreign policy cannot be conducted by the media. But neither can it be done without participation from the media”.<sup>3</sup> The importance of information and media was actually formulated in 1940, when the American General, Eisenhower, stated that “Public opinion wins War” (Public opinion wins war).

The formulation of information and news about the Kosovo crisis followed three phases: The first phase covers the period before the air-strikes of NATO. The second phase belongs to the period of bombing against military and strategic targets in Serbia, while the third phase belongs to the post-war period.

1. In the prewar period, efforts were made so that information, news and chronicles of the events in the field went public as soon as possible. This process aimed at preparing public opinion in support of a possible military action. The content of the media information of this time was mostly promoting the

<sup>1</sup> Erich Rathfelder: *Kosovo -Geschichte eines Konflikts*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Berlin 2010, Seite 250.

<sup>2</sup> Cited from Edward Stourton, “Spinning for Victory”, *Electronic Telegraph*, 16.10.1999.

<sup>3</sup> Warren P. Strobel, “The Media: “Influencing Foreign Policy in the Information Age”, *USIA Electronic Journal*, Vol. 5, no 1, Mars 2000.

idea that Milosevic was preparing for Kosovo a second Bosnia, advocating the logic that in such case the democratic world should not be indifferent. The Swiss newspaper "NeueZürcherZeitung" thus commented: "It is the same scenario as in Bosnia. Albanians are convinced that the Belgrade Government has started anew their ethnic cleansing in Kosovo".<sup>4</sup>Meanwhile, the German newspaper "SüddeutscheZeitung" also wrote that: "It is the same scenario as in Bosnia: ... the Military and police forces of Serbia burn villages and force tens of thousands of civilians to flee - and then we see slaughter and mass graves in the news".

Before the start of the war in Kosovo, the foreign media, as well as those published in Albania, Kosovo and the Balkan area, had expressed the fear that Kosovo would be Serbia's next victim. Information, comments, opinions, and analyzes were used to legitimize an armed intervention to resolve the crisis. The media tried to recover after each event the historical memory of war crimes and crimes against humanity in Europe and the world. The Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic, during the wars in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, was compared to Hitler and his crimes received the same moral condemnation in the media. Meanwhile, Milosevic's comparison with Saddam Hussein was a common routine in the media jargon and the statements of politicians, especially in Albania and Kosovo, but also in the Western media.

Facts and events before 1999 were sufficient for the Serbian leaders to be viewed as perpetrators of crimes against humanity and genocide against non-Serb peoples in former Yugoslavia, but in Dayton, Milosevic was able to take on the nickname "man of peace". However, the developments in Kosovo, after the emergence of the KLA in September 1997, returned his previous crimes to the public attention. The media and information formulated before, during and after the war, had provided the backbone of the argument, avoiding a human tragedy, which was caused by a government known for its crimes against humanity.

The specific cases of the Serb violence and massacres in Kosovo constantly occupied television screens and newspaper pages in the world, but the most influential echo in the public was caused by the Racak massacre. The media effect of that time was caused in particular by head of OSCE mission in Kosovo, William Walker, who went to the scene and standing before the massacred corpses held accountable the head of state, Slobodan Milosevic. President Clinton defined the Racak massacre as an act of death. The television screens in the West presented horrific footage of the murder of innocent people. Meanwhile, the Racak massacre raised awareness in public opinion, especially in the Western democracies. In these conditions of battleground horror and media coverage, the Rambouillet Conference was convened on February 6, 1999.

<sup>4</sup>Andres Wysling, "Treuerzüge und Ruinen in Drenica". In: *Neuer Zürcher Zeitung vom 17.3.1998*.

However, the Racak massacre had been contested in the Western media. Two French newspapers “Le Figaro” and “Le Monde” described it as “a fabrication of the Albanian party”.<sup>5</sup> It seemed that the French diplomacy and politics was not moving quickly towards perception of the truth regarding the events occurring in this hotbed of crisis. After the war, in 2001, the German television ARD and the newspapers “Frankfurter Rundschau” and “Berliner Zeitung” were declaring that Racak had the massacre appear as a manipulation, with the specific purpose of “justifying military intervention in Kosovo”. The show aired on German television ARD and published in BZ and FR even called the Racak massacre a lie (Eine Lüge).<sup>6</sup> The Racak massacre and its inclusion as a key event in all global media marked a turning point in the pro-intervention positioning in former Yugoslavia of NATO and its members.

2. The U.S. President Bill Clinton, in his television speech on March 24, 1999, when he also commanded bombing of the military and strategic targets in Serbia stated that “It is imperative to put an end to this tragedy”, legitimizing the military intervention of NATO without a Security Council mandate. Meanwhile, two days after the bombing, at a meeting in Budapest, the U.S. special envoy to the Balkans, Richard Holbrooke, defined the central role of the media in this conflict. According to him, in this conflict, the politicians are more concerned with what the public should be informed of and what not.<sup>7</sup>

From this moment, the clashes among media had as an objective the legitimacy of military intervention of NATO in Kosovo. In this context, film footage received a particular importance. Videos and cameras were more effective than thousands of words. The wave of refugees increasing each day was part of all television screens and newspaper pages across the world. Although Milosevic tried to present the refugee crisis as a crisis caused by the NATO bombing, he could not achieve the goals of his media campaign.

Politically, Serbia took an irreparable blow. The political statements issued in the public opinion further strengthened the comparability of Milosevic and his repressive apparatus to that of Hitler’s regime during World War II. At a press conference on March 28, 1999, the German Minister of Defence, Rudolph Scharping, spoke for the first time of “crimes against humanity” in Kosovo. A few days later, he used the terms “death machinery of Milosevic” and “ethnic cleansing”, while the German Foreign Minister, Joschka Fischer

<sup>5</sup> See: *Le Figaro*, dated January 20 and *Le Monde*, dated January 21, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Es begann mit einer Lüge, Manuskript des Films von Jo Angerer und Mathias Werth (PDF) [http://online.wdr.de/online/news/Kosovoluege/sendung\\_text.pdf](http://online.wdr.de/online/news/Kosovoluege/sendung_text.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Richard Holbrooke, “No media - no war” *Censorship* 3/1999.

spoke of the “Serbian SS” and called the opponents of the war “supporters of a new fascism”. Responding to the opponents of the war in his party of the German Greens, Fischer declared that “I haven’t only learned from the notion “Never again war”; on the contrary, I have learned from the notion “Never again a new Auschwitz “. <sup>8</sup> The comparisons to the Holocaust and Hitler’s genocide faced the opposition of various Jewish organizations, especially in Germany. While, the holder of Nobel Peace Prize, Holocaust survivor, Judeo-American Elie Wiesel, wrote in the “Newsweek” magazine: “The persecution of Albanians is very serious, but it’s not the Holocaust”. <sup>9</sup>

The British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, was the most active political personality in the media at the time of the NATO bombing and took it upon himself to raise public awareness more and more about what was happening with the Albanians in Kosovo. He repeatedly warned that Europe could not accept another Nazi time at the end of the twentieth century. <sup>10</sup>

In the organizational level, media information centers were created in several bases in Europe and the United States of America. The most important of these was the “Media Operations Centre” (Media Operations Centre- MOC), where the best and more intelligent 20 experts of information processing were involved. This center was directed by Alastair Campbell, the main personage of the group of advisers to Tony Blair in the media during the campaign. In Europe and the United States of America, there were also formed and operating companies of war imaging performance. The statements of political leaders of major NATO countries as well as the Generals and political leaders of the North Atlantic Alliance itself were the main object of the media war and communication of the truth to people. For example, MOC, soon after the beginning of operation, coordinated the statements of all political leaders, Presidents and Prime Ministers of the member states of NATO, in order to maximize their impact on public opinion.

Meanwhile, the Centre arranged the daily press conferences of Alliance spokesman, Jamie Shea, formulating for him with special care each sentence to be cited. Media operation center of NATO in Brussels was the main source of information, in which skilled experts in the military field of international law were engaged. Journalists, experts, Generals, Prime Ministers, Presidents of the member countries of NATO pledged to argue in public on “Why this war was so important for the New World Order”. The NATO’s spokesman

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<sup>8</sup> ARD Television, in the “Panorama” transmission, dated 15.4.1999.

<sup>9</sup> Elie Wiesel: “The Question of Gjenocide” Newsweek, 12.4.1999.

<sup>10</sup> Tony Blair: “A New Moral Crusade”, Newsweek, 14.6.1999.



Jamie Shea, later on after the war, would make the comment that “Kosovo was the first media war. The utilization of media, the battle for elaboration of the public opinion were just as important as the air strikes ... Journalists were also soldiers, in the sense that they had to explain to the public, why this war was so important”.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, videoconferencing became a very important tool of information. They had a tremendous impact in terms of the periodicity of addressing topics and the process of attacks occurring on those 78 days against Yugoslavia (Serbia).

3. Post-war information aimed mostly at justifying the use of force for resolution of the Kosovo crisis. Generally after the war, the media defended its previous positions of the argument for military intervention to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe, but in the meantime, doses of doubt increased, on whether the media and information had been misused for the purpose of disinformation and manipulation or not. It can be assumed that the revocation of any event or process, as in the case of the Racak massacre, also had to do with internal political conjuncture of the countries where such initiatives, as the ADR in Germany were disclosed.

However, any correction was due to difficulties during the war to follow the development of events from up close. Reports, information and news provided the chance for a real perception of the situation and real coverage in support of the war. However, in specific cases, this difficulty was based on the fact that the media was not able to convey the actual situation in the field. E.g., if for some reason, aircraft bombs missed the provided target and caused damage and victims among the civilians, the image conveyed to the public was always owned by the opposition media, Milosevic regime. Although NATO reports went to TV-screens and newspaper pages through statements, the local media in Serbia were able to broadcast specific footage of the consequences of collateral damage occurring in the field. This opportunity had given to Belgrade the advantage of unverifiable manipulation of the truth. For this reason, the media war took on such proportions, as to create the possibility of manipulation of facts and figures. After the war, in the West and especially in some East European countries, statements, contradictions and half truths were put together. This created the image of an unjust war in Kosovo.

However, as the main actor in the NATO war of media was considered its spokesman, James Shea. After the war he wrote some notes, which are of interest to researchers in this field.

**First,** James Shea states that it could be expected for a war and crisis such

<sup>11</sup> “*Balkan-Gewalt ohne Ende, Teil II “Der Krieg und ein Fauler Friede”*, ARD 29.10.1999.

as the one in Kosovo to have a perfect reflection of reality. Conflicts and crises lead to polarization of opposing parties. A conflict always involves opponents and, therefore, it has counter-arguments, propaganda and disinformation. The Atlantic Alliance links with the media and press in times of crisis are harder than during peacetime. This is because information from the government during the war is limited, while the media is interested in penetrating the background of the developments.

However, writes James Shea, the strategy of NATO cooperation with the media and the press during the Kosovo crisis has had a positive impact enabling military operations to be associated with mitigating of adverse actions.

**Second**, the former spokesman of the Alliance wants NATO media outlets to be structured during peacetime and not just function in times of war. Even the Media Operations Centre in Brussels should have to be institutionalized earlier, from the beginning of operations. The absence of such center had hampered at the beginning of operations the processing and dissemination of information. The main tasks of this center had been the planning and coordination of activities in view of the goals of the war, observation and selection of the reports spread by the media network of the opponent, in this case Serbia, opposition of the opponent's options, as well as the design, analysis and examination of incoming news and announcements.

**Third**, James Shea highlights the fact that it is necessary for information to be transmitted at a fast pace from the first days of combat operations. The experience with the conflict in Kosovo indicated that in the first days the organization of disseminating information hadn't been good, which had damaged the ongoing work, as well as the credibility of information.

**Fourth**, he demands that in the future, i.e., any potential conflict or crisis, more information is to be had on the opponent. In the case of the war in Kosovo, NATO was late in starting to collect information for the media and the Yugoslav press. Therefore, the center of Brussels was at times caught off guard by the propaganda machinery of Milosevic. While Milosevic had access to the media of Western democracies, due to the principles of freedom of the press, the Alliance had no access to the media controlled by Milosevic. Therefore, it was required an improvement of the media planning.

**Fifth**, if Serbs in the Kosovo crisis were able to broadcast through the media anything they cared about directly from the scene, with photos and video



footage, the media centers of NATO and the pro-war media and press in the West was unable to provide images of the burning of villages by Serbian military, and could not present through moving images the mass graves, which were later discovered and so on. The advantage of the adversary, writes James Shea, needs to weaken through some specific measures which can be pondered and processed in the future.

**Sixth**, he stresses that, during the Kosovo crisis, the media could have been better at coordinating time in order to pay attention to the constant supply of the media with new material.

Media participation in the Kosovo drama and conflict was of crucial importance, because never before Albanians had been able to draw the attention of the democratic countries. The media restored, to Kosovo its rights, what Kosovo had been missing throughout its history, unlimited support and therefore public awareness on what the parties in conflict represented. At that time, television screens were filled with gruesome images of the Kosovo drama. These images as well as countless stories of the written media sensitized all strata of population in the democratic countries. Given that in these countries the public opinion determines the position and implementation of state policy, then we can imagine how large of an impact the media had in promoting a fair decision-making in support of the Albanian victims in the Kosovo conflict.