

The Milošević Regime and the Manipulation of the Serbian Media  
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The violent break-up of the former Yugoslavia often leaves people wondering how groups that had lived together in relative peace for decades could suddenly take up arms against one another. While it is important to consider all factors, one thing that cannot be overlooked is the role of the official state media, particularly television. Tracing back to the 1974 constitution, the media played an integral part in the shift towards more nationally focused identities, and was successfully employed as a tool for promoting nationalism. Looking at the Serbian example, one can see how the Milošević regime manipulated the media in order to instigate ethnic tensions and draw attention away from economic and political issues that otherwise might have caused its downfall. His success relied largely on the reinvention of the image of Serbia as a victim of foreign oppression, which was based on reviving memories of past oppression of the Serb people.

While popular media in the former Yugoslavia was never free of political control, it did not develop a strongly regionalized character until after the adoption of the new, decentralizing constitution in 1974. The new document transferred control over the media budget from the federal to the regional level, which meant local leaders were able to monopolize their influence over television and newspapers and use them as platforms to promote further devolution of powers.<sup>1</sup> At first, the structures and tones of news reports remained largely unchanged, and upheld a sense of Yugoslav unity. However, around 1987 there was a gradual but marked shift towards inserting regional and nationalistic opinions and viewpoints into issues reported in the entire federation. The

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<sup>1</sup> Milan Milošević, "The Media Wars: 1987-1997," in *Burn This House: The Making and Unmaking of Yugoslavia*, ed. Jasminka Udovički and James Ridgeway (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 109-110.

pace of regionalization quickened with the advent of multi-party elections in 1990, at which point the incumbent socialists focused on control of the popular media as a strategy to ensure re-election. In Serbia, the official media began depicting the Yugoslav idea as a burden on Serbs, and the socialist party as the way to protect Serbian interests.<sup>2</sup>

In conjunction with an increase in the regional focus of the media, the advent of elections also led to a drastic tightening of the control and censorship exerted over television and, to a lesser extent, radio. After opposition groups seemed to be making progress by forcing an official statement that Radio Television Belgrade (RTB) was biased in favor of the socialists, leading to the resignation of the director-general, the Socialist Party acted quickly to initiate the Radio and Television Act of 1991. This resulted in the dismissal of the entire radio and television management and the consolidation of media into Radio Television Serbia (RTS), with centers in Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Priština. Under the new law, the socialists found it easier to dismiss journalists who refused to promote the official message of hate and fear towards other Yugoslav peoples. This replacement of journalists highlights not only the level of control the regime exerted over the popular media, but also how important it was to the Socialist Party to maintain that control.

The Milošević regime also managed to ensure that the official state media, particularly television, was by far the main outlet for information. While some independent publications and television stations did exist, the socialists eventually either nationalized them, or their circulation was so limited as to render them almost meaningless. A survey of the available media in 1994-95 showed that the only television station available nation-wide was the heavily controlled RTS 1. Even in Belgrade, where

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<sup>2</sup> Veljanovski, 573.

the availability of independent media was markedly higher than elsewhere, the only station that broadcast an independent nightly news program, NTV Studio B, was finally nationalized in 1996.<sup>3</sup>

This monopoly of television proved the most crucial, since the vast majority of Serbs had no other source of information available to them. In May of 1992, the United Nations Security Council placed economic sanctions on Yugoslavia in response to the outbreak of war in Bosnia.<sup>4</sup> After these sanctions led to phenomenal rates of inflation, only 8% of Serbian families could afford a daily paper, and many independent publications found they could no longer meet production costs.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, researchers have estimated that as much as 69% of the population relied on television as their primary source of information, and that over 60% watched the news program of state-owned RTS (*Dnevnik*).<sup>6</sup> Others have estimated that while the combined circulation of all six major news publications in Belgrade in 1993 was just over 500,000, the audience for official state television in the same area surpassed 3.5 million.<sup>7</sup> This dramatic difference shows how manipulation of television gave immense power to the regime over availability of information.

Even in the less influential areas of print and radio, the government made sure their manipulation of information was not jeopardized. These attempts to ensure government control over potential news sources demonstrate the high priority the Milošević regime placed on media as a means to stay in power. In fact, the intensity of

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<sup>3</sup> Eric D. Gordy, *The Culture of Power in Serbia* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 66-67.

<sup>4</sup> V. P. Gagnon, Jr., *The Myth of Ethnic War: Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2004), 112.

<sup>5</sup> Milošević, 114-115.

<sup>6</sup> Gordy, 65-66.

<sup>7</sup> Lenard J. Cohen, *Serpent in the Bosom: The Rise and Fall of Slobodan Milošević*, Revised ed. (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2002), 151.

the repression of independent media shows just how much the regime depended on that control for survival.

This survival was very much in question in the early 1990s. The first threat came from reformists within the party itself. Since the death of Tito in 1980, the issue of economic and political reforms came to dominate debates among party members, with some reformists going so far as to call for a multi-party system.<sup>8</sup> From his beginnings in the party, Milošević opposed this atmosphere of reform and promoted a return to orthodox ideology and rigid state control.<sup>9</sup> During the same period in the 1980s, an atmosphere of increasing ethnic tensions arose in Kosovo due to long-lasting inaction on the part of communist leaders. It became clear to Milošević that the unresolved national issue provided an opportunity for gaining political power after the publication of a nationalistic plea from the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU) and a volatile meeting with disgruntled Serbs and Montenegrins living in Kosovo.<sup>10</sup> A meeting of the Central Committee of the Serbian League of Communists in 1987 gave Milošević the chance to use the popular support he had gained through his expression of solidarity with Serbs in Kosovo in order to put himself and his conservative faction into power. With new rhetoric about the need to protect the interests of Serbs throughout Yugoslavia, Milošević managed to replace the moderate leaders of the Party with conservative hard-liners willing to use the language of nationalism to consolidate power.<sup>11</sup> Over the next two years, the conservatives staged mass rallies to replace the leadership of Vojvodina,

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<sup>8</sup> Gagnon, 60.

<sup>9</sup> Cohen, 100.

<sup>10</sup> Cohen, 107-109.

<sup>11</sup> Cohen, 116-118.

Montenegro, and Kosovo itself with conservatives loyal to Milošević.<sup>12</sup> In this way, he overcame his first obstacle of silencing reformists within the Serbian party apparatus itself.

However, this victory did nothing to solve the pressing economic and political issues plaguing Yugoslav society, which had only grown in intensity following the fall of communist regimes throughout eastern Europe. While Milošević at first attempted to repress calls for political pluralism by claiming reformists were secretly motivated by support for Albanian separatists, he was eventually forced to face the reality of multi-party elections.<sup>13</sup> These elections came about in Yugoslavia in 1990 mainly as a result of three factors: pro-reform regimes in Slovenia and Croatia, support from federal Prime Minister Ante Marković, and massive protest rallies led by newly formed opposition parties.<sup>14</sup> Confronted with these elections, the Serbian conservatives decided to alter their tactics. They saw that the only way for them to remain in power was to give up the idea of preserving Yugoslavia, since Marković and others were already attempting to use federal powers to force reforms on Serbia. However, the idea of Yugoslavia was still highly popular among Serbs. The conservative leaders played to that by publicly proclaiming that their main goal was preservation of the multi-national federation. Simultaneously, they used the popular media to accuse other ethnic groups or foreign nations of oppressing the Serbs and therefore forcing the destruction of Yugoslavia.<sup>15</sup> This situation led to the heavy reliance on media to propagate these accusations in order to allow leaders of Milošević's newly reformed Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) to appear

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<sup>12</sup> Gagnon, 69-71.

<sup>13</sup> Cohen, 164-165.

<sup>14</sup> Gagnon, 90-91.

<sup>15</sup> Gagnon, 92.

defensive victims of foreign aggression and thus remain in power despite carrying out extremely unpopular policies and failing to provide solutions to economic problems. At the same time, this enabled the SPS to delegitimize the opposition by claiming that dissidents supported the oppression of Serbs living outside Serbia proper.

The main method for Milošević and others to promote the image of themselves as peacemakers in a time of foreign aggression was through highly publicized speeches. This strategy was founded on the regime's ability to ensure their speeches receive wide media coverage. In fact, speeches were essentially turned into major media spectacles, and crowds were drawn in with promises of a day off work with pay, free transportation, and entertainment. The trend goes back to perhaps the most infamous speech at a rally in 1989 in Kosovo on the Serb national holiday of June 28<sup>th</sup>, made to commemorate the 1389 Battle of Kosovo. Repeatedly throughout the speech, Milošević calls for "equal and harmonious relations among the Yugoslav peoples," emphasizing his commitment to the Yugoslav idea. However, he also refers to Serbia as an "unjustly suffering country," and claims that the escalation of ethnic tensions into armed conflict "cannot be excluded yet." He therefore presents himself as an ardent multi-nationalist who is simply trying to defend the "full equality" of Serbs in the face of threats from outside nationalist groups.<sup>16</sup> This approach continued after the introduction of the multi-party system. When it became necessary to mobilize support leading up to elections, the SPS was forced to deal with questions about the unstable economy, which it did by blaming the dire economic conditions on the "anti-Serbian" reforms of Prime Minister Marković, reinforcing the image of Serbia as a victim at the hands of the other Yugoslav peoples and the SPS as its

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<sup>16</sup> "Slobodan Milošević Addresses Rally at Gazimestan," *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts* (30 June, 1989), online via LexisNexis, <<http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/>> (1 November 2005).

defender.<sup>17</sup> Curiously, the Milošević regime also lashed out in speeches against the new openly nationalist parties, such as the Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO) and more extreme Serbian Radical Party (SRS), despite the fact that the SPS was actually supporting a culture of nationalism through the media. Milošević called elections a choice between “peace and economic and cultural prosperity, or for conflicts and hatreds.”<sup>18</sup> The fact that the regime publicly rejected these nationalist groups shows that they felt the majority of Serbs would be more supportive of a platform of peace and cooperation.

The regime complemented the peaceful rhetoric of these speeches with the violent images presented on the daily news. Journalists of the official media created images of a victimized Serb population in order to convince the population that defense of Serbian interests needed to be the top priority. The most frequently used method to portray Serb victimization was to invoke the memory of past oppressions of Serbs. Croats were constantly compared to the World War II-era fascist Ustaša regime, which was an ally of Hitler, while the Muslims were called Turks to recall the centuries of rule by the Ottoman Empire. A prime example is the coverage of a memorial service for the Serbs killed at the Jasenovac concentration camp by Croatian fascists. Serbian reporters blamed Croatian authorities for trying to prevent the ceremony with roadblocks, and media commentators demanded that Croatia “offer an apology... to the entire Serb nation, to whom no one ever apologized for Jasenovac.”<sup>19</sup> This had the effect of reminding Serbs of past grievances while simultaneously creating the impression that Croatia was on the path to another “Ustaša” regime bent on eliminating Serbs. With Muslims, both Bosnian

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<sup>17</sup> Gagnon, 97-98.

<sup>18</sup> Gagnon, 99.

<sup>19</sup> Lazar Lalić, *Three TV Years in Serbia* (Belgrade: Independent Media Union, 1995), 21.

and Albanian, the media used religious labels to remind viewers of past Ottoman oppression. When Serb TV began reporting on the outbreak of violence in Muslim areas of Bosnia, they commented that it was carried out “in the name of Allah,” purposefully implicating the entire Muslim population. In other cases, Muslims were referred to simply as “jihad warriors.”<sup>20</sup> The leaders of the Milošević regime activated and tapped into these memories to make their claims of foreign oppression credible. Viewers were made to feel as if the Serbs in surrounding areas relied on the military support of Serbia proper for mere survival.

On the other hand, the events that RTS did not cover in its news broadcasts also give insight into the process of creating the image of victimized Serbia. One of the most egregious examples is the lack of reports of the Serb shelling of Sarajevo. In some instances, Serb media even went as far as to blame Muslims for killings that happened in Sarajevo, claiming that they took place “deep inside Muslim territory,” and often omitting that the victims themselves were Muslim.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps the most infamous example is the reaction of the Serb media to the Vase Miškina Street massacre of 1992 in which dozens died in the shelling of a Sarajevo breadline. Serbian journalists claimed that the Muslims attacked their own people in order to have something to blame on the Serbs and gain international support, even going as far as to cite a fictitious UN report confirming this.<sup>22</sup> The media went even further with its denial of the Serb shelling of the Croatian city of Dubrovnik, broadcasting interviews with military Generals who assured

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<sup>20</sup> Branka Mihajlović, “Television Belgrade – Spirit of Intolerance,” in *Hate Speech*, ed. Branko Milinković (Belgrade: Center for Antiwar Action, 1994), 22.

<sup>21</sup> Mihajlović, 23.

<sup>22</sup> Milošević, 122.



viewers that not even a “grain of sand” had fallen.<sup>23</sup> These attempts at hiding information from the population of Serbia are just as revealing as the broadcasting and exaggerating of the violence committed against Serbs. This combination resulted in an almost unshakable image of Serbs as the victims of unprovoked foreign aggression.

After placing current events within the framework of victimization, the Milošević regime then used this image to lash out against opposition at home. When faced with demonstrations led by the opposition in March 1991 calling for freedom of the press and election reform, the media responded by condemning the organizers for having “more than once shared the demands of the [Albanian] secessionists, the pro-Ustaše policy of the [Croatian government] and have worked against the interests of the Serb people.”<sup>24</sup> During the presidential campaign between Milošević and Milan Panić in 1992-93, state-owned television portrayed Panić as a traitor for largely the same reasons.<sup>25</sup> Essentially, the media was claiming that Panić contributed to the oppression of Serbs and would not protect their interests the way Milošević surely would. Once the image of the victim was well established, the Socialists even used it as a means to continually purge the media of “undesirable journalists,” claiming they were “obstacles to the government’s effort to restore order.” They even went as far as to read out lists of media professionals who were “bad Serbs” on prime-time television.<sup>26</sup> This created a self-perpetuating system that ensured tight government control of the media and made positive popular images of the opposition impossible.

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<sup>23</sup> Milošević, 120.

<sup>24</sup> Lalić, 46.

<sup>25</sup> Milošević, 117.

<sup>26</sup> Milošević, 116.

In conclusion, it is clear that manipulation of the media was the centerpiece of the Milošević regime's strategy for remaining in power. Using the existing ethnic tensions in Kosovo, Milošević managed to lead his conservative faction of socialists to power, and then maintain that power through subsequent multi-party elections. By portraying themselves in public speeches as cooperative peace-seekers, leaders of the Socialist Party were able to appeal to voters once they provoked the rise of ethnic tensions through falsified and exaggerated media coverage, despite the fact that they did nothing to solve the more pressing economic issues. The Serbian government was able to successfully promote the image of a victimized Serbia by reviving memories of past oppression. Finally, the efforts to suppress independent media and ensure a monopoly of information for the state-owned broadcasts and publications underscore the integral role of the press in the struggle to retain political power.