

Media & Crime

INTERVIEW WITH A JOURNALIST

JOURNALISTS IN THE MIRROR

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- Today's disputes between the government and the opposition in Serbia by their form are derived from old divisions and conflicts which in this country have been lasting already for two hundred years. Serbia's divisions ran along many lines. The basic line of division, however, has been and still is the division in "two Serbias" – the patriarchal, traditional, conservative and the majority one; and the other one – the minority, but always present – the modern, liberal, civic Serbia.

Of course, these divisions were intensifying, multiplying and deepening in times of crises and major challenges, for which it was necessary to find answers. The fall of communism and the wars that were waged in the nineties led to big confusion, frustration and a crisis of the broadest scope. And, of course, to new divisions.

This "duality" in the domain of politics was transferred to all social structures, including even many professional associations. Due to completely different social and personal attitudes in regard to the period of Milosevic's war politics a group of journalist left in these years the Association of Journalists of Serbia (UNS) and founded their own Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia (NUNS). This new Association entered now its fourteenth year. Recently the Assembly of the Independent Association elected as its new president Ms. Nadezda Gace, who has a long carrier as a journalist and was one of the founders of this organization. For some thirty years Nadezda Gace was working as a journalist and publicist, stepping through all levels of the journalist's hierarchy from reporter to editor, she worked also in numerous editorial boards, on TV, in daily newspapers, weeklies, journals.

Together with congratulations usually comes the question related to plans and intentions. Hence, do you have some new plans in regard to this Association and, having in mind that the times are changing anyway, what are the present relations between the to journalists' associations – NUNS and UNS?

- The establishment of the Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia was the direct result of divisions within the journalists during the nineties. A group of us who disagreed not only with the atrocious and criminal policy of Slobodan Milosevic but primarily with the horrific manipulation of the media, and through it also with the public opinion – founded this Association. I think that the role of NUNS in these years was really a significant one because we, together with some independent intellectuals, a part of the nongovernmental sector and some other lonely voices have persistently been showing that there does exist a different Serbia as well, a Serbia that wants to talk, to negotiate, and not to wage war. In these years it was really difficult, often also dangerous, to confront a seducing national policy of Slobodan Milosevic through which he justified even the worst crimes. Some of our colleagues paid this with their lives. On the other hand, we were fully aware of the big responsibility for everything that reaches millions of people through the media.

The previous leadership of NUNS had clear aims and plans related to its work. I will continue to do all that they have done, but, of course, there are new possibilities as well. One of them is, and we are just now working on it, the organization of round tables devoted to facing the reality and our recent past. This is an important work, this is what this society is missing – an open, honest talk on what was really happening and this not in order to "haunt" the culprits, but first of all in order to help this society use the truth in order to find the exit from a long-lasting, persistent hate, bitterness and permanent search for culprits among the others. Then, for the first time this year, we shall award four best journalists, and I want to note that the competition is still open. We have ongoing a few other projects, among others our schools for journalists. One of the most important tasks ahead is the forthcoming privatization of the media. As far as the public service is concerned, its position is completely clear both in regard to its legal position and its competences and how it should behave. However, forthcoming is the privatization of other media, and here we shall particularly take care of local media so that it would not happen that some journalists completely arbitrarily, due to the caprice of some mighty man, loose their job. What s the role of the new owners? These are themes for discussion within NUNS. Of course, we cannot influence the market conditions, who is going to buy and who is not, we are an association and what we

can do is to take care as much as possible about the interests of our members.

As far as the relations between our two associations are concerned, of course that times are changing, but as I have already said, our association is a result of resistance to a monstrous politics, and in this regard we shall not change. I think that UNS is awaiting a big purification. I do not when, in five or ten years, new generations will come and these generations will not be as burdened with all these problems as we are, which is also normal because these were fifteen years of our lives.

Perspective

When I was recently elected as President of NUNS there was a strange, almost ironical coincidence, as life sometimes has it. This was the day when our Parliament was in session, and the same day we got the information that Slobodan Milosevic had died in The Hague. We emerged in resistance to him, to this politics, but with his death the reasons for our existence did not cease to exist. This is exactly what I said to my colleagues when I thanked for their confidence and election. The consequences of the destructive politics of Milosevic's rule will be felt for years to come. We are living in a country in which this system has left over so many unresolved situations, has imploded all parts of the society, that NUNS will have a lot to do for a long time ahead.

Journalists who were directly linked to Milosevic's regime are now again leading personalities in certain editorial boards?

- The Association of Journalists of Serbia convened an Assembly during which eight of their members were excluded from membership for life. Let me not list them, these are only the most known names like Milanovic, Komrakov, Cukic. However, this cannot be sufficient. It is true that a big number of journalists remained in UNS by inertia, that they withdrew and are doing their jobs, or stepped aside and are leading a different life, but they must organize themselves and hold in their association a well-prepared assembly and unequivocally evaluate this period and the work of their colleagues. It is not sufficient to exclude eight journalists and say – we solved this problem. No, we did not, the role of the media was certainly not a peripheral one. It is true that the media did not create the war, this was done by irresponsible politicians, but the media are extremely responsible for inciting hate, contaminating our spiritual space, supporting lies, obscurantism and crimes. Media had a crucial influence upon the developments at that time. Out of all consequences of the war the worst ones are those which left traces upon human soul and thought. And here it is exactly some media who were the worst poisoners and this responsibility cannot be neglected.

However, there are problems in journalism also beyond these moral nulls among the journalists. The journalists are often criticized for being also unprofessional, illiterate, easy to corrupt and the like?

- There is a general attitude that journalists are uneducated, that they do not know things, that they are easy to buy. I do not want to say that a greater part of this is not true. However, if we live in a society which has imploded in each of its segments, I do not see how exactly the journalists' profession could now remain pure and untouched. If this happened in regard to healthcare, the judiciary, education, economy, how could it be expected that our profession would remain beyond this.

We are only more visible, more exposed to the eye of the public. This is in no way meant to be an excuse, but simply judging will not solve the problem, it will not replace the need to explain. It is only in this way that it will be possible to search for some solutions for the way out from this vicious circle. Journalism has simply shared the fate of the society in which it was living. Somebody found a better way, was thinking better, somebody a worse one, somebody took the line of least resistance, like all other people do, by the way. It is true that many young journalists are intolerably undereducated. However, I warn often – everything what happened during these wars is horrible, but there are only two things which cannot be changed: we shall build new houses and towns, we shall build new bridges and roads, but we shall never ever get back the lost lives or get back the lost education of the young generation. Recall these years: whoever was, say, a pupil in the four-year secondary school, actually attended only two years, and they were of bad quality. There was either no electricity, or heating, or we had strikes, or demonstrations, than we had protests, and finally the bombing campaign. When you make such a big hole in the education of young people, this is an irrecoverable damage. Serbia will be culturally backward for decades. Of course, this also happened with young journalists – a missed education. In this sense, what can be of some help and is missing in our media, is a strong editorial staff. NUNS is working exactly in this sense – to organize round tables and bring together the editors. The editors must be persons which not only know well their job, but also persons which will know how to educate and give a good orientation to the young journalists. Of no less importance for a good editor is to know what can be published and what cannot, to know how to decide and make a responsible decision. I think that these round tables will be of extraordinary benefit for the journalists' profession.

The media, like a "big public mouth" as somebody put it, have a very significant role in the process of facing the crimes.

- I must say that this is a very difficult issue. I have been working quite a lot on experiences within other nations and tried to understand this phenomenon that you do not accept that somebody from your people committed forbidden things to other people only because they are of a different ethnic affiliation. Everywhere this is a complex, difficult and painful process. It actually hurts the people and they do not want to be reminded of bad things. You look to them like a red scarf to a bull. I think that the media can influence this process to a certain extent, but this must be primarily the attitude and program of the state, the Government. The political elite must be involved in this process if they really want the democratization of this society, so must also the intellectual and cultural elite of this people. It is one thing if we talk about this with other people, and a completely different thing if somebody who is perceived as the creator of the national conscience keeps silent in this regard. Then the people say – well, what do these want from us now? But, is this our private struggle? No, of course it is not, it is not even in some narrower interest of ours. It is an authentic need, even a practical interest of this people: to look clearly, unequivocally and truly into its past in order to be able to leave it behind.

The problem of this government is that it gave up some kind of lustration. At second glance, this problem reaches far back into history of Serbia, which always had these so-called progressive, pro-Western forces and those conservative and right-oriented ones. This is the division. This is why lustration is actually not accepted in Serbia. In the Government, in the Parliament, there are advocates of this conservative and traditional Serbia and it is them who cannot really accept this. I do not say that they are not aware of the problem, on the contrary, they are, and they work on changing Serbia – but they work in the wrong direction.

Recently a journalist said something interesting: today's Serbian nationalism is deeply destructive because it is basically a losers' one, it has no elements of statehood, unlike the case with some other peoples.

I come back to the evil inflicted to us all by Milosevic's regime. It seems as if I am obsessed with him, but this is where the roots of the evil are, and therefore constant talk about him. Milosevic pushed Serbia into a wrong, suicidal nationalism. This is the ethnocentrism, which is simultaneously primitive and on seemingly very proud. We were always right, we were always on the victorious sides, we have always been the target of various malign conspiracies, all others hate us. First, this is not true. Second, why would somebody so persistently have something against the Serbs? What are the Serbs – a great, powerful, rich, or particularly gifted people and now it provokes envy and animosity of others? No, many liked this story on the endangerment of Serbs and Milosevic's ideas were hitting exactly this irrational part of the Serb collective being, they expressed and satisfied some of such needs. This takes us back again to the story about the conservative and right-oriented conscience in Serbia and here, I must say, the Church has played a historically negative role. Serbs have always thought to have the right to create the biggest state in the Balkans, and when we have not managed to have the biggest state, well, here we have at least the biggest Orthodox temple. Wars which were waged for territories ended in the loss of territories. Today's political and intellectual elites do not speak about this being from the very beginning, in essence, wrong politics, for them it is wrong because it was unsuccessful. It is hard to expect a genuine facing with the past to emerge from this standpoint.

On the other hand, Serbia does not have the essential elements of statehood: where are her borders, what are her symbols, what are her holidays? People do not know this, ask them in the streets. There is a huge number of TV and radio broadcasts, dailies and weeklies in Serbia. But only few read all this, people hardly buy one daily and then it is usually the cheapest one.

Umbrella for the code

There will probably be a rapprochement between UNS and NUNS. We had already an initial step, however under the auspices of the OSCE, or as I like to put it, under its umbrella. They insisted that both associations make one code of conduct. We did write it together, and now there will be a discussion within the associations in the next two months. We in NUNS made serious preparations. We shall organize talks with our members from Novi Sad, Subotica to Novi Pazar, Bujanovac, Nis, Cacak... As far as we are concerned, there is nothing new, we have behaved in this manner all these years, but it is a common code of UNS and NUNS. We shall invite to each of these talks also the colleagues from UNS. After these two months this paper will go again to the OSCE and afterwards the common code should be adopted, and it will encompass all questions of interest for this profession – ranging from the protection of journalists, rules of conduct, the conduct of private owners, what is a secret and what is not, the accessibility of information, etc. This is the first indicator of some sort of rapprochement between these two associations, but this does not mean our unification. These are simply professional criteria, professional standards of conduct.

In Serbia developed a kind of newspapers which we usually call the "yellow press". However, many say it would be more adequate to call it the "black press".

- These newspapers have a large circulation first of all because they are cheap, and they also were created along the tabloids' model in the West. People like to read short news, to hear a gossip. However, these are not tabloids, these are political newspapers which create the public opinion. What is devastating is that certain politicians began to court to this kind of press, because this press has editions of 120 or 200 thousand, so why should they not give an interview to Kurir instead of Danas. Here the politicians bear great responsibility, but I am afraid that they do not think about this, they simply are buying one more vote. On the other hand, it is obvious that we are neither a mature nor a democratic society. We cannot expect to have some of these newspapers undergo the same process as some of the newspapers in the West do after they published, say, a direct lie, defamation or insult. These newspapers not only pay huge fines, their edition also declines drastically because the readers themselves sanction lies. We here have a "Watergate" everyday, and nothing happens. And it is clear that these newspapers, particularly when they were initiated, could not have been with so many pages, in color, and still cost only ten dinars. It is clear that somebody is financing this. These newspapers were actually initiated with the aim to disorient, not to inform. And as it is often the case on the market, better selling rates have the cheaper and lower quality goods, and the more expensive and better merchandise is reserved for something like the elite. And although here everybody speaks today that the fate of the media is in the hands of the market, I do not fully agree with this. There is the market also in England, and we do have the BBC, there is the market in Germany, France, Italy and they still do not have this "black" and "yellow" media as we do.

Serbia has a quite good Information Act, a good Broadcasting Council, a good Council for media monitoring. Something did start to change here, it is not true that really nothing has moved. Only, it is very difficult and slow.

However, wrong behavior is not sanctioned in any way?

- This is not completely true. Here is one recent example: recently there was an advertisement in Glas which invited national and religious hate. It is an advertisement given by an association of refugees from Croatia on the occasion of the opening of a Croatian warehouse in New Belgrade. Apart from a call to boycott Croatian goods, there is a mention of the Croatian boot that must not step upon Serbian soil, and similar things. The owner of Glas, Mr. Rodic, says that this was done by his marketing department and that he himself did not know about the advertisement. However, this is not the answer. On this occasion we gave a statement and asked the Public Prosecutor to react. Later we were supported also by Mr. Bojan Dimitrijevic, Minister of Trade and Tourism, which is very good. Hence, we in NUNS cannot judge, but we can indicate to the public about such things and call upon those responsible in such cases. It is not true that in market economy it is possible to do whatever you want. And if now Mr. Rodic would be, as we hope, adequately sentenced for such a misdemeanor, tomorrow this would be of great significance for the others.

Did NUNS follow the reports in the media related to the death of Slobodan Milosevic?

- NUNS reacted very promptly. We reminded our colleagues, as well as owners of the media, not to take upon themselves the role of the judge. A day after Milosevic died all newspapers belonging to this "yellow-black" profile have already given their judgment that Milosevic was killed in The Hague. This is not the role of the media. A part of the editorial boards acted adequately, the other part did not. There was also a complete confusion of the Government of Serbia which we see as additionally responsible for numerous manipulations which emerged in our press on a daily basis. The Government of Serbia allowed itself to be blackmailed by SPS, the Radicals used this for their political promotion. I do not want to talk about the family Milosevic and their various letters, this is already within the realm of pathology. However, I want to point at the intolerable misuse of children in this event. Here I do not have in mind the parents, they can after all be people with problems, but the behavior of one party, SPS, was inadmissible, just like that of the respective social services which were bound to react to such an inadmissible manipulation with children.

The entire story related to Milosevic's funeral was best defined, as usual, by our recently deceased colleague, a terrific journalist and a man who knew to think, Aleksandar Nenadovic. In a telephone conversation a few days before he died he told me: the funeral of Slobodan Milosevic stripped the Government of Serbia and showed what this Government is. I have nothing to add to this.

However, I do have to add something to what did not happen after the funeral of the former dictator. No newspaper has published a text saying it was a pity that Slobodan Milosevic died without a sentence, that he did not live to hear the pronouncement of the sentence for what he had done. This too, probably, is part of facing the past.

Who killed Curuvija?

What is, in your opinion, the relationship between the media and the judiciary in Serbia?

What the so-called special courts in Serbia are doing nowadays is a very difficult work. I admire these people. On the one hand, they are doing an extremely strenuous and socially responsible work, and on the other hand, they are attacked by everyone who feels like attacking them in the way he wants to. The media, too, to be more precise a part of them, have shown a big level of irresponsibility in this regard. Everything was written, verdicts were brought in advance, culprits were identified and the like. However, it is of particular significance to have good cooperation between the media and judicial organs in this country. This will bring closer to the people the truth about what had been happening. I am very much in favor of TV broadcasts from the courtrooms, at least of the final phases. I also think that both courts should issue special documentary publications on the course of these trials so that all those interested could have this as documents. I personally would have liked to have been able to follow some of these processes.

At the same time, I must remind about the fact that for years now it was not possible to initiate proceedings for the murder of our colleague Slavko Curuvija or, generally, the numerous political murders which happened here. Why? It is clear that there are pressures by the political criminal underground. In some cases they are visible with the unaided eyes. It remains for us only to really believe in the well known saying that "the wheels of justice grind slowly".

Vera Ninic