

# Who Rings the Bell?

By Maja Vasic-Nikolic, Serbia

Three journalists murdered and one assassination attempt in Serbia around millennium. While many aspects of these murders could be discussed, one is beyond debate: Vujsinovic in 1994, Curuvija in 1999 and Pantic in 2001 were murdered because of their work and by - or under the veil of - the State. We may eventually find out who pulled the trigger, but it's unlikely we will ever find the mastermind. My doubts are not baseless: the very instigators of violence against journalists are the rulers of 2017 Serbia. It would be naïve to expect from them to bring themselves or their closest allies to justice.

But - you may argue - no journalist has been murdered since, and the number of physical assaults against them is declining. That should be a good sign? Don't fall into that trap: the essence of journalism is being murdered by different means: threats, pressures, state sponsored smear campaigns, selective justice or no access to justice at all are different modes of destroying what's left of journalism in Serbia. [Records](#) show a decrease in physical and verbal assaults (2015: 37; 2016: 35; 2017: 28) and increase of other forms of pressure (2015: 17; 2016: 33; 2017:62).

Though there are many evidence that the chain of justice is heavily politicised, the text will address some of the present forms of political pressures against media in Serbia.

## Use of legal instruments to intimidate free media

*Vranjske* was a renowned independent media outlet from Vranje, southern Serbia that fostered and promoted investigative journalism. Since its establishment (1994), its owner, Vukasin Obradovic and his team were marked as *political opponents* and as such lived with intimidation - burglaries, car damage, threats to journalists, Obradovic and his family – reported but not solved. They are no strangers to pressures either, facing discrimination, smear campaigns, withdrawal of advertisers, etc.

Years of struggle culminated after *Vranjske* published an interview with a former local Tax Authority director. The warning came quickly: media will be subjected to inspection with a sole aim to compromise its business and, finally, close it. The rumour has it that on many occasions corridors of Vranje City Hall echoed shouts of the SNS officials “*Vranjske* will be closed!” They succeeded – after 23 years, five investigative journalism awards and Obradovic’s own record of being the only journalist in Serbia who received three highest journalism awards - *Vranjske* closed.

Political use of legal instruments to intimidate media is present Serbia wide. The inspections, as a rule of thumb, come after media scrutinises officials and government actions and result in reports stating *minor irregularities* were found. At the same time, inspections pay visits to media regular advertisers and partners, often implying that business relations with them is undesirable and intimidate them out of such relations.

## Selective tax inspections

While tax inspections are acceptable state instrument, it is impossible not to notice how selectively they are being used. With more than 60 channels *TV PINK* dominates Serbia's television market and is a first choice for Vucic, former Prime Minister, now President of Serbia, his SNS party and allies as a key platform to share their thoughts with the nation (including EU Commissioner Johannes Hahn who infamously gave it an [exclusive interview](#)). This puts the Serbian Public Broadcasting Service under additional pressure: not only that it is heavily dependent on the state budget, it's continuously publically marginalised by the leading politician. Vucic is *a must* in *TV PINK* shows, but never with someone who opposes him and, on occasions discussing hot topics with himself or with [printed tweets](#) of journalists and politicians.

Zeljko Mitrovic, its owner, is a close friend of Vucic (and former ally of Milosevic-Markovic couple), Minister of Defence's best man (at two weddings, insisted the Minister) and many other things, all of which may offer an answer to the following questions: How *TV PINK* got away with owing 3.5 million EUROS in tax and received more [7 million EURO credit](#) from the Serbian Export Credit and Insurance Agency in 2014-16? Why tax inspection didn't pay it a visit? Why The Agency ignored orders by the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and paid 2,000 EURO in fines? Well, because it can.

## Regulatory body turns a blind eye

Audience share of *TV PINK* is, without a doubt, large – but with a national frequency come legal obligations, to start with respect of the law.

Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (RAEM) is the kind of watch dog any democracy would wish. Mandated to issue licenses to national broadcasters, nurture media pluralism, monitor their content and react on violations, it has made the mockery of itself: experts argue its only purpose is to work in interest of one man. It does so by ignoring its legal obligations (refusing to monitor pre-election campaign) and turning a blind eye to violations of media close to Vucic which broadcast rape, women beatings, exorcism, sex, exposing vulnerable minors' identities, hate speech... Such violations would have closed the media with national frequency long time ago. But not *TV PINK*, a loyal ally of the president.

Gordana Susa, its Council former member [insists](#) that RAEM wasn't always dysfunctional:

*Analyses show that as Vucic become stronger, RAEM weakened, as Vucic increasingly appropriated the duties of respective institutions, RAEM became more dependent on him.*

Such dependence was crafted through a deeply politicised process of election of RAEM Council members: all are appointed by the National Assembly which took as much time as it needs to secure that only the ruling party favourites get in and follow the political instructions from the top.

## **Widening the scope of influence**

In 2015 state owned media faced compulsory privatisation. Facilitated by the state inefficiency, legal loopholes and blatant violation of law, privatisation process gave way to *party media*, owned by close allies of the ruling party. The second stage of this process is abuse of a well design mechanism to co-finance media content of public interest which resulted in funding the ruling party's political interest.

Demonstration of political power in this process is more blatant in the case of *Informer* daily, responsible for the worst degradation of journalist profession and smear campaigns against anyone objecting Vucic, often focussing on investigative journalists. The most read tabloid's editor-in-chief D.J. Vucicevic publicly rejects the Ethical Code of Journalism and views those who respect it as morons. Recorded 1,208 violations of Ethical Code in 10 months of 2016 did not stop the authorities from awarding *Informer* multiple contracts in various public calls. Nor it stopped Vucic labelling Vucicevic, an honourable and decent man.

The *Informer* is a *political tabloid* translating Vucic's policies into messages to wider domestic audience and creates constant atmosphere of fear, state of emergency, *coup d'état*, assassination attempts against Vucic - all blamed on either political opponents or journalists, and all so far proved untrue.

On the other hand, media known for their professionalism are treated as politically unsuitable and, as such, rarely receive support through this mechanism. When they do, they often reject the allocated amounts since those cover only a small fraction of proposed activities. Political influence and vengeful approach boiled out of Ivan Tasovac, 2016 Minister of Culture and Information and his unprecedented move to change the grants commission decision and allocate, as he put it, zero dinars to two organisations previously awarded grants. This came after months of criticism from these organisations against the same Minister.

## **The bell**

Political influence and interference in work of media can be neutralised by good legal framework and consistent implementation. But, without *political will* nothing ever changes in Serbia, and there is clearly a will to maintain control over media at any cost.

Year 2018 will be marked with new Media strategy and changes to media legislation. Before the laws are passed to 250 strong National Assembly, the Strategy is drafted by a Working Group. Entrusted with the important task of writing the crucial document, the Group was assembled in accordance with the *participatory approach*. In reality, the state has the full control of the process: out of 15 members, only 3 represent journalists and media.

Even with joined forces and strong advocacy, it is unrealistic to expect that views of the profession will be heard and professional journalists' interest protected. Since its formation, three representatives of the profession and one expert left the Group and the Ministry announced it will go on without them. This is hardly a participatory approach to policy making, but bills will be sent to National Assembly for discussion and adoption.

The Assembly holds the crucial evidence of political influence on media and media freedoms – and not only those, but on basic human rights and lives of Serbian citizens. Bills are discussed in an Assembly that became much like *TV PINK* reality programme - used by MPs to bring the worst in them, their colleagues and viewers (it is broadcasted live). In such environment, allowed and nurtured by the Speaker, Maja Gojkovic, any form of suggestion put out by anyone not affiliated with the ruling party seems to be rejected. To understand the process, think of Pavlov's experiment: if you ring a bell and give a treat to a dog enough times, the dog will start salivating when it hears the bell.

It seems that any motion is adopted in the National Assembly only if the bell situated next to the Speaker rings. On numerous occasions it became clear that if the Speaker presses the bell, all the MPs belonging to the ruling coalition vote YES. If there is no bell, they do not vote.

Add to it an unbelievable lack of shame and think for a minute about who rules Serbia, how and to which end. About the civil servants, policemen, prosecutors and judges who refuse to be instrumentalised in a war against freedom of expression. The slow murdering of journalism mirrors the slow murdering of, already fragile and deteriorated democratic and civic values in Serbia.