

MARK THOMPSON

Forging peace

Balkan media, particularly the Serbian press, were actively engaged in forging war in the region. Now they have to learn a new role

On 29 September 1997, so the story goes, General Wesley Clark, NATO Supreme Allied Commander, Europe (SACEUR), was scanning transcripts of that morning's press conference in Sarajevo when a detail leaped out at him.

Among the statements by the international organisations that were implementing the Dayton peace agreement in Bosnia and Herzegovina was some strong criticism of SRT, the Bosnian Serb television network. The United Nations spokesman was indignant that SRT's latest coverage of the War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague had been given an anti-Dayton slant.

Clark could not let this pass. The Bosnian Serb hardline leaders had agreed a mere month before to cease their inflammatory broadcasts against the international community. The NATO powers were ready to show that 'persistent and blatant contravention' of the peace process would not be tolerated. On 1 October, despite a hurried apology from SRT, troops from NATO countries took control of four key SRT transmitters. To get use of the transmitters back, SRT had to accept a far-reaching programme of restructuring.

With hindsight, this military operation was a turning point. It meant that the powers then trying to mend the Balkan countries and set them on the road to democracy had at last woken up to the importance of democratising the mass media.

Assistance to the Balkan media had been championed in the early 1990s by non-governmental organisations, from George Soros's Open Society Institute to the tenuous outfits staffed by dedicated activists with hand-to-mouth funding. These NGOs were excellent at supporting

professional media. What they could not do – lacking either mandate or resources – was tackle the structural problems that held the media back.

The result was an explosion of private media outlets in a context of outdated socialist legislation, abysmal market conditions and total political control of the main television networks and many leading newspapers. Bosnia and Macedonia gained more broadcasters per capita than anywhere else in Europe, possibly the world.

Then, in 1996, the OSCE (Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe) tried to make Bosnia's unruly media contribute to an environment for free and fair elections in September. The wholesale failure of this half-hearted effort persuaded Swedish politician Carl Bildt, the senior international civilian in Bosnia, that his mandate to tackle refractory media must be beefed up. This was done, and six months later the world's most powerful military alliance swung into action.

The following year, in 1998, plans to democratise Bosnia's media were unveiled. Several international organisations combined to start the transformation of the so-called 'state broadcasters' into public-service networks, to liberalise media laws and to mould an effective association of journalists as a first step to raising ethical standards.

Meanwhile, next door in Croatia, the OSCE mission joined with US and European diplomats to push the Tudjman regime on media reform. Croatia's own reformists kept a discreet distance from this external pressure, yet, to judge by the nationalists' heavy defeat in January 2000 elections, it did the liberals and democrats no harm, perhaps some good.

When tiny Montenegro distanced itself from Serbia in 1998, it tried to demonstrate its democratic good intentions in the media sphere. The fall of Milosevic last October awakened interest in bringing Serbia's media laws and institutions into line with European norms. The new OSCE mission in Belgrade is recruiting four or five international staff for its media development unit.

The most controversial effort at media restructuring occurred in Kosovo, where the UN and OSCE were soon accused by media watchdogs in the US, as well as by newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, of plotting a neo-colonial domination of the media. When the UN issued a draconian edict against hate-speech, then imposed a regulatory regime for print and broadcast media, it was denounced for making itself prosecutor, judge and jury against local journalists: hardly a model of democratic practice.



Kosovo, 2000: all the news that's fit to watch. Credit: © George Georgiou / Panos Pictures

These concerns were partly resolved by creating an appeals board that proved its independence in September 2000 by annulling the UN-OSCE mission's punishment of a Kosovo newspaper. After this, relations between the mission and the local media settled down. The professional quality of media coverage before elections in November exceeded expectations. The real problems afflicting journalism in Kosovo are lawlessness and poverty rather than international diktat.

The standard-setting agency here is the Council of Europe, working against a background of international instruments such as the European Convention on Human Rights. Sometimes deprecated as a talking shop, the CoE is another intergovernmental organisation that has come into its own since the end of the Cold War. Its experts have travelled widely

in Europe's transitional countries, assessing media laws and proposing amendments. What they lack in muscle is partly made up in quasi-moral authority, which resonates loudly in countries that are queuing up to join the European Union.

But only partly. International efforts at media reform in the Balkans have been undermined by opportunism. The performance of governments in the region has not been judged consistently by a set of agreed standards. On the contrary, criticism waxes and wanes in line with international priorities across the region. NATO only acted against SRT to boost a rival Bosnian Serb leader against the hardliners. When Croatia was under pressure for meddling in Bosnia and blocking the return of Serb refugees, it was also denounced for repression in the media. With the election of more pliable leaders, the great powers lost interest in Croatia's media.

The starkest case of opportunism, however, is provided by Macedonia. This impoverished country of some 2 million people has been praised, indeed overpraised for taking a more liberal attitude to the media. In fact, Macedonia's media are in a chaotic and dangerous condition. Pluralism is merely numerical, political manipulation is ubiquitous, and standards both professional and ethical are low. Perhaps worst of all, the media sector is split along linguistic lines that reflect all too accurately the parallel ghettos where the ethnic majority (Macedonians) and largest minority (Albanians) live.

The international community, however, seems indifferent to the potential of media to bridge this gap. Absorbed in learning the painful skills of post-conflict peace-building, western governments are still reluctant to address the needs of active conflict prevention. Some of the slack can be taken up by NGOs such as the US-based Search for Common Ground, which pioneered multi-ethnic programming for children in Macedonia; but engagement at government level is still needed. □

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