

# Problems Facing Quality Press Development in Serbia

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## Traditions of the Quality Press

The emergence of the press in Serbia was part of the process of building a modern Serbian state after several centuries of Ottoman Turkish occupation. The first newspaper appeared in 1834. Serbia entered the 20<sup>th</sup> century with 13 dailies and about 60 periodicals published in its capital Belgrade only. The early press reflected the characteristics of a hectic political life torn between two rivalry dynasties – it was opinion-loaded, highly partisan, sensationalist and unreliable. The first modern, civic-oriented daily, *Politika*, was launched in 1904. Its owner and editor Vladislav Ribnikar, a graduate of French and German universities, proclaimed in the first issue his intention to publish an independent paper that would ‘help the opposition by a justifiable critique of the government and protect the government from unjustified attacks from the opposition’ (Milivojevic 1984: 12). *Politika* was the first paper to provide fact-based reporting, to nourish an impartial analytical approach to public life, to launch editorials written by people from all walks of life, to promote sports as an important part of personal and public life, to employ a female journalist – in sum, it introduced the standards of modern European journalism in Serbia.

The press burgeoned in a short period of industrial progress and development of parliamentary democracy between the two world wars. About 1,600 new periodicals were launched in 20 years, reflecting a significant change in the modernizing social fabric. Daily papers won a massive audience and important influence. In 1941, three Belgrade dailies – *Politika*, *Vreme* and *Pravda* – had a total circulation of 255,000 per day. *Politika* alone was selling 145,000 copies a day (Misovic 1996). It enjoyed a high reputation for its moderate liberal orientation, adherence to reliable and balanced reporting, and commitment to promoting the best achievements of national culture and arts. In 1935, a group of pro-left intellectuals started the first analytical political weekly, *NIN*, which was constantly watched by the police because of its critical stance towards the regime and ultimately banned after only 26 issues. *NIN* marked the beginning of quality magazine journalism in Serbia.

After 1945, Serbia – by then part of the socialist state of Yugoslavia – was building a Soviet-type social system in which the press functioned as a propaganda tool of the ruling Communist Party. The state nationalized newsprint factories and printing houses, and totally

controlled press production. The 1945 Press Law criminalized any calls for change in the existing constitutional order, limiting the freedom of expression in accordance with the Leninist understanding of freedom and roles of the press. The newly established print media landscape was dominated by *Borba*, the Communist Party daily, which published the views of the political leadership only. *Politika* was restored as the paper of the People's Front, a wide union of anti-fascist and socialist forces. *Politika*'s pre-war fact-based professional tradition played an important role in the rise of its popularity over *Borba*.<sup>1</sup>

The gradual liberation of the Serbian media from the Party's dogmatic grip started in the 1960s, within the system of self-management and introduction of some forms of market economy, transformation of the *de facto* ruling Communist Party into the 'ideologically ruling' League of Communists, liberation of the cultural sphere from direct state and party control, and a considerable degree of openness to the world. Some of the main features of the centralized command media system were formally abolished: state monopoly of the media, pre-publication political censorship, laws banning critical journalism, barriers to international information flow. The media were organized as socially-owned enterprises which could act on the market. Social ownership, however, granted the right of control to political power centres. The general publisher of all the press was the Socialist Alliance of Working People (SAWP), a wide front of citizens, political and public organizations, considered a representative of general public interests. Besides establishing the programme platform and directing the editorial policy, the publisher had two additional control mechanisms: financing, and appointment of managers and editors. Since the SAWP acted as a transmitter of the Party and state will rather than as a representative of the pluralistic interests of its members, the dominant influence over the press was preserved by the Party and the state – that is, by their executive bodies.

Still, starting in the 1970s, political communication was characterized by a diminishing political influence on the everyday functioning of the press. As direct control was gradually replaced by controlling influence designed to secure journalists' promotion of the official ideology, certain segments of the communication system overstepped the limits of the ruling consensus and were open to alternative views of society and critique of dominant values. *Borba*, which was also placed under the auspices of the SAWP instead of the League of Communists, remained the ideologically most rigid paper and lost its prestigious position.<sup>2</sup> *Politika* fought fiercely to keep a degree of editorial autonomy in news coverage and editorial content, risking open conflicts with its publisher and the Communist Party.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, it evolved into a large

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<sup>1</sup> At the end of the 1950s, *Borba* had a circulation of about 230,000, against 300,000 for *Politika* (Misovic 1996).

<sup>2</sup> In the 1980s, *Borba*'s circulation dropped to around 50,000 (*Journalism* 1983, 1986, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> On several occasions, the Party tried to prevent 'wrong ideological turns' of *Politika* journalists by imposing Party

publishing company, with several high-circulation quality periodicals – the daily *Politika*, the evening paper *Politika Ekspres*, and the news magazine *NIN*, established on the basis of the traditions of the pre-war analytical and critical paper of the same name.<sup>4</sup> The alternative views, addressing tabooed topics and promoting debates on undesirable issues, were most present in literary magazines and youth papers, which had a low circulation but were quite numerous (*Knjizevne Novine, Student, Omladinske Novine, Mladost, Vidici*).

The economic and social crisis at the end of the 1980s and the disintegration of the federal Yugoslav community, followed by the strengthening of nation states in all of the republics, stopped the process of decentralization and liberation of the media. The escalation of the conflict between republican power centres was paralleled by growing centralization of media subsystems within the borders of individual republics. The previously won areas of professional freedom and autonomy were reduced. In Serbia, as well as in other republics, the media were put into the direct service of the republican authorities, i.e. in the service of national interests (Bacevic 1991), becoming a main instrument of legitimization of the state-building projects of the nationalist elite. Very soon after the disintegration of the Yugoslav Communist Party, the SAWP also dissolved. All its rights as a publisher were transferred to the parliament or even directly to its executive bodies. The Serbian leadership was the first to use the media for turning nationalistic rhetoric into a socially desirable form of public discourse. After Slobodan Milosevic's nationalistic fraction of the Communist Party became leading in 1987, it replaced the top managers in all the major media, the publishing company *Politika* being among its first targets. The media stimulated nationalistic mobilization and accused the other nations and their leadership of nationalism, justifying the policy of their own authorities as necessary for the protection of the national community. The real war on the territory of ex-Yugoslavia was thus preceded by a 'media war' between the Yugoslav republics, waged by both the commercial and the quality press. The only paper in Yugoslavia that promoted ethnic tolerance was the low-circulation daily *Borba*, the former communist paper now financed by the federal government.

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officials in editorial positions, but some of those Party personnel as journalists became the most agile guardians of *Politika*'s professional autonomy (Marovic 2002).

<sup>4</sup> At the beginning of the 1980s, the circulation of the *Politika* daily ranged from 260,000 to 280,000, that of the evening paper *Politika Ekspres* was approximately the same, 230,000 to 290,000, whilst *NIN* appeared in 130,000 to 180,000 copies (*Journalism* 1983, 1986).

## Quality Periodicals after 1989

The social context of post-communist transition in Serbia during the 1990s was dramatically different from that in other East European countries. Instead of replacing the communist system with the institutions of parliamentary democracy, the ruling Serbian elite was preoccupied with the building of a nation state that would unite all the Serbs living in Serbia and other former Yugoslav republics and secure them a dominant position among other ethnic groups. A formerly dominant class interest that guided the social organization was replaced by the ethnic interest, and the ideology of nationalism was affirmed as a form of new collective legitimacy. The result of the rule of the reformed Communist Party – the Socialist Party of Serbia led by Slobodan Milosevic – in a pseudo-democracy whose only novelty was an ineffective multiparty political system, was ethnification of all social spheres, re-etatization, centralization, re-traditionalization, and wars in Croatia and Bosnia (1991-1995) and with NATO (1999).

Throughout the 1990s, an institutional change securing real and not only formally introduced political and economic pluralism was entirely beyond the reach of the communication system. The social struggle for the liberation of the media had to focus on the very first step of de-monopolization of the media sphere – abolishing the state monopoly over information and a pure survival of the independent media (Ivanovic 1998). The media system remained structurally dependent on the state authorities, i.e. on the ruling party. Although the autonomy of the media was a major point of political conflicts throughout the decade, the state managed to maintain a privileged position in the media domain and to preserve control over all key points of the media system. The government's control of the press was enabled by its monopoly in the legal regulation of the media system, in the production and import of newsprint,<sup>5</sup> printing facilities and distribution networks; by impeding the transformation of ownership; and also by creating a negative image of independent media, intimidation of journalists,<sup>6</sup> harassment of media advertisers,<sup>7</sup> and forceful shutdowns of media.

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<sup>5</sup> The newspapers close to the regime were generally cheaper and more accessible to the public than the others. The government controlled the production, the price and the import of newsprint, putting the media in an unequal position on the market. There was only one factory manufacturing newsprint – a public enterprise – and it sold newsprint to newspapers close to the regime at a reduced price. The import of newsprint was under a special system of government licensing. The price of newspapers was also under government control. The government would not allow newspapers to raise their prices, even if they certified that they were operating at a loss. Because of the unfavourable economic conditions, a number of independent daily newspapers went out of business.

<sup>6</sup> Government officials publicly accused the independent media of non-patriotism, of being foreign mercenaries, of being employed by foreign intelligence services, national enemies etc. This attitude was highly promoted by the regime-controlled media. A famous journalist and publisher of the independent daily *Dnevni Telegraph* and the new magazine *Evropljanin* was killed in 1999, after he had been accused of national treason in a daily that was very close to the regime. Independent journalists were often exposed to threats and intimidation, and attacks by police while covering protests, strikes, and demonstrations.

The media scene was sharply divided between the regime-controlled media and the independent media. The first camp included almost all of the media structures inherited from the previous communist regime: the state news agency *Tanjug*, the national television and radio *RTS*, the most popular broadsheet *Politika*, the regional daily *Dnevnik*, the high-circulation evening papers *Politika Ekspres* and *Vecernje Novosti*, and influential commercial weeklies (*Duga*, *Intervju*, *Svet*), except for the daily *Borba* and several local weeklies, such as *Svetlost* from Kragujevac, one of the large Serbian cities.

At the beginning of the decade, the independent media camp was considerably smaller. It was made up mostly of new media enterprises founded after 1989: the first private TV station *Studio B* and the youth radio station *B92*, the private weekly newsmagazines *Vreme* and *Nezavisni*, and some local papers. Of the ‘old’ media, it included the daily *Borba* and the political weekly magazine *NIN* after the latter succeeded in ‘divorcing’ the parent company *Politika*. The independent press comprised quality papers only.

The ‘life stories’ of the Belgrade-based dailies *Politika* and *Borba*, two old rivals, are a good illustration of media developments in the 1990s. At the beginning of the pluralistic period, the two dailies completely reversed their roles. From the most appreciated and professional daily which had succeeded in keeping a distance from the government to the degree allowed by the communist system, *Politika* became an obedient servant of the ruling political elite (Nenadovic 1996; Matic 1995). By contrast, *Borba*, the former daily of the Communist Party and the most official voice on the media scene, from a typical regime daily became a free and critically oriented paper. Government control over *Politika* was preserved by a process of ‘controlled privatization’, which enabled state companies to buy the largest share of its stocks, and to dictate its editorial policies. On the other hand, the government monopoly over the newspaper market and direct measures such as tax exemptions secured *Politika* a privileged position on the market. Throughout the decade, *Politika* had the largest professional staff, the greatest volume and the lowest price of all the dailies. At the beginning of Milosevic’s rise, *Borba* was financed by the federal budget that kept it independent from Serbian authorities. In 1991, it was transformed into a joint-stock holding company with journalists as the majority shareholders, becoming the only independent Serbian daily. In 1994, by a court ruling, *Borba*’s privatization was annulled altogether and it reverted to being a state-owned enterprise with a new, pro-regime management. The journalists did not accept this change and established a new paper, *Nasa Borba*, starting virtually

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<sup>7</sup> The financial resources at the disposal of the independent press, particularly during the country’s economic isolation from the rest of the world because of UN sanctions, were incomparably lower than of the press close to the regime. There was strong political and economic pressure on advertisers who placed advertisements in the independent media, as much of the economy was centralized and operated under a licensing regime.

from scratch – with no equipment, no premises, no capital. In addition to struggling against the unfavourable position on the market, the new paper had to endure constant pressure from the regime, which denounced it as unpatriotic, treacherous and a foreign mercenary since it was supported by Western donors. *Nasa Borba* was among the first papers to be banned by a new draconian Public Information Act in 1998, on the eve of the war with NATO.

Until 1996 the regime-controlled press was absolutely dominant over the independent press. In 1995, there was only one independent daily, *Nasa Borba*, with 30,000 copies a day, as against the at least ten times higher circulation of the four national pro-regime dailies. The independent press gathered momentum during and after the massive three-month civic and student protests against the regime in winter 1996-1997<sup>8</sup> after the government attempted to rig the local elections, demonstrating the growing anti-regime orientation of Serbia's urban population. New dailies appeared, mostly tabloids or semi-tabloids, but carrying reliable political information – *Dnevni Telegraph*, *Blic* (the first paper financed by foreign capital), *Glas Javnosti*. Two new quality papers were also launched. The first, *Demokratija*, was founded by journalists from *Blic* who protested the latter's downplaying of political issues.<sup>9</sup> The second, *Danas*, was established by discontented journalists from *Nasa Borba* who were in conflict with its new private majority owner. As regards newsmagazines, however, the independent ones have been superior ever since 1992, when *NIN* journalists initiated a privatization process and reduced the *Politika* company shares to 10%, which allowed them to appoint a new editorial team that supported the magazine's critical-oriented tradition. In 1998 the owner of *Dnevni Telegraph*, Slavko Curuvija, started a new weekly newsmagazine, *Evropljanin*, which was financed by his sensationalist and highly commercialized daily *Dnevni Telegraph*.

However, the upsurge of the independent press was very short-lived. In 1998, the government intensified repressive measures against the media because of the Kosovo conflict and the NATO threat of bombing, and this dealt society another severe blow. A newly adopted Public Information Act imposed direct government control over every media content. As a result, the government was able to control all the conditions for media functioning and development but not the content of the independent media. The law provided severe fines for

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<sup>8</sup> While the independent newspaper readership had increased only negligibly for seven or eight years, in 1996 it increased tenfold, and won more than 100,000 new readers in just ten weeks between November 1996 and January 1997 (Smajlovic 1997).

<sup>9</sup> *Blic* was a typical tabloid, with short and simple stories, and a lot of entertainment content. It won its position on the market by fair coverage of events ignored by the regime-controlled media. Its start was very successful – it rapidly achieved a circulation of 200,000. The Milosevic government lashed back – it restricted *Blic*'s access to print and distribution facilities as the state printing house refused to print more than 80,000 copies of the paper. The *Blic* publishers caved in under state pressure and drastically reduced the number of political pages. As a result, *Blic* quickly lost half its circulation, as well as many of its journalistic staff who resigned in protest. *Blic* then contracted a new printing house, resumed a critical line and soon increased its circulation to nearly 160,000 (Smajlovic 1997).

disseminating ‘false information’ and for offending the dignity of individuals or organizations. Under the Act in question, the media were fined on 67 occasions, by a total exceeding DEM 2.5 million (only three of the punished media were pro-regime).

In highly unfavourable economic circumstances – due to the drastic economic crisis, large-scale and rapid impoverishment of the population, and unfair competition on the market – and in a hostile political environment, the independent quality press could survive the 1990s only with the help of international donors.

### **The Role of the Quality Press in the National Debates from the Last Decade**

The absolutely dominant player on the Serbian media scene throughout the 1990s was television. As the purchasing power of the population was in constant decline, the circulation of print media decreased steadily<sup>10</sup> and its influence was incomparable to electronic media. At the same time, the Milosevic regime was more concerned with limiting the influence of independent television and radio – it never allowed them to get national coverage – than with eradicating the independent press. However few and low-circulation, the independent papers were the only available source of non-propagandistic information for a great part of the population.

During the 1990s, the regime-controlled and the independent press presented every major social issue in a strikingly different way, offering the public opposite visions of reality. The former articulated the collective identity as national identity and promoted an authoritarian political culture that valued nationalistic patriotism, ethnic intolerance, war, xenophobia, etatism, monism, collectivism, and the personality cult. The latter promoted a political culture with ethnic tolerance, peace, cooperation with the world, parliamentary democracy, pluralism, human rights, and civil society as supreme values, and educated the audience to respect them.

The regime-controlled press functioned openly as the ruling party’s propaganda tool, aimed at mobilizing public support for government policies in the process of nation-building which the ruling party favoured over the promised democratic reconstruction of society. It employed a very strict selection pattern that granted coverage only to those events and sources which reinforced the official versions of reality, while opponent voices were either ignored, trivialized or interpreted in a way that never opposed the dominant meanings. It employed aggressive intolerance towards critical discourse and a militant rhetoric about political opponents that prevented a rational

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<sup>10</sup> According to the Federal Bureau of Statistics, in 1991 the total circulation of newspapers in Yugoslavia was 519,000 copies a day. A year later it was only 289,000 (Antonic 1992). Drastic drops in circulation were recorded in 1992 and 1993, when the UN imposed economic sanctions on Serbia.

public debate on social controversies and tried to build social consensus only around ideas and values promoted by the ruling elite. The independent press questioned the official views of reality and legitimized critical discourse on major social issues. While the regime press flagrantly violated basic professional standards by using libel, refusing to correct false information and disregarding the right of reply, the quality alternative press was much closer to the professional ideals of fair and balanced reporting.

For the regime press, the central problem facing society was the conflict of geostrategic interests between the West, on the one hand, and the Serbian state and people, on the other. It defined all social problems as consequences of the anti-Serb orientation of the greatest world powers. The change in power was not seen as an authentic interest of citizens but as an 'imported' need of the West that the opposition falsely presented to the people as their own. Its coverage of the political struggle between the government and the opposition, especially of election campaigns, promoted the status quo, directly favouring the ruling party and marginalizing or satanizing the opposition (Matic 1998). In each of numerous elections (1990, 1992, 1993, 1997, 2000), the regime press defined the protection of Serbian national interests as the central election issue and presented the ruling party as the only guardian of those interests. The opposition was never treated as a respectable political opponent and a partner in the political dialogue but as a disturber of political life and quite often as a public enemy. The opposition parties were portrayed as a bearer of values contrary to the official ones, or as a traitorous political force, or as an 'aspirant to (mere) power' to the benefit of their leaders' personal interests.

The independent press favoured the change in the government-opposition conflict. It defined the basic social conflict as a conflict between modern values of a democratic, pluralist society and an autocratic regime that prevents its development. In the interpretation of the independent press, the main cause of the social problems was the autocratic nature of the regime, and their solution was a peaceful shift in government. Instead of the protection of national interests, it perceived the necessity of democratic change in society as the crucial issue in every election cycle. It depicted the political scene as a dramatic struggle between two political platforms, and their protagonists as carriers of two opposed projects of social organization and development – one leading the community to international isolation, stagnation, poverty and violence, and the other offering a possibility for democratization, normalization of life, international reintegration, peaceful resolution of conflicts, and respect of the rights of others.

The regime press presented the wars in Croatia and Bosnia as liberating wars which the Serbs were forced to wage in order to defend themselves from annihilation in the emerging Croat and Muslim states. In this interpretation, the international community unjustly accused the Serbs



of aggression and Serbia of involvement in the war, because it favoured the Croats and Muslims and wanted to bring the Serbs 'to their knees'. The focus of the media coverage was on the situation on front lines, the hardships of the Serbs, and the sanctions imposed by the Western conspiracy against all of the Serbian people. War consequences, suffering of civilians and refugees as well as solutions to the war conflict were pushed to the background, and the horrors of war were completely absent. This kind of journalism was defined as 'patriotic journalism' and the need for it as a need for the nation's survival. The independent press presented the wars in Croatia and Bosnia as conflicts of nationalist projects of political elites on ethnically mixed territories. It opposed the idea of a 'Greater Serbia' and the regime's war policy, emphasizing the deep social crisis as its outcome. The war coverage was structured around the problem of solution to the conflict, supporting a need for negotiations that would end the suffering of all the sides involved, bringing peace and tolerance.

The media also treated differently the development of civil society. The regime press mainly ignored those nongovernmental organizations that were involved in humanitarian work and helped the most vulnerable social groups which society could not provide for, and in particular ignored the fact that they were financed by the West. On the other hand, it conducted a negative campaign against the NGOs dealing with human rights issues and democratic development, regarding them as a mechanism by which the West was trying to destabilize society, and invariably emphasizing the fact that they were financed by Western donors. The independent press considered civil society development an important part of the development of democracy and gave great publicity to all kinds of activities of nongovernmental organizations.

The reporting by the two media camps differed even when the state imposed censorship on the media during the 1999 NATO aggression on Serbia and Montenegro. The regime-press coverage was designed to present the illegitimacy of the NATO action, the unanimity of the Serbian people, and the Serbian invincibility. It was dominated by a nationalist code: most powerful Western nations wanted to destroy the small but freedom-loving Serbian nation, which was preventing the establishment of the new world order. The presentation strategy included downplaying of NATO official announcements, selective reporting on NATO actions, focus on bomb damages to civilian facilities, euphoric stress on successes of the domestic defence system, and complete ignoring of the Kosovo Albanian refugee issue which was only referred to as a fabrication of Western propaganda. The principal aim of the coverage was to equate the citizens' disapproval of the aggression with their support for the regime and its policies. During the bombing, all the media were put under a special 'war regime', and were censored. However, the alternative press made a clear distinction between the citizens' opinion about the aggression and

the government policy. The general disapproval of the aggression was presented as opposition to the violent solution of a problem, mostly affecting civilians, and it was not equated with support for the government and its policy of conflict with the international community. The alternative press did not indulge in promoting hate speech against the aggressors – against the NATO countries, NATO nations or individual politicians or public figures who promoted the idea of striking harder; by contrast, this kind of hate speech was hugely promoted by the regime media.

### **The Relation between the Quality Press and the Tabloid Press**

The media situation in Serbia normalized only after the regime of Slobodan Milosevic was replaced when his party lost the September 2000 general elections.<sup>11</sup> The media that used to be one of the strategic pillars of the Milosevic regime started talking negatively about it and supported the new election winner – the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS). In the state-owned and not yet privatized media, the change of editorial policy was done politically, by appointing new managers, while the private media sided with the dominant mood of the public because of their commercial interests. The changes in the former regime media eliminated the division of the media into two antagonistic factions. In the first year of the DOS government there were more similarities than differences between the media outlets.

Political stabilization has resulted in the rise of the commercial and entertainment press. The once most popular evening paper, *Vecernje Novosti* – which saw its circulation of more than 400,000 in the eighties sink to half in the nineties, has been steadily increasing the number of its copies to 300,000 per day. It is followed closely by the tabloid *Blic*. The quality papers are far behind: *Politika*'s circulation approximates 150,000, while the most popular weeklies *Vreme* and *NIN* print 22,000 copies each. The commercialization of the Serbian press is now a process whose outlines can be clearly seen but it is still at the initial stage. It bears the marks of the specific developments during the 1990s but also of the economic and political circumstances of post- Milosevic Serbia. The media – not only the independent but also the regime-controlled ones – emerged from the Milosevic era greatly devastated. They were technologically backward, financially exhausted,<sup>12</sup> worn out in terms of personnel, and had a very low reputation. The

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<sup>11</sup> The regime press, along with all the other media, changed in one day – virtually overnight on 5 October, the day when citizens massively took to the streets, protesting against the regime and setting fire to its most pronounced symbol, the state television building.

<sup>12</sup> Some of the regime media had great debts, as the regime in its last year forced them to function regardless of their financial situation. *Politika*'s losses were estimated at 100 million Euro (*Balkan Crisis Report* 2003).

advertising market was quite poor in comparison with neighbouring countries and foreign capital was barely present.

The early rise of the commercial press in the immediate aftermath of Milosevic's fall owed more to the general mood of an audience saturated with politics for years than to other factors. Contrary to the previous period when the audience was hungry for political information, now it felt fed up with politics and longed for non-political contents.<sup>13</sup> Commercialization got under way with some normalization of the economic situation, growing advertising market, growing interest of foreign media investors but also with the reconfiguration of the political scene as new media appeared trying to exploit old political feelings.

Although the lion's share of the advertising market is currently still held by television, the participation of the press in the market has been growing slowly but steadily, and is still expected to become significant. According to research conducted by the Strategic Marketing Agency (March 2003), television takes 72% of the advertising capital, while the print media get 12%. However, in 1997 only 6% of the advertising capital went to the print media; in 2000 this figure rose to 8%, and in 2002 to 11%. Foreign capital is still cautious as regards the Serbian media and it is primarily interested in mass-circulation media. The largest investor at the moment is the German media group WAZ (Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung), which bought 50% of the Politika company in 2002 and plans to buy the regional (Vojvodina) publishing company Dnevnik. Another German company – Gruner and Jahr – holds the tabloid daily *Blic*.

Today, two types of commercial press with a considerable amount of political news can be distinguished among the Serbian media. The first is characterized by relatively balanced reporting of political issues. Although these papers have only few political pages, their political coverage is reliable, fact-oriented, and provides a diversity of views. These papers do not consult experts on significant issues and prefer a human-interest, emotional angle over the analytical and documentary perspective in their stories. They strive to be seen as watchdogs of democracy but do not aspire to be stimulators of rational public dialogue about public controversies. Their rhetoric is simple, rather dramatic and sensational, but it never goes beyond the limits of publicly dominant morals. However, in dramatic situations that offer opportunities for higher circulation, they would willingly offer themselves for political instrumentalization and promotion of unethical official political communication – as they have done during the conflict of the two

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<sup>13</sup> The independent press owners used to complain that their circulation went down if they put a picture of Slobodan Milosevic, or some other political figure, on the front page. Audience studies have shown that even during the 1990s, the daily *Politika* managed to preserve a considerable share of the audience owing to the wide diversity of information it offered – about culture, sports, entertainment – rather than its political coverage, which readers did not trust. The independent press was over-politicized; it could attract only politically highly motivated readers and was not considered interesting by people with a low interest in politics.

largest members of the DOS coalition since 2001. These papers include tabloids and semi-tabloids like *Blic*, *Vecernje Novosti* and *Glas Javnosti*.

The second type of commercial press has developed significantly in the last two years, along with the consolidation of national-oriented forces which claim that the way the new Serbian leadership is conducting the reform processes protects the interest of Western powers rather than of the Serbian people. These papers promote the opponent discourse, giving the floor to various dissatisfied actors, and target primarily the victims of the transition. Their content is mostly political. They do not hesitate to publish rumours and unreliable news, and provide one-sided opinion rather than fact-reporting. Their coverage is primarily designed to dramatize political events and promote political scandals. They employ a very aggressive rhetoric that goes way beyond public decency and justify it by their effort to be a watchdog with regard to government wrongdoing. A typical example of this type of press is the daily *Nacional*. It won popularity rather suddenly, after the two largest parties in the DOS coalition – the Democratic Party (DS) and the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) – engaged in a strong political conflict and the latter strongly emphasized the national elements in its democratic orientation, giving new legitimacy to nationalistic feelings. One of the main points of conflict between the DSS (led by Vojislav Kostunica) and the rest of the DOS coalition led by the DS (headed by Zoran Djindjic) was the extradition of Slobodan Milosevic to The Hague Tribunal, which the former strongly opposed. A fierce battle between supporters of yesterday's coalition partners was incited by launching ever new scandals of illegal action, aiming at discrediting each other. *Nacional*, in particular, exploited those scandals extensively and at one point became the strongest anti-government voice. The paper was ultimately banned – on unclear legal grounds – during the state of emergency after Prime Minister Djindjic's assassination, and was accused of being financed by the 'Anti-Hague lobby' which was also blamed for Djindjic's assassination. Its line, in a somewhat milder form, has been taken by new papers established in the meantime – *Kurur* and *Balkan*, which employed most of the former *Nacional* reporters. Their circulation is much smaller than that of *Nacional*, which claimed to print 100,000 copies.

The quality press coverage of political conflicts between the DS and the DSS differed significantly from the mass press. While the commercial press served as a tool of the two rival political forces in their attempts to diminish the political credibility of their opponents, not concerned about the resulting new contamination of the public domain by intolerant political discourse, the quality press behaved as a socially responsible actor and treated the events with a professional detachment. It opposed the re-entrance of antagonized pluralism on the political scene, trying to demonstrate that the conflict between Djindjic and Kostunica was not a clash of

two leaders with different personalities but a consequence of the long-term process of reconfiguration of the political scene driven by political and economic interests of all the actors involved.

### **Obstacles to the Development of the Quality Press**

Despite its promises for radical transformation of the communication system, the DOS government placed the reconstruction of the media system very low on its agenda. The media are not able to base their autonomous position either on a stable commercial ground independent from dominant political groups, or on the legal protection of the freedom of expression. The media system bears the marks of delayed reconstruction: A new legal framework is still on the drawing board;<sup>14</sup> the inherited chaos in the electronic media that take most of the advertising revenues has remained intact; some media are yet to be privatized; the possibilities for development are quite limited.

The development of the quality press is severely restricted by the latter's low technological, financial, and professional resources. The only paper that has recorded some progress is the daily *Politika*, now operating under the company Politika Newspapers and Magazines, half-owned by the German WAZ. WAZ invested 12.5 million Euro in the company publishing the daily *Politika*, the evening paper *Politika Ekspres*, a sports paper and 14 other titles, developing its own printing facilities and distribution network. Under the new owner, *Politika* has introduced a colour edition, steadily increases its volume, attracts a growing number of advertisements and has increased its circulation to more than 150,000 from about 100,000 in the earlier period. It nourishes a detached, balanced and moderate style of reporting and although it is restoring its reputation, according to audience studies some people have not forgiven it the shameful role it played in the 1990s.

In comparison with other quality papers that remained independent from the Milosevic government, *Politika* has been more active in promoting the new DOS government and its policies in the first two years of its rule than in providing critical views of its work. The daily *Danas* and the weeklies *NIN* and *Vreme* have preserved the critical distance from the government which they maintained in the past, and therefore better perform their role of a check on government. Additionally, *Danas* and *Vreme* pursue their own agenda in raising public

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<sup>14</sup> The Public Information Act was adopted after a long delay; the Broadcasting Act is not yet effective even though it was adopted in mid-2002; a Free Access to Information Bill has been drafted but is yet to be debated in parliament.

awareness of the role of the Serbian state and people in the Balkan turmoil during the 1990s, and in offering a critical analysis of the nationalistic programme of the Milosevic regime – especially of its role in the wars and war crimes in Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo. It could be argued that the press that served the Milosevic regime is not capable of a critical investigation of the recent past because – except for the very top personnel and most publicly exposed supporters of the regime – the same journalists who promoted Milosevic’s policies have continued to work in those media, easily switching their support from the previous to the current government and not ready to accept that they have violated the basic rules of the trade in the past few years.

The paradox in the status of the Serbian quality press is that the papers that contributed most to the democratization of Serbia in the most difficult period in the 1990s and that served the public interest are the poorest and still have a limited influence on the public. The daily *Danas* has the lowest circulation of all dailies – slightly above 20,000 copies. *NIN* is only at the beginning of the process of computerization. *Vreme* has a debt of about 100,000 Euro.

The major problem of the high quality press is economic unsustainability. These papers are barely profitable – they suffer financial losses or survive with minimum income. The production costs are high while the advertising revenues are quite low as they are taken by the mass circulation press; distribution is expensive and non-efficient. The advertising rates in Serbia are much lower than in neighbouring countries. As a result, the press is kept alive by underpay of professional work. According to the director and editor-in-chief of the *Vreme* magazine, his paper is 5,000 Euro in the red every month. The financial burden is borne by the professional staff. The average monthly salary of journalists in the magazines *NIN* and *Vreme* is about 230 Euro, which barely allows them to make ends meet. *Vreme* has not been paying social insurance contributions for its employees in the last year and a half. This only adds to the problem of the exhaustion of human resources as a result of an entire decade of repression and instability. For years, independent journalists have not been able to live on their earnings and have been forced to do additional jobs. A great number of them still work at several places. The opportunities for those who used to report for the international media are getting lower as Serbia is no longer in the focus of international attention. Western donations that helped those papers survive the period of repression have significantly declined or stopped altogether.

The independent quality papers also suffer from the inadequate development of the distribution system. Distributors charge large percentages of newsstand sales, delay the payment for sold papers, and provide information about sales too late to be of use in planning the next issue.

In terms of content, the quality press faces the problem of an inability to expand its thematic diversity, thus attracting new readers. Due to financial hardships, these papers are understaffed. Additionally, most of their reporters specialize in the coverage of political issues, and they lack high-qualified journalists for reporting other issues that have become important in the meantime. Recruiting new experts on banking or environmental problems or social welfare reform is difficult in itself, but for these papers the problem is that they cannot attract new reporters with the very low pay they can afford to offer.

The government has not done anything to make the economic position of the independent press easier or to create some conditions for its development. In fact, it imposed a new 20% tax on all the press at the beginning of its term in office. The government finally agreed to abolish the tax only after joint action by press publishers who protested that the tax was higher than in EU and transition countries. The tax abolishment, however, has not improved the economic situation of the press tangibly, as distributors immediately increased their percentages of newsstand sales per copy from 25% to 30% and the government imposed some additional taxes on human labour.

The only prospect for the improvement of the status of the quality press is economic development and the rise of the print media share in the advertising market. Both are long-term processes and are not expected to make considerable progress in the near future. The journalists from *Vreme* have decided not to wait for the future but to sell their shares of the paper to a foreign investor. A deal is expected to be reached by the end of 2003 after negotiations on the guarantees of journalistic autonomy from the owner. What kind of changes this will bring to the paper that has become a symbol of Serbian independent journalism for a great part of the audience remains to be seen. *NIN*, the analytical weekly with the longest tradition, has not yet passed through a primary form of privatization of its majority social capital. *NIN*'s journalists fear that if the paper is bought by some domestic businessman it could lose its critical edge because business is still dominated by political interests, and seem not to be looking forward to the upcoming ownership transformation. According to *NIN*'s director and editor-in-chief, *NIN* has managed to introduce full-colour print by its own great efforts, but is not capable of any other major improvement, even though for the first time since the 1980s its circulation has been growing slowly. *Danas* counts on the loyalty of its readers who would prefer it to the commercial press and the uncritical orientation of the rising *Politika*, but it is also looking for a strategic partner willing to invest in the alternative press.

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