Article by Simon Haselock, Deputy High Representative for Media Issues:”Freeing the Media is a Vital as Clearing Mines”

Serb nationalism was whipped up by the regime’s TV factory of lies. Simon Haselock says that creating an independent media is fundamental to the region’s stability

Here is a short test. Is the following true or false? Kosovo is the spiritual homeland of the Serbs: that is the reason why they have refused to compromise on the province’s nominal sovereignty. The centrepiece of this spirituality is called the Field of Blackbirds, where in 1389 the outnumbered Serbs fought valiantly against a Turkish invader, but were forced to yield, thus ushering in 500 years of Ottoman occupation. This explains the depth of Serb hatred for the Muslim Albanians. The current ethnic cleansing of Kosovo amounts to revenge.

It’s false, of course – and if you believe any of it then you, too, have been tricked by Slobodan Milosevic’s propaganda machine. Actual facts about the battle are scanty, but what is known is that the Field of Blackbirds was not the turning point in the struggle against the Turks. It was not a Serb defeat but a draw: some chroniclers even talk of an emphatic Christian victory. Serb statehood survived after the battle for another 70 years. And the army, led by Prince Lazar (who died on the field, was later canonised and is still a national hero), was not exclusively Serb but a mixture of Hungarians, Romanians, Czechs, Franks and, yes, even Albanians.

There is no “ancient hatred” between Serbs and Albanians, who

have fought side by side and lived together many times over the centuries. And however “sacred” Kosovo might be to modern Serbs, before the First World War their grandfathers were perfectly willing to cede the territory to the then separate kingdom of Montenegro. And so on.

The “spiritual homeland” thesis relies on a traditional folk version of history that was resurrected by the Serb Academy of Arts and Sciences 11 years ago and hijacked by Milosevic as a useful tool of nationalism in his quest for power.

Kosovo matters to Serbia all right, but not for reasons of history. Northern Kosovo happens to be the regions’s richest source of raw minerals: it is Serbia’s industrial heartland. (We never hear much about that in the media, either here in the Balkans or in the West. The old saying about not letting facts get in the way of a good story is universal, it seems.)

It is testimony to the strength of the hold that Milosevic has over the media that he has sold his version of history not just to his own people but to the West as well. His technique is simple: close control over state media, particularly TV.

It seems scarcely credible that the Serb public still does not know what is happening in Kosovo. The invasion force, they are told, is a UN one, and the pullout “a victory for peace”. No wonder sophisticated Belgraders have long called the RTS state TV headquarters, bombed by NATO early in the campaign, the Factory of Lies.

Milosevic’s other technique is the brutal suppression of any alternative voices. Shortly after the NATO airstrikes began, Slavko Curuvija, the Editor of Belgrade’s Dnevni Telegraf, was shot dead outside his house. He was awaiting a five-month jail sentence for publishing details of a scandal involving the Yugoslav United Front (JUL) of Milosevic’s wife, Mirjana Markovic. Milosevic learnt the power of TV in Kosovo. RTS seized on his now infamous words at a Serb demonstration in

Kosovo in 1987: “Niko ne sme da vas bije”.(“Nobody should dare to beat you”). Those words were fired into every home in former Yugoslavia, catapulting him towards the presidency on a wave of Serb nationalism.

If the international community is serious about bringing stability and prosperity to Kosovo and the region, it is essential that the terrible legacy of regime TV be addressed. The architects of the planned international administration in Kosovo would do well to avoid the oversight of the last Balkan treaty, the 1995 Dayton Accord. That agreement ended the bloodshed in Bosnia but failed to provide a formula for restructuring the press and broadcasting. In fact it failed even to mention the media. The international community has since struggled to make up lost ground. The governments that are preparing a reconstruction package of Kosovo are duty-bound to build a genuine Fourth Estate that will serve as a kind of insurance against authoritarian aggression. Extending the signal of Radio Free Europe or other quick fixes are not enough. The Factory of Lies can be repaired.

New legal and economic structures must be put in place, first in Kosovo but then throughout the region to allow a free flow of information and to protect journalists from intimidation, or worse. There must be rigorous judicial reform, freedom of information legislation and Western-style labour laws.

Future aid and assistance to Balkan states should be linked to concrete progress in promoting media freedom. Removing direct political control of public broadcasting should receive the same priority as removing landmines – and the same long-term commitment.

Despite the shortcomings of the Dayton agreement, a degree of media freedom has begun to take root in Bosnia. Millions of dollars of direct assistance have been channelled to alternative media. We have created a regulatory body that seeks to strip away political interference from the airwaves.

For the first time broadcast licences are being issued, based on transparent criteria.
Journalist associations from each of the three ethnic communities have agreed on a voluntary press code and are discussing the formation of a press complaints council. Overdue legislation on public broadcasting is making its way through parliament. Veteran BBC professionals now teach young Bosnian journalists the basics of broadcast news at a training centre that will soon be linked to universities across the country. Training necessarily starts from a low base since there has never been a truly independent media in this part of the world.

Efforts to instil Western Western standards of journalism sometimes miss the mark. For instance, a Western European official recently gave a speech on the need for a strong Fourth Estate. One English language news service, clearly baffled by the concept, translated this as “the need for a Fourth World Power”. Still, the progress is unmistakable. Perhaps the most significant advance has been the creation of the Open Broadcast Network (OBN), a TV channel that is funded almost entirely by the international community. Multi-ethnic and editorially independent, the network has proved popular and influential. It is, in fact, the only TV station that broadcasts to the whole country and has succeeded in breaking the cartel of the old state broadcasters, providing a reality check to the nationalist rhetoric.

OBN cost $10 million (Ł5.8 million) to set up, and another $7.5 million (Ł4.5 million) to keep it going over the past three years. Compare that to Britain’s Channel 5, on which Ł250 million was spent before it even went on air and OBN looks distinctly cheap. It is now well on the way to becoming self-sustaining and could prove to be a model for the region.

Last month Goran Matic, Belgrade’s Minister without Portfolio, informed journalists that the Kosovo refugees seen on TV were, in fact, ethnic Albanian actors – 3,000 to 4,000 of them, each

paid $5.50 by the CIA to traipse around in vast circles for the cameras. “This is the only truth in Kosovo’, he explained. Even without its Factory of Lies, Serbia remains an information la-la land. Matic should serve as a warning to the West. Whoever administers the peace in Kosovo will need to hold sufficient authority to guarantee free and fair access to the airwaves and editorial independence for broadcasters and newspapers. Anything less will retard democratic development and hold back the peace process, just as it did in Bosnia until the international community intervened.

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