

MEDIA DEPARTMENT

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“The Goal is to Silence Journalists”

Someone in this country has apparently had a difference of opinion with Vreme journalist Dejan Anastasijevic. It seems unthinkable that this person has resorted to winning the unspoken argument with a bomb thrown at the bedroom window where Anastasijevic lay asleep. Through some quirk of fate, Anastasijevic remains alive. However, many of his colleagues have had to pay with their lives for asking the wrong questions at the wrong time. More than 1100 journalists and media workers died in the world during the past 12 years- a grim reminder that those who have the courage to rely on the power of the pen are often felled by those who hide behind the power of the sword.

Amongst them is Milan Pantic, Vecernje novosti correspondent from Jagodina who was killed in 2001. At the time of his death, Pantic was writing about crime and mafia dealings in central Serbia, publishing several articles about corruption in his hometown. His case still remains unresolved.

Slavko Curuvija, owner of Dnevni Telegraph and the weekly Evropljanin was gunned down in 1999. Curuvija never believed that the forces of darkness about whom he was writing would be so brazen as to actually murder him in the town where he spent his life. His case still remains unresolved.

Dada Vujasinovic, journalist of Duga weekly, was found dead in her apartment in Belgrade 1994. According to the official version of events, she committed suicide by shooting herself with a rifle, but her family and friends seriously doubted she had taken her own life. At the time of her death, she was writing about matters no one dared to address – featuring the then political and mafia elite.

The right of freedom of expression is enshrined in many constitutions of today's states, including Serbia. The modern idea of human rights guarding the relationship between the State and individual lays down not only the basic principles of individual freedoms, but also the inalienable right to be informed.

In a modern society almost all individuals rely on the media to learn about events and developments in their surroundings, including news about the affairs and decisions taken

by a government elected to act in their name. Many regard the role of the media as some kind of “public watchdog” of the work of the authorities. The power of the press to influence public opinion makes it an attractive target to those who would seek to take illegitimate control of the political arena.

However, a strong vibrant press is not only an anchor of social and political stability, but also a powerful tool that maintains the pulse and pluralism of a democratic society. Its role in building accountable national institutions within the state should not be underestimated.

An independent media is the bridge that helps a society move from the role of passive citizenry to dynamic actor in the decision making process.

Encouraged to exchange ideas and information freely with others, people can gain a better understanding of their surroundings and wider world. Freedom of expression is a necessary precondition not only for good governance, but also for economic and social progress.

Media scrutiny of the government and opposition helps expose instances of corruption and other improprieties and makes it more difficult for a culture of unethical conduct to become pre-eminent.

The press enables citizens to make informed choices by exposing strengths and weaknesses of various political actors.

“Freedom of information is a fundamental human right and (...) the touchstone of all the freedoms to which the United Nations is devoted”, it was said in declaration at the very first session of the United Nations in 1946. It was in the wake of the atrocities of the Nazi regime that the international community finally recognised that the way the State treats its individuals is not solely an internal matter.

The preamble of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the UN, proclaims that freedom, justice and peace in the world are based on the recognition of the inherent dignity and equality of all members of the human family.

The Universal Declaration’s Article XIX goes on to say that a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of mankind. Journalists such as Dejan Anastasijevic courageously test the limits of this freedom without which those silenced will feel even more muted.

The Joint Declaration adopted in December 2006 by the UN, OSCE, Organization of African States and African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights states that “[i]ntimidation of journalists, particularly murder and physical attacks, limit the freedom of expression not only of journalists but of all citizens, because they produce a chilling effect on the free flow of information, due to the fear they create of reporting on abuses

of power, illegal activities and other wrongs against society. States have an obligation to take effective measures to prevent such illegal attempts to limit the right to freedom of expression.”

Whoever was behind the grenades at Anastasijevic’s home last Sunday, was well aware that the most effective form of censorship is self-censorship, with a broader aim to make journalists and broadcasters think twice before shedding light on those areas of political and economic life which some would prefer to remain in the shadows. Without doubt, they or he have failed.

The OSCE Mission, together with numerous media and other institutions in this country, sees the preservation of press freedom as a key to the nurturing of a strong democratic tradition in Serbia.

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