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## **Human Rights and Democracy Violation Early Warning *Newsletter* No. 35**

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The *Public Information Act* (2003) stipulates that all print media in Serbia including *Politika* should be privatized by 2006. During the course of ownership transformation, 50% of *Politika's* capital was purchased by WAZ, a German media group, whereas the remaining 50% is controlled by *Politika a.d.*, a joint stock company where government-owned capital in different forms is involved.

*Politika* daily is therefore made subject of analysis not because it represents what is colloquially called a "pro-government newspaper" -- since it is every newspaper's legitimate right to pursue editorial policies of its own choice -- but because it represents a government newspaper due to possible government's involvement in its ownership through various forms. *Politika's* position is specific, because its editorial policy has depended -- and still does -- on the political will of those in power. It is for this reason that *Politika's* reporting should be closely monitored until its privatization has been completed as prescribed by law.

The analysis presented in this issue of the EWS Newsletter argues that writing about *Politika* does not mean writing about a newspaper, but about the misuse of a newspaper on the part of the government which exercises decisive influence on the choice and intonation of information communicated by means of the daily. Each message sent through *Politika* therefore carries special weight and deserves additional attention.

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## ***Politika***

- A Government-Owned Daily in a Transition Society

Despite numerous zigzags and ups and downs in domestic and international politics, Belgrade daily newspaper *Politika* has established itself as an important opinion maker -- both a powerful instrument and an influential player -- at the Serbian<sup>1</sup> political scene, respected by the public and feared by many a politician. In a nutshell: *Politika* is considered to be a national institution *par excellence*, second only to the *Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts* (SANU) and the *Serbian Orthodox Church* (SPC). It is therefore no wonder that all power politicians from **Tito** to **Milošević** -- yesterday's **Koštunica** and today's **Tadić** are no exceptions to that rule -- have considered full control over *Politika* to be their top priority as a matter of course. This was especially visible during the **Milošević** rule: along with the state-controlled *Radio Television of Serbia* (RTS), *Politika* played a key role in the propaganda machinery that dutifully advocated, supported, defended and further fuelled the policies of war against almost all ex-YU „sister Republics” and indeed much of the free world. Countless observers and analysts at home and abroad consider *Politika's* role of an enthusiastic mouthpiece in propagating Serbia's expansionist crusade during the 1990s to be one of the most remarkable features of the **Milošević** regime.

The overthrow of **Milošević** brought about negligible changes in *Politika*: whereas only few top editors and managers were removed and replaced by more moderate „professionals”, the entire team of editors and journalists „inherited” from **Milošević** remained in place and adapted to the new political and business<sup>2</sup> climate. The extent to which these changes were cosmetic was to be recognized only after the assassination of Prime Minister **Djindjić** in March 2003 and the restoration of much of the **Milošević** value system under Prime Minister **Koštunica** (2004-2007 and 2007-

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<sup>1</sup> During the existence of earlier Yugoslavias (from 1929 until 2003 – and especially since the World War II), the daily's influence beyond Serbia's boundaries was also considerable.

<sup>2</sup> In an attempt to introduce modern management, uphold values of media freedom and independence, and help surmount economic difficulties accumulated during the 1990s, a joint venture with *Westdeutsche allgemeine Zeitung* (WAZ, a German media group), was entered into in 2002. The contract stipulated that the ownership would be split 50-50, with a „golden share” for WAZ in business matters and for the Serbian side in issues of editorial policy. The 50% of the company co-owned with WAZ is still owned by the Government of Serbia and/or state-owned companies, utilities and banks, which is contrary to the *Public Information Act* which stipulates that all media had to be privatized by April 2006.



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2008), assisted by President **Tadić's Democratic Party (DS)**<sup>3</sup>: **Koštica** gained control over key ministries and other pillars of the system – *Politika* included. After **Koštica's** departure from power, Serbian part of the Management, as well as Chief Editor **Ljiljana Smajlović** and some members of her team were replaced in October and a new team installed in November 2008. The „hard core“ of *Politika*-„professionals“ stayed on.

Almost half a year after the change at its helm, *Politika* continues to adapt its editorial policies and reporting on burning problems of contemporary Serbia and indeed the world to the liking, expectations or interests of the dominant ideological and political elites. Following is a description of views held by journalists and other authors represented in *Politika* on some of the most topical issues of domestic and international affairs.

#### WESTERN WORLD, EUROPE AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

Little has changed in *Politika's* reporting on developments in the Western world after **Milošević** and the xenophobic attitude subsequently cherished by journalists, editors and columnists subscribing to **Koštica's** world outlook: the West is often depicted as a nest of materialism, moral decay, corruption and selfish insensitivity to the plight of the needy, jobless and weak. Reading *Politika*, one can learn very little about the setup and functioning of the European Union as a value-based community fostering socially responsible market economy, rule of law, human and minority rights and functioning democratic institutions. According to *Politika*, the EU is an over-bureaucratized mastodon that serves its own purpose and wastes money, time and energy on endless debates on how long a cucumber dare be instead of addressing the burning issues of the modern world. Brussels bureaucracy's allegedly arrogant and indeed discriminatory attitude towards new EU members represents one of *Politika's* favorite topics – the message sent is clear: Serbia has no reasons to expect a better treatment, once a member.

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<sup>3</sup> As an (effectively junior) coalition partner, the DS agreed to a „confederative“ concept of government setup, whereby parties had 100% control over all ministries, public enterprises and media entrusted to them.



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## COLUMNISTS AND GUEST AUTHORS

*Politika's* openness for advocates of traditionalist and patriarchal values and staunch opponents of Serbian society's modernization and inclusion into contemporary world trends has become commonplace in Serbia's media environment. *Pogledi* (Viewpoints), a section featuring editorials and commentary contributed by outside authors, often turns into a tribune open to hate speech tirades abundant with xenophobia, fierce attacks on all those who stand for European values, and harangues on human rights activists and nongovernmental organizations. It is with the (November 2008) change of *Politika's* top editors that *Pogledi* has become more accessible to the latter to answer to those attacks and defend their views, but the fact remains that advocates of a regressive, xenophobic, anti-European Serbia continue<sup>4</sup> to be present in *Politika* as a proof of a rather naïve (mis)conception of "letting a thousand flowers blossom".

Readers' comments to be found on *Politika Online* website represent an inseparable part of what appears to be *Politika's* failure (or refusal?) to resist the misuse of freedom of expression by individuals who advocate political, ethnic, religious and other forms of intolerance, hatred and even anti-Semitic and pro-Nazi views: some of columns by authors mentioned in footnote 4 were followed by hundreds of readers' comments reflecting or openly propagating such views. An example: European Parliament's decision to proclaim July 11 *Srebrenica Remembrance Day* was reported on in *Politika* on Jan. 16, 2009, but *Politika Online* carried a total of 206 readers' comments<sup>5</sup> which included the following: "And who are those people who proclaimed [the] Srebrenica [Day]: Jews, Croats and perhaps Catholics. What kind of a history is it when it's them who decides on our fate". Or: „ ... it is now clear that the so-called European Union [is] just a new Third Reich. One knows where Serbs belong [in a Third Reich]".

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<sup>4</sup> As this paper was being written, *Politika* carried March 26 the last contribution by **Slobodan Antičić**, one of the most radical proponents of anti-modernistic views, who on countless occasions misused his Thursday columns to openly advocate aggressive chauvinist ideology, homophobia, support for neo-Nazi groups, corporal punishment of children etc. It remains to be seen whether such ideas authored or advocated by other *Politika* and guest columnists such as **Djordje Vukadinović**, **Miroslav Lazanski**, **Obrad Kesić**, **Slobodan Samardžija**, **Mirjana Bobić-Mojsilović**, prof. **Svetozar Stojanović**, **Borisav Djordjević**, the *New York Times* veteran **David Binder**, etc. will continue to be welcome on the pages of *Politika*. Irrespective of their political affiliation and ideological viewpoints, all these authors share what can be termed a (sometimes pathetic) concern over the ill fate of Serbia and Serbdom, confronted with an unscrupulous conspiracy lead by the West.

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.politika.rs/index.php?lid=sr&show=rubrike&part=list\\_reviews&int\\_itemID=71124](http://www.politika.rs/index.php?lid=sr&show=rubrike&part=list_reviews&int_itemID=71124). 95% of these comments reflect aggressive hostility towards all those who stand for open and honest relations with Serbia's neighbors, advocate a sincere confrontation with the recent past and respect of basic human rights, especially of those wars' victims.



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On the other hand, several attempts to "test" *Politika Online* by submitting comments carrying messages critical towards this "mainstream" have failed: they were never published.

### Kosovo

In line with the dominant "patriotic" discourse on Kosovo, which "seasons" Serbia's political atmosphere with a mixture of pathetic lament and cocky defiance, *Politika's* reporting on developments in and around "our southern Province" does not diverge from the uniformity of Serbian media approach to this issue. Duteously discharging its role of the ruling political class' mouthpiece, *Politika* reports on Kosovo in a manner which has two dimensions: (1) As a result of an unprecedented international conspiracy against Serbia, Kosovo was, contrary to all principles and provisions of the international law, "snapped away from us" and unlawfully declared independent; and (2) Serbian minority in Kosovo suffers grave consequences of unbearable oppression, terror and denial of all rights and freedoms<sup>6</sup>.

Not a single word can a *Politika* reader find about the course of events and processes that have brought the situation in Kosovo to the present stage. The 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of NATO air strikes against the then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia represented yet another opportunity for *Politika* to remind (with much pathos) of the ferocity of the bombardments and magnitude of the loss of life and property, as well as to report extensively on various events and statements commemorating the anniversary. Again, there was no mention on what preceded the events of 1999 and what role Belgrade had played in them: according to *Politika*, the history of the last Balkan wars began and ended 1999.

A UN Security Council session on Kosovo was held on the very anniversary day, March 24. *Politika* carried on March 25 lengthy reports on the session, reproduced the entire speech President **Tadić** gave on that occasion, and informed about the President's activities while in New York. The contents of [Kosovo Foreign Minister] **Skender Hyseni's** address to the Council -- as well as the fact that he spoke -- remained a secret to *Politika* readers, as did the exchange of blows between the two and

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<sup>6</sup> Several winters in a row, *Kosovo Energy Corporation* (KEK) refuses to supply electric energy to numerous towns and villages in Kosovo, including those inhabited by ethnic Serbs. Manipulating this information and implying that this represents an additional act of discrimination against ethnic Serbs, *Politika* -- like all media in the country, for that matter -- reports on their plight extensively, but fails to mention that (1) electricity is not delivered because of their refusal to pay KEK bills, and (2) ethnic Albanians are also denied electricity delivery for identical reasons.



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interventions of a number of Western ambassadors during the session. According to *Politika's* report, the only speaker to address the Council besides President **Tadić** was Russian Ambassador **V. Churkin**.

## RUSSIA

By far is Russia the country most frequently mentioned, referred to or reported on in *Politika*. Along with frequent, extensive and extremely apologetic<sup>7</sup> reports from its Moscow correspondent, there are several commentators and columnists who contribute enthusiastic odes to Russia's renaissance under **Putin** (as opposed to **Boris Yeltsin**, frequently referred to as "the beggar") and celebrate Russians' support for "our just cause of retaining Kosovo". Apart from occasional references<sup>8</sup> to limitations imposed on media freedom and some other features of **Putin's** "sovereign democracy", *Politika's* readers have no opportunity to inform themselves on what really goes on in that country's economy, society, culture and arts. Instead of availing itself of the resources at hand (a Moscow-based correspondent and several experts on Russia on its staff), *Politika* insists on an obsequious attitude toward Russian rulers and reduces its reporting on Russian affairs either to 19<sup>th</sup> century geopolitical "analyses" of Moscow's role in the world, or to Russian stance on Kosovo. Even when **Putin's** clamp down on opposition or human rights groups becomes a topic in *Politika*, understanding is shown only for official policies.

However, there is a change in *Politika's* reporting in the context of economic aspects of Serbia's relations with Russia: simultaneously with odes to Russia's -- especially **Putin's** -- foreign and Kosovo policies, and uncritical celebration of the neocolonialist energy deal with Serbia<sup>9</sup> in its reporting on political topics, *Politika's* economics section recently embarked on a more critical and analytical approach to Russia treating Serbia as a junior partner in their economic relations.

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<sup>7</sup> In a report on the acquittal of the persons indicted for the murder of **Anna Politkovskaya**, *Politika*-Correspondent from Moscow **Lj. Milinčić** writes on Feb. 28 (p. 2, Headline: „New Investigation of Anna Politkovskaya's Murder“): „Although some [people] hurried to label the acquittal ... a disgrace for justice, it would be more honest to say that what we are dealing with is justice's triumph ... since the prosecution was unable to prove the [defendants'] guilt“.

<sup>8</sup> Such contributions are authored by **Petar Popović**, whereas other journalists dealing with Russia share **Ms. Milinčić's** approach by and large.

<sup>9</sup> An energy agreement was signed between Serbia and Russia February 2008 which includes sale of 51% of *Serbia's Oil Industry* (NIS) at a ridiculously low price, as well as very loose promises concerning the passage of a Russian gas pipeline through Serbia and construction of a gas storage northeast of Belgrade. Observers are unanimous in viewing the terms of this agreement as a reward for Russian support on the Kosovo issue.



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Fully in line with the attitude towards Russia, *Politika's* reporting on former Soviet republics features full support for Russian views and policies on Ukraine, Chechnya and Georgia (including S. Ossetia and Abkhazia), as well as understanding for Belarus' **Lukashenko**.

#### FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLICS, BALKAN WARS OF THE 1990S

Much of *Politika's* reporting is devoted to developments in former Yugoslav republics, especially Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, and to a lesser extent to Macedonia<sup>10</sup>. This section's emphasis -- sometimes even its sole purpose -- is to depict the plight of ethnic Serbs who live there: they allegedly are discriminated against, the areas they inhabit are backward and neglected, and they have problems when attempting to claim their rights, attend school, speak their language, and find jobs. The causes, actual development and consequences of the 1990s Balkan wars represent a topic in *Politika* only inasmuch as "additional evidence" is necessary to prove the continuity of Serbs' position of an underdog in ex-Yugoslavia and the main - if not the sole -- victim of those wars.

Here, too, the pattern applied to the Western world is recognizable: economic hardship, social backwardness, corruption, scandals and bad governance are the most outstanding features of these countries' reality.

#### **Outlook:**

*Politika* represents a reliable indicator of political and intellectual elites' attitude towards issues related to human rights, democratization and modernization in present-day Serbia. Any significant advance in respecting and implementing democratic standards and values in that daily is therefore unthinkable if the Government's involvement in its ownership and political influence on its editorial policy remain perpetuated.

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<sup>10</sup> Although *Politika's* Ljubljana correspondent **S. Vasović-Mekina** contributes lengthy articles on a daily basis, her reports often deal with issues such as European Union, Kosovo, Serbia's relations with third countries, and even internal political developments and disputes in Serbia, rather than with what goes on in Slovenia, let alone Slovenia's EU experiences and lessons learned. **Ms. Vasović-Mekina** seems to have taken upon herself the mission of denouncing the alleged anti-Serbian stance of Slovenian (and European, for that matter) politicians, describing Slovene scandals and EU's decadence, and listing all the perils and traps the new EU members run the risk of falling prey to.