



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
The Representative on Freedom of the Media
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The Role of the Media
in the March 2004 Events in Kosovo

-Report-

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Executive Summary

The aim of this report is to evaluate the role of the Kosovar media in the tragic events of mid-March 2004 in Kosovo. Even in a society with no ethnic conflict, linking the media to loss of life entails walking the thin dividing line between defending freedom of expression and condemning hate speech. But in a post-ethnic conflict society such as Kosovo, biased reporting alone could lead to violence. This report offers ideas and recommendations as to how to repair the evident deficiencies of the media in order to prevent similar situations in the future and provide for a free, fair and balanced media landscape in Kosovo.

While displaying the weaknesses it did, the media was not, of course, intentionally instigating violence. But the media has a responsibility to react properly and professionally to serve the best interests of the population of Kosovo.

Without the reckless and sensationalist reporting on 16 and 17 March, events could have taken a different turn. They might not have reached the intensity and level of brutality that was witnessed or even might not have taken place at all.

In particular, the clear spin given by the media in accounts of the fatal drowning of a group of children on 16 March seems to be unsupported by any journalistically valid accounts. Neither can one say these accounts were informed by a desire to help avoid violence. In fact, media coverage seems to have led to massive demonstrations of a violent nature involving 50-60,000 people on 17 March, as compared to the 18,000 who demonstrated prior to the coverage of this incident in the media.

It should also be noted that the media, specifically the broadcasting sector, displayed unacceptable levels of emotion, bias, carelessness, and falsely applied “patriotic” zeal. In particular, the reporting on the evening of 16 March by the three main Kosovar TV channels deserves the strongest possible criticism. The performance of RTK (Radio and Television of Kosovo) during the riots, as well as on the evening before, should be viewed with special concern, since this is the only public broadcaster.

In contrast, the mainstream print media, with some unfortunate exceptions, displayed rather more constructive behaviour. Editorials and most of the reporting in the dailies *Koha Ditore* and *Zeri* helped to decrease tensions.

The events also made it evident that there is a severe lack of mutual trust between UNMIK Public Information offices and local journalists.

However, it would be premature and unfair to say the media development efforts of the OSCE Mission in Kosovo (OMIK) and others have failed. One has to acknowledge free media is still a novelty in Kosovo. OMIK, the Temporary Media Commissioner (TMC), the donors and the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media will have to strengthen their efforts to improve the quality and accountability of broadcasters in Kosovo.

Finally it should be noted that the events of mid-March were the first serious crisis that the Kosovo media has ever faced. While this report shows there is credible concern that the electronic broadcast media might have been one of the reasons for the outbreak of violence, long-term sanctions could prove counter-productive.

Background story

This is the event related by the Kosovar Albanian media that is believed to have sparked the riots: on 16 March, six Kosovar Albanian children from the village of Caber, located in the majority Serb-populated municipality of Zubin Potok, were playing on the Serb side of the river Iber. This divides the village of Caber from a Serb neighbourhood. At some point, an unidentified group of local Serbs was said to have charged the children with a dog. While escaping them, four of the children jumped into the river. After a terrible experience, only one of the four survived. The surviving child is also the only eye-witness source the media continued to refer to. It was never explained how the two other children – those did not jump into the river – also survived. Nor was it made clear whether they were also attacked by the Serbs allegedly chasing the group or by the dog, and if not, then why not. Finally, neither of the two other surviving children, nor their views, were ever presented in the media during the critical days.

The present report does not set out to speculate about the reasons, possible organisers or motivation behind the violent events in Kosovo in mid-March. Nor does it aim to speculate about the circumstances of the tragic death of the three children from Caber. Its sole purpose is to analyse the role that the media (in particular the TV broadcasters) played or might have played to fuel or provoke the intensity and the nature of the events which led to the massive ethnically-motivated violence and the loss of life and property, including religious and cultural sites.

Circumstantial evidence and opinions gathered by a number of institutions, as well as by the author of this report, suggest that the way the news about the drowning of the children was qualified and presented by the mainstream media constituted the *casus belli*, so to speak. What the organisers of extremist anti-UNMIK demonstrations had failed to achieve in the past, the news concerning the drowning of the three children succeeded in doing. It offered a perfect emotional motive for popular outrage and a good tool for sentimental manipulation by extremist individuals and groups longing for escalation.

There is hardly anything that provokes stronger feelings and greater outrage than crimes against innocent children, the more so if they are committed on ethnic grounds in a volatile environment, as is the case in Kosovo.

However, the relevant question is not whether we know today what caused the tragic deaths of these children or whether an investigation might even prove the initial media allegations to be right. Rather the fundamental question is, could the media have known for a fact, beyond any doubt, that the children were victims of an ethnic crime at the time it disseminated this news?

Unfortunately, there is no supporting evidence that the media presented the news after having checked all facts to the best of their knowledge, nor that the media were even in a position to know beyond any doubt that the children had been victims of an ethnically-motivated crime. In fact, it seems they did not even listen carefully to their own interviews with one of the children who survived the incident.

Different statements by the surviving child, aired on 16 March, referred to a distant Serb house, to Serbs who had sworn at them from the house, to a dog, and to the fact that they were afraid. *At no point in the interviews aired did the child use the words, “We were chased by a group of Serbs with a dog.”*

The TV stations chose, however, to spin the story as if the Serbs had actually chased Albanian children to their deaths with a dog. Even the respected daily *Koha Ditore* on 17 March had as its front-page headline: “Three Albanian children drown in Iber, while escaping Serbs.” The public was left to believe, that beyond any reasonable doubt, a despicable, ethnically-motivated crime had been committed.

To date, the main TV broadcasters and other media have failed to explain to the public:

- that they had based their story on statements by only one of the three surviving children;
- that they had misrepresented and/or exaggerated the statements of the child in their headlines;
- that they had ignored or/and censored statements by appropriate authorities cautioning them not to jump to premature conclusions as the case was still being investigated; and that
- they chose to interview partners who seemed to confirm their story, no matter that those interviewed had no credible means of knowing what had really happened (this is in particular the case with RTK, the public broadcaster).

To date, several senior representatives of the Kosovar media refuse to acknowledge any link between their reporting on 16 and 17 March and the events that followed over the next few days. This is the equivalent of saying that the events of 17 March and of those the following days would have happened anyway, no matter what the media had broadcast the previous night. This is both unconvincing and misleading.

A reconstruction of some of the events on 16 March (before the media began airing headlines about the alleged killing of the children by Serbs), when placed in contrast to next day, will probably prove wrong the alleged total lack of connection between the reporting and the riots.

The demonstrations on 16 March

Since the end of the war in June 1999, demonstrations have become routine in Kosovo. With few exceptions these events have usually ended peacefully and have failed to attract massive crowds. As March marks the anniversary of the start of the NATO campaign in Kosovo, it is routinely used by different groups to express their opinions in the streets. Every year since June 1999, diverse groups and organizations originating from the former KLA (UCK) have called for Kosovo-wide demonstrations (“All in Support of the Liberation War”). This time, the demonstrations were organised in protest against the arrests and prosecution, on war crimes charges, of a number of former KLA officers by either the UNMIK authorities in Kosovo or by the ICTY in The Hague.

On 16 March this year, in almost all major towns of Kosovo (including all 27 Albanian-majority municipalities), among them Mitrovica-South, supporters of these organizations gathered and voiced their dissatisfaction with the above-mentioned arrests. According to UN police figures, the overall number of protesters was 18,000. This is in marked contrast to the next day, the violent nature of the riots notwithstanding, when some 50-60,000 people took to the streets. Also in contrast to the previous day, school directors in many towns, having heard the news about the drowning of the children, ordered students and school children to take part in the demonstrations in protest over this “monstrous crime,” as did many other institutions and organizations.

As one of the organizers of the riots in Gjilan/Gnjilane put it in an interview:
“Yesterday (16 March) we had fewer demonstrators than today ...”

Even though the rhetoric used during the pro-KLA rallies on 16 March was extremely hostile toward the international presence – in particular towards the UNMIK administration – remarkably the demonstrations ended peacefully, with no major incidents reported. In Mitrovica-South itself, the demonstrators marched towards the bridge which divides the town but made no efforts to cross it nor to charge the security forces. This is also in contrast to the following day, when the number of demonstrators was dramatically higher and angry protesters engaged both the security forces and local Serbs in lethal confrontations.

Simultaneously, local Serbs in the villages of Gračanica and Caglavica were continuing to maintain a blockade of the two main roads that connect Pristina with the southern and the eastern parts of Kosovo. This protest had begun over a drive-by shooting which left a member of the Serb community in Caglavica wounded. The local Serb community attributed this incident to an unidentified Albanian gunman and provoked a few minor incidents involving Kosovar Albanian passers-by. The number of local Serb protesters in both blockades was estimated in the hundreds, while no attempts were made by Albanian protesters participating in the pro-KLA demonstration to “unblock” the roads. This also stands in contrast to the pattern of behaviour on the following day, when a large number of young Albanians, including some who had gathered in the centre of Pristina on a rally “Against Violence” (following a hand-grenade attack on the residence of Kosovo President, Ibrahim Rugova), decided to march towards Caglavica, there to engage in confrontations with the security forces and local Serbs.

Halil Matoshi, one of the leading veteran journalists in Kosovo, and editor of the weekly *Zeri*¹ described the role of the TV media during the events in an editorial as follows:

“The rebellion was a chain reaction that spread across Kosova within a few hours. It was the spark of Caber which ignited the fire that as a consequence burned our home of Kosova. Of course, in times of advanced technology, the rebellion was transmitted live on TV and this strongly influenced every teenager in Kosova to want to be part of that picture that was being aired non-stop for 24 hours. This picture had a lot of influence on anyone who had no idea what was happening and suggested that now everyone had to rebel, everyone had to use this opportunity to grab something of what had been left from the rule of law and the law itself.”

Another Kosovar Albanian columnist, Ylber Hysa, compared the way people tend to take media news for granted in Kosovo with the experimental broadcast in 1938 by Orson Welles in the United States, when he aired the “news” that Martians were invading the country. Back then many people believed the “news”, which generated panic.

Ylber Hysa:² *“... no matter if the news is true or not, we tend to believe what we like to hear. So that was the case with the wounding of the Serb in Caglavica; the local Serbs took it for granted that it must have been an Albanian perpetrator and blocked the roads.*

¹ Halil Matoshi was a prisoner of conscience in Serbia for nearly a year during 1999. The Office of the Representative on Freedom of the Media was involved in trying to secure Mr. Matoshi’s release. The column quoted is from the weekly *Zeri* of 27 March.

² In the daily *Koha Ditore*, 2 April.

The same thing happened later as the news was spread about the drowning of the Albanian children.”

But while the situation on 16 March seemed tense, there was nothing to suggest that the next day would lead to the greatest eruption of violence in post-war Kosovo, nor did it seem to represent a great exception to previous similar uneasy situations.

Media coverage of the fatal drowning of the three children

Later that night, the main Albanian-language TV broadcasters began airing news of the fatal drowning of the three Kosovar Albanian children in the river Iber. It must be noted that at this stage it was absolutely unclear what had happened or even *if* all the missing children were dead, since not all the bodies had been recovered. In journalistic terms, even the incident as such was not a *fact* until the respective authorities had confirmed it.

What the media reported that evening was, however, letting the audience believe that the case was absolutely clear: three innocent Albanian children had drowned in the cold river Iber while escaping from Serbs who were chasing them with a dog. A cowardly, brutal and ethnically-motivated crime!³

The first news about the incident, aired during prime-time on almost all TV channels, was already connecting the death of the children with a potentially ethnically-motivated crime. Later in the evening, additional “evidence” was produced suggesting to the audience that, beyond any doubt, the children had been victims of a vicious ethnically-motivated crime, committed by local Serbs.

What follows are excerpts from transcripts of the TV media coverage of this case during the late evening on 16 March.⁴ These were broadcast several times during the night and throughout the next day with minor, unsubstantial changes.⁵ Particular attention should be paid to the news presenters who guided the story in the “no doubt this has happened” direction. It goes without saying that this constituted breaking news until later in the day on 17 March, when other violent events dominated the screens.

RTV 21 (an independent private broadcaster, founded after the war):

News Flash at 22:00, 16 March.

Presenter:

"Two Serbs chased four Albanian children today around 16:00 in the village of Caber and, while trying to escape from them, the Albanian children jumped into the Iber river. To learn more details we have our correspondent in Mitrovica..."

³ In all truth and fairness it should also be stated that ongoing police investigations might well prove that this indeed was the case. However, it was by no means possible for the media, on the evening of 16 March, to know for a fact, beyond any reasonable doubt what had happened, nor is it clear to date.

⁴ The quoted transcripts are courtesy of the Office of the Temporary Media Commissioner in Pristina.

⁵ Even as the regular programme was aired, a news bar at the bottom of the screen constantly reminded the audience about the incident.

The correspondent from Mitrovica on the phone:

"It is feared that a major tragedy happened today at around 16:00 in the village of Caber, Zubin Potok municipality, the only village inhabited by Albanians in this municipality. As 13-year-old Fitim Cerkin Veseli recalls, he and five other children around his age were walking along the bank of the Iber river. Then, two persons came out of a Serb house who had a dog and started chasing the children. From fear, four of the children jumped into the river hoping to make it to the other side by swimming. But, since the current was too strong, only Fitim Veseli made it to the other side, whereas nothing is known about the fate of Egzon Deliu, 12, Avni Veseli, 11, and Florent Veseli 9 ..."

While the "criminal" nature of the incident was underlined through the attribution of the narrative to the 13-year-old witness, no other sources to confirm or deny these facts were mentioned, leaving the impression of a clear case of an ethnically-motivated crime. The same news was broadcast at least half-a-dozen times during the night and the following morning.

RTK – (the only public broadcaster, founded after the war)

Blic News at 23:00, 16 March.

Presenter:

"Three Albanian children, Florent Veseli, 8 years old, Avni Veseli, 11 years old, and Egzon Deliu, 12 years old, went missing in the waters of the Iber river, meanwhile Fitim Veseli, 14 years old, has been found. They are victims of an attack by a group of Serbs in the village of Caber(...) Before seeing the material, we'll go live to our reporter Petrit Musolli, who is at the scene."

Reporter from Mitrovica on the phone:

"The police, KFOR and TMK have not yet found the bodies of the three children missing in the river Iber, having fallen in after being chased by a group of Serbs. At the moment, police, KFOR and TMK have put some nets close to the bridge of Binaq in Koshtove in the Iber river, expecting to find the bodies of Florent Veseli, 8 years old, Avni Veseli, 11 years old, and Egzon Deliu, 12 years old... so far, the police have not issued an explanation nor given any information other than the story of Fitim Veseli, the only one found. The police said that all the information they had was from Fitim Veseli ..."

News presenter:

"How is the situation in Mitrovica, is it under control, how are the citizens reacting?"

Reporter:

"The situation in Mitrovica is calm at the moment. Almost all citizens are heading toward the village of Caber to learn more about the fate of the three children missing in the Iber river."

Of course, not "almost all citizens of Mitrovica" were marching toward Caber that evening. While it is evident that a critical mass of young Albanians was moving towards

the village, by no means did the number constitute “almost all citizens.” The reporter chose to dramatize the situation and the news presenter failed to ask him if this indeed was the case, thus leaving the impression that a popular uprising over a brutal crime was already underway.

After the presentation by the correspondent (2 minutes and 16 seconds), a statement by the regional UNMIK Police spokesperson was aired:

Tracy Becker - UNMIK Regional Police Spokesperson:

*Initially, some have said that the incident was ethnically-motivated. Since for the moment we don't have such information, we cannot confirm it.
(The airtime given to Tracy Backer was 12 seconds).*

What followed was an interview with one of the surviving children for 1.42 minutes.

Interview with the child (Fitim Veseli)

RTK: *"Fitim, can you tell us about today's event, how did it happen?"*

F.V.: *"Yes, we, some cousins of mine and some friends of mine, and myself were walking and we went close to the river when some Serbs with a dog swore at us from the house. We looked at them, I can identify them if I see them, and I know their house, and we tried to escape but we couldn't as we were close to the river. My brother, Florent Veseli, 9 years old, was with me, he can't swim. I put him on my back, I swam 15 metres, I could not swim more than that. He fell from my back, I don't know anything more about him, and the other two swam in front of me, I don't know anything about them either. But there were another two who did not go in the Iber river, they were further away from us, further away from the bridge. It was 4:00 p.m., 3:55 p.m., and there was a Serb hidden in the maize, and we tried to tell them to run away, we called them but they did not hear us and we jumped in the Iber but they survived, I don't know how the others survived but my brother who was on my back fell from my back because the waves were big, the Iber was big, he fell from my back, I came out from the Iber somehow tired."*

RTK: *Who helped you to come out of the river?*

F.V.: *I came out myself.*

NOTE: It is clear that the boy never said himself: “We were chased by Serbs and a dog.” It was RTK which decided to qualify the story in the way they did, thus misinterpreting the child's statement.

Immediately after the interview with the child, there was a live studio interview with Halit Berani (for 1.46 minutes), a senior regional activist of the “Council for the Defence of Human Rights and Freedoms” in Mitrovica. It should be noted that while Mr. Berani is viewed as controversial by some international and local institutions, he was invited to (and did) testify in the trial against Slobodan Milosevic in The Hague and so is considered a credible source by some. The fact that Mr. Berani was invited to talk does not itself constitute a problem, nor necessarily does what he said as it is up to him to qualify things his way. But the fact that his conclusive claims were at no stage challenged by the

interviewer nor balanced by inviting other appropriate authorities, represents serious misconduct on the part of RTK. It should also be noted that Mr. Berani was not an eye-witness to the incident itself, but was invited as an “expert witness.” To this extent, there is no reason why other “expert witnesses” were not present.

Interview in the studio in Pristina with Mr. Berani

Presenter:

"The Chairman of the Council for the Defence of Human Rights and Freedoms in Mitrovica, Halit Berani, is with us in the studio. Mr. Berani, what kind of information do you have about this case?"

H.B.: *"Today around 16:00 in the village of Caber, Zubin Potok municipality, while six children from the above mentioned village were playing, a group of Serb bandits attacked these children, the Serb bandits also had a dog, and swearing at their Albanian mother they forced the Albanian children to run away. Two of them managed to hide in the roots of the willow trees by the river Lumebardh [recent Albanian name of the Ibar river-editor's note], whereas the other four fell into the river. It is known that the Lumebardh river, apart from being very deep, has very cold water and is fast-moving. Most probably the children could not swim well. There is no information about the fate of three of them, whereas one survived after making it to the other side of the river."*

Presenter: *"So what will your reaction, from the Council, be to this tragic event?"*

H.B.: *"We are used to these Serbian bandits. As well as that case, tonight at 19:17 in the suburb called "7 September" they threw a bomb near three multi-storey buildings. We think that is in revenge for what happened in Caglavica, the case that showed what the Serbs are willing to do when the situation is getting calm in Kosova."*

Presenter: *"Mr Berani, thank you!"*

Mr Berani's unchallenged allegations and the way the news presenter and the reporter qualified the incident led to yet another conclusion: that the incident was undoubtedly one of the most sinister possible character. RTK also chose to allocate a disproportionate amount of airtime to the content that spoke in favour of the fact that this was an ethically motivated crime: 258 seconds, while allocating only 12 seconds to the police spokesperson. Disturbing too is the probability that RTK and the other TV broadcaster, KTV, who had their correspondents on the ground on the evening of 16 March, might have willingly chosen to ignore the statements calling for calm made by UNMIK and UN Police.

Tracy Becker, UNMIK Regional Police Spokesperson in Mitrovica, stated for this report:

"At about 22:00 we received intelligence information that some Albanians from the areas were coming to Caber to protest the death of the children. I went back to the media, specifically to RTK and KTV, and gave them an on-camera interview during which I appealed for people to stay calm and stay home so that police can focus on finding the children rather than deploying manpower to handle crowds. I again emphasized that we had no evidence to support the rumour of Serbians killing Albanian children. I requested

RTK and KTV to air the footage in order to calm the public and decrease ethnic tension. To my knowledge they did not air my interview.”

Georgy Kakuk, the regional UNMIK spokesperson, also stated for this report:
“During that evening it did not seem to matter to the journalists what we said. They seemed to have made their conclusions before. Whatever we said, it was disregarded.”

As far as this report can establish, RTK did not air the appeals by the UN Police.

While the reporting over the death of the children was the main focus of the media on 16 March, it is also important to look, at least briefly, at how the other events of the day were reported.

The pro-KLA Kosovo-wide demonstration was extensively presented during prime-time, and also in the subsequent news programming during the evening. All three TV broadcasters displayed a high degree of sympathy with the demonstrators and their demands, while at no time were the views of the institutions challenged by the demonstrators presented. The ICTY and UNMIK were not invited to present their views over the serious allegations by the demonstrators and those who made speeches in connection with the arrests of former KLA officers on suspicion of war crimes. The arrests were generally qualified as unfair, ill-intended, as criminal and as a service to Belgrade, a fact that should have forced the editors to seek opinions from the ICTY and UNMIK, or other independent sources, given the serious nature of the allegations and the sensitivity of the issue in itself.

The demonstrations by local Serbs in Caglavica and Gracanica were also extensively covered. In general terms, the reporting over these events was rather more balanced. In fact, had the media reported the case of the three children the same way as they did the events in Gracanica, probably Kosovo would not have experienced the situation it did during the following days.

The reason for the demonstrations by the local Serbs was a drive-by shooting, which left a Serb male wounded. The crime was attributed by local Serbs to an Albanian suspect.

The media, while reporting the case, respected the rule that the crime was still being investigated and did not jump to conclusions or speculate about the nationality of the suspect or the nature of the crime. Whether they did so out of professionalism, or out of bias because the victim was a Serb, is a question one cannot answer.

Reporting of the events on 17 March

On 17 March, as the violence had begun to spread throughout Kosovo, all TV channels switched to special programming including live broadcasts from the scenes of violent unrest. The news about the drowning of the children was still being presented the same way as the previous night, however this time it was accompanied by images and reports about the violent protests that had begun in Mitrovica and had been provoked by the news about the tragic death of the children.

It is a rather complicated exercise trying to evaluate the quality of the reporting during such a crisis. It is at this stage when freedom of speech can easily be confused with incitement and hate speech and vice-versa. While it might be considered careless and

sensation-driven or even an incitement, the fact that the media decided to air live footage sometimes even without comment from these scenes (including hospitals filled with blood-covered casualties), it also represents a widespread phenomenon of how modern media report in real-time.

What is worrisome is the extremely one-sided anti-Serb and sometimes anti-UNMIK nature of the reporting that had begun to dominate the TV screens. The media did little, if anything at all, to calm down the situation on 17 March. The way interviews were conducted, their content and the failure to balance the statements by providing different opinions cannot be even remotely described as professional. In fact, the nature of most of the interviews and some of the reports by correspondents represent a clear case of incitement.

What dominated the screens on 17 March, was a mixture of dramatic and often disturbing footage from the scenes of violence, the repetition of the story about the tragic death of the children and interviews with individuals and personalities who expressed understanding for the riots, condemned the “barbaric Serb” killing of the children and criticized the conduct of the security forces engaged by the protesters. Programming containing balance, calls for calm and reason was a rarity during this day. Only on 18 March did the media begin to give sufficient space to constructive statements and actively engage in calming the situation down.

Here is a just a brief selection of some of the interviews and contributions by correspondents aired on 17 March.

RTK Special Edition, 17 March

In an interview, LDK Member of Parliament and former senior human rights activist, Nekibe Kelmendi, said:

RTK: *Some say the revolt is understandable ...*

N.K.: *Of course it is understandable. There have been many thing going wrong here ...*

RTK: *How do you see this? The police are using force and teargas against Albanian protesters, while the Serbs are allowed to block roads for days?*

N.K.: *This is a clear double-standard practice that UNMIK has applied from the beginning. This is the effect of so-called “positive discrimination” ...*

In an interview, another MP, Berat Luzha, said:

RTK: *The tragic events of last night, caused by Serbs and the inefficiency of the security forces. How do you evaluate this and also today’s protests?*

B.L.: *This is all due to the failure of UNMIK and the double-standard policy towards the ethnic groups here ...*

In an interview with another PDK MP, Arsim Bajrami, Mr Bajrami states:

“The barbaric act of the killing of the children ... has provoked a legitimate revolt by the Albanian population. This should be a lesson for the international community”...

Other interviews of a similar nature and content, with suggestive questioning by the journalists continue to be aired during the *Special Edition* of RTK and throughout the day.

KTV, 17 March

Correspondent from Gjakova/Djakovica:

“The criminal acts of the Serb population in the north have been condemned by the population of Gjakova during peaceful demonstrations. They demand an end to these terrorist acts against the Albanian population. In an expression of solidarity, the protesters marched towards the Serb street, the Serb church was set on fire. The situation is calm, while the church is burning.”

Later an interview with Ali Ahmeti, the leader of the largest Albanian Party in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, was aired. He explained the reason for the riots:

“The reason is the death of the three children who, while trying to escape Serb monsters, drowned in the river ...,”

This was also a statement by the PDK (the Democratic Party of Kosova), read out by the presenter without comment: *“... The killing of the children is a well-planned act by Belgrade, executed by its agents in Kosova ...”*

Another interview was aired with Shaqir Shaqiri, who was presented as a member of the organizing committee of the protests:

“Yesterday we had fewer demonstrations (referring to the pro KLA-demonstrations of the previous day) than today and this gives a good picture to the international community. This is a popular revolt and an expression of the accumulated frustration with the wrong policies of UNMIK” (while the interviewee was praising the event, burning cars and other debris left by the demonstrations could be seen).

Another news report that day deserves a closer look, as it is a good example of bias by the media when reporting on victims of a different ethnicity. According to a correspondent from Gjilan/Gnjilane:

“Thirty wounded and one dead is the toll after today’s events. The dead person is a Serb, who according to witnesses came out of his house with a Kalashnikov and provoked the protesters, they then took away his gun, subsequently the Serb died of his wounds.”

On closer examination, it is clear that the reporter offers a “good” reason for the “death” of the Serb, who had “provoked” the demonstrators in the first place. Even more interesting, for the media the Serb was not “killed” or “lynched.” He simply “died” after having been disarmed. The case was reported identically in some print media the next day.

But according to the appropriate authorities in Gjilan/Gnjilane, this is what occurred:

“It seems to be true that the victim was armed. However he did not use his weapon. It also is true that the crowd disarmed him. However he did not just fall dead after being disarmed. In reality, and, according to a senior local official, the victim, after having been disarmed, was stabbed and then beaten to death for almost half an hour by dozens of young Albanians, cheered by the crowd. What had happened in reality was a mob lynching, which the media presented as a very ‘clinically clean’ sudden death.”

It should be noted, that this is not an isolated case. On numerous occasions, Kosovar Albanian media have shown tendencies to downplay stories when Serbs have been victims of possible ethnically-motivated crimes. In some cases the media have gone so far as to suggest that the casualties were victims of their fellow Serbs who had killed their compatriots in order to blame the Albanians.

The print media on 17 and 18 March

It is clear that TV played the main role during the events, as the three main TV channels reach at least 70 percent of the population. It is also assumed that the newspapers based their story of the drowning of the children mainly on TV reporting during the evening of 16 March.

Nonetheless, the role of the newspapers should not be downplayed as, in general, they exercise important influence with the so-called “opinion leaders” and the educated elite of the communities. For the sake of keeping this report at a reasonable length, only headlines, main titles and quotes of special interest are presented. Compared to the analysis of the TV footage, which was randomly sampled and by no means complete, all the relevant print media output during the crucial days has been examined.

17 March

The main stories in the newspapers were the same as those on TV: the drowning of the three children, the pro-KLA demonstrations and the blockade of the respective roads by local Serb protesters.

Koha Ditore

Main headline: “Three children drown in Iber, while escaping Serbs.” While the headline did clearly suggest the incident was an ethnically motivated crime, the story itself was rather balanced, and space was given to the UN Police to express its views. The coverage of the pro-KLA protest was balanced and moderate, the same is true of the coverage of the Serb protest.

Zeri daily

The main headline is not related to any of the three main stories of the day. The incident involving the children is presented on the front page: “Three Albanian children went missing in the river Iber. (...) They went missing while escaping two Serbs.” The Serb blockade is given a full page and in general the reporting was fair and balanced. Over one page is dedicated to the pro-KLA protest. Here extensive space was allocated to a variety of serious allegations against UNMIK and other institutions involved in the prosecution of war crimes suspects, but not a single line was offered to other views, nor to these respective institutions.

Bota Sot

The news about the children was presented on the front page. At this point no allegations were made toward the possibility of an ethnically motivated crime. However, a different title on the front page reads: “Serb gangs have started their activities to expel Albanians from the north,” This, it was suggested, had been a consequence of a report by the Berlin based think-tank ESI. Another editorial implied that the hand-grenade attack on the President’s residence was a terrorist act organised by the Serbian Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica. The pro-KLA protest and the Serb blockade were given no special attention.

Epoka e Re

Main headline: “Serbs drown three Albanian children in the river Iber.”

Next prominent headline from the pro KLA-protests: “This was also chanted at the protests: 'UNMIK beware, KLA will burn you down'.” Three additional full pages were dedicated to the event. While extreme anti-UNMIK statements were carried, no quote from an UNMIK official was given space.

The next day (18 March) the print media, in general, while reporting extensively about the riots, did not engage – with a few exceptions – in any serious misconduct. In fact the two respected dailies, *Koha Ditore* and *Zeri*, besides offering a rather more balanced picture of the events, published statements and editorials appealing for calm and a stabilising of the situation.

Unfortunately, the two other main dailies, *Bota sot* and *Epoka e re*, did continue to use anti-Serb and to some extent anti-UNMIK rhetoric. However, this constitutes a long-term problem, as both these media outlets have behaved so in the past and continue so to date. It should, however, be stated that to the credit of these two outlets, they also contributed to pacifying the situation, through editorials and the publishing of appeals for calm.

In general terms, the print media cannot be blamed specifically for having negatively influenced the situation. In fact, aside from worrying language used by some of the print media, they were more engaged in calming down the situation than escalating it. In particular the dailies, *Zeri* and *Koha Ditore* as well as the weekly *Zeri* should be commended for their work during the crisis.

Conclusions

One cannot judge the media without taking into account the overall situation in Kosovo, and the social and political problems that still exist.

It is generally accepted that media cannot generate sentiments or hostilities overnight. Instead, what they do is to strengthen existing or previously generated stereotypes and animosities. What the broadcasting media in Kosovo did, especially on 16 March, was to inject into a situation already dominated by fear, prejudice and uncertainty,

- emotional, unsubstantiated reporting about a tragic event involving innocent children,
- one-sided reporting about the unjust arrests of “liberators” by UNMIK and the blockade of the main roads of Kosovo by rebellious Serbs.

This is not to say that some of the prejudices and fears had not originally been generated by the same media in the past.

The situation created on 17 March and during the following days, cannot be separated from the TV reporting on 16/17 March.

In particular, TV journalists and their editors failed to behave according to the ethics of their profession, acted emotionally and put their “patriotic” duty, as they saw it, first.

The Kosovar Albanian TV media decided to qualify the incident of the drowning of the three children as cases of death caused directly and beyond any doubt by hostile, local Serbs. No evidence was offered to support this and the child interviewed never claimed this, as was clearly and vigorously presented by the media. The coverage of the riots created a new dimension of biased reporting when references to the violence were preceded by “justifications.” The strong visuals used were there not to appal but to incite.

At this stage it should be noted that all three channels mentioned have been founded since the war in 1999 and have been generously financed by international donors. In particular, RTK – the only public broadcaster of Kosovo – has enjoyed substantial financial and technical support, including training, provided by the OSCE and other international donors and organizations.

While this report does not deal with the general quality of the media in Kosovo, one should ask whether the unsatisfactory performance during these crucial days represented just a accidental mistake or a pattern that became evident only during the tragic events.

The fact that the media decided to ignore statements by UNMIK and the UN Police on 16 March, and to some extent also during the following day, is another matter of concern. While strong criticism should be voiced of the media in this regard, this also clearly indicates a seriously flawed relationship and lack of mutual respect between the UNMIK press operation and the local media.

This present report did not set out to examine the role of the Serb-language media during the crisis. There is no Kosovo-wide Serb-language broadcaster operating in Kosovo. The respective local TV and radio stations usually air news programming generated in Serbia, in addition to their own programming. During the crucial period, most of these media provided extensive air-time to news from Serbia. While no credible analysis is available, circumstantial evidence collected by media monitors from the OSCE in the region suggest that there is also reason for concern regarding their programming.

In order to examine the role of the Serb-language media in Kosovo during these days and also in order to analyse the performance of the electronic media in Kosovo in general – including radio – the Temporary Media Commissioner in Kosovo (TMC) asked a number of broadcasters to provide his Office with the tapes of the programmes aired during those turbulent days.

Recommendations

- A full investigation into the performance of the electronic broadcast media, Kosovo Albanian and Serbian, during the events of 16/17 March should be conducted. This should not only investigate the content of the footage aired, but also look at footage, statements and evidence that was not aired.
- The findings of this investigation should be presented to the public in Kosovo and to the donors, as well as to the journalists in question.
- OMIK and the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media should hold a special meeting with donors in order to evaluate the performance of the media and discuss further plans for action.

- In particular, the performance of RTK, as the only public broadcaster, needs to be evaluated. The fact that only four out of eight members of the RTK Board of Directors appeared for the first board meeting after the events is worrying and needs to be properly addressed.
- The senior management and the editorial component of RTK needs to be strengthened. Ways, scope and nature of appropriate measures should be considered with the aim of enhancing the quality and the accountability of the public broadcaster.
- While there is a legitimate need to further regulate and strengthen the accountability and transparency of the public broadcaster, this should also be dealt with by introducing a necessary legal framework – for instance, through a Law on Broadcasting and a Law on Public Service Broadcasting.
- The Law on the Establishing of the Independent Media Commission, which was drafted last summer and is awaiting approval by the Office of the Prime Minister, should be urgently presented to Parliament for consideration.
- Self-regulating, non-governmental institutions, such as journalists’ associations and Media Councils, need to be established and/or strengthened.
- Serb-language media in Kosovo relies mostly on information provided by broadcasters in Serbia. Media broadcasting news programming generated out of Kosovo should be held accountable for content, regardless of origin, according to the regulations valid in Kosovo.
- A local Kosovo-wide Serb-language broadcaster should be established.
- OMIK should be advised to re-establish the Media Development Section. Particular attention should be placed on training, education of young journalists and monitoring of the local media. Funding for training would be required.
- In addition to monitoring the print media, regular, random checks of programmes aired by the electronic broadcast media should be conducted. This should be done outside the Office of the TMC, whose role is to enforce the TMC Code of Conduct, and should focus on evaluating the quality of the broadcasters for the purpose of identifying genuine problems that are not related to legislation.
- The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media should appoint a special representative for a limited duration to assist OMIK, the TMC and the donors to identify problems and action needed to be taken in order to rectify the situation. This representative could also serve as a new and neutral asset in re-establishing a constructive dialogue between the Kosovar media and the institutions involved.
- The TMC should be supported in his efforts to enforce existing regulations, and in particular article 2.2. of the TMC Code of Conduct for Broadcast Media, which states: “Broadcasters will not broadcast any material that encourages crime or criminal activities or which carries imminent risk of causing harm, such harm being defined as death, injury, or damage to property or other violence.”

- Necessary sanctions notwithstanding, OMIK, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media and donors should increase their activities to financially and otherwise support the Kosovo media.
- UNMIK Public Information components need to take action in order to ensure that UNMIK's message is represented in a fair and consistent manner in the future.