

Gagging the Media

Slovenia: Under My Thumb

Slovenia's government is proving resourceful and energetic in its attempts to control the country's journalists.

by Borut Mekina

LJUBLJANA, Slovenia | A certain long-distance courier service has become an unwelcome sight among some Slovenian journalists, who have taken to joking at the end of the work day that they "survived it without DHL."

That's because it was through a DHL delivery that the Vienna and Zagreb correspondents for the country's largest daily discovered in mid-April that they would likely lose their jobs.

The firings of two reporters, called "bad journalists" by their editor, would not raise many eyebrows in a country with a mature media market. But in Slovenia, where for two years the government has worked to tighten its grip on journalists, it looks like only the latest and most blatant example of political bullying.

Slovenia's center-right government, which will be the first from the new European Union members to take the EU presidency in January, came to power in October 2004. It quickly set about "reforming" the country's media landscape, concentrating first on the country's national radio and television broadcaster, RTV Slovenia.

RTV's governing council had been composed primarily of civil society representatives, journalists, musicians, writers, academics and representatives of sports associations. But Branko Grims, a member of parliament from the Slovenian Democratic Party, which is the largest in the country's ruling coalition, argued that such a council represented largely left-wing interests. As leftist parties had fared poorly in the elections, Grims said, such representation was not in keeping with the wishes of voters.

Instead, he proposed that parliament be allowed to appoint a majority of council members or approve those proposed through a public process.

The first consequence of this political takeover of RTV was commercialization. The new council introduced an "infotainment" program that started with a scandal: a right-wing politician essentially got the opportunity to insult Slovenia's Romani community. The show invited a member of the Romani community and the leader of a nationalist party, who made a distinction between hard-working and honest Slovenes, on the one hand, and promiscuous and irresponsible "gypsies" on the other. It received excellent ratings.

ONE BY ONE

But while the most ink was spilled over changes at RTV, the process of "balancing the media," or "pluralization" as the government called it, hit hardest at the seemingly independent daily Delo, Slovenia's biggest and the most influential newspaper, with a circulation topping 65,000. Through a series of deals using connected companies, some of which were partly state-owned, the government exerted pressure on Delo to change its management.

Editorial changes followed, and dozens of respected journalists left the company. Barbara Surk, for example, who had won several awards for her coverage of the Middle East, was forced out after she refused to accept a deal offering her the lowest salary permissible by law. Surk, who said she never received an explanation, now writes from Dubai for the Associated Press.

One of the Delo correspondents to receive a fateful DHL package, Matija Grah, is convinced his ouster has more to do with the displeasure of the Slovenian foreign minister than with his own job performance. Grah, who had been recognized by the country's journalists association for his reporting from Vienna, last year criticized an Austrian plan to settle the issue of bilingual street signs in Carinthia, a southern region of the country where a Slovenian minority lives.

The proposal would have listed the towns where bilingual signs would be required but would have denied the Slovenian community the right to challenge the list or even to complain if it were not enforced - a real concern, given that the notorious nationalist politician Jorg Haider is Carinthia's governor. Further, such a denial would arguably violate the Austrian State Treaty of 1955, which established Austria as an independent state and outlined the rights of its Croatian and Slovenian minorities.

The Slovenian foreign minister, Dimitry Rupel, however, did not see it that way. On the day that Grah's commentary ran, he hailed the proposal as a "step in the right direction." Although he would later change his opinion of the Austrian bill, Rupel phoned Delo's editor in chief that day to complain about the commentary.

After an unsuccessful attempt to recall Grah from his Vienna posting, the paper's chairman of the board is trying to have Grah fired for incompetence, but Delo's foreign editor has admitted publicly that he was forced by the paper's management to give Grah a poor job evaluation. The matter is now before a court.

"What I can say is that my reports and comments from Vienna triggered relatively major interventions ... in Delo, Grah said during a public discussion of the case recently.

"Suddenly others were also not allowed to raise their voice. But in the end, it was my opinion article that made them want to call me back from Vienna, of course with a different justification. Now, you should imagine the effect this had on the other journalists: Even the ones who didn't know me before stopped me in the corridors, telling me how horrible it was."

The other DHL victim was Rok Kajzer, Delo's Zagreb correspondent. Kajzer received his package after criticizing Slovenia's dispatching heavily armed special police forces

to a disputed border area with Croatia to prevent Croatian workers from building a road there.

When Delo's union representatives complained about the treatment of the correspondents, they, too, were warned that their jobs could be in jeopardy if they continued to damage the paper's reputation.

In late May, more than 60 members of the Slovenian Writers Association released a letter titled "Against Intimidation and Punishment." They protested that Delo's journalists must have freedom of expression and declared, "We don't want to live in a society that is ruled by fear."

PULLING STRINGS

Rupel has made no secret of his interest in seeing what gets published. He recently made a singular offer to journalists who complain that their work is censored: send him the articles, he suggested, and he would personally arrange their publication. Rupel's offer, with its implicit suggestion that he has such control over editors, caused a stir.

Ervin Hladnik Milharic, a former features editor at Delo, said he was once invited to lunch with Rupel, who warned him not to oppose the government.

The government also exerts financial pressure on the country's media. In late 2005, all major state-owned companies - telecom firms Mobitel and Telekom, internet service provider Siol, insurer Zavarovalnica Triglav, Adria Airways, Nova Kreditna banka Maribor, and Petrol -- left the two predominant media planning agencies to join a new one. Afterward, independent daily Dnevnik saw its advertising revenues from these companies fall far below its projections for 2006 of 1.17 million euros, instead taking in almost 376,000 euros.

The loss of Mobitel's business, the country's largest mobile operator, was especially difficult. Aside from contracts signed long ago, it no longer advertises in Dnevnik or the weekly Mladina, which nearly went under for lack of advertising.

Neither paper's circulation has dropped.

On the other hand, Delo, with its new, more pliable management, saw its circulation drop while advertising revenues rose.

At Primorske novice, a daily newspaper near the Italian border, local politicians dictated to the publisher, via the town's public information office, who the new editor in chief would be. The ownership structure of Primorske novice includes a few state-controlled firms and a couple of others that depend largely on doing business with the government.

In the face of such pressure, journalists have begun creating memorials to spiked stories. Boris Jausovec, a reporter for the Vecer daily, which is controlled by a state-owned bank, started collecting the articles that had been killed by the paper's management and gluing them inside a wardrobe, which he called a bunker. He soon had a collection of more than 40 pieces of work. Now the bunker is an institution, set up at more than four media outlets across the country.

The government has responded to accusations that it leans on the media by saying that these instances were independent decisions made by private companies or by dismissing such protests as a political reaction from left-leaning journalists.

The government's hand was strengthened by the U.S. State Department in March, which, for the first time since 1999, declared in its annual human rights report on Slovenia that "the independent media were active and expressed a variety of views without significant restriction." That sentence is a departure from the department's previous assessments that the "the media were active and independent but did not express a broad range of views."

Grims, the parliament member who championed the restructuring of RTV's council, had seized on the State Department's prior criticism of the media, using it as support for his program of "reform." At a press conference last year, he even glued the statement to the wall.

The department's change of opinion has come as the current government has enjoyed a closer relationship with Washington. Unlike its predecessor, this government has sent troops to Iraq. Further, the Washington-based International Republican Institute has provided communications training to the Slovenian Democratic Party. The institute describes itself as a nonprofit, nonpartisan promoter of democracy. Its board of directors includes former political appointees in the Bush administration as well as the former chairmen of state and national Republican parties and Republican presidential candidate and Senator John McCain.

Despite the U.S. government's seal of approval, several international watchdog groups have weighed in. Freedom House, a U.S.-based group that promotes free speech and democracy, has noted that the country's new press laws have "the potential to hinder press freedom." Freedom House singled out the new laws governing RTV as having been proposed without debate or input from local media.

At its annual gathering last year, held in Slovenia, the European Federation of Journalists pronounced itself "deeply concerned with the recent intrusions of politics into the Slovenian media sphere, as well as by the ongoing lowering of social standards for journalists." It continued, "In the past year, the Slovenian government has drastically increased pressures on the media and journalists. ..."

Evidence of such pressure has even started to come from the government itself. Upon her resignation in mid-June, Vice Minister for Economics Andrijana Starina Kosem wrote an open e-mail admitting that she had been tasked by Prime Minister Janez Jansa to manipulate Delo so that the ruling party would have a long-term presence on the paper's board of directors and would therefore maintain influence over its editorial policy.

Jansa responded the same day, dismissing Kosem's statements as trivial.