

ŽELIMIR KEŠETOVIĆ

## IMPROVING POLICE AND MEDIA RELATIONS IN SERBIA

***Abstract.** In the introduction author underlines the utmost importance of good relations between the police and the community. As social reality in contemporary world is predominantly constructed by the mass media, they also play very important role in public perception of the police and in creating its image. On the other hand, the police is in the focus of media attention due to the fact that we live in “risk society”, where people are rather concerned for their safety and security. In that context mutual relations are important both for the police and the media. However, there are some general and universal problems that emerge in police-media relations due to structural factors that shape both professions. Author describes police and media relations during the system of personal rule that existed in Serbia during (1989-2000), in which the freedom of the press was seriously endangered, and the police was responsible only to the ruling elite. The police used mass media that were under the direct influence of the ruling party as their loud-speakers, while the independent media were discriminated against and, from time to time, openly censored. Communications between police and the media were unilateral and one-way, while the public were treated as an object of influence. After the democratic changes in October 2000, the new democratic government launched extensive reforms in an attempt to establish rule of law and democratic institutions. As the police was one of the main pillars of the non-democratic regime, its reform was of utmost importance. In the context of overall reforms to make a shift from police force to police service, it was also necessary to change police-media relations. The tempo and results of the reform process was rather fast until the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić in March 2002. Later on the process underwent a backlash, due to the new political conditions. With Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe– OSCE, as a strategic partner, the project of improving police-media relations was launched in 2005. The first phase of the project included assessment of contemporary media and police relations in Serbia through a series of roundtable discussions organized in various regions of the country. Major findings of the actual problems in these relations, from the viewpoint of the journalist and police officers, are presented in the paper, as well as some system obstacles and recommendations for further improvement.*

**Keywords:** police, media, democracy, transition, public opinion, public relations, image, OSCE, Ministry of Interior, Serbia.

## 1. General features of the police-media relations

For the police (e.g. for the police managers) being operating in the framework of authoritarian regime it is important to be seen as an efficient agency in the eyes of the political leadership. Satisfaction of rulers was the first and oldest criteria for measuring police performance. In open societies with democratic regime police is the service of the citizens and one of the most important criteria of police performance is satisfaction of the citizens. The police and the citizens are considered as partners in achieving the common goal - favourable security and safe society. The citizens are not willing to cooperate with the police and to share informations if they do not have trust in the police organisation.

The majority of ordinary citizens have rather seldom direct contacts with the police, so their perception of this agency is predominantly based upon the media picture of the police. Media representations of the police are very important and have an effect upon the role of the police in a society. In particular, media images of the police impact upon public perceptions of police

legitimacy.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, police legitimacy in a democratic society is, in many respects, dependent upon an appropriate presentation of police work by that society's media. So, establishing good relations with the mass media is of utmost importance for each police organisation that is striving to achieve high levels of public trust and support.

On the other hand, police organisations are very interesting for mass media, as their public like to read, hear and watch about security issues, crime and public order.<sup>2</sup> As Ulrich Beck pointed out, we are living in "risk society" where people are very excited at the slightest sign of danger and threat. On the individual level, it also seems that people are, in a certain way, fascinated with the dark side of human mind. This is the framework within which the police and the media are interrelated.

Although, generally speaking, media do support the police and the role of the police in society, relations between the police and the media are often loaded with a number of problems in many countries due to the fact that each institution is based upon different and sometimes conflicting attitudes, values, norms, logic, interests, rules and regulations.

<sup>1</sup> Mawby, R.C., *Policing Images: Policing, Communication and Legitimacy*, Intl. Specialized Book Service Inc., 2002.

<sup>2</sup> According to Robert Reiner, the media are fascinated with police and dramatizations of police action provide sensational entertainment. Reiner, R., *The Politics of Police*, Oxford University Press, USA; 3 edition, 2001. and Reiner, R. "Media Made Criminality: The Representation of Crime in the Mass Media" in Maguire, M., Morgan, R. and Riner, R. (eds). *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology*, second edition, Oxford:Claderton press, 1997.

Bogoljub Milosavljević highlights the following key reasons which may help explain this mutual antagonism between the media and the police:

There exists a conflict between the role of the police as an instrument of government for controlling the public and, eventually, limiting human rights, and the role of the media as proclaimed protector of human freedom and the most influent external instrument of control of the government.

Information's are important both for the police and for the media. These organisations simply cannot function without collecting, processing and using information. In this respect, information becomes a commodity which both the media and the police compete for.

The public and political spheres impact upon the relations between the police and the media. The media can influence public attitudes towards the police in positive or negative way. On the other hand, through the media, the police can inform the public about its work, and receive feedback of their success in matching public expectation. With regard to the political sphere, the government can put pressure on the media to treat the police more or less favourably.

Disregarding the principle of objective reporting and the freedom of the press the media sometimes, due to commercial or political reasons, may distort reality in their coverage of certain subjects. Besides that, despite the fact that the freedom of speech is proclaimed in the constitutions and laws in number of countries, occasionally, even in societies with democratic traditions, censorship is undertaken by the police.<sup>3</sup>

In everyday life a number of misunderstandings occur in police-media relationships. Sometimes they can lead to serious tensions and even total cessation of contacts between the police organisation and one or several media. This is followed by distinctive blame game. The journalists often blame the police, and the police chiefs often hold the media responsible for all the mutual misunderstandings.<sup>4</sup>

## **2. Police and media relations in Serbia in period 1989-2000**

After the World War II Serbia had a socialist regime that was more liberal and open than in all other countries behind the iron curtain. But, while almost all other socialist countries in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have made decisive transition towards

<sup>3</sup> For more details see Milosavljević, 1997:275-277, Kešetović, 1998:74-77.

<sup>4</sup> Besides the cited Reiner's work for the subject are also relevant: Leishman, F. and Mason, P., *Policing and the Media: Facts, Fictions and Factions*, Willan Publishing, 2003, Boyle, R., "Spotlight Strathclyde: Police and Media Strategies", *Corporate Communication: An International Journal* Vol 4 No 2 1999 93-97, Kenneth, D., "Media Influence on Citizens Attitudes toward Police Effectiveness" *Policing and Society*, 2002 Vol 12 No 03 pp 227-238.

democracy Serbian ruling elite made only formal changes of the political system in which the newly-introduced democratic institutions were just a facade of the personal rule of Slobodan Milosevic and his party – the Socialist party of Serbia - SPS. In this party-state opponents of the main ideology, including media that were not under direct government control, were considered not as a viable political opposition, but as dangerous enemies of the state and serious threat to the nation (extended hand of aggressor).<sup>5</sup>

The police were an instrument of the ruling elite and one of the main pillars of the non-democratic regime. The only thing that was important to the police was to be seen in the eyes of the ruling elites as an efficient protector of the existing system. Protection

of the interests of the ruling elites was, with the help of the ideological mechanism, interpreted in terms of “constitutional order” and “national interest”. The protection of citizen’s lives and property were tasks of much less importance a state of affairs which had tragic consequences for both police organization and public safety. Besides politicization, processes that devastated the police professionalism in Serbia were also centralization<sup>6</sup>, militarization<sup>7</sup>, criminalization<sup>8</sup> and etnization<sup>9</sup>. Result of these processes was the significant decrease in public confidence in the police. According to the findings of the survey done by the researches of Institute of political sciences in Belgrade in 1997 less than one third of 2000 respondents had considerable trust in police.

<sup>5</sup> These are some examples: On the 2nd of June 2000, journalists of dailies Danas, Blic, Glas javnosti, and agencies Fonet and Beta were not allowed to attend the session of the administrative committee of the Serbian Parliament. At the very beginning of this session, president of the Committee, Dragan Ljubojević (Serbian Radical Party - SRS), enumerated news desks of “treacherous media” and “asked” their journalists to leave the meeting. Otherwise the meeting will not begin. Ten days latter reporting from the session of federal assembly for these journalists was precluded with rationale that their requests for accreditation were late.

Nikola Šainovic, vice-president of the Government of FR Yugoslavia accused on June 06th 2000 independent media that they are “traitors and NATO servants”, adding that it is time for the citizens to become “owners of the truth”.

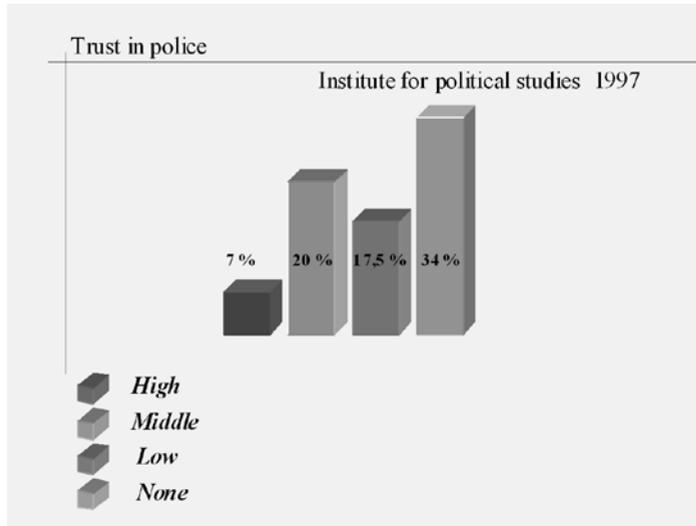
On the meeting of the local committee of the SPS Veliko Gradiste, minister of Interior Vljako Stojiljković accused Otpor (oppositions organisation), media and NGO’s for terrorism 29.06.2006. Source: *Dossier on repression No 4 for June and July 2000 in Serbia in media sphere*

<sup>6</sup> Serbia introduced one of the most centralized police model. Actually there was only one police organization in the country - Ministry of Interior that included both public and state security. Regional and local police organisations were organizational units of the MoI.

<sup>7</sup> Military-alike ranks were introduced into police, and police training and education became similar to the military.

<sup>8</sup> A number of even high-ranking police officers and managers were involved in, or very close with organized criminal groups, while those in lower positions were involved in corruption.

<sup>9</sup> Although Serbia is multiethnic society, all the police managers that were not of Serbian origin were replaced.



Control was exerted not only with the hard power (police), but also through defining the reality and shaping peoples' thoughts by using mass media. State-controlled media and press agencies functioned as a propaganda machine, repeating official messages,<sup>10</sup> mobilising people for supporting the wars in ex-Yugoslavia or entertaining them with low quality entertainment. There were only a few newspapers, TV and radio stations<sup>11</sup> that were independent from, and critical towards the regime. Even journalists and their professional associations were divided on lines of their support or

opposition to the dominant regime.

In this context, the government-controlled police and press were natural allies. On the other hand, the police and the independent media<sup>12</sup> were opponents. The government media were all speaking with one voice, which produced a favourable image of the police, whilst critical

media perspectives were less prominent. The independent media did however focus its critique on the police and highlighted, first of all, its brutality in dealing with the opponents of the regime, its corruption, its nepotism and its politicisation.

The Ministry of Interior maintained relationships only with the official media and their journalists. This was mainly one-way communication through official statements and specially arranged "events" for eligible reporters. Journalists from independent media organizations were excluded from such MoI media events and labelled as enemies, non-patriots, traitors, foreign payees and spies. Leading opposition journalists

<sup>10</sup> Slogans and mantras like "Serbia will not stoop down" created by Slobodan Milošević, disseminated and repeated for hundred of times in electronic and printed media, on billboards, T-shirts etc.

<sup>11</sup> Newspapers "Naša Borba" and "Danas", radio stations "B 92" and "Index" and TV "Studio B", being the most popular and with the widest influence.

<sup>12</sup> Of course, fully "independent media" is a Utopia, or, at least, an ideal. This term is used to denote the media that were not under direct control of Serbian government.

were under the surveillance of secret (state) police.<sup>13</sup> During the peaks of social and political crisis independent media were banned, their facilities occupied, equipment and recorded material seized, journalists were imprisoned and subjected to police hearings. Two journalists were even killed under circumstances which appear to implicate the state.<sup>14</sup>

### **3. New framework for police and media relations in Serbia in transition**

The milestone in recent Serbian history is October, 5th, 2000, day when more than 600.000 citizens gathered in massive demonstrations in front of Federal Assembly in Belgrade, protesting against manipulations with election results.<sup>15</sup> Police refused Milosevic's order to use force against demonstrators, so in the evening Milosevic had to accept the fact that he lost. For Serbia this day was turning point towards democracy regime, and a new framework for establishing different relations between police and media.

After three months interregnum, first democratic government headed by Prime minister Zoran Djindjić came into power in

January 2001, and declared police reform as one of the priorities. In order to achieve the general aim of the police reform - shift from police force to police service, it was necessary to create professional, depoliticized police responsible for law enforcement and protection of human rights and freedoms, and in the same time efficient in prevention and repression of crime and ensuring public safety.

For the first democratic government and its Prime Minister, dr Zoran Đinđić, the public was not a pure object of influence. The image of the government, its officials and all the ministries became very important and, consequently, the Ministry of Interior began a policy of establishing good relations with media. The Ministry of Interior opened up to the media to a greater degree and journalists were not discriminated against any more. Some organizational changes have been introduced in order to improve communications with media, like establishing the Bureau for Co-operation with Media within the cabinet of the Minister of Interior. However, many of the problems from the previous period were still present and a coherent overall strategy in police-media relations was still missing. One important

<sup>13</sup> Notorious "Resor državne bezbednosti" - State security sector.

<sup>14</sup> Slavko Ćuruvija and Dragomir Pantić. Ćuruvija was under surveillance of secret police one minute before he was killed near his flat in the centre of Belgrade. Milošević's wife in certain way announced this murder few days before. These cases were never solved.

<sup>15</sup> In competition for the position of president opposition candidate Vojislav Koštunica cogently defeated Slobodan Milošević, who was trying to forge the results, e.g. lessen the difference in votes in order to obtain another election circle.

obstacle for such reform was the fact that the reform of the Ministry was slow due to political rivalry within the governing coalition leading to a slow rate of policy reform.<sup>16</sup> Despite such reforms as have already occurred, the Serbian police is very centralized, politicized and unprofessional.

After the democratic changes in the Serbian media, political influence has become both more sophisticated and more discrete. A number of printed and electronic media have emerged and journalists are relatively free to write, search for information and criticize the policy-makers at both local and state level. There are a lot of new and privately-owned media searching for sensational stories. Yellow journalism is emerging. Among the stories about local celebrities there are also those dealing with famous criminals, often described in euphemistic terms like “controversial businessman’s” or “tough guys from streets of Belgrade”. Also, some media are owned by “nouveaux riches” some of whom have great political ambitions. The level of journalistic quality is low and there is a sense that objective reporting is declining. Six years after the democratic changes the media is inadequately regulated by laws.<sup>17</sup>

In new circumstances police work was more transparent and public image become more important for the police managers and

even for the government. Although there was no overall police-media strategy, there were several steps on the operational level aimed to improve relations between the police and the media. The most important and comprehensive was the project of improvement communications between media and police launched in 2005 together with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

#### **4. PROJECT “Improvement of Communication between Media and Police”**

Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe is the most important strategic partner in the police reform process. Two departments of this organization (OSCE Mission to SaM - Media and Law Enforcement Departments) launched in February 2005 in co-operation with the MoI-Bureau for Media the “Improvement of Communication between Media and Police” project aimed to improve relations between the police and the media in Serbia.

This project is a part of overall efforts of the OSCE to assist Serbian authorities in building up stable democratic institutions. It is beyond doubt that both police and media are very important social institutions that have considerable influence upon citizens’ quality of life, the establishment of the

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<sup>16</sup> Assassination of Prime Minister Djindjić also slowed the reform process

<sup>17</sup> New law on radio diffusion (broadcasting) is adopted in July 2006 despite many serious objections raised by OSCE and independent journalist associations.

rule of law and the functioning of the legal system. In that context, partnership relations between the media and police are very important in transforming the police from a regime based on force to one based upon the notion of 'service'.

The processes of political and economic transition in Serbia have led to safety-related issues that society, as a whole, has to combat. This is impossible without a certain level of trust in the police (as well as in judicial system and other institutions), and it cannot be achieved without two-way efficient co-operation between police and media. The period of autocratic regime still burdens relations between the media and the police, so a concerted effort has to be made to forge a new relationship.

The basic aim of this project is to highlight the importance of mutual co-operation and good relations, to decrease the level of mistrust between the police and the media and to broaden the mutual knowledge of circumstances and limitations of both professions.

### *Methodology*

Implementation of the project is envisaged in three phases. The first phase included the assessment of present media and police relations in Serbia, through a series of roundtable discussions organized in various regions of the country. At these events the representatives of local and district police and local and regional media assess the level of existing relations, point

out problems and suggest possible solutions. The sample comprised of only one third of district police organizations. Having in mind the fact that police in Serbia is rather sensitive to the critique of its work, and that, generally, people are still not used to speak freely about the problems in public, parallel with round tables a surveys of the opinions of journalists through questionnaire were conducted. Unfortunately, due to some technical and organizational problems this survey was not conducted in all districts.

In the second phase, recommendations are made on the basis of situation assessment and implemented in order to improve relations between media and police.

The third and last phase of the project includes evaluation, supposed corrections of recommended solutions and, if needed, suggestions of some other measures that would make the project self-sustainable.

### **Implementation of the first phase**

Within the first phase of project implementation the OSCE Mission to SaM, with support of the Bureau for Media Co-operation of the Serbian Ministry of Interior, organized eleven roundtables from February to November 2005. Roundtables were organized in the following Secretariats of Interior (district police organizations): Vranje (Bujanovac), Zajecar, Kragujevac, Novi Pazar, Subotica, Nis, Kikinda, Sabc, Pozarevac, Uzice and Belgrade.<sup>18</sup> As relevant target groups, the representatives of district police Secretariats, local police

officials and representatives of local and regional media that regularly co-operate with the police were invited to take part in roundtable discussions.<sup>19</sup> Representatives of local self-governments (Municipalities, Cities and Districts) also attended the events, as the future decentralization of police structure predicts a very important role for local authorities in solving local safety issues. After the first few roundtables it became obvious that representatives of local or regional judiciary (pre-investigative judges or public prosecutors) should also be present and active in roundtable discussions. In total, 342 participants took part in the roundtable discussions.

As a part of preparations for each of the roundtables a questionnaire, designed for purposes of the project, has been distributed to invited media outlets. Media representatives were asked to fill out the questionnaire and present the most important problems they face in communication with the police, as well as their suggestions for improvements. The purpose of this pre-investigation was to use time at roundtables efficiently and to point discussion to key issues.

The aim of the roundtables was to engage representatives of the police, media, judiciary and local authorities into dialogue on the most important issues which effected relations between the police and media in general, identification of problems specific for region/police Secretariat where the event took place, and proposals of possible solutions for some of them.

#### *The most important findings*

In each of the events, the co-operation between media and police was considered to be much better than during the period of non-democratic regime. However, it is hard to give a general and universal assessment on quality of media and police co-operation in Serbia as a whole, as huge differences exist from one Secretariat to another. If we would try to rank Secretariats in which roundtables were organized, according to successful co-operation of media and police, on one end of the scale would be Zaječar, Niš, Požarevac and Užice as the most successful ones, while Bujanovac and Novi Pazar would be the unsuccessful ones. The rest of the Secretariats (four of them)

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<sup>18</sup> It was not possible to organize a roundtable in each Secretariat in Serbia, so sites with different primary security issues, north and south of the country, border regions and big cities were chosen.

<sup>19</sup> Bureau for Media Co-operation of the Serbian Ministry of Interior in each case provided the OMiSaM with list of media with which they co-operate, and the OMiSaM selected the media to be invited, using the criteria of type (print and broadcast), ownership (private, public), coverage (local, regional, correspondents of central media). In multiethnic and multilingual regions (Bujanovac, Novi Pazar, Subotica) ethnic and linguistic criteria were also taken into consideration

would rank in the middle. Due to a number of specifics, the Secretariat in Belgrade is hard to compare with other district police units in Serbia.<sup>20</sup> It is interesting that good conditions were often related to personnel changes in certain Secretariats (e.g. the appointment of a new Head of Secretariat) and that the situation is bad in communities where inter-ethnic and other social and political tensions are present. Even in regions where co-operation is generally good (Užice, for example) there are still serious issues to be addressed.

The fact remains that, in all roundtables, media representatives initiated topics and discussion, while police officials mostly replied, sometimes in a defensive manner, to their remarks and suggestions. At some of the events (in Novi Pazar, for example) the participants were not ready to talk about problems openly during formal discussion, but rather during breaks. In Kikinda, questionnaire answers were much harsher than criticism and remarks disclosed in the discussion.

None of the Secretariats has a formally appointed spokesperson (as a specific post with a job description), nor any other official whose exclusive task would be to communicate with the media. On the other hand all of the Secretariats have an official who is in charge of communication with the media. In most of the cases those are the officials

employed in the Department for Analysis and Information. Contact with the media are only part of their job description and, on average, account for around 30% of their work. Often they share the office with police officers that perform completely different tasks, and rarely have any technical equipment for their work (PC, audio/ video recorders, Internet access and e-mail account). Usually these are police officers who have no journalistic experience at all<sup>21</sup> and who were never trained for that job. In most cases, they consult and ask for approval of pre-investigative judges and prosecutors in charge of the case before revealing any information (in order not to jeopardize efficiency of criminal investigation).

Media outlets are being informed daily (via telephone or fax, rarely via e-mail), weekly (through bulletins that police sends to news desks) and monthly. Specific statements are issued in cases of grave criminal acts, such as fires. Some Secretariats organize regular weekly (Niš) or monthly (Zaječar) press conferences where representatives of all local police stations within the Secretariat are present.

When it comes to remarks of media representatives, a number of them are more or less the same in all, or at least in majority of Secretariats, while some are specific for one or few of them. It is interesting that even

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<sup>20</sup> Belgrade has around one third of total population of Serbia, being the administrative, business, political and cultural center of the country. Belgrade police is the largest city police in terms of staff and resources.

<sup>21</sup> Exception is officer in charge of media co-operation in Kragujevac who has three years experience as correspondent of "Vecernje Novosti" daily

within the same Secretariat some journalists assessed the co-operation as very good, while some claimed it was insufficient or even bad (Subotica).

*Remarks of journalists distinctive for all, or for majority of Secretariats*

- Information is late and often insufficient, secrecy over data is common, and police statements are mostly dry in content, administrative in style and usually consist of statistics. It seems that police officials do not have a clear picture of what news is and how press releases should be composed.<sup>22</sup> As the police are still relatively 'closed', journalists are forced to use unofficial sources of information beside official ones.
- Communication goes one-way, from police to media outlets, and is strictly centralized; representatives of local police are not free to provide media with any information before receiving an approval from the Ministry HQ in Belgrade.
- A special problem is that initial information on some criminal acts, or other safety-related incidents are incomplete and procedures for actions of police and journalists regarding information distribution are unclear.
- Procedure to get approval for police officers to be guests on radio and TV shows is undefined, complicated and time-consuming, although their presence in the live shows is essential, as "live interview coverage" is far more efficient than written statements. Police officers lack basic media training (especially in relation to TV appearances). Approval for broadcast media to video/ audio record police activities or crime scenes is rarely given. Communication is mostly reduced to distribution of approved and formal written statements from the police, with no possibility for further inquiry.
- There are cases of discrimination of certain media and even censorship of some information. Provincial media are in worse position than their colleagues in Belgrade-based media. In Uzice, for example, journalists from small-town media could not get the information on a case that happened there from local police, while media from Uzice, who communicate directly with Secretariat, got the same information promptly. It is very important in some cases, as on-time informing can prevent negative consequences.
- The issue of TV reporters and their crews on the crime scene was raised. Both journalists and police officers agreed that some general rules should be set, and training on crime scene procedures be provided for media professionals. It was suggested that journalists and their crews, specialized and trained for covering police work/ crime investigations should get special accreditation that would ease their everyday work.<sup>23</sup>
- Police are often over-sensitive to critiques of their work that is published/broadcasted in the media.

<sup>22</sup> Journalist in Kikinda roundtable stressed that "events are being described by a person who has no basic journalistic sense for important details" and that the language used is "incomprehensible both to journalists and the public"

<sup>23</sup> According to the research that Journalist Association of Serbia (UNS) published in 2006 around two hundred journalists in Serbia are specialized for coverage of crime/police work.

- There is no possibility to communicate with police via e-mail.
- Problems in communication are also present in relation to the local judiciary - pre-investigative judges are inaccessible to media representatives, or unready to give information. In some cases, certain media are being privileged to get information from the investigative court or the prosecutor's office.
- There is no communication between the police and local authorities.<sup>24</sup> (Novi Pazar)
- Officers, especially Heads of Secretariats and local police chiefs, are inaccessible. (Subotica, Kikinda)
- Some official requests from journalists are left unanswered. (Subotica)
- No unified criteria for distribution of information. When a six fold murder was committed on Christmas, none of the police officers could be reached by telephone. Conversely, when national flag was burnt on a Sunday, all the media outlets received a written official statement. (Subotica)

### *Remarks of journalists distinctive for specific Secretariats*

- Police abandoned the practice of holding press conferences, which is a step backwards comparing to the period 2001- 2003. (Bujanovac, Novi Pazar)
- Even widely known facts cannot be officially confirmed. Statistical data on 1964 murders were not given to a journalist writing an analytical article. Audio/ video recordings of police officers statements are rare. (Novi Pazar)
- Officers in charge of media communication are inaccessible after office hours and during weekends. (Novi Pazar)
- Sporadic cases of pressure over journalists are present. For example if the journalists, having their own sources of information's, gather some data about criminal activities of some local criminal groups, and local powerful people, they quit further investigation, being afraid for their own safety. Some of this problems and affairs in the town are "public secret", but reporting on them might be dangerous. (Novi Pazar)
- Information from some Secretariats leak to some journalists due to personal contacts. This puts other media in an inferior position. Media are not adequately used in public safety campaigns such as those concerning traffic safety and drug abuse. (Subotica)
- Police are still closed, inflexible and sometimes arrogant. Media that opposed Milosevic's regime still have problems in communication with the police, and officers who described journalists as "traitors" and "foreign mercenaries" during the 1990's still hold the same positions within the police. Police officers are afraid to be seen in public with certain "opposition" journalists. In one of the comments a journalist stated: "We have no problem in communication, as we do not have serious communication". (Kikinda)
- Police officers do not permit themselves to be audio/ video recorded and communicate only through written statements (Užice)

<sup>24</sup> The biggest obstacle for better co-operation of police and local authorities in Novi Pazar are political disputes between opposed political parties gathering Bosniaks- SDA and SDP

- Police are inert and inept in presenting “success stories” that would improve their public image. There are no video footages of police rescues, officers assisting the injured and the self-sacrificing acts of police officers. (Užice)
- Some journalists expressed their doubt that any real changes can be implemented at local level before an overall strategy is adopted, and systemic solutions are put in place and become operative. Strategy should ensure a more open approach and decentralization in police communication with the media. (Užice)
- There remains unequal practice in revealing information - for example, in Belgrade, police reveal not only names, but also even photos of suspected criminals, while the Secretariat in Sabac provides the media only with initials. Even informally police will not reveal names to journalists, which makes them feel “not trustworthy”. (abac)
- Police statements are often useless for the media (for example “a person in a company embezzled certain funds”). The situation is even worse when information is requested from the Prosecutor’s Office. At the crime scene journalists were forbidden to record anything, while police allowed people suspected to be involved in the criminal act to use mobile phone cameras. Journalists are not protected while reporting from rallies and other possibly violent events. There is also no protection of journalists from the “nouveaux riches”, local tycoons and criminals after publishing stories about them. (abac)

*Remarks of police and prosecution representatives:*

- Journalists often do not have the proper knowledge of criminal procedure and police Modus Operandi. Media often give more publicity to irrelevant rather than important information about police work. In many cases, legal terminology is misused (terms like criminal procedure, investigation, custody, arrest, etc.) and the jurisdiction of state authorities (Police, Prosecution, Pre-investigative judiciary and Court of Law) is often mixed in media reports. At some of the roundtables even journalists claimed that “in recent years police learned much more about journalism than journalists learned about police work.” The necessity for training and specializing of journalists covering crime and police work was stressed.
- Journalists should take care not to turn their media into a “school for criminals”. Sometimes articles/programs report criminal techniques and police work methodology in full detail.
- There are very few positive stories on police successes, risks and sacrifices police officers take while performing their duties.
- Police officers suggested that certain media organisations and journalists are under influence of local political and financial interests.

- The media should educate citizens and create a new model of reporting that would increase the overall level of safety and responsibility in local communities.
- Police representatives pointed out that they are aware that there are a number of obstacles to better communication with the media, as the structure of the police service is very centralized. From their point of view new 'Instructions for Informing' need to be adopted, procedures for communication defined, the system of approvals and distribution of information decentralized, more authority given to local police chiefs and the type of information that cannot be published defined. New systematization of work posts, foreseeing position of spokesperson in each police Secretariat is currently being prepared.
- Representatives of the prosecution stressed that only the court trial is (usually) open to public, so it is risky to reveal information related to different phases of criminal procedure. Interests of investigation, interests of suspected perpetrators and victims limit the information that can be given to the media. Prosecutors support the transparency of state authority's activities, when it does not jeopardize their work, but they also stress the personal and biased attitude that journalists have in some cases. Prosecutors believe it is unacceptable that the media sometimes report on a case in which the prosecution still have not pressed charges. Journalists are also usually very interested for the charges, but rarely follow court procedure until the verdict. If charges are dropped, the media rarely report on that and the person who was suspected and presented as a suspect in the public inevitably suffers damage to their reputation.

Besides the remarks during the roundtable discussions some examples of existing good practice in Secretariats that are rather successful in their media relations were mentioned. The importance of constant dialogue between the media and police was highlighted in the conclusion of all roundtables. Periodical meetings would contribute to the solving of the majority of misunderstandings between the media and police rather than waiting for "global" solutions. It would also influence the increase of mutual trust, respect and awareness of the advantages of efficient communication.

## 5. CONCLUSION

With stepping into transition, support of citizens, and public image is becoming more important for Serbian government and for the Ministry of Interior (police). As the process of transition is rather slow and variable, due to the political constellation, same is the case with comprehension of the importance of public opinion. Without radical shift in system of values it is very hard to make strategic moves, so improvements in public relations practice is partial and inconsistent. In this context MoI had some activities in improving relations with the public, especially mass media. Most ambitious and comprehensive one is the project launched in February 2005 together with OSCE mission aimed to improve police and media relations.

It is rather hard to estimate the overall effects of the project. It is sure that the project helped in making a diagnosis. Although

relations between the media and the police are much better than during the 1990's, they are still far from the ideal standards required by a democratic society. Mistrust is still present; the police are not sufficiently open and still in need of a strategy for their public relations and media policy. The present situation is marked by legacies from the past, including insufficient awareness of the necessity for co-operation and true partnership. Unevenness in the process of reform of the Ministry of Interior influences the lack of systemic solutions that would help improve communication between the media and the police and other linked stakeholders (e.g. community policing initiatives). This is best reflected in the centralized model of police structure, the absence of local and regional influence on police and safety related issues, the bureaucratic procedures and low capacity of ordinary police officers and local police chiefs in the decision-making process, partially caused by an overly hierarchical system inherited from previous times. It seems that the media and the police are still seen more as rivals or even enemies than partners in protecting the community and its democratic values. This certainly is a consequence of the slow pace of transition within Serbia. Getting to know each other better is the main precondition for the improvement of co-operation between the media and the police in the future.

Main problems in this field are:

- Lack of the strategy of police relation with media,
  - Vague operative procedures in everyday dealing with media,
  - Authority and responsibility of police officers on local and regional level,
  - Disorganization of unit for communication with the media,
  - Lack of technical equipment,
  - Imprecise regulations on secrecy of data,
  - Irresponsibility regarding accurate reporting,
  - Lack of educated journalists/ editors covering police work
  - Lack of police officers informed about the essence, character and aims of media
- Concrete results of the project are also a set of recommendations to the MoI:
- Compilation of the Strategy of Ministry of Interior of Republic of Serbia for relations with the media, formulating concrete media policy upon this Strategy, and promoting this documents in public
  - Compilation of Guidelines/ Instructions for media relations that will clearly define to authorities how to reveal information, criteria for withholding information, relevant rules and clear procedures of communication between media and police, foreseeing the need for decentralization that will contribute to faster information flow. It is also necessary for police to be more proactive, organize press conferences more frequently, to have less formalism, to produce faster and more complete public statements, ensure easier access to police chiefs, implementing the same practice in all Secretariats and to equally treat all media outlets.
  - Structuring of media relations service in district police units countrywide (posting a spokesperson in each Secretariat) and their equipping. Giving authority to police officers

on local level to provide media with initial information.

- Tailoring suitable education programs for police officers, police chiefs and media representatives.
- Spreading of best practices nationwide
- Putting additional effort in joint work of police and media outlets on citizen's education and increasing awareness and building a system of values regarding safety.
- Organizing various joint PR campaigns
- Organizing regional events to exchange experiences (if possible even wider than regional).

Some of these recommendations have already being implemented. After roundtable in Belgrade Ministry's Bureau for Media Co-operation drafted that Guidelines and submitted them to the OSCE Mission to SaM, media outlets and police Secretariat. Initial feedback is very positive. Seminars for journalists that are dealing with police and security issues have been tailored and realised on the initiative of the OSCE. The rest is still to be done, but it doesn't seem to be one of priorities of the MoI's top management.

For more radical and sustainable changes it is crucial that both the police and the media in Serbia have to adopt rather new system of values, and to learn a lot about how to play the new role they should have as key institutions of democratic society, constantly bearing in mind the enormous responsibility they have. A necessary prerequisite is a radical change in the way that the political leadership is managing the process of transition towards a modern and

open society based upon the rule of law and a respect for human rights.

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E-mail: zkesetovic@yahoo.com