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# **“MILITARY AND THE MEDIA”**

## **“BETWEEN THE WAR AND THE TRUTH”**

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Paper prepared for presentation at the Conference

### **Military and the Media**

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The common place of many analyses of Macedonian conflict in 2001 done by the ethnic Macedonians is that the truth about “our right cause” allegedly never appeared on the surface which according to them contributed enormously to its negative outcome. In my opinion, neither shorter the sentence, nor the less accurate one.

My main point of departure is that the Republic of Macedonia didn't lose the propaganda war as many politicians and journalists speculated during the conflict and after, blaming allegedly biased media reports of the foreign journalists for not so successful military actions. It is more honest to say that the Republic of Macedonia have not had at that time, thoroughly planned and consequently executed military propaganda. Without that basic precondition serious states are not even thinking about entering a small military campaign. You shouldn't lose what you had never started or exercised and irrespective of the fact what kind of efforts and activities we undertake that year, the end result is still an encouraging one.

Analyzing several events from 2001 all flaws of the so called security system of the state and lack of experienced people regarding the needed military campaign will appear in a self - explanatory manner.

Paradoxically, but true, the very war was “discovered” by the media. One television crew was detained for an hour by an unknown group which at that time still didn't call itself NLA. The first reaction by the Interior Ministry was that the whole event was fabricated by the television station concerned, due to the need to increase the number of viewers, which was the indicator that the competent organs instead to be in a good shape for the incoming conflict , were caught by surprise by the outburst of violence.

The Republic of Macedonia doesn't have ever, in a formal way adopted media strategy for joining NATO or the European Union. Nowadays, we are organizing ourselves to draft and propose a National Security Strategy and Defense Strategy. So, it is obvious that if we lack the basic documents of this kind in the peaceful times, even more we will be confused trying to find and enforce the non-existent public relations propaganda in a tense periods.

Starting from this basic set of things, what was our concrete performance during the conflict concerning the daily briefings and press conferences at the governmental press centre ? Short and just answer will be: not so good and I personally have, at least, a few solid reasons to support mixed feelings which followed our frequent appearances on the screens.

From my point of view, as a spokesperson of the Ministry of Internal affairs at that time, the task was a difficult one: during my ten years in the Ministry, there was one instruction signed by the Minister which stipulated that nobody is authorized to speak about the activities of the ministry , with the exception of the Minister or the person authorized by him. Simply that. This means that there was no established public information office and the adequately developed structure throughout the municipal departments. The information gathering went on the whole territory, but that was not the case with the dissemination of it. So, for the various data related to the different security events only one person was in charge to receive and to deliver them to the public and it was quite understandable that he or she was simply not physically able to cover all activities and measures taken by the agents of the ministry. During the Kosovo air campaign in 1999 and conflict on our soil two years later my working day lasted 15 hours and again, the job was only

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partially done. Therefore, the issue of the day is to decentralize as soon as possible public relations sphere in the Ministry and to authorize a few employees in every larger police department in the country for informing the citizens about this very important sphere of public interest. Today you cannot see anybody from the local police station who is standing in front of the camera and spelling out the basic facts about the most ordinary case of robbery or stolen vehicle that just happened somewhere in Macedonia.

My colleagues from the Defense Ministry and the Government, at the time encountered similar problems simple because the concept of modern day PR is not working in this country.

Two basic tenets of information wars of today: speed and accuracy were very often out of our reach due to the unproductive centralization of information and un-coordination on the highest political level in the Government which has its direct consequences on the field.

Therefore, the three of us, from times to times, presented outdated or inaccurate facts and very frequently our press conferences were overrun by the events. Thus, producing publicly ( without the slightest intention), incomplete picture of the incidents , means de facto widely opening the door for alternative sources of dis(information) which started to feed people's minds with the unbelievable speculations and demagoguery speeches.

It was known fact that Macedonia does not have the concept or special unit for the propaganda war. However, it sounds really incredible that some of the leading authorities in the Ministry of Interior many times leaked to "their journalist" allegedly confidential stories or purely fabricated information which content has a huge impact in frightening the ordinary people and decreasing morality of would be recruits. Only an example: headline in a newspaper or on TV saying that "yesterday 400 terrorists illegally passed the border and are preparing the major attack on the capital" will speed up quite natural reaction and feeling of the people that it's a high time to leave the country. For those who are not familiar with the subject, just two short explanations: firstly, such a massive transfer of an extreme armed groups in only one day never happened in 2001 and later, and secondly it's impossible to raise credibility of a competent state organs with just informing about the border crossings not trying to prevent this illegal activities to happen, for what they are paid for. Covering in such a manner their personal irresponsibility and de facto incapability to lead respective departments and agencies these people contributed to the shockingly low percentage of recruits and reservists who joined the army and the police in various stages of the conflict.

Some of the journalists had known that some information which originated from the official organs are false, but regardless of that fact they disseminated them trying to increase the circulation rate or to reach more viewers. Within that mental boundaries probably they got the point , but unfortunately a very bad precedent was set up for the future according to which the money are more important then pride, dignity or human life.

The same devastating effect was produced when some operational plans and combat preparations were made public (for example in November 2001, the case of a mass grave near Neproshteno which led to the failed actions and even worse, to the loss of three human lives). Or the story of the Vejce massacre where eight soldiers and policemen were brutally killed has to be mention in order to illustrate the lack of morality and rationale behind behavior of some people, without pointing the finger at anybody. Namely, shortly

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after the massacre the slides from the autopsy of the killed were made public which is impossible to happen in an organized state with the functional propaganda strategy, and especially not in a period of investigation and preparation for counteraction.

Now, I would try to focus your attention, in my opinion, on the prime source for the wide spread confusion created during the conflict about what was going on and what were the main challenges and threats which lay ahead of the state and of the nation . Shortly: the notorious disagreement within the political leadership about the most effective military strategy to be applied and the un-coordination between two main components of our security forces: army and the police which have had , apart from the main source , additional legislative and legal reasons for their poor mutual synchronization.

To repeat once more the matters already known : during the conflict the joint headquarters of the army and the police was not established and collecting and analyzing the information went separately which finally produced rather different security and threat assessments. Even soldiers and policemen were poorly informed about the current situation in their theater of operation. A regular way for increasing their moral standing and patriotism and spelling out the goals of the overall engagement were very often, by - passed. This state of interrupted lines of communications between the respective ministries produced one of the strangest and in the same time the most pitiful episodes in 2001 when one police unit was caught up in a trap in Radusa , near Skopje and asked for help by the army planes and helicopters using the standard channels of communications, but without avail. Then, on the national TV the appeal was publicly announced and shortly after it, allegedly, the much needed military help arrived.

At the very beginning of the conflict some foreign media experts came in Skopje in order to offer help to the Government, but their efforts were futile because we didn't have a clear military and media strategy and goals and were not able to deliver what they wanted from us: unison message by all competent organs involved. So, our daily press conferences unfortunately were in numerous cases wasting everybody's time, while our superiors pretended that we are calming the worrying people and offering good answers to their quite legitimate and natural questions and concerns. I do not share that opinion.

After the signing of the Framework Agreement the country's leadership priority was suppose to be to explain to the people, in a simplest way, what are the main points of that document which they stands for and political and security context which lead to this end. The Agreement from Ohrid is beyond doubt far away from the perfect document but, one thing is certain: it did have the power to stop the conflict in 2001. Unfortunately, due to the lack of the timely and proper media campaign the Framework Agreement was immediately publicly destroyed by the ethnic Macedonians and in absolute terms supported by the ethnic Albanians. This is pitiful due to the results of a survey done by foreigners in 2001 which shows that well over 90% of both Macedonians and Albanians are not able to name three most important provisions from the Agreement, so radically hatred or loved by them.

In an attempt to take realistic approach and to analyze impartially the whole set of issues and problems which have an impact on the subject, but, do not wear original Macedonian brand I have to mention the real and long standing divide between the military people and the media. The widely cited study of the US Army college from 1982 on the attitude of the military towards the media concluded: "In any future

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conflict, the overall attitude of senior Army officers towards the media would be extremely negative. The majority of officers don't trust the media to tell the truth". The study pointed out that the press and the armed forces are two completely different cultures and whereas the military stresses conformity, deference to authority, discipline, group loyalty and cohesion, the press is typically individualistic, independent, competitive and suspicious of authority.

This "natural" gap should be narrowed by undertaking mutual efforts on both sides to learn more about the specifics of the other and special procedures applied by these two totally different branches. To be clear: it is not acceptable military maneuvers or serious military actions of the Army to be followed and reported by absolute beginners or journalists with an insignificant experience in the field. It is obvious that only men and women who are physically and mentally fit might be successful war reporters. Unfortunately, Macedonian conflict was followed dominantly by the people who were not familiar with the subject and not always prepared to report without emotions. About the impact of the war: even some of my PR colleagues were emotionally shaken by the scenes they saw on the terrain and changed significantly their vocabulary on their return back. I got the friendly advice from the very beginning not to appear anywhere near to the battlefield and stick to it throughout the conflict. In my opinion, that helps me to be a bit more rational and focused during the press conferences.

Although the basic conclusion of the American study according to my humble working experience of twelve years spent within and with the services, couldn't be challenged very easily, the behavior of our security forces towards the journalists in 2001, especially the foreign ones was at times openly hostile. They were faced with suspicions instead with the strategy. Without establishing so-called operational procedures and making them known in advance to the journalists, Macedonian security forces stopped and interrogated randomly members of the foreign press and even in some cases arrested them without obvious reasons. Bearing in mind unusually high number of cases of embarrassing domestic and foreign journalists on the places rather remotely from the known hot spots, it's a bit surprising for me that generally speaking we got an impartial and accurate reporting in the period from March to August in 2001.

The general atmosphere in Macedonia in 2001 was very inclined to accept stories widely circulated about the Grand Conspiracy forged against us with the hidden aim to destroy or at least to divide the country and simply to grant to the Albanians a half of the territory. A dozens of allegedly suspicious cases (Aracinovo, Sipkovic and others) were analyzed at length in the Macedonian press always spiced with incredible elements: American instructors trained and fight along with the NLA or NATO helicopters landed big quantities of weapons in a remote mountainous village, a known NLA stronghold and so on and so forth. Not insignificant percentage of ethnic Macedonians believed in these stories, while ethnic Albanians disagree en masse. Knowing the sources which disseminate afore mentioned disinformation I was more concerned about the general climate created and the spiritual state of the people who were pressed to believe in such a naïve, but in the same time very dangerous stories, then about the activities of the foreign services who were very active on our soil , two years ago. Even more damage was done upon our relationship with the collective security systems .Credibility and public image of NATO among ethnic

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Macedonians in 2001 was unbelievable low and despite their hard work and commitments in the past year and a half, it will take some time more to be repaired .

Here, briefly I would like to turn attention on the fact that our inactivity in the propaganda field was wisely used by the foreign services which forced the hostile propaganda to demoralize the population and to spread defeatism within the security forces in the critical stages of the conflict and among the citizens, especially at the moments when the peace agreement in Ohrid was taking its final shape. Beside the fact that domestic services missed the opportunity seriously to counter negative propaganda ,a very few experts from Ministry of Defense on the psychological propaganda were not engaged during the conflict to prepare some of the offensive actions of our military or at least to mitigate the disruptive effect of misinformation campaign.

Apart from the general specifics of virtually every armed conflict in the world Macedonian one has one more which put additional burden on the shoulders of the PR people. Namely, the Republic of Macedonia had and still has completely separate public and media - one for the Macedonian speakers, and one for the Albanians. Ethnic Albanians can read or at least skim through so- called Macedonian press, without checking out their willingness to do that, while ethnic Macedonians are not able to understand what is reported in the so called Albanian press and public, regardless of their eventual intention to do that. The end result is: two blocs of journalists conveying the views and messages of two separated ethnic communities each of which with different prejudices, preferred themes to listen and read and the truths to accept.

This factual situation was enormous burden for the spokespersons during the conflict, including myself. I have not the slightest intention to judge my achievements or to repeat what the verdicts of the people from various ethnic background were at the time about my job , but I remember that some of the politicians and security experts who appear publicly during the conflict draw very negative or very positive comments , depending only on the ethnicity of the commentator. In my opinion this way of perceiving the reality actually contributed to the deepening of the existing differences. The most simplest example: every successful action of the Macedonian army and police against the NLA was viewed differently by the halves of the journalistic camp: ethnic Macedonians praised it as a big step towards the final crack down on the terrorists, while on the other side ethnic Albanian journalists remain silent or comment about the allegedly excessive use of force by the military. Within this rigidly set pattern, every emotional reaction by the spokespersons was immediately qualified positively or negatively depending on the ethnicity of the people during the very same press conference. To be real: a few questions posed at the time for example the ones regarding the structure and activities of the special police unit “Lions” were not answered properly: Why it was ethnically pure? Why its members were honored with religious badges of only one faith if our intention was really to build ethnically mixed police structure or why they were positioned only in the villages inhabited by the ethnic Macedonians? The propaganda of the Ministry of Interior at the time didn't persuade the Albanians to trust this unit and to see its members as their defenders, also.

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This real and deeply rooted dividing line de facto prevented or obstructed the very idea of building and sustaining integral media strategy and campaign with the same basic messages for all citizens of the country. The empty space was used by the structures of the NLA which were de facto main producers of news and reports for the Albanian speaking media and in large parts for the foreign press. In the time of the conflict some of the local representatives of this then illegal armed structure gave more interviews and public statements for domestic and foreign media than the official press officers which certainly were not a positive indicator for the job done by the state.

The problems and challenges in Macedonia very often have ethnic prejudices in their background.

So, the existence of two actually ethnic halves of the public in Macedonia has the potential in the near future to undermine the implementation of the confidence – building measures from Annex C of the Framework Agreement because the process of reconciliation of the people from the various ethnic and religious backgrounds shouldn't be the effective one without having an integral approach and same messages towards all of them.

Let's reconsider the planned action by the state for collecting and destroying the pieces of weapons illegally possessed by the citizens. Without performing an excellent preparatory media campaign which will explain the reasons and goals of the very idea there is a danger that concrete activities of the relevant organs should be misperceived by the people as politically and ethnically biased.

The same might be with the case of the 19 people, 13 Macedonians and 6 Albanians, all of them citizens of Macedonia missing or kidnapped during the course of the conflict which needed further investigation by the competent departments. Regarding this case, absolutely ethnically balanced and careful step by step approach is necessary in order to shed the light on the destiny of those persons because the public is already oversensitive and sharply divided along the ethnic lines.

Considering the future activities of the state, especially in the formally affected regions, some lessons have to be learnt from the turbulent year of 2001 in order not to be repeated again.

From the standpoint of the media campaign one positive moment occurred during the last stage of the armed conflict when NATO troops arrived for the operation Essential Harvest. They immediately established a press office which started to work along well known professional standards and criteria virtually 24 hours a day. Due to the NATO soldiers and personal who were deployed in crises areas, they were well positioned throughout the region and plus have had connections with the leadership of NLA. All of that, generally speaking, enabled them to possess the critical information, to disseminate them cleverly and so to have a power to persuade both sides. They started to perform daily press conferences which simply pressed out two sides of the public in Macedonia by the accurate and impartial information, delivered in time.

The basic method of the police work should be community policing which means dealing with all citizens not from the position of the power over them using predominantly the repressive tools of its arsenal, but via regular contacts with the local leaders and ordinary citizens explaining their mission of protecting people's

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legitimate interests (physical integrity , private property etc) and not the interests of the current political nomenclature. Doing the things in this manner is not possible without informing all citizens in advance about the intentions of the state, by a timely and intelligent media campaign which will take an equal and just approach with respecting everybody's dignity. If the strategic goal is sustainable development of multiethnic police structure then it couldn't be done in a country with the media and the public sharply divided along the ethnic lines.

At the very end of my presentation I would like to add a few words about my personal experience of two wars in 1999 and 2001 I went through when besides my primary responsibility as a head of analytical and research department in the MIA, I was engaged in the PR. My professional and personal motto was to be permanently available to the journalists and demands of the public, always bearing in mind that I am a clerk paid by the state to be in the people's service. I established correct personal relationships and even trust with virtually every member of the media community from Macedonian and Albanian halves and understanding and verbal agreements reached among us on various occasions endured the hardships of the times we went through. My experience in working with the press, with rare exceptions, is truly a positive one, but to have a complete picture in mind, the other side has to be asked for comment, also.

Unfortunately, from the very beginning I discovered that one's personal engagement, unless systematically and continuously supported by the state doesn't mean a lot. This area shouldn't stay sidelined and forgotten by the state because the personal commitments and energy of the many dedicated people I know are not enough to fill the gaps the very state created. Apart from personal frustrations Macedonian experience of 2001 confirmed that this could be very dangerous for the viability of the state.

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