



Sarajevo National Library, 1992: Vedran Smailović, the cellist who never stopped playing for peace. Photo: Mikhail Evstafiev

# For peace's sake

## Serbian journalists go “on the war path” in Bosnia and Herzegovina

*“Let’s establish the facts once and for all and then start living like normal people, instead of having a situation every 50 years in which one generation has to rebuild what a previous generation has burned down and destroyed.”*

— Hatidža Mehmedović, one of thousands of women who lost their sons and husbands in the bloodbath in Srebrenica

**BY IVAN JOVANOVIĆ**

These resolute words were quoted in a powerful three-part series in October 2005, in *Politika*, a leading daily in Serbia and Montenegro. The in-depth reporting was by Dragan Vlahović, one of 14 Serbian journalists who had seized the opportunity offered by the OSCE Mission to Serbia and Montenegro to visit sites in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) that figured prominently during the war of 1992-1995.

The OSCE Mission had initiated the ground-breaking trip to enable journalists from Serbia to see with their own eyes how war crimes were being researched, investigated and tried in their neighbouring country.

The Sarajevo Media Centre set the stage for the visit with a screening of the provocative documentary, *Slijepa Pravda* (“Blind Justice”). Produced by two young Bosniacs,



it explores how war victims in BiH from different ethnic backgrounds perceive the work of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in meting out justice.

This was followed by a spirited discussion between the Serbian journalists and ten of their counterparts in BiH on the media's crucial role in reporting war crime-related issues.

At the State Court of BiH, which is responsible for trying the country's war-crime cases that are deemed sensitive, the group's conversation with Judge Meddžida Kreso, President of the Court, was the first of a series of golden opportunities to exchange views with leading authorities.

Marinko Jurčević, Chief State Prosecutor of BiH, reminded the journalists of their professional responsibility to help heal the wounds of war.

"Justice and reconciliation in our countries cannot be achieved by penal law alone," he said. "We in the judiciary, you in the media, and members of NGOs and religious communities — we must all work together to build a positive climate."

The next stop was the small Sarajevo office of the ICTY. The journalists were briefed on the Tribunal's strategy to complete its work by 2010, on the transfer of five cases from the ICTY to the domestic BiH court — involving 12 accused — and on the close interaction between the ICTY and the national judiciary.

#### CONFERRING DIGNITY

Mirsad Tokača, head of the War Crimes Research and Documentation Centre, a Bosnian NGO with a solid reputation, said that his institute's painstaking research was aimed at putting an end to the manipulation of statistics and at conferring dignity on — and putting a name to — every single victim.

When asked for hard facts relating to casualties, Mr. Tokača said preliminary statistics showed that of the more than 91,000 BiH citizens who perished, 69 per cent were Bosniacs, 25 per cent were Serbs, and 5 per cent were Croats.

A meeting with representatives of the Commissions for Missing Persons of the BiH Federation and Republika Srpska shed further light on the search for war victims, a painful task that continues to this day.

For many of the journalists, the mere fact of walking down the streets of Sarajevo was enough to fill them with a sense of awe of this multi-ethnic capital, still marked with so many scars of suffering and destruction.

Memorial cemetery in Potočari, 11 July 2005: Bosnian Muslims pray at the tenth-anniversary commemoration of the massacre in Srebrenica.



## Helping Serbia deal with its recent past

The 12 journalists who took part in the organized trip, from 25 to 28 October 2005, represented television broadcasters RTS, B92 and TV5 Niš; *NIN* weekly; *Politika*, *Večernje novosti*, *Glas javnosti* and *Kurir* dailies; and Tanjug, Beta, Fonet and ANEM news agencies.

The project was made possible with the financial support of the Embassy of the Netherlands in Belgrade and with the co-operation of the office of Serbia's War Crimes Prosecutor, whose spokesperson traveled with

the group. The OSCE Mission plans to organize a similar visit for Serbian journalists to Croatia in 2006.

The visits are part of the OSCE Mission's larger efforts to strengthen the capacities of Serbia's institutions to deal with the legacy of war crimes and to foster public discussion on the recent past. Other related Mission activities include monitoring trials, fostering inter-State co-operation, drafting legislation and mobilizing outreach campaigns.





OSCE MISSION TO SERBIA AND MONTENEGRO

Former army general Jovan Divjak guides Serb journalists around the city he defended.

One of the programme’s highlights was a special tour of wartime Sarajevo, guided by none other than controversial Sarajevo resident, former Serb general Jovan Divjak, who had been Deputy Chief of Staff of the Bosnian army during the war. Regarded as a hero by Sarajevo citizens and vilified as a traitor by many Bosnian Serbs, Mr. Divjak, now in his 70s, gave forthright answers to the endless stream of questions posed by the journalists.

The ex-general gave a running commentary on the sites made famous during the siege of Sarajevo: the front lines, the zones where the fiercest fighting took place, the sniper and shelling positions of the Bosnian Serb army, the sites where executions were carried out, and the secret tunnel under the Sarajevo airport that served as the only escape route from the beleaguered city.

The border-town of Bratunac, near Srebrenica, provided the group with a change of pace. The journalists were impressed with the work of “Women of Podrinje”, a small grass-roots NGO run by Bratunac residents Stanojka Avramović, a Bosnian Serb, and Zegneba Sarajlić, a Bosniac whose husband was killed by Serb forces. Both women have won international recognition for their passionate pleas for tolerance and for the return of refugees, regardless of ethnicity.

The journalists proceeded to the nearby town of Srebrenica, which has come to symbolize the whole horror of the Balkan wars. At the memorial centre and cemetery in Potočari, some 50,000 visitors had gathered on 11 July 2005 to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the massacre of 1995.

About a dozen Bosniac women who had



OSCE MISSION TO SERBIA AND MONTENEGRO

Edis Kolar shows journalists a map of Sarajevo under siege. He and his father turned their family house into a museum devoted to the tunnel that served as the city’s lifeline during the war.

lost sons, brothers, husbands and other male family members in the genocide shared their personal stories with the journalists. They led the group to the exact locations in the former United Nations base in Potočari where they had been inhumanely detained and separated from their families during the capture of Srebrenica by Bosnian Serb forces.

A harrowing account of atrocities committed against the Muslim population in 1992 was narrated to the journalists in the town of Čelopek, which straddles the border of Serbia and BiH at the Drina river. The spokesperson of Serbia’s War Crimes Prosecutor, Bruno Vekarić, told the group that the massacre was to be the focus of a trial set to take place in Belgrade in November [2005], to be monitored by the OSCE.

Not a single journalist came away unmoved from the four-day programme.

“Reporters covering war-crime trials should make a point of visiting the sites that played a role in the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, so that they are better able to reconstruct the mosaic of events,” said Gordana Petrović, a journalist with Radio Television of Serbia (RTS).

“No court document can ever serve as a substitute for the experience of being right there at the crime scenes, taking one’s own pictures, and speaking to victims, witnesses and officials involved in the quest for justice.”



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