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INTERNATIONAL PRESS CENTRE - A HIDDEN ETHER OF WAR REPORTING IN OSIJEK

ABSTRACT

With the escalation of war destruction in the area of Osijek, foreign journalists showed interest in the events in eastern Croatia. Due to the growing need to share information in foreign languages, *Glas Slavonije* hired several employees and announced competitions for associates at the International Press Centre. At first, it was called the Press Club and was located in the Hotel Osijek. After the shelling, the team moved to Osijek's Pothodnik with the task of holding and recording all daily press conferences and giving statements used to inform the domestic and foreign public. The specificity of the Underpass itself is that it is an atomic shelter that housed civilians who remained in Osijek but also refugees who did not have adequate accommodation. They witnessed the events in the Underpass and were the first with the information at the field.

The historical method will be used to show the context in which the city of Osijek operated at that time. Equally, an analysis of the content from available sources will be used. Also, six key actors who participated in the work of the International Press Centre in Osijek will be interviewed using the in-depth interview method.

Keywords: radio journalism, war reporting, media, communication.

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INTRODUCTION

With the escalation of war destruction in the area of the city of Osijek and the arrival of journalists from foreign newsrooms, the need to form an International Press Centre arose. The idea itself was born within the editorial office of *Glas Slavonije*, which has been visited by journalist teams from foreign media since June 1991. The Mayor of Osijek, Zlatko Kramarić, supported the initiative of several employees of *Glas Slavonije*, and a press club was formed in the mezzanine of the Hotel Osijek.

The Centre began operations in August 1991, and with the end of the conflict in June 1992, the Centre was disbanded. With the establishment of the Foreign Press Bureau at the Croatian Information Centre and the Ministry of Information, the Osijek International Press Centre enters their network but remains an independent Osijek project. All political, military and civilian officials and diplomats who visited the city of Osijek came to the International Press Centre, but Mayor Zlatko Kramarić introduced the practice of daily press conferences.

At that time, the media scene in Osijek was not extremely rich, so such an improvised studio is significant for showing the way of functioning of a kind of war reporting. It is important to note the role of Osijek in the defence of the Republic of Croatia, after the fall of Vukovar. Back then, Osijek was an extremely important political and military centre, on the front line of defence. After the shelling of the Hotel in September 1991, for security reasons, the Centre was moved to the Underpass, where it operated until 1 June 1992.

All the world's newsrooms that reported on the war in Eastern Croatia went through the Press Centre. The last days of war reports by Siniša Glavašević, from occupied Vukovar, were recorded by satellite phone in the premises of the Osijek International Press Centre. During its operation, the Press Centre held approximately 200 press conferences and 70 interviews with political and military officials who came to Eastern Croatia, which were recorded.

A certain phenomenon of the Homeland War, important enough to be spoken and written about, but rather unknown in the history of Osijek, is

the existence of the International Press Centre and its role in the war reporting of the war in Eastern Croatia. However, the Press Centre played a significant role in media - information activities and in channeling and transmitting necessary and true information about the defense of the Republic of Croatia.

The city of Osijek played a significant role in the defense of Eastern Croatia, and then the entire homeland. Osijek was and remained an *unconquered city*, and in addition to numerous battles fought on the ground, Osijek's International Press Centre was a pioneer in the Republic of Croatia, which served foreign journalists and fought for informing the domestic and foreign public through information and propaganda activities.

HISTORICAL CROSS-SECTION - ESTABLISHMENT OF THE INTERNATIONAL PRESS CENTRE OSIJEK

The International Press Centre in Osijek started operating on 7 August 1991 under the name "International Press Club of the *Glas Slavonije*", and its headquarters were in the Hotel Osijek. A similar press Centre started operating at the same time in Vinkovci, but when the need for it became the biggest, it stopped working, mainly due to human weaknesses (Runtić, 2011:499).

The Osijek Press Centre has introduced a 24-hour duty, practically from the very beginning, and almost thirty Osijek's volunteers worked in it. Very soon, this press centre became very popular among foreign journalists as they knew they could get quality and reliable information there as well as the services of translators and drivers. They even had the latest communication and computer equipment at their disposal. After the Hotel Osijek was attacked in a deliberate artillery attack on 14 September 1991, and the space of the Press Club was destroyed, a safer accommodation was found. Along with the address, the Club changed its name, as well, and became the "International Press Centre Osijek". For security reasons, the number of employees was reduced and they were Tatjana Mioković, Mirko Volarević, Sonja Vuković, Domagoj Šimić,

Igor Brkić, Tihomir Ravlić and Željko Jung (Runtić, 2011:499/500). Five foreign journalists from Spain, Bulgaria and Denmark were injured after the Hotel Osijek was hit. There would have been more victims if the journalists had not taken refuge in the shelters (slideshare.net, 2012; portal.braniteljski, 2016).

Although it was located in Osijek and its activities mostly covered the war on the Osijek battlefield, the IPC Osijek also played an important role in cooperation with the Croatian Radio Vukovar and the Vukovar defenders. Immediately after the establishment of the Osijek Press Centre, their journalists went to Vukovar with foreign journalists and TV crews. These departures were regular and the entrances to Vukovar took place along the Corn Road, and this was the case until the fall of the Marines on 1 October. Igor Brkić usually accompanied the journalists (Runtić, 2011: 500).

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND - FOREIGN PRESS BUREAU

The Foreign Press Bureau was founded in Zagreb in August of 1991 to facilitate journalist access to reliable information to report to the international public on the aggressive war waged against Croatia and later against Bosnia and Herzegovina. Initially, it had an office in Zagreb at the Ministry of Information, before moving to the Hotel Intercontinental, now the Westin, where the majority of foreign reporters found accommodation. Field offices were created at key locations along the zone of conflict in Croatia (Osijek, Vinkovci, Slavonski Brod, Split, Zadar, Dubrovnik, Imotski), and later in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Mostar, Međugorje, Tuzla, Vitez, Sarajevo, Kiseljak, Orašje). There was no existing infrastructure or a working system at the time, and the operation began from scratch. Initially, the work focused primarily on the translation of releases from the HINA news agency, quickly moving on to authored reports, documentation work, accompanying reporters to the front lines and specific translations (reports on key events), staging foreign press conferences and interviews. Later, one-

on-one work with reporters was introduced. The Bureau offered services to journalists reporting from the battlegrounds, visiting razed villages, collecting documentation, describing events, gathering eyewitness accounts and footage. In their work, the offices avoided the trap of cheap propaganda and documented only that which could be corroborated. They earned the respect of foreign reporters for their reliability and objectivity, which was and remained the chief asset of the FPB. Later, very good contacts and cooperation were achieved in part with the European Community observers, the UN peace forces, international war crimes investigators (the Bassiouni Commission and the Hague tribunal) and with many humanitarian and human rights protection organizations (matis.hr; 2016).

THE CONTEXT OF THE CREATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL PRESS CENTRE IN OSIJEK

The International Press Centre, although independent, was attached to the Ministry of Information and the Croatian Information Centre. The priority job was to organise and record all press conferences as well as all information that were released to the public. The press conferences which took place in the Osijek's Underpass, below the central Square of Ante Starčević, and all guests who visited the city and came there, including Mayor Kramarić, the military and civilian authorities, will remember the setup. The part of the Underpass was a shelter for the citizens of the nearby streets that didn't have their basements, and they were a living audience, witnessing that time.

The core of the International Press Centre consisted of Mirko Volarević, Sonja Vuković, Tiho Ravlić, Tanja Mioković, Domagoj Jung and Domagoj Šimić. Their task was, in those official times, to record the press conferences that took place in Osijek and to archive them in the archives of the Croatian Information Centre. At that time, there were only cassettes on which the sounds from the press conferences were recorded, because those times were completely different, technologically speaking. The International Press Centre

organised the work according to the time those events were taking place in the city, and in the two months starting with the fall of Vukovar and ending with the Vatican recognition of Croatia, 78 press conferences were recorded.

Searching for the truth, that is, recording it, a Dutch journalist in the Osijek Press Centre said that the job of Croatian journalists was the same as the job of members of the Croatian National Guard. Equally dangerous and equally important (Topić, Špišić, 1992: 126, Mihaljević, 2017: 28).

RESEARCH GOALS AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The International Press Centre in Osijek is a phenomenon that requires detailed research precisely because there are not many documents dealing with this practice during the Homeland War, neither at the national nor the local level.

Using a historical method, based on various documents and evidence in the form of in-depth interviews with key actors of the time, we will examine what happened in the past and how and why it happened. We will present the chronology, development and cause-and-effect relationships that led to the establishment of the International Press Centre and the circumstances in which the besieged Osijek functioned.

This paper aims to determine the circumstances of the need for the establishment of such a press Centre and the importance of the media - information struggle in the Homeland War. Correspondingly, the goal is to determine how much the information service organised in this way influenced the faster availability of information to foreign journalists and to what extent transparent communication influenced the information activities through foreign media.

The in-depth interview method will examine the six key actors who participated in the establishment of the International Press Centre. The sample of respondents who participated in the research is not representative, but the answers obtained for this research and the conclusions drawn from them may be indicative. Interviews were conducted from January to May 2020.

RESEARCH

The first respondent is Mirko Volarević who was the key person to launch the project according to other respondents. The respondent said that he had worked with his colleague Sonja Vuković in *Glas Slavonije*. "We were not in the newsroom, but a part of marketing and we had to come up with a new marketing concept for *Glas Slavonije*. As this was the beginning of the war, a rising number of journalists was coming to Osijek. The simplest thing was to send those people to us because we were those two who speak English. At first, it was interesting because some attractive names were coming, but over time, it became a burden for us through work. During one conversation, we agreed to create an unofficial place, a press club, where we could gather journalists. The idea was to invite volunteers to jump in as drivers, translators, and field guides. A problem with telephones was present at the time, which is probably hard to imagine from today's perspective, so they needed telephone services to be able to report to newsrooms. Young people who knew foreign languages responded to our calls. The Faculty of Economics equipped us with the first computers. The post office connected our telephone line, and other companies delivered food and drinks to us. We thus began to socialise informally with journalists, completely unaware of what was happening around us. The war was felt, but the worst was yet to come.

Considering that the Ante Starčević Square is also an atomic shelter, this location was proposed for safety reasons. We placed the Press Club at one of the shops in the Underpass, and Branimir Glavaš played a big role in it. The agreement was reached that Sonja Vuković, Tanja Mioković, Domagoj Šimić, Tiho Ravlić, Željko Jung and I would continue our work in the Press Club. The six of us were the ones that made up the core of the Press Club. Volunteers for translation and other logistics came to us when needed, but we were the backbone. We realised that the only way for us to fight and help in defending the city was to spread the truth about the horrors that were happening to us. None of us had experience with that kind of communication, and we were supposed to be an information service to the, then lea-

ding, world journalists like Christiane Amanpour from CNN or Martin Bell from the BBC. I don't think anyone who hasn't been through our club has found journalists in Croatia."

Furthermore, Sonja Vuković testified that at that time she had been the Head of Marketing at *Glas Slavonije*. "The first war events started and we realised that there was a great interest of foreign journalists who besieged the editorial office of *Glas Slavonije*. They came to ask what was going on, where they could go to film something or do a report. After a while, we realised that the situation wasn't feasible and we needed to provide them with some space where it could all happen together. Here I should definitely mention Josip Kelemen who was the editor-in-chief of *Glas Slavonije*. Somehow, the two of us started that idea and Mirko Volarević joined us. Mirko also worked in marketing as an assistant and was a member of the team. We started researching what we could do, and where we could do it, so we went to Mayor Kramarić, who gave us a letter, asking companies to support the Press Centre project. With this letter, we toured the companies of Osijek, and for me, it was a great discovery at the time. We visited a dozen companies and within a week we gathered everything we needed. We were given the mezzanine part of the Hotel Osijek, and it resembled a movie scene. We planned to create a space where journalists could come and look for information. The deadline to equip the Press Centre was one week, which meant that we would get complete equipment which included computers, fax machines, copiers, a refrigerator, etc. With the kitchen, we arranged free meals for journalists. Then, we published an ad in *Glas Slavonije*, looking for volunteers who were supposed to walk with foreign journalists around the field. The journalists themselves said that they had not received such a service anywhere in the world. Wherever they came, anywhere in the world, they had to pay separately for field guidance services, translation, accommodation, and food. Osijek provided absolutely everything for free. That was the standard we wanted to achieve and we waited all the time for them to announce the truth about the war in Osijek."

The testimony of Tanja Mioković says the following: "Working in the war press Centre be-

gan with translating, and I remember my colleague from high school and I were going to the *Glas Slavonije* editorial office at night. From that, the idea for the establishment of that press Centre was born, and since we could no longer be in the newsroom, my colleague Volarević started the realisation. The school did not start. Children were sent to various places to survive the war. Circumstances wanted me to stay in the Press Centre, working and helping with the arrival of foreign journalists. They needed someone who could contact them and understand their questions if they had any. Volarević played a big role there. The intention was to create a service for journalists that would be open and available 24 hours a day, so I decided to stay with them, too. The setting up of the Press Centre was easy, as there was a need for providing information to foreign journalists. The City gave us a very nice-looking glazed room in the Hotel Osijek. Journalists gladly stayed there, until the moment when the Hotel was hit in mid-September 1991, and it was no longer feasible to work there. Everything had to be reorganised and resolved on the fly when we moved to the Underpass under the Ante Starčević square.

IT support was provided by Tihomir Ravlić, who said that he had been an employee of the International Press Centre in Osijek in 1991-1992, and the adventure in the Press Centre had begun just after the attack on the city of Osijek in the summer of 1991. At the time, he had been a student of Electrical Engineering, just at the end of his studies. As he had mastered computers, he had decided to go to the Hotel Osijek on his initiative. *Glas Slavonije* was read to the journalists in the Press Centre and they were able to get information. The Centre was founded by *Glas Slavonije*. At that time, *Glas* had an associate Sonja Vuković who collaborated with Mirko Volarević, who she studied with at the Faculty of Economics in Osijek, and a colleague Željko Jung - the three of them were the heart of that press Centre. Gradually, they joined the others. Tatjana Mioković and Domagoj Šimić were also in the team.

Foreign correspondents have already started sending their teams to the field. The Press Centre was located in the Hotel Osijek. After the rocket attack on the Hotel, they realized that they could

not stay there anymore. At that moment, they decided to ask for help from the civilian authorities to place the Press Centre in another, more convenient and protected place, so they could receive journalists. They moved to the Underpass underneath the Ante Starčević Square, and it remained their location until the beginning of summer of 1992. In the Underpass, the majority of the work of the Press Centre continued. Everything that was happening and that was worth mentioning was happening there."

The penultimate respondent Željko Jung also confirmed the previous claims and said that the beginning of the Press Centre had been in *Glas Slavonije*, initiated by Sonja Vuković and Josip Kelemen accompanied by Mirko Volarević. "We started at the Hotel Osijek, and then, journalists from all over came to Osijek. Our Press Centre was well equipped, and we got all the equipment from abroad. She came successively. At that time, we had both a fax machine and a computer, and at one point, we also had a satellite phone. This satellite phone was a key tool in our communication with Vukovar. Mirko and I came out of the basement and stayed at the Hotel Osijek for a very short period. We carried that phone to the people of Vukovar and communicated with Siniša Glavašević daily.

In mid-September, when the Hotel was hit, we had to move out. It was a dreadful moment, and we said that those who lived would tell the tale. I think there were a few peaceful days during our relocation to the Underpass. We agreed that the Press Centre must continue working, and the Underpass was a logical location for us. The impact of the grenade on the Hotel Osijek was terrible, and we fled outside, through the garage. I don't remember which floor was hit, third or fourth. Despite the nice atmosphere in the Hotel, the situation forced us into the basement, where we worked until the end of the armed conflict. The space in the basement was emptied for us, and we transferred the equipment we had. We started with a minimum, and later, the equipment started coming. The city government allowed us to get all the necessary equipment and that was never questionable. At the very beginning, our press Centre was not called that, we were called 'PRESS CLUB', and later we were renamed to the Inter-

national Press Centre. We organised ourselves as the first such Centre in Croatia, with the great support of Mayor Kramarić. We started working in the summer of 1991. After a while, the Foreign Press Bureau was formed, and when they started working, they immediately contacted us, and our excellent cooperation with Zagreb began."

The last respondent is the sixth member of the team, Domagoj Šimić, who also confirmed the initial claims, and said that the head of the Press Centre had been Sonja Vuković, who had known him, and a couple of colleagues from high school. "She worked at *Glas Slavonije*, and immediately after her invitation, I came to the Hotel Osijek, to that glass part of the mezzanine. In the beginning, many people worked voluntarily on some preparations, materials, etc. It was a time when a few journalists were already showing interest in this area of ours. At that time, *Glas Slavonije* was organised very well, and through the professionalisation of management, volunteering became available even to those of us who had nothing to do with newspapers. Anyone who knew foreign languages, and was able to speak fluently and proficiently, could join the team. Tanja Mioković was also there, I went to high school with her, and we were of the same profession. None of the six of us (Tanja, Sonja, Tiho, Mirko, Željko, and I) were trained for this type of job, nor were we trained as journalists but during our work, our senses, and to a lesser extent knowledge, were the things that enabled us to know how to shape information and align with what was coming towards us. In the development of our Press Centre, the point was that people like our veterans, who were engaged in similar jobs and belonged to the Information and Propaganda Activity (IPD) of the Crisis Staff, came to us to the basement and were a great source of information."

DISCUSSION

The phenomenon of common content was lost through the dissemination of information through various communication platforms, but thirty years ago traditional media had a strong influence on the formation of public opinion and

through time and timely information had space to influence media content consumers.

Compared to today, when information has an overtone of information (Danesi, 153), i.e. it is adapted to commercial media content, the information is adapted to wider target groups in order to bring closer the nature of war events in the heart of Europe.

Although most of the war reporters at the time had no experience from the battlefield, the war in the Republic of Croatia was a platform for many to apply media theory in practice.

Following the above, we can say that the employees of the International Press Centre, despite their amateurism, did the job of collecting, processing and distributing information professionally. In the same way, the journalists themselves, although without experience from the battlefield, knew how to collect and send information without making it understandable to the general public.

What constitutes the limiting factor of this work is the passage of time. Furthermore, a lot of documentation has not yet been submitted to competent institutions. As a limitation, it is important to emphasize information that is not yet possible to disclose, for security reasons.

Despite a number of limitations, future research on the work of the International Press Centres may go into collecting memories to make future works valuable memorabilia on Homeland War phenomena. It is important to emphasize that it was important to win the information war in the traditional media, so the study of the International Press Centre makes a quality case study for future research.

CONCLUSION

Although a very important segment of information in the Homeland War, the International Press Centre in Osijek is an under-researched phenomenon. Only a few authors have commented on the existence of a press Centre on a couple of occasions, and this topic has not been thoroughly researched.

With this paper, the authors tried to show the way of informing and reporting, especially by foreign

news agencies. Moreover, the importance of the media-information battle was shown, in order to obtain another dimension of warfare during the first year of the Homeland War.

It is also important to note that the International Press Centre was the first such service established in the Republic of Croatia, but the existence of the Foreign Press Bureau, which was established shortly after Osijek but operated at the national level, is far better known. This only shows that the entire military and media activities in the area of Eastern Croatia have not been sufficiently scientifically or popularly researched. This leaves room for further research.

The six surveyed actors showed how young volunteers, in times of crisis, knew how to act responsibly and professionally and how to systematize a service that covered the largest news outlets and news agencies. Those six actors formed the core of the International Press Centre, and numerous domestic and foreign journalists, as well as political and military officials who used the service Centre in Osijek during the year of operation of the Press Centre, remain for further research.

The eastern battlefield was rich in events, especially in the first year of the defence of the homeland, so future research, in addition to Osijek, can cover Vukovar and Vinkovci, where the people who the respondents also collaborated with were.

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MEĐUNARODNI PRESS-CENTAR – SKRIVENI ETER RATNOGA IZVJEŠTAVANJA U OSIJEKU

SAŽETAK

Kada su eskalirala ratna razaranja na području Osijeka, strani novinari pokazali su interes za događanja u istočnoj Hrvatskoj. Zbog sve veće potrebe za dijeljenjem informacija na stranim jezicima *Glas Slavonije* zaposlio je nekoliko djelatnika i raspisao natječaje za suradnike u Međunarodnome press-centru. Isprva se zvao *Press-klub* i nalazio se u Hotelu *Osijek*, no nakon granatiranja ekipa se preselila u osječki *Pothodnik* radi održavanja i snimanja svih dnevnih konferencija za novinare kao i svih javno danih izjava kojima su informirali domaću i stranu javnost. Specifičnost samoga *Podvožnjaka* jest da je riječ o atomskome skloništu u kojemu su bili smješteni civili koji su ostali u Osijeku, ali i izbjeglice koje nisu imale adekvatan smještaj, pa su uživo svjedočili događanjima u *Podvožnjaku* i prvi se informirali o događanjima na terenu.

Za potrebe rada autori će povijesnom metodom prikazati kontekst u kojemu se tada nalazio i funkcionirao grad Osijek. Također, koristit će se analiza sadržaja iz dostupnih izvora, a metodom dubinskoga intervjua intervjuirat će se šest ključnih aktera koji su sudjelovali u radu Međunarodnoga press-centra u Osijeku.

Ključne riječi: radijsko novinarstvo, ratno izvještavanje, mediji, komunikacija.