

Journalism, political change and front-page design.

A case study of the Belgrade daily *Politika*

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The day the army tanks arrived at Teheran airport^[1], trying to stop the return of Iranian religious leader Ayattolah Khomeini from exile, the Serbian daily, *Politika*, published three front-page articles. At the top right, a story under the three-column heading ‘Believers are annoyed’ predicts that, although the airport closure might be a coup d’état attempt, Khomeini will no doubt return home; in the bottom part of the page, “Everything ready for ambassadorial meeting in Moputu” announces the upcoming Conference of the Non-Alignment Movement in Mozambique; and the third text, occupying the two top left columns, is an editorial entitled ‘Jubilee’, marking *Politika*’s 75th anniversary with observations on the paper’s own history. Two items of international news and a self-obsessed editorial on the front page: what does it reveal about the *Politika*’s editorial policy, about the standards of journalism, and about the links between journalism and political change in Serbia?

Well known for its stylistic steadiness, comprehensive reporting and a kind of conformist but refined caution, *Politika* is the paper that has played an important role in the development of the press in the region. The italic type of the editorial stresses its distinctive character, a quality that makes it suitable for an analysis of the relationship between journalism and political change: ‘There are older newspapers in the world but they have had continuity thanks to the stable, unchangeable social system, absence of revolution and radical social and political changes’ (January 25, 1979). This editorial was written on the eve of a new cycle of the Yugoslav ricochet. Since then, the long-serving communist leader Tito has died; the political tensions between the republics has exploded; the most brutal conflicts in Europe since the end of World War II have blown up; the country has bled; the neo-communist, Caesar-like ruler Slobodan Milosevic has taken power and been overthrown; a democratic government has been elected, and the Prime Minister assassinated ... The Balkans.

Rulers have come and gone in this troublesome region, but the daily *Politika* has stayed the course. Taking the central place on the news-stands in Belgrade, it has lasted longer than any other paper in the region. Founded in 1904 and still running, *Politika* has survived

four different political systems, two world wars, two Balkan wars, four Wars of Yugoslav Succession,² three forms of ownership and three forms of censorship.³ The question of its survival polarizes journalistic and academic circles in Belgrade. The competition claims Politika has always been close to the government, pleasing the rulers and compromising journalistic principles whenever new political orders were introduced. On the other hand, Politika and its journalists argue it has survived because it kept the highest standards of reporting while always staying in tune with the Serbian nation. Occasional professional slips, when political support overrode journalistic assignment to work in the public interest (like the paper's pro-Milosevic orientation in the nineties) were, Politika now claims, kept on the political pages, did not appear in the rest of the paper, and were exceptions rather than the rule. The question is: exceptions from what? What standards of journalism has the paper followed to endure these historical turmoils? How did the journalistic field resist external pressures and respond to the dramatic changes in the political environment? How did external shocks 'transform the relative "attraction" of the autonomous and heteronomous poles of the journalistic field'?⁴ What journalistic norms keep the autonomy of the journalistic field in a region with such a small capacity to articulate peaceful interactions between the fields, a region very well known for transparent and dramatic crashes of all norms in all fields of cultural production?

This essay focuses on the question of journalism and political change by looking at the content and layout of the newspaper's front pages. Two notions of journalistic professionalism are investigating: the 'form' and the 'norm'. The aim is to explore variations of the idea that 'journalists serve a public interest that transcends the interests of particular political parties, owners and social groups'.⁵ The representative sample for analysis consists of 91 front pages, namely that published on the day Politika was founded in 1904, and those of the 25th of January in each subsequent year through to 2004.⁶ The first research question,

² The term belongs to Michael Kennedy and refers to war in Slovenia, war in Croatia, war in Bosnia and war in Kosovo. See Kennedy M., *Cultural formations of post-communism: emancipation, transition, nation and war*, (Minneapolis, 2002).

³ Political systems: monarchy, communism, socialism and parliamentary democracy; three forms of ownership: private, public and stake holders; and censorship: semi-official (1915), official (1929), and self-censorship (in rigid communist times).

⁴ Benson, R. and Neveu E., *Bourdieu and the journalistic field*, (Cambridge, 2005) pp.5-6.

⁵ For more details on logic of journalism in Southern Europe see Hallin, D. and Papathana, S., 'Political Clientelism and the Media: Southern Europe and Latin America in Comparative Perspective', *Media, Culture and Society*, 24 (2002), pp.175-195.

⁶ The sample consists of 91 pages (not 101), because *Politika* was not published during the war years (1916-1919; 1942-1944); because there is no available copy from 1920; and in the 1950s the paper didn't appear on Tuesdays – therefore no copy on 25 January 1949 and 1955; It was 12 January till 1915, and 25 January from 1921 because the official calendar changed in the meantime.

the development of journalistic form, is addressed by using content analysis to identify various features of the front page. The second research question, the development of journalism norms in relation to the political change, is addressed by discourse analysis of editorials that have marked Politika's Anniversary Day. These texts discuss the history of the paper, the journalist's profession and the role of the press in society.

Assuming that the front page of a daily broadsheet newspaper simultaneously reflects the most important events of the previous day⁷ (representation of social reality) and reveals journalism's approach to those events⁸ (interpretation and construction of reality), the essay discusses the notion of journalistic field,⁹ and its capacity to develop a set of flexible tools to strengthen the paper's position in interactions with the political environment and to protect its autonomy, even in the cases of the most rigorous political control. This system, explained and understood as 'the rules of the game', defines the field in relation to the outside world. In democratic times the 'rules' are transparent, the expressions free and the organisation of the front page resembles an hierarchy of important events; in politically rigid times, the rules are reduced to set of codes, unwritten conventions that modify the front page to reflect the hierarchical importance not only of the events but of the agents of the events as well.

The investigation of journalistic form and journalistic norm in Politika, in a course of a century, reveals journalistic conventions that are 'affected to much greater degree by the overall political culture than by their relationship to political parties and politicians', as it is often presupposed.¹⁰ Unlike journalism studies of the Western (primarily American) press,¹¹ journalism in Eastern Europe subsists in an unknown zone, labelled as highly ideological¹² and suitable mainly for investigations of the ways news media represent and reinforce the power structures in times of crisis.¹³ The attempts to approach the news culture – different not

⁷ For more on the steady development front-page design in American press see: Barnhurst, K. and Nerone, J. 'Design Changes in U.S. Front Pages, 1885-1985, *Journalism Quarterly* 68 (1991), pp.796-804; Barnhurst, K., *Seeing the newspaper*, (New York, 1994).

⁸ For details on 'reading' the news discourse see Bell, A. and Garrett, P., eds., *Approaches to media discourse*, (Oxford,1998).

⁹ Bourdieu P. 'The Political Field, the Social Science Field, and the Journalistic Field' in Benson, R. and Neveu, E., eds., *Bourdieu and the journalistic field* (Cambridge, 2005) 29-48; Bourdieu, P., *On Television and Journalism*, (London, 1996).

¹⁰ Gross, P., 'Between Reality and Dream: Eastern European Media Transition, Transformation, Consolidation and Integration', *East European Politics and Societies*, 18(1), (2004) p.110.

¹¹ Sigal, L., *Reporters and Officials – The Organization and Politics of News Making*, (Lexington, 1973); Tuchman, G., *Making News: A Study of the Construction of Reality*, (New York, 1978); Gans, H. *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek and Time*, (New York, 1979); Hallin, D., *The 'Uncensored War': The Media and Vietnam*, (Berkeley, 1986); Schudson, M., *The Sociology of News*, (New York, 2003).

¹² See Lalic, L., *Three TV Years in Serbia: The First Year*, (Belgrade, 1995).

¹³ See Skopljanac B. N.et.al. (eds) *Mediji I rat* [The Media and War], (Belgrade 1999).

only from the most investigated Anglo-American news culture but also from the other continental European news cultures – are scarce and on the margin of academic discussions. Carey explains the case with ‘you cannot have journalism without democracy’, and argues that modern despotic societies, including the former Soviet Union, simulate journalism, keeping its form – news and editorials in newspapers, for example – but control its content from the outside: ‘The reason why all this activity that looks like journalism is something other than the real thing – why the term Soviet journalist was an oxymoron – is that journalism requires the institutions of democratic life either in fact or in aspiration’.¹⁴

It is this point of ‘aspiration to democratic life’ that deserves attention and helps to understand why the East European press appears as a model of ‘simulated’ journalism in modern autocratic societies. It is true that the authoritarian curtain in the second half of the twentieth century highly influenced the newspaper’s content, rightly triggering the question of whether any protocol of journalism existed, or if everything was simply an ideological composition of the news content. But what the investigation of Politika’s front page reveals, and what the vast majority of the journalists in the region readily confirm, is that the links to the universal principles of objectivity, accuracy, fairness and balance have never disappeared. What does change in hard and tense political times is the degree of their expression. This expression is strongly intertwined with a specific political context and a shared cultural experience that cannot easily be transferred from one political environment to another or from the Western to East European news culture.

The essay starts with an explanation of why the newspaper’s front page is most suitable for discussion about historical and cultural interactions between journalistic and political fields; it then moves to a brief introduction of the context of the study: the history of the daily Politika and the social and political milieu it has been operated in. Then the changes of journalistic form and expressions of journalistic norm are discussed, and the conclusion offers some general observations on the journalistic field’s response to an intrusive political reality.

The front page

Being the central feature of the newspaper’s design and the first to be noticed on the newsstand, the front page functions as a display that declares the truth about the previous day’s

¹⁴ Carey, J., ‘Where Journalism Education went wrong’, (Chicago, 1996) [September 18, 2005], [<http://www.mtsu.edu/~masscomm/seig96/carey/carey.htm>].

events. The front page depicts newsworthy parts of reality and presents them according to an imagined order of importance within a greater social context.¹⁵ It simultaneously reflects the selected reality and the mediation of that reality. Like a poster, it communicates the distinctiveness of a particular news outlet and announces its representational intentions. Along with the leader pages, it is subject to the most intense editorial scrutiny. The front page content is the editor-in-chief's domain; he or she decides what articles and visuals will be published and how they will be graphically composed. The most experienced graphic designer (art director) crafts the front page. The ritual preparation of the front page indicates how important it is to make an accurate and attractive offer of readings that depict reality and underline paper's identity.¹⁶

The complex set of objectives the front page has to fulfil makes it more resistant to typographical, layout and content experiments. Changes on the front page, the recognizable 'face' of the paper, are less likely than in the rest of the paper.¹⁷ Front pages require long and careful preparation and, in the East European context, changes, when introduced, usually signify a shift in criteria of news relevance related to wider social change, both real and desired. A change in front-page design, be it to the nameplate (masthead) the number of columns, the length of a headline or proportion of news and opinion, is a move towards altering either the newspaper's approach to reality or its own identity. The identity, a set of gradually developed visual and content characteristics, communicates the newspaper's character and its position in society. The same elegant black letters in *Politika's* nameplate have been used as a powerful model of the Cyrillic form for more than a century, symbolizing the development of civil society in the country. The *Politika's* nameplate connotes Serbian tradition, both the success and the failure to develop the public sphere in a dramatic century when public opinion has been more neglected than respected. The neat columns of the paper's layout, a reminder of earlier century printing standards of order and beauty, have changed their appearance only twice in a hundred years of history, indicating a reluctance to make graphical innovations when journalism is still struggling to define its norms and its own place

¹⁵ Meyer, P. 'The National vs. Local News Controversy', *Newspaper Research Journal*, 1 (1980), pp.3-9.

¹⁶ In the 1980s and 1990s all *Politika's* section editors were asked to select articles as 'candidates' for appearance on the front page; the editor-in-chief would make a selection of texts during the day and go to the art designer to start the creation of front page when layout of all other pages were finished. Although most of the editors would observe the preparation of the front page – at that time the layout was prepared manually – they rarely interrupted the two chief creators. The performance was ritual, included brief, but sharp comments on the reported events and the occasion was almost always accompanied by the freshly made coffee and celebrated with a glass of whisky at the end.

¹⁷ Barnhurst and Nerone, 'Design', p.6.

in social interactions.¹⁸ What constitutes the norms of journalism can be, of course, a matter of academic dispute.¹⁹ The proposed research examines journalism by approaching the ‘norm’ as a standard of either achieved or desired journalism practice that is clearly expressed in the anniversary texts. The articulation of such norms is visible through the processes, or forms, of ritual solidarity, cultural contact, institutional setting and political control.²⁰ In the Serbian context the articulation of norms is certainly encouraged, and occasionally governed, by all four forms.

Politika and the Serbian press

The Serbian press lagged considerably behind that of other European countries. The country was under Turkish occupation for almost five hundred years and only officially got its full independence in 1876 at the Berlin Congress. The beginnings of the periodical press date back to 1768, and the first newspaper was published in 1834.²¹ When founded, *Politika* was one of the 72 papers in print in Belgrade. Historical studies state that at the beginning of the twentieth century, only 21 per cent of people in Serbia were literate, a proportion that indicates the characteristics of the newspaper’s audience – the middle- and upper-class city elite – and its position in the society.²² It is said that a ‘readers’ revolution’ occurs when the ratio of literate and non-literate people moves to less than 1:3. In Germany, for example, it happened in 1870 and in Serbia almost a century later.²³

The emergence of *Politika*, the first modern civic-oriented daily, is related to a very specific political and historical situation.²⁴ The country was ‘still trembling from past upheavals, revolutions and conflicts, political and armed conflicts, state coups, and even

¹⁸ From four columns to five in 1930 and from five columns to six in 2003.

¹⁹ Across the world ‘there are important variations in the degree to which distinctively journalistic norms have evolved, the degree of consensus they enjoy among those who practice journalism, and their relative influence on news-making practices’ Hallin, D. and Mancini P., *Comparing Media Systems: Three models of Media and politics*, (Cambridge, 2004) p.35.

²⁰ Schudson 2001, p.149.

²¹ The first published periodical was *Slavensko-Serbski Magazin*, a magazine printed in Venice. The first newspaper published in Serbia, and not abroad, appeared in Kragujevac in 1834 – *Novine Srbske*. After the liberation, from 1871 to 1880, a total of 140 new periodicals were founded, and about 800 new newspapers and magazines were published in the last two decades of the 19th century.

²² Ekmečić, M., *Sivaranje Jugoslavije 1790-1917*, (Beograd, 1989), p.476.

²³ In 1904, 85 per cent of its citizens made their living from agriculture, it was a rural undeveloped country, 7 per cent worked in industry and services, 4 per cent in trade and 4 per cent in state administration and other professions.

²⁴ Matic, J. ‘Problems Facing Quality Press in Serbia’, (2004) in Spassov O. (ed) *Quality Press in Southeast Europe*, Sophia: SOEMZ.

executions of heads of state' and political insecurity had huge effects on the press.²⁵ Papers were either privately owned or in hands of fighting political parties. The process of the democratization of the country was painful at the beginning of the century, and the idea of establishing 'a new newspaper, independent and on equal distance from all parties, neutral and objective' attracted a group of progressive, Western European oriented intellectuals in Belgrade.²⁶ The most enthusiastic was Vladislav Ribnikar, a graduate from German and French universities, who left the job of Belgrade-based foreign correspondent to launch the new daily. Scholars noted the early distinctiveness of *Politika* as a paper that provided facts-based reporting and an impartial analytical approach to public life, the first one to introduce the European standards of modern journalism.²⁷ Along with simplicity of layout, a kind of graphic minimalism, *Politika*'s vigilant and luminous reporting style soon became the journalistic model for all of the press in the region.

Since its early days, *Politika* has demonstrated an ambition to influence public opinion and play a role in the democratization of Serbia by raising its voice in political disputes, in a manner of moderate advocacy. As a liberal-oriented daily, it developed considerable credibility in a century when the country was moving from one crisis to another. This is not the place to elaborate on twentieth-century Serbian history, but it is relevant to note that Serbia has changed its territory, population, political system, and name of the country it belongs to, borders, friends and enemies, more often than other countries change their elected governments. In 1908, when Austro-Hungary annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia led the first Balkan War against Austro-Hungary. It defeated first the Turks in 1912 and Bulgaria in 1913. The expansion of Serbian territory in the Balkan Wars antagonized Austria, and the assassination of the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand led to the outbreak of World War I in 1914. In 1918, Serbia became the leading force in the formation of the new state, the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. The South Slavic harmony was short-lived; the political tensions between three parts of the kingdom soon exploded. The state was renamed Yugoslavia in 1929, the same year when the King suspended the Parliament and introduced a dictatorship. The King was assassinated in 1934 and the Regency established. It lasted till 1941. During the World War II, the German army occupied and divided Yugoslavia. The country was liberated in 1945 and in 1946 Serbia became an autonomous republic within neo-

²⁵ Simic M., *Politika: 1904-1994*, (Beograd 1994) p. 7.

²⁶ First editorial 'The Task of Independent Press', *Politika*, 12 January 1904.

²⁷ Matic, 'Problems facing', p.1.

communist Yugoslavia. Tito died in 1980, and the tensions between different republics led to the four civil wars in 1990s.

Politika was a witness to and participant in these historic events.²⁸ The paper was not published during the world wars, a fact Politika often uses to stress its patriotic and national orientation. A long life in different political, economic, cultural and social conditions, the continuity and transparency in declaring principles of independence and objectivity and a stable and relatively wide network of foreign correspondents in the major world centres make this paper a good model for analysis of the development of front-page design as reflection of the relationship between journalism and political change.²⁹

The development of the front page design

To find out the links between journalism form and political change, without slipping into the anecdotal description of journalism mythology, I systematically counted all the features on the front page.³⁰ Each front page was coded for the numbers of items, illustrations, photographs, columns, words per page, and words in headlines, then for topics and countries the news originated from. It was clear from the beginning that it would not be easy to recognize a pattern. With such an interrupted history it is certainly difficult to identify a steady line of development. The hope was that some trends or indication of journalistic tools used to deal with the explosive reality still might appear. Indeed, the results of the content analysis of the front page signal three specific forms that journalism develops over time: in tense and insecure political conditions there are more politics on the front page, there are more items and the headlines are longer.³¹

The most obvious outcome of the frequent political turmoils is the absolute dominance of politics on the Politika's front page. Political struggle for power, chaos in international relations, wars, dictatorships, small-scale conflicts, resignations and assassinations are among

²⁸ The most important meeting of the Communist Party in 1941, when it was decided to lead the antifascist movement in World War II, was held in the house of *Politika's* owner and editor-in-chief, Vladimir Ribnikar. Ribnikar's involvement helped the reappearance of the paper after the war.

²⁹ On their return to the office, foreign correspondents would usually take senior editorial positions that gave them an opportunity to apply West European standards of journalism.

³⁰ I worked in *Politika* from 1978 till 1997, as a reporter, commentator, editor and foreign correspondent. Although this inside knowledge of *Politika's* journalism doxa helped me in the preparation of this paper, it also required the application of a strict methodology to reduce the possible influence of my own experience on the topic.

³¹ No visible pattern was found for the number of illustrations and photographs, number of columns, number of words per a page or the list of news-origin countries – although France and Italy being at the top indicates the region of interests and corresponds with the assumption about similarities between three media systems .

the most newsworthy events that easily feed hungry news outlets.³² **The supremacy of political topics over the economy, cultural and social issues, real-life events or interesting soft news, justifies Politika's name and illustrates the principal content of mass communication in Serbia.** There are 88 out of 91 front pages with 'political' articles. Only three issues did not feature political topics on the front page, and this was because the content was filled with Politika's celebration events.³³

Politika's front page reflects the most important events of the twentieth century: the sickness of Austria-Hungary ruler Franz Josef ('It is not the gossip but the truth [...] that Franjo Ferdinand is neither liked by the Palace nor the citizens, nor even the people he lives with'); the establishment of the International Court of Justice in the Hague ('The League of the Nations has finally succeeded in establishing the institution and has made ground for the peaceful resolution of international conflicts'); the complex situation in Germany in 1931; the details about Red Army's movement across river Odra in 1945; the death of Winston Churchill ('It was hard to say the pure truth about the man who became a national legend while he was still alive'); the end of the Vietnam War ('Following great expectations and an equally great number of disappointments, after even more deaths and devastations, and after five years of public and three and a half years of secret negotiations – the longest war in the century has ended, the Vietnam War').³⁴

The main design requirement, passed on from generation to generation as an aesthetic ideal and Politika's editorial motto, is the 'balance of the front page'. It is related both to the content and to the layout. The layout at the beginning of the century (1904–1915) has Victorian characteristics – the pages are filled with text, and banner-like headlines that give a general indication of the text topic (i.e. 'Foreign policy').³⁵ The first steps in parliamentary democracy are advocated by highly opinionated articles where politicians are given a timely reminder to inform the public about the foreign affairs: '[The Prime Minister] is indifferent to the protests that have been raised in all our press: he thinks that his party caucus is the only forum, apart from the National Assembly, where he has to perform; he leaves Serbian public

³² See Masterton, M., 'A Theory of News' in Breen, M., ed., *Journalism: Theory and Practice*, pp. 85-104.

³³ The list of the topics on *Politika's* front page over a century includes: politics 88, economy 26, *Politika's* anniversary 18, literature 12, soft news 11, incidents and weather 4, culture 3 and science 1. Pages without political topics were published in 1964, 1984 and 1989 – the 60th, 80th and 85th anniversaries of the paper.

³⁴ *Politika*, 12 January 1911, 25 January 1922, 25 January 1931, 25 January 1965, 25 January 1973. The text in 1931, signed by X.Y.Z certainly wouldn't pass today's standards of political correctness. It says for example: 'Even the Negro republic of Liberia has been accepted as a full member of the Geneva organisation, but the Reich is explicitly excluded'.

³⁵ Barnhurst, K. and Nerone, J., *The form*.

opinion uninformed about the most important affairs the country should and must know'.³⁶ The development of civil society and the journalistic requirement of balance of the front page are achieved at the beginning of the 20th century by combining 'soft' and 'hard' news. Articles labelled 'Women's world', 'Famous quotes' and 'A joke' can be found on the front pages as early as 1905 but they would disappear from the front page after the World War One. In the course of the century, proportion and balance were sought by careful placement of photos, by arranging the three- and two-column headlines at the top and at the centre of the page (1952, 1984), or by a mixture of horizontal and vertical layouts and texts that fit together like bricks in a wall (1977, 1980), a feature of modernist layout.

The number of items published on the front page shows that political tension usually brings more news items per page than relatively stable political situations.³⁷ When World War I began (1914), *Politika* published 10 articles on the front page. Five years earlier there had been only six items on the front page. When World War II started in Yugoslavia (1941), *Politika* published 14 items, whereas five years earlier there had been only five front-page articles. When a political experiment called 'the social self-management' was formally introduced (1953), there were nine articles on the front page. Five years earlier there had been five. The political turbulence of the 1990s started with nationalistic demonstrations across the country called 'happenings of the people'. That year (1988) *Politika* had 11 front-page stories, whereas five years earlier (at the time of the first mild inter-republic tensions) there had been eight.³⁸

What does 'more news in a time of crises' indicate? The first assumption is there are simply more dramatic, relevant events that deserve to be represented in the news. But journalism is not only a representation of reality; it is also an interpretation and construction, 'an arena of struggle between external and internal forces to valorise their forms of capital'.³⁹ The journalistic field capital is diverse and it includes newsmakers' right to make a sense of the world. A page with more items reflects journalism's strategy of dealing with information overload. More news items on the front page in times of crisis resembles on Victorian print or a 'dense jungle of news items', a feature that leaves the reader to draw a map of reality.⁴⁰ At

³⁶ *Politika*, 12 January 1907.

³⁷ Four important events, the beginning of the World War I, the beginning of World War II, the introduction of 'self-management' and 'people's revolution' were used to compare the number of articles published in those 'turbulent times' with the number of articles published five years earlier.

³⁸ The decade with the biggest number of stories is the '50s. This might reflect high insecurity (conflict with Russia, beginning of first steps in developing the Yugoslav model of socialism) but could be part of a wider world trend, namely a dramatic post-war approach to reality.

³⁹ Benson and Neveu, *Bourdieu*, p.4.

⁴⁰ Barnhurst and Nerone, 'Design', p.6.

the same time, more short stories on the same topic construct the atmosphere of a running news cycle where the right news is ‘still to come’. In 1941, for instance, only one topic features on the entire page – the upheaval in neighbouring Romania. However, the representation of these happenings is broken into 14 news stories in order to both cover and separate conflicting sources and indicate the event’s complexity. Statements from military and state officials, and ‘news’ broadcast on the Romanian national radio differ and the paper claims objectivity by breaking several versions of reality into several separate stories. The transparent intervention of journalism, in the form of interpretation, was expressed in a long headline that gives meaning to the event: ‘Although it is stated in Bucharest that the peace and order has been re-established in the whole country, other news from Romania shows the rebellion has not been put down’.

The fragmented front page in time of crisis, with the blocks of separate news on the same topic, anticipates the style of journalism in the 1980s: the 24-hour news bulletins and the ‘breaking news’ culture.⁴¹ The vivid front page gives the impression that news is unfolding from minute to minute, rather than the characteristic ‘from-day-to-day’ composition of this page in times of ‘ordinary’ news reporting. History would attest Politika’s strategy in 1941 was far-reaching. Two months later, on March 27, 1941 big demonstrations were to begin in Belgrade, and a week later German airplanes would drop bombs on the Serbian capital and announce the beginning of World War II.

The third content analysis finding connects the length of headlines and reality: the higher the political tension, the longer the headline. The longest headlines appear around wartime and at times when the country was under strong political pressure. One can find editorial insecurity in headlines with 20 or more words on the eve the World War II (‘There was a question in the Lower House yesterday about the break-up of diplomatic relations between the Great Britain and the Soviet Russia’) and in the year when the tensions between the Yugoslav communists and Stalin would generate Belgrade’s exclusion from the East European communist organisation: the headline is a quote from a political speech (‘The friendship and firm cooperation of people that live in this part of Europe is guaranteed by the fact that Soviet Union’s people and top politicians approach us with the feeling of honest friendship’).⁴² The headlines are much longer in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s than in other

⁴¹ Kovach, B. and Rosenstiel, T., *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect*, (New York, 2001).

⁴² *Politika*, 25 January 1940, 25 January 1948.

decades, and they are longer in 1991 (before the war in Croatia), 1993 (before the war in Bosnia), and in 1995/1996 (around the Dayton Peace Agreement that ended war in Bosnia).

The headlines published in times of political tenseness trade the statement about the meaning of reality for a flat and wordy table of contents. In hard political times, newspapers can be banned, their content censored or editors replaced. The way to stay on a news-stand is to find a tool that allows objective dissemination of news and prevents a possible costly mistake – not an easily achieved goal. The main three-column headline on the anniversary front page in 1948 reads: ‘The second congress of anti-fascist front of women in Yugoslavia’, while the two-column headline for international news, taken from the Russian official press agency TASS, says: ‘The Dutch aggressors want to transform Republic of Indonesia into marionette state’. The first sounds like an item on a political agenda, the second is reminiscent of a passionate ideological speech. Both headlines lead to the question of journalism and democracy, and real and simulated journalism: indeed, what journalistic form, what sign of journalism profession, makes a distinction between a political pamphlet in the form of news and the ‘real’ news item? What is it that tells the reader that the autonomy of the journalistic field, although highly reduced, still exists and can be trusted in the complex process of knowing and understanding reality?

The development of professional norms

The Serbian press belongs to ‘Mediterranean’ media system.⁴³ This model of the press developed in a region where liberal institutions, including capitalist industrialism and political democracy, appeared much later than in the rest of the Continent. Mediterranean journalism plays an active role in the development of the society and is always interested to expose ideas and not only facts. This journalistic model significantly differs from the Anglo-American type of journalism that privileges news over commentary. Serbian journalism, like Italian, Greek or for that matter French journalism, has always been ‘more a journalism of expression than journalism of observation’, giving the priority to the opinions over reports or reportage.⁴⁴ The success and longevity of Politika lies not in the fact that Politika tried to follow the political prudence of Anglo-American journalism (it did occasionally) but in the fact that the supported political cause (often enough, if not always) exceeded the limits set up by the individual

⁴³ Hallin, D. and Mancini, P., *Comparing Media Systems: Three models of Media and politics*, (Cambridge, 2004) p.90.

⁴⁴ Hallin and Mancini, *Comparing*, p.98.

political agents. The newspapers in Serbia flourished around the idea of being independent and above political parties, ‘objective, but not neutral’.⁴⁵ The newspaper progressed as a political and literary institution, with the majority of prominent intellectuals, writers, academics and artists publishing in *Politika* at some stage. The sense of journalistic elitism and political, social and cultural mission that newsmakers have carried in such an environment is summed up in one of the many sayings that constitute *Politika*’s professional mythology. It says: ‘Other papers pay authors to write for them, but when it comes to *Politika*, authors pay *Politika* to publish their work’.

How does it happen that papers like *Politika* switch from the professional commandments of objective and independent reportage into a pamphlet of news and spy-like codes of understanding between journalists and their readers, without being ever state-owned?⁴⁶ The front-page texts that mark *Politika*’s anniversary throughout the century make references to the role of the press and the paper’s mission and ambition to support the development of a modern and prosperous society. What varies over the century, as this analysis shows, is the definition of ‘modern and prosperous society’, and the political cause that leads to it. The promotion of political pluralism and compromise, evident in the 1920s, or the very strong endorsement of international cooperation in the 1960s and 1970s, is on the margin in the authoritarian times (early 1950s and 1990s) when editorials play at the eloquent reinforcement of the rigid governing ideology rather than the honest examination of the paper’s own role in its corroboration.

In a culture where political changes are so frequent and radical that they present a constant treat to the autonomy of the field, journalism has developed norms that have been dubbed ‘keeping a foot in both camps’.⁴⁷ This phrase, used for decades among *Politika*’s journalists, articulates the strategy of pleasing and teasing political authorities. It incorporates both the proofs of fidelity to the governing political cause, and the insistence on standards of accuracy, fairness, balance and objectivity in political reporting. The simultaneous expression of political compliancy and professional integrity has been hard. *Politika*’s front pages show how it might result in both reason and absurdity: a set of sensible reflections on journalism and the political context, and a set of schizophrenic attempts to obey the rules and not hurt the

⁴⁵ ‘A Century of *Politika*’, *Politika*, 25 January 2004.

⁴⁶ After the Second World War the publisher was People’s Front, a political association of socialist organisations, but the money never came from the budget. Two sources of income have been advertising and selling the paper. In the ’90s there were some Government-supported special arrangements in buying the paper needed for production, but officially the Government itself never provided the revenue. The lowest circulation in the ’90s was registered in 1996 when *Politika* attacked pro-democratic demonstrations in Belgrade.

⁴⁷ The expression in Serbian language is “sedenje na dve stolice” (sitting on two chairs).

newsmakers. What is constant here is the norm: the attempts to find a balance between the real and desired political and journalistic reality, characterizes all analysed texts in *Politika*, expanding the meaning of journalistic norms from the professional toolkit to the element of political culture. The tricks like ‘keeping a foot in both camps’ proved to be satisfactory and stretchy enough to accommodate radical and frequent political change – the tougher the politicians, the more words in anniversary editorials were dedicated to development of their political cause; the more liberal they were, the more words were used to explain *Politika*’s independence and cultural mission in the society.

In 1904, *Politika*’s first editorial cites Bismarck’s definition of an independent press that is tasked to ‘freely discuss all public issues, without anger or taking sides; to help the opposition by a justifiable critique of the government and protect the government from unjustified attacks from the opposition by being loyal and impartial; to hit left and right with the equal eagerness.’ The paper clarifies that the task will not be easy, and promises that it will ‘freely express its opinion, not from this or that party viewpoint, but from its own firm belief’.⁴⁸

This understanding of the press, as the voice that transcends political divisions in society, stayed embedded in many texts throughout the century. But the idea of increasing the power of public sphere, and conceptualising the role of citizens outside of the political parties, has been entwined with and influenced by official claims of what constitutes democratic culture. The journalistic definition of ‘democracy’ would therefore vary to accommodate and adjust to the present-day definition of democracy.

The arrival of communism after World War II, for example, would give the press, and the whole culture, a special task to ‘serve the interests of working class’, where the interests of the working class were, firmly and resolutely, defined by the Communist Party. *Politika*’s 50th birthday in 1954 is marked by three congratulatory telegrams written by high-ranking state officials and published on the front page. The paper is still reluctant to celebrate its own history, because the current political environment treated the past events, and any allusion to tradition, as dangerous bourgeois practice. To respond to the political demand to distinguish between desirable and non-desirable events, journalism developed a norm of making a distinction between ‘official’ news (telegrams received and published) and ‘hidden’ news (the anniversary will be marked by publishing official telegrams and nothing more than that). Still – one of the telegrams defines *Politika*’s assignment as to ‘successfully work on its big and

⁴⁸ *Politika*, 12 January 1904.

extremely responsible mission of correctly informing working people of our country about the events at home and abroad and of interpreting and expressing the interests of the working class'.⁴⁹

The 'correct' informing of the public, as East European journalists very well know, is a euphemism for the state control of the press, being formal or informal. Communist instruction to keep to the Party line would become Democles' sword over the press in decades to come. Journalism in Serbia, established a few decades earlier on the principles of a free and independent press, responded to this undemocratic change by building a system of norms to protect the remaining elements of professional integrity. It has already been said that it kept high standards of journalism in its foreign desk and non-political reporting. It also developed – and horrified Western observers – a system of codes between journalists and their readers, usually called 'writing between the lines'. This style of journalism, illogical and professionally absurd, was a mode of Politika's political reporting in decades of communist and socialist rule. When the political pressure was relatively weak – and 45 years of one-party system had its soft and hard phases – Politika played with distinctions between 'official' news (state and party statements) and 'real' news. For example, in 1964, Politika marked January 25 by providing a historical overview of its sixty years of publishing. The article, a 'real' interpretative news report, explains the paper's development, achievements and contribution to Serbia's modernisation. The other texts on the front page are the 'official' news, congratulatory telegrams received for the occasion. Among them, the most important 'news', headlined 'The President of Republic Tito honoured Politika', underlines Tito's words that Politika makes efforts to 'inform public objectively and to promote democracy'.⁵⁰

The move from 'correct' reporting (1950s) to 'objective' reporting (1960s) was acknowledged in the form of the paper's support to the shared political causes. It took two decades to get Tito's telegram for the anniversary of Politika, an event that stirred many frustrations among politically ambitious editors, and the paper 'celebrated' the occasion by printing the text in the largest possible font size. Politically, the big font illustrates the rise of Tito's personal cult; when it comes to journalism, this typographical tool communicates the dependence on the political elite, and connotes the paper's unconditional loyalty to the Leader. By glorifying the act of Tito's goodwill in congratulating Politika on its anniversary, the paper constructs both the event and the news. It is the reflection of Tito's personal cult and

⁴⁹ *Politika*, 25 January 1954.

⁵⁰ *Politika*, 25 January 1964.

paper's own contribution to the cult; what matters here is the Leader's interpretation of reality, not the reality itself.

The tougher the time, the faster journalism makes a bond with the politicians and surrenders to the governing political course. Here is an example from the 1970s: there was a political clash between hardliners and liberal communists in Serbia; the hardliners won in politics, the hardline journalists got the editorial power in *Politika*. The anniversary editorial in 1974, two years after the editor-in-chief was forced to resign for 'unacceptable promotion of liberal ideas', said the paper was 'ready to correct itself after the criticisms given by President Tito'. To correct itself means, in Serbian context, to simply forget professional integrity. Still, along with the acceptance of political slavery, goes the claim of journalistic autonomy: the editorial stresses how *Politika* 'cultivates modern, precise journalism style aiming to offer its readers timely and accurate information'.⁵¹

The words 'independence, 'freedom', 'neutrality', 'objectivity', 'accuracy' have been occasionally pushed to the margin of professional discourse, but they have never disappeared. Those norms are articulated as desired journalistic norms throughout the century, regardless of the political circumstances. Different contexts have modified the meaning, but the norms don't fade away completely. They follow the pattern of political development: real when the environment allows freedom of the press, and desired when the freedom of the press is suspended. The editorial published in 1979 states *Politika* is made and read 'by people who want and have a need to approach everyday life thoughtfully, people who carefully observe and reflect on the world around them, people who seek in-depth, more developed, more comprehensive information, interpretation and opinion'.⁵² The editorial published on the 1984 anniversary explains how journalism has become an act of social creativity and culture: 'The means of mass communication are the never-sleeping conscience of social action. Journalists are neither observers nor loners, but an unbreakable part of the society's efforts to make crucial breakthroughs.' And then, to please the political rulers: 'In the middle of the political scene they are responsible for behaving daily in accordance with fundamental socialistic and self-management rules'.

The same journalistic game, celebrating the profession and pleasing the rulers, would be played whenever the editors sensed a threat to the paper's autonomy. The studies of journalistic standards in Serbia show how this autonomy was kept in reports but not in commentaries and how the claim of being the 'conscience of social action' was used as a

⁵¹ *Politika*, 25 January 1974.

⁵² *Politika*, 25 January 1979.

cover-up for serving the interests of the governing party.⁵³ In the 1990s, the time of nationalistic hysteria led by Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic, the terms ‘socialism and self-management’ ran out of fashion and were replaced by a new social action adhesive – the ‘nation’.⁵⁴ At the beginning, there were still some attempts to keep a clean slate and accommodate the ruler. An editorial published in 1992, for example, mentions the paper’s circulation (in the 1990s, the socialist economy was replaced by a market economy), the multiparty system (introduced two years earlier), and Politika’s professional norms (‘no political party can have a place for transmission of their ideas’), culminating in a promise that ‘the paper cannot and will not blindly call for conflicts, divisions, bloodshed and crime and be indifferent towards suffering, particularly suffering of Serbian nation in intellectual setting it was founded’.⁵⁵ The pledge proved to be impossible to achieve. In an environment where the Milosevic government stirred conflicts, divisions, bloodshed and crime in the name of the ‘suffering of the nation’, the paper did not have a chance to resist the calls: it had to surrender its professional norms to the (anti) intellectual setting it operated within.

Concluding question: Does it still inform?

The analysis of the Politika’s front pages points to the links between journalism and frequent political change. When it comes to journalistic form, political turmoil brings more politics to the front page, loose hierarchy of importance and more fragmented articles; the longer headlines in tough times tend to stress the news media’s role of representing rather than interpreting the reported reality. In terms of the development of journalistic norms, Politika transparently expresses its ambition to influence public opinion but, in tough times, takes care to adjust this mission to a present-day definition of political goals.

The specific set of tools used by East European journalists to deal with political pressure – namely making a distinction between official and real news, writing between the lines or ‘keeping the foot in two camps’ – seeks to answer the question: Does the modification of form and norm in journalism affect the press’s ability to inform? And, if the logical answer is ‘yes’, to what extent does this happen? This essay shows how Politika developed its ethos of journalism on the ideals of civic sphere and journalistic autonomy, but under pressure made

⁵³ Rupar V., ‘Medijska priprema rata: patriotski ugovor s vascu’, [How Media Prepared for the war: The Patriotic Contract with the Government] *Novinarstvo*, [Journalism] (Belgrade, 1994).

⁵⁴ On sociolinguistic aspects of Yugoslav wars see Bugarski, R. ‘Language, Nationalism and war in Yugoslavia’, *International Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 151 (2001) pp. 69-87.

⁵⁵ *Politika*, 25 January 1992.

compromises to serve a political elite as well as public. The analysis of the front page, where politics dominate the content, reveals the modes of the relationship between journalism and politics but does not give adequate indications of the character of non-political reporting in the course of the same century; part of the answer to the question ‘how does it inform’ should come from the analysis of these sections as well. The first and the last editorials analysed here, in January 1904 and 2004, emphasise almost the same principles and definition of the role of the press in society: to promote dialogue, to support modernisation and to serve the public: ‘We keep the right to support some actors on a political scene and to criticize others but we refuse to serve anyone. Anyone – except the public. We think that only informed citizens are real participants in the democratic political process’.⁵⁶ *Politika* has been a commercial enterprise even in a socialist-run economy; therefore the answer to the question ‘how does it inform’ should be sought on the news-stands and among generations of faithful readers.⁵⁷ The century-long need to underline and stress the same task ‘to serve only the public’ indicates it might be the case that *Politika* is still talking about its own desired, rather than real, role in the society.

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⁵⁶ *Politika*, 25 January 2004.

⁵⁷ Readers might be extremely disappointed as it happened in December 1996 when they demonstrated and threw eggs at the *Politika* building; there was also a significant drop in circulation in Milosevic’s time but most of the readers eagerly came back when the editorial team changed.

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