**About censorship and self-censorship and how to regain them**

***By: Senad Avdić***

**Sergei Dovlatov** (1941-1990), one of the most prominent dissident writers from the former Soviet Union, after fleeing to the United States wrote the book *Compromise*, which is considered if not the best, then his most illustrative book for understanding the state and social context from which he escaped and the drama of individual subjugation within such an oppressive, unleashed, inhumane order. Prior to his arrival in the United States, Dovlatov lived in Estonia within the Soviet Union, and was a journalist in a local newspaper. The book *Compromise* contains thirteen of his newspaper articles from that period, dry and boring, and after each one the author writes a new story the way he wanted and intended to write those articles if that was possible in such a system, with such media and social freedoms.

In touching auto-ironic, yet entertaining storytelling, the author shows that self-censorship, or as he calls it "compromise", was not his professional and moral choice, the ketmanian cunning of the mind, but the only way and principle to (re) live and work within such an order where journalists and the media are not provided with the luxury of thinking freely with their heads and relaying events as they see them. The book *Compromise*, to conclude, shows that in the conditions of cruel and total communist control, it is not only journalists, public workers, artists who resorted to "self-censorship" - the whole system rested consensually and voluntarily on internal self-discipline, suppression of truth, suppression of opinion.

In his essay *Censorship / Self-censorship* (1985), **Danilo Kis** wrote that self-censorship "is invisible, but present, far from the eyes of the public, pushed into the most hidden realms of the spirit ... it does its job more efficiently than any censorship." Drawing a parallel between censorship and self-censorship, Kis writes that "both use the same means - threat, fear and blackmail - self-censorship conceals, or at least does not deny, the existence of coercion. The fight against censorship is public and dangerous, therefore heroic, while the fight against self-censorship is anonymous, lonely and without a witness, therefore, in the subject it evokes feelings of humiliation and shame over collaborationism."

The great writer Danilo Kis, himself a victim of dogmatic repression, persecution and humiliation, concludes that recourse to self-censorship by the writer creates his own double.

*"This dual writer succeeds in conceiving and compromising every and even the most moral person, the one that censorship has failed to break. Not wanting to admit its existence, self-censorship is the sister of lies, spiritual corruption“*, Kis wrote.

So, we have two great Eastern European and Slavic writers, Sergei Dovlatov and Danilo Kis (who knew each other well, in Kish's legacy, as *Sarajevske sveske* wrote in the past, a postcard was found in which Dovlatov apologizes to him and begs him to forgive him for insults on some literary meeting in Portugal!), both grown in single-party, communist regimes, who, at first glance, have different experiences and relationship with their own freedom and censorship as its negation, but, in fact, from different angles, speak about the same. About different paths to the same goal - winning artistic and human freedom. Dovlatov accepted the rules of the play of the repressive dogmatic order in which he grew up and lived, self-censorship as a "sister of lie" was his refuge, to make himself and that order later in the auto-ironic poetics absurd, ridiculous, corrupt. Kis opted for a second, harsher and more painful battle, which despised compromises and disgusted self-censorship, from which he emerged victorious, but with scars with which he could not live long.

**"Censorship has been following me like a shadow throughout my life"**, another literary classic, **Miroslav Krleza**, said in talks with **Predrag Matvejevic**. In three states and as many regimes, Krleza lived to a deep old age, without the shadow of censorship retreating, or at least diminished in inverse proportion to the growth of his literary fame and social reputation.

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With the global disappearance from the historical scene of the one-party communist order and its repressive control over human freedoms, including the right to think and write freely, has the monster of censorship been stored in the warehouse of history, has self-censorship in the brave new world lost its status, to quote Kis, of the "double" that drives a person into fear, humiliation and moral capitulation? Have new, more ideal boundaries of freedom been adopted in a public space made up of artistic and media productions? Or was it just a change in the system of values, the taboo hierarchy, where the untouchability of the values of a single order, such as the myth of a classless society, the working class authority, the cult of personality, was replaced by the new myths of liberal capitalism and the idols of the new world order, the value of capital, profit, utilitarianism. If it is true that with the destruction of the Iron Curtain and the utter triumph of default - capitalist, liberal values ​​that guarantee the widest range of freedoms, how come today are possible and vital phenomena like the films of **Michael Moore**, or **Julian Assange** and all that cybernetic the empire called *Wikileaks*, as well as a whole host of other anti-establishment movements and "underground" networks that persistently, viciously point out the imperfection of the achieved, allegedly unquestionable "empire of freedom" within the "end of history", as announced by **Fukuyama** after the collapse of the communist order.

A news story from the end of last year about problems with a new movie of one director would not deserve more serious attention if his name was not **Michael Winterbottom**, one of the most engaged filmmakers of today, still known to the local audience here for his movie *Welcome to Sarajevo* made almost 25 years ago. After finishing the filming of his new movie *Greed* in which he problematized the exploitation of children and the inhumane conditions of their work in Southeast Asian factories, Winterbottom was censored and his film castrated by the production company *Sony*. Producers have asked him to drop parts of his movie in which little hero-workers for a horribly small amount of money make clothing for the global textile giant, Spanish firm *Zara*: *Sony* and *Zara*, global multimillionaire corporations, have serious joint ventures that would be seriously shuddered by the Winterbottom film. Within the existing liberal capitalist order, the market, that is, profit, plays the role that the state played in the etatist communist regimes: it regulates everything, including artistic and media freedoms, determines censorship and self-censorship. Maybe one day a filmmaker or other artist does the same auto-ironic project that Estonian writer Dovlatov did: make a collection of his (un)voluntary compromises and present what his film works might look like if he was allowed to create in absolute creative and intellectual freedom.

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If we agree with the largely unquestionable claim that the media is a mirror of society, then we should also agree with the conclusion that the degree of freedom in the media cannot be much different from the level of overall freedom. If we focus on the experience of Bosnia and Herzegovina, then one should seriously address the fact that the greatest degree of freedom of the media, including human, economic, business freedoms in general, was achieved in the period of several years before the entire society sank into one of the darkest episodes in its history - bloody, four-year war from 1992-1995.

The previous years, from the second half of the 1980s to the beginning of the war, were marked by an unexpected weakening of the control of one-party power over the media, the collapse of the censorship technology and the monstrosity of self-censorship, which was an indicator of the loss of power of the authority rather than the systematic and planned conquest of freedom by journalists and the media. By liberalizing in the economic sphere, encouraging private enterprise and abolishing the state monopoly over all segments, including the media, the space for launching private media projects has been opened. All those years we were learning on the go, for the first time we were faced with this kind of experience - challenges, we believed, of boundless media freedoms. Gradually, however, we were taught and accustomed to the fact that the private media were not the same as free, independent media, but that they were, at best, independent of everything other than their owners, financiers and their interests. We have found in the course that in the list of private priorities in the media their freedom, the abolition of censorship and self-censorship are usually not in the first place.

The first private media, print, and I believe in general, in Bosnia and Herzegovina was the weekly *Bosanski pogledi* (Bosnian Views), launched immediately after the first democratic elections in early 1991 by **Adil Zulfikarpasic**, a longtime emigrant, multimillionaire and liberal-civilian politician (at least thus he legitimized himself and required others to treat and respect him in the same way). In that newspaper (unfortunately for its employees), as an outside cooperative, I wrote a column that, after less than half a year, would cause the newspaper to be terminated, and journalists and other employees fired brutally and without any courteous procedure as expected from the owner with the experience of living in democratic conditions and in gentlemanly manners.

The occasion was my text in which I critically treated Zulfikarpasic's political partner at the time, **Radovan Karadzic**, anticipating that his politics and rhetoric were leading society and citizens in only one possible direction - war and unprecedented slaughter. In previous (socialist-self-governing) media practices and the production there were examples of newspaper bans, editorial changes, official and informal censors existed who were ejecting or "taming" texts and radio and television broadcasts, but this was a precedent, a unique example that a media has been abolished, liquidated, extinguished due to one, single article published in it.

Later, when somehow I managed to get an explanation from Zulfikarpasic for this arrogant act, from a rich-aristocratic heights he taught me a thing that today's journalists must always keep in mind: **"I am a democrat, but not so much as to allow my own newspaper to confronts and quarrels me with my political partner and ruins my interests."**

Some thirty years later, that is recently, an explanation came to me, which may not be completely accurate, about the reasons for the exclusion of one journalist and his column from the pages of the "most circulating and influential daily": in his article he let „through the fists" his bosses friend and business partner, whom he knew neither to be a friend, nor to be a partner. Had he known this, he would have resorted to a reliable ally - self-censorship, in which few today recognize anything self-degrading, professional, or morally profound. If you've already agreed to play in that circuit, then it's silly to look for a needle of ethics in a layer, not to mention a tower, of business interests...

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If we abstract public media services that are viewed and perceived by the authorities as any other "good" that has reflected any general interest, that is, they are used by a rule for private political, narrow-minded and clan needs, the media image in today's Bosnia and Herzegovina is an accurate reflection of today's society. It is a copy of the distribution of power relations, economic and political, after thirty years of transitional rampage, privatization tirany and ownership transformation following the model of a narrow circle of profiteering-mafia, interconnected groups.

Former state-owned media, which were transformed after the war into public service broadcasters under international scrutiny, are replaced by regime media which, mainly in the information and political segment, fulfill and satisfy the demands and interests of the ruling political or party castes. The only state media in BiH in the classical sense of the word, therefore, to promote and secure the interest of the country that founded them, are the ones with other countries standing behind them, such as Qatar (Al Jazeera), Turkey (Anadolia Agency, one weekly newspaper and one portal), and Russia (the Sputnik media group and the entire network of portals and similar forms of hybrid public relations).

Opposite them is the entire gallery of media projects with not very clear ownership and business legitimacy. Given that in the majority of cases behind these media projects are the caste of suspiciously enriched tycoons who, on the one hand, have no elementary experience in the media industry, and on the other, have extensive other businesses, it is advisable to ask what are their real, original interests in the media business. Especially when it is known that the viewer-reader market in this country is dwarfed and impoverished, which is why the marketing interest cannot be greater or more significant.

Such journalism which, on the one hand, serves as an ornament to its owners in their megalomaniacal greed, and on the other to (through these media) influence the political, economic processes associated with the ruling nationalist oligarchies, has deprived the media industry of some of its essential tasks, virtues and characteristics: engagement, professional curiosity, passion and ambition, free and exploratory questioning of the broadest field of social and political phenomena... Freedom and dignity, trade union security of journalists in such journalism, and the media as an instrument of wild, corporate capital are no different from the freedom of other employees with the same employers, cashiers in their malls and stores, masons on their buildings, or dealers in their drug business.

In such a depressing, disturbing picture of journalism here, every voice that something is forbidden, shortened, thrown out in a media, that someone is "slammed", that he is reprimanded, and even fired from his job, not only gives cause for protest, but is also an encouragement because it creates some kind of illusion, the illusion that the devil has not yet taken it all and that there are individuals who pull that devil of anti-journalism by its trail and do not allow it to feel like a definitive winner. The absence of "good old" censorship in the public space here is the ultimate proof that there is no need for it, it suggests that there has been a resignation of media workers from expanding the space of freedom, a kind of fatalistic peaceful capitulation. Self-censorship, as Kis would say, "spiritual corruption", has become even the most benign form of corruption in an order and society in which everything, including the media industry, is impregnated with real, devastating, ruthless corruption armor.