

INTERVIEW

SVETLANA LUKIC, AUTHOR OF THE RADIO PROGRAM "CLAPSYDRA"

LITTLE ISLAND OF RESISTANCE

Vera Ninic

I only believe that it is possible that certain people, in certain media, in some individual manner, are trying to preserve a little common sense.

The Balkans were always described as a zone of constant divisions and conflicts and, at the same time, of accentuated interdependence of its peoples. This Balkan "ethnic retort" formed a particular mentality, lifestyle, idea, political goals. Here everybody comes forward in the name of some grand, general goals. And here everybody follows one's own logic based on maximal demands – "everything or nothing", "either – or" (either it will be this way, or it will not be at all). In the political and spiritual space of biggest diversities in Europe differences are not tolerated, much less accepted. Each side is positioning itself with the right to get a lot, taking care that the other side does not get more. Huge lagging behind the development of other peoples in Europe, a low level of everyday life – these are an implicit victim in the name of these very same, higher and eternal aims.

This unwillingness to reach compromises and rational political arrangements in Serbia is almost part of the national character or the "soul of Serbia". However, the story on compromises, particularly in Serbia of today, has also its other side and different argumentation.

Svetlana Lukic, editor and hostess of Pescanik, a cult program of Radio B92, is one of those who are not inclined to compromises in their professional engagement.

- I do not think compromise is something bad in itself, on the contrary. However, we do have a problem because we do not live, say, in Denmark, but in Serbia of today. This means that we are living in a society and in a country in which everything is apt to being made relative, including even whether there was crime committed in Srebrenica at all, whether Ratko Mladic is a national hero or a war criminal, etc. For us in Pescanik this is an issue which can be neither established as an issue nor initiated as an issue because it carries in itself the intention to make relative a crime, a sever crime. Here we really do not make compromises.

But not all themes are so drastic.

- We deal mainly with issues which, in our view, are drastic and which ask for an answer, saying either yes or no! Here today everything is made relative and leveled – the past, the ideas, the ideologies, human acts. Our conviction – I speak of Svetlana Vukovic, the co-author and myself – is that we must constantly focus this as a problem. Maybe it is sometimes overreacting, maybe it does not correspond with the taste of many, but I think in such a society it is necessary that, from time to time, there do appear people who will say – this question cannot be asked because if you ask it, you make it legitimate. We think, for instance, that it is an illegitimate question (which, by the way, appears on state TV) whether Mladic is a hero or a war criminal. Then we all can discuss about everything, everything is suitable for different perspectives and solutions. In some times and on some themes there are no medium solutions. Simply, we must name the things, and it is our intention to do so: this is called a crime, and there is no talk about it or making things relative in this regard. We can start from there. Other crimes do not change anything in regard to the fact that this, too, is a crime. Or, is the Serbian Radical Party what it is and is the Socialist party of Serbia that what it is! There is no way that I can accept the standpoint – well, everybody was now in elections, these are all democratic parties. This is drawing a thick line, and we do not agree to that.

When you position yourself in such a Manichean manner, do you think it is wise to do so from the standpoint of your influence? According to most recent polls, more than 100 thousand people listen to Pescanik. Together with the co-author of Pescanik, Svetlana Vukovic, you made more than thousand interviews, and based on your program Pescanik is now present also in the form of books which are promoted throughout Serbia.

- No, from the beginning we did not have the intention to make a program for like-minded people. At first sight, this does seem to be the case. For a more accurate and more intelligent listener, however, there is a visible difference among those who talk for Pescanik. This program is to a great extent treated

as a talk between like-minded persons simply because there is no conversation in the program, nor does it instigate themes for which the two of us, as authors, think are appropriate to be discussed. In some cases there must be a Manichean approach.

According to polls, our program has over hundred thousand listeners in Serbia, and that in a situation when Radio B92 does not cover a good part of Serbia's territory. Fully aware and with full responsibility – and we talked frequently about that – I can say, that actually we do not care if a thousand or a hundred thousand people are listening to us. We do not pay much attention to this kind of popularity: why should everybody like us? We are not a political party to gain voters. Professionally, you make a decision on your editorial policies: if this has a big audience, good for you, if there is not a big audience, it is again good for you. You have some ethical and professional convictions which are such as they are and you cannot change them now because the majority has a different opinion. Why should the majority part of Serbia overcome the better one? They simply are not our target group. However, our target group is not at all that small. You have a big number of young, relatively educated people in Serbia who can be our potential listeners. If we succeed in this – excellent, we fulfilled our mission, if we do not, then something we did not do well.

Local control

I followed now this pre-election campaign in the local media in Novi Pazar. This is hard to believe! Sulejman Ugljanin is controlling everything, you cannot come to any media without seeing him, there are songs about him, there are spots about him. Then, when I was in Cacak and Jagodina – you know exactly who is controlling what. Here we have links among different people like Palma, Velja Ilic, Sulejman Ugljanin – they have divided the media in Serbia, they have fractured it and completely closed for the others. We are not aware how much this will influence the results of the next elections in Serbia.

During summer the team of Pescanik traveled throughout Serbia. You were in over 20 towns, met many people, met colleagues from local media. What is your opinion regarding the media situation in inland Serbia?

- We decided to travel throughout Serbia first of all because there are big parts of Serbia which Radio B92 does not reach. Also, the people often have neither the possibility nor the money to buy books, journals, newspapers. In my view, they live in some kind of media blockade similar to that in Milosevic's time. Do not forget that in many places in Serbia the power is held by coalitions of Milosevic's people and the right-wing forces, and they are holding the local media under strict control. We went exclusively upon invitation of our listeners and various non-governmental organizations. They have somehow self-organized in order to secure the halls for our talks: they borrowed money and rented the halls, someone would have a friend who has a small cinema hall, someone a friend who runs a coffee-house – it was really incredible how people were finding the way. They really wanted us to come and this is why it was so well organized and well visited, particularly in small places where you have the impression that even God has forgotten about them. Coming were people who wanted to be there, to hear again other people with whom they share some identical or similar value systems. Of course, there were also minor provocations on part of those with different standpoints, like broken locks and flat tires on the cars, comments and the like. But nothing serious.

Working in the school for journalists within ANEM during the last few years, I got to know a big number of colleagues from local radio-stations. I think that now the situation regarding the media in Serbia beyond Belgrade, from the point of censorship, self-censorship etc. is worse than six or seven years ago. We in Belgrade are not even aware of the almost tragic position of local media in Serbia. These are completely controlled and devastated media, impoverished to such an extent that they work only in times of pre-election campaigns or when the president is opening an object. In the meantime, while normal life is going on, they are completely languishing, many journalists left in search for a job which can secure their living. They were replaced by people who only come to do their work during the campaign, and then go away.

It is clear that the media in Serbia are involved in a network of various interests and needs of some mighty men. However, information is a market commodity like any other commodity.

Our situation regarding the media is so problematic, among others, also because a big number of media has started to go commercial in a completely wrong manner, trying to gain as many listeners or readers. Some people will by definition never support a certain type of program and whatever you do, whatever the extent to which you lower your standards, you cannot get them on your side. Those who were, say, a decade-long voting for Milosevic, who believe that the Serbs have no guilt, that they were only defending themselves, they will for sure never read, for instance Danas, whatever that Danas might do in order to attract them. They think this is a hostile daily and there can be no change in this regard.

Many did not find their way in the framework of the free market rules. This is like with the Democratic

Party, which is trying to get as many voters as possible: it must constantly look to the right, it must renounce some of its ideas, etc. I am very sorry because of this, but I think that neither these media nor these parties do get anything, since they have already been perceived by the majority as hostile, anti-Serb and similar nonsense. Whenever you say B92 – this is a hostile media and it is very unlikely that those who watch Pink will switch to B92 no matter what the latter does.

Recently we saw also this privatization of Novosti. The Government was exceptionally keen not to have Novosti come into wrong hands, from their point of view, of course. They need Novosti for various reasons, particularly now when the elections are approaching, and they did not want to let this out of their hands. Here you have people who have made money thanks to political trading and closeness to Milosevic, and now they are returning, buying Novosti and making deals with the new regime. In my view, this will only narrow the room for objective and independent information. Divac was not exactly reliable for them and now the most important thing is that Novosti remained in Serbian hands. And I should not even speak about the Broadcasting Agency. All this is very bad for the general situation regarding the media in Serbia. Of course, this is not the problem of Serbia only. Everywhere one can speak of influence and money when it comes to the media, both in the West and in transition countries. The problem is that in Serbia this acquired ridiculous proportions. I am not living under the conviction that there are independent media either in America or in England, for example, or anywhere. But here it has grown out of any proportions. The executive power, this you can see every day, is under no control, it has completely gone wild. In the West there are at least some institutions which limit this, here we have no institutions but there is the executive power personified in certain personalities. There is exact knowledge on who holds the money, who the roads, who is the boss in this or that field. If they now buy all the media, you will have no leverage of resistance to this plague. You have no institutions, no court, no police and now you do not have even the media. Beautiful, we shall live in ideal peace of unison mind, finally all the Serbs will unite.

Black press

There is also the so-called "yellow press", which is a wrong expression, because it is something different from what we have. Here it is more correct to say "black press", trash which comes out with deliberately published and well planned and directed disinformation. These are media of various agencies. Anyway, some did emerge only to disseminate lies and rumors. Here, then, a painful situation emerges. A certain number of serious media, trying to catch up with these spectacular and bombastic themes imposed by newspapers like Kurir, Press and the like, fall into this trap – they check things, they comment their writings, so that these are constantly one step forward. These so-called newspapers imposed themselves through the selection of dramatic themes, they threw the glove to serious media. Certainly, one of the reasons why the people read these newspapers is their low price, but then there is the question who is financing them. Also, when you read these newspapers it turns out that everybody is a thief, murderer, thug, everybody is corrupt and there is no difference at all among them. Then this poor and miserable people who read this have at least the illusion – well, I am poor and unsuccessful because I am honest. All those who succeeded in life in this or that manner are corrupt and rotten. This is some comfort and they feel morally more pure.

What is the possible and reasonable alternative to this situation?

- The money remained in the hands of Milosevic's people, and there is nothing to do about it. What had to be done was not done: here we come back to the subject of lustration. Nobody is naïve to believe that those who stole the money will now return it, but at least some limitations could have been erected: they cannot buy the media, they cannot found parties and the like. Lustration is a missed chance and when this was not done, we got what we have now. I do not see a solution, I think it will get even worse, and in not such a short period of time. I only do believe that it is possible that certain people in certain media, in some individual way, will try to keep that little common sense and critical stance, to speak where they can, to write where they can. As one of my interlocutors said in Pescanik, these are something like small kibbutzes, wherever you can you make a little island of resistance, hoping that one day all this will get linked and that the better Serbia will win.

The Serbian society is divided along many lines. It is usually said that there are two Serbias, and now there is emerging the idea on a third Serbia?

- This talk about third Serbia was launched by the actual ruling structure in Serbia. Namely, they would like to show that there is the first Serbia, which is Milosevic's, communist etc, that there is the second Serbia which is also extremist, traitorous, democratic-radical. It is interesting that as one of the paradigms of this Serbia they also take Pescanik. Hence, the solution is imposed – they are the third Serbia – the honest, parochial, tolerant and the like. They modestly offer themselves as a Serbia in which all Serbs, well, will multiply, belong to God and unite, return to their roots and tradition. And, as is known, these extremes are similar by definition, so that we come out to be the same as the radicals,

only with different titles. This is not done by accident, it is done with full awareness, counting with the inclination of the majority of people to compromise: do not quarrel, do not be extremists, we must come along, and the like.

However, some things cannot be put together and between them there is no common denominator. You cannot bond Serbia's not wanting to renounce in any way Milosevic's heritage and Serbia's simultaneously wanting to go to Europe. We would like both not to renounce anything, and to have the Europeans accept us, if possible together with Mladic. They do say this cannot be done, and we do think it can be done.

Unfortunately, what we have is the party structure from the Parliament and the Government fully copied down almost to every village football club. Not to speak of managerial boards – there you have copied the relation of powers also from the municipal assemblies. Wherever you clutch – the judiciary, economy, culture, sport – you find the same: the relation of political forces. Therefore, the broader society cannot have a calmer and healthier situation.

In Pescanik we have dealt quite a lot with the Church, I have in mind the Serb Orthodox Church. Here is why: on the Serbian political and social scene there is emerging a power which has growing influence, might, money. It imposes itself as an arbiter in many profane issues – from the one whether Serbia should be a republic or a monarchy, over whether or not sausages are to be eaten, or whether the theatrical performance in Novi Sad should be banned. When you react to this as a journalist and start asking questions – who is financing you, why is he financing you, etc. suddenly everybody jumps to the feet: do not touch at least the Church! And why, are they untouchable? It was demonstrated that although we have hardly got used to be in the position to ask questions pertaining to the work of the Government or the President – no questions can be asked referring to the Church. We in Pescanik wanted only to say that this, too, can be a theme, nothing more than that. The people do probably have the need to trust at least somebody and I think that in the Serbian society this is exactly the Church. The judiciary, too, is a frequent subject, certainly, because it is one of the most sensitive mechanisms of the society. This is a field which is first to fall under the interest of different people who hold power and who are not exactly inclined to the idea of an independent judiciary. We are living in a country which has no tradition of a democratic and legal state based upon laws and the rule of law. We have here generations of prosecutors, judges, lawyers who were formed in the times of communism and Milosevic and who have, even unconsciously, learnt to think in this way – that the judiciary is the extension of the authorities.

Nothing to be taken for granted

I also do not believe anything in regard to this Action plan. They can adopt hundreds of such plans, but when somebody is not speaking the truth the whole time, then you do not believe him when he is maybe telling the truth. From people who have such type of political options, who had spoke what they did – I do not take anything for granted. I do not blame Kostunica at all for not extraditing Ratko Mladic. Kostunica thinks and feels that Ratko Mladic is the protector of the Serb people and it is normal then not to extradite him. Mladic was Milosevic's general, Kostunica is continuing Milosevic's policy – hence, Mladic is Kostunica's general. Why then would he transfer his general to The Hague? I do not say that maybe, in order to remain in power, Kostunica will not extradite Ratko Mladic, but this will be completely contrary to his convictions and desires.

Do you think that here really nothing has changed in this regard?

- There were attempts, maybe something is changing anyway, but so clumsily and slowly that it is mainly not noticed at all. We have these two special courts and this is progress for Serbia. But look what is going on during this trial for the murder of Prime Minister Djindjic. This is such a farce that I am asking myself is it actually good at all that such a court exists as such! If your Minister of Justice is somebody who is from the very start obstructing and bringing into question this court, if the judges and prosecutors ran away – something serious is wrong here. And on the other hand, you as if have the institution. And this is our problem: we do have institutions, we do have laws, only nothing functions. As a citizen, it crosses my mind that maybe I would feel better if we did not have them at all, then at least I could have the illusion that we will get better when one day we establish institutions and pass the laws. Thus, we all believed that there is a trial for the murder of Prime Minister Djindjic and this is, actually, a farce, it was obstructed the whole time.

Here is also the court for war crimes, I see they are praised for their work, mainly side compliments. I do not doubt that there are people who are trying professionally and honestly to do their work. However, you hear, mainly among the lines, that they do not have, for instance, good assistants in the police, that they lack in people, money, etc. I do believe that they have no easy time. I fear that they are forced, in order to do something, to make compromises and that they are keeping silent on a lot of things. I would

like to hear one day one of them say – listen, I do not want to be any longer in this position, because I have no conditions to do my job.

In the biography written on the Internet site B92, with which Svetlana Lukic is working since 1994, it is written that the most famous projects with her signature are Fantom slobode, Putokaz and Peščanik.

Svetlana Lukić was the editor and hostess of a cult political program Niko kao ja, within the Second Program of Radio Belgrade, at the end of the eighties and beginning of the nineties. She was a war reporter from the territory of the former Yugoslavia. After being punished and suspended, the last time because she was reporting from Sarajevo, she was dismissed from Radio Belgrade. With journalists from entire former Yugoslavia in the winter 1993 she was sailing on a Radio Ship (project of the European Union), she reported on military operations Flash and Storm, she was reporting from Kosovo at the end of the nineties. She was awarded the prizes Jug Grizelj, Dušan Bogavac, Konstantin Obradović, and the City of Belgrade's Prize for Journalism.