

## MEDIA & CRIME

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INTERVIEW WITH A JOURNALIST

### I like to research underneath the surface

Filip Svarm *EDITOR-IN-CHIEF OF THE WEEKLY VREME, AUTHOR OF "THE UNIT"*

**Sometimes I really do ask myself – why am I doing all this, why does somebody else not deal with this? And then some new story grabs me again, and I have actually learnt to live with this. After a while you are aware of everything, but you worry less and less. My greatest concern is how to get a new story.**

Serbia is living with the burden of war crimes. Guilt is individual, but responsibility is common. Filip Svarm, journalist and Editor-in-Chief of the weekly Vreme belongs to those, few in number, who formulated this common responsibility in war crimes related texts as long ago as the beginning of the nineties.

He is author of the documentary film "Unit", produced by Vreme filma and B92. "The untold story of the Red Berets", says he. The main characters of this true drama, which is unfortunately based upon real events, are Milorad Ulemek Legija, Zvezdan Jovanovic, Jovica Stanisic, Franko Simatovic, Zeljko Raznatovic Arkan... The most notorious and most dangerous people in Serbia in the last decades.

This documentary is dealing with organized crime and war crimes in the territory of former Yugoslavia in a most comprehensive and multifaceted manner.

- First of all, this story has been part of the themes I have been writing about for fifteen years, since 1991. I have in mind the war in Croatia, in Bosnia, also in Kosovo, as well as related developments in Serbia. Hence, quite a pile of work has been accumulated. During all these years I found certain documents, I made certain acquaintances. Some former functionaries also gave some useful information; they are no longer in politics, and in the meantime they have decided to speak, for different reasons. I have used my acquaintances from the army of the Republic of Srpska, or the army of Srpska Krajina, who knew quite a lot about the Special Operations Unit. I must say that I also had contacts with people from the Unit itself, both from the Arkan's part and those belonging to the Red Berets. Here I would like to draw attention to one point. The murder of Prime-Minister Djindjic had a sobering effect upon some members of the unit – at least those who I have been talking to. They said – mind you, this is not exactly what we are, at least not all of us. I learnt a lot from them. A significant source of information on the activity of the Unit were also our Special Court for War Crimes, as well as The Hague Tribunal. I went carefully through all these minutes, records, I attended the trials – I used everything that was available. And gradually a mosaic emerged, composed of different parts from different sides. This is a huge amount of facts. We separated only what we could prove more or less. There are many things for which we have indications, but we could not be sure. This we left aside.

In the Unit you deal with the connection between organized crime and war crimes, you follow the money flow.

- From the very beginning it was a story about money. It started long ago, at the beginning of the nineties, with the smuggling of weapons. I would remind that Arkan was arrested at that time in Dvor na Uni because he smuggled a minor quantity of weaponry. Those were times when weapons were scarce and expensive, so that there was room for big profit. Later, as the war was unfolding, smuggling of deficient goods led to accumulation of huge wealth in Serbia. Only those who were close to Milosevic's regime could take part in this. Various clans emerged, and they fought to get control over the market. The biggest transactions were controlled by State Security headed by Jovica Stanisic. The business constituted the financial source of Milosevic's regime. In these times various businessmen had to pay racket to State Security, and the Unit was used, inter alia, as a factor to regulate this market. If somebody would not pay the racket, if somebody would take something not belonging to him, if somebody would have thought to be too powerful – the Unit was always there to put him in his proper place. Some of them reacted to the threat, some others had to be removed. In the war in Bosnia the Unit was used as a special unit with two tasks: they were the shock troop, which meant – they came to an area, took part in an action, this would last for a short while, and then they would leave. And they also trained local men and then left them to work alone. This was a minor part of their activities. The most important one was the control of local authorities – of Karadzic and the others, and control over local

business. Here politics cannot be separated from crime. In principle, all large-scale business was a criminal one. Business was possible only if racket was paid to Milosevic. What the Unit was doing at that time in Bosnia is best illustrated by what was going on in Fikret Abdic's so-called Autonomous Province Western Bosnia, from 1993 to 1995. Was it Jovica Stanisic who contacted Fikret Abdic, or was it the other way round, I did not manage to find out; anyway, Fikret Abdic declared his autonomous province in 1993. He immediately got full Milosevic's protection, performed by the Unit. Abdic was paying every bullet to the Unit, every grenade, every bag of flour, they were engaging for him people whom he was paying. Actually, this was the Unit's private state. This is where it began to make enormous profits. When they saw that Abdic cannot win over the V Corps headed by Dudakovic, the Unit began to trade also with Dudakovic. They were selling him weapons, food, cigarettes, oil. Huge wealth was gained there.

In Eastern Slavonia Arkan and his unit played a similar role of a factor controlling the entire business. There was absolutely nothing that Goran Hadzic would do without Arkan. This is where Arkan developed his own business – he was exporting oak woods, he was smuggling oil and cigarettes. Eastern Slavonia was practically Arkan's private state for four years. In the local jargon it was named Arkansas.

When in 1995 this came to an end all these people and all this money poured into Serbia. And numerous crime groups became active. This was part of the state structure. These people continued to act as before – they plunder, kill, blackmail. It is not true that State Security worked for the mafia, actually there was no border line between the State Security and the mafia – this was the same firm. Along with this State Security and this mafia came also Serbia's political establishment of that time. Serbia was a miserable, complicated state in which practically nobody in the regime could have clean hands because the entire system was deeply criminalized.

### **Horrors, anecdotes**

In these talks and contacts with members of the Unit I heard all sorts of things, from horrors to anecdotes. This was one very, very dangerous group of people, however, here, too, there was a lot of different Balkan messiness. For instance, there was prison discipline, although in the Red Berets it was also not much different. Alcohol was forbidden. At some point a few of them got drunk somewhere in Eastern Slavonia, and as a punishment the commander tied up one of the main culprits to an oak tree, took a pistol for firing teargas and was firing teargas at his feet the whole day long. I thought – what can the people who underwent such a drill and who are doing such things to each other do to someone who was identified as their enemy?

And exactly this is seen as the major weakness of the present fragile Serbian democracy – all these agencies remained practically untouched after Milosevic's fall. A recent report of the European Commission warns of the insufficient pace at which these agencies are reformed.

- I still think that a lot has changed. These changes are neither sufficiently rapid, nor of a quality that we would like to have, but after October 5th something crucial has changed. A system, Milosevic's system, did die anyway. Another system emerged, with all its weaknesses, straying, deficiencies. But October 6th and October 4th definitely were not the same. The agencies began to change, at least the top layers did. I have already said that the security agency is not a homogenous body and that there are different clans. Of course, there were also people connected with Karadzic, with Mladic, with Stanisic, with Milosevic, and they have remained there. But it is terribly important whether policy was conducted via the security agency or not. Zoran Djindjic did not conduct politics via the security agency and maybe this is why he lost his life. It is a fact that Zoran Djindjic was killed by the structure of state apparatus. Let me remind: Milorad Ulemek was a retired police colonel, Zvezdan Jovanovic was the deputy commander of the Unit, Maricic was also a police colonel. After March 12, the unit could not present itself in the public as some heroic and patriotic formation, as a fighter for Serbhood or whatever it was they were claiming to be. They became murderers. Since the Unit was the most important part of the Security Agency, in a way the state security itself came into public focus. Within the Agency a lot of things continue to exist, but its power and the way in which it is used are no longer like under Milosevic. All political circumstances have changed. Of course some people within the Agency would like to continue to do what they have been doing, but the room for their maneuver has simply shrunk. They continue to have a very big influence upon organized crime, but no longer generally as the Agency, but rather as individuals and certain groups. Within that they can sponsor some crime groups, but not as publicly as before. Now they must hide, and their field is reduced anyway. Of course, they all do protect their own interests, there is also some type of false solidarity, brotherhood in weaponry. They are ready to continue to serve this or that political interest, but generally speaking they are no longer the mainstream of politics as they used to be. Certainly, it must be insisted upon quicker reforms, there are a lot of things there, I only want to say it is not like "everything is the same, only he is gone".

What about the Military Information Agency?

- In my view, this agency is by far exaggerated. This is an Agency which has been marginalized during years and on a continuous basis. Let me remind: Milosevic had his first clash exactly with the Military Information Agency. The first thing Jovica Stanisic did in 1992 was to dismantle the military information agency. During entire Milosevic's rule the Military Information Agency was in a way in the service of State Security. It was not the military Head of Office who had a say, it was rather the Head of State Security. But each time the State Security, now Security Information Agency (BIA), is pressurized, they point the finger at the Military Information Agency. Also, after October 5th some leaders of DOS believed that the Agency which was loyal to Milosevic – and which they have overtaken like a turn-key plant – will now work in the same manner for them and, listening to these cadres from the State Security, they began to talk about what the Army has been doing to us. This was a table-tennis ball. Serbia's Army is undergoing serious crisis, it is constantly being reduced, they do not have enough money even for the salaries. In this nightmare in which nobody knows what exactly to expect, where a big number of military personnel must be retired – it is difficult to speak seriously about the big powers of the Military Information Agency.

Do you believe that such a Military Agency, thus weakened, was protecting Ratko Mladic for years?

- They did protect Ratko Mladic, partly also due to sentiments of camaraderie, but this is much more about political influences. There are many politicians here for which it is not convenient to have Ratko Mladic extradited to The Hague. For some persons this is not convenient simply for business reasons, because any association of Serbia with the European Union, hence a bigger market competition, would drive them out from business. They, let us say, are paying for Mladic's protection. There are also circles who have no interest in a politically stable Serbia, because they operate best in political backroom dealing and these suit them best.

There are probably also those who are afraid that in The Hague Mladic could speak about certain things? - I met Mladic around 1992-1993. I talked to him and everything that I know about him indicates that he is not a person that would be remorseful and would be ready to talk about others. He believes that he is, let us say, greater than Napoleon, greater than the state, the people. I do not believe that he would testify against anybody. His defense in The Hague would probably be no different from the way in which Milosevic was defending himself.

How do you comment the recent statements of Aco Tomic, until recently military security chief, that nobody had asked him to arrest Mladic, and of Rade Bulatovic, head of BIA, that the social and political situation is not suitable for this?

- In a way, they are releasing themselves from responsibility, which actually they do not bear. Nobody has to ask Aco Tomic to arrest Mladic, he is on the list of wanted persons. I can understand this statement only as washing hands. The same refers to Rade Bulatovic. It is not his role to evaluate the social-political situation. He got a clear order and he must fulfill this task of his.

The problem of Ratko Mladic is one of Serbia's key problems. There are institutions responsible for finding, detaining and extraditing Ratko Mladic to The Hague Tribunal. These are, first of all, the police, BIA, the military security agency. I will remind you that at the end of last year, at the end of winter, Prime-Minister Vojislav Kostunica gave a very binding statement in this regard. This deadline came and is over now. Then an Action Plan was made, and again there were no results. Cooling down the story about the Action Plan is of course connected with the elections. The problem is that the Action Plan lost credibility. Mladic has not been arrested for so many years, and the same people are leading these same agencies. As long as there are no resignations, or the leading persons in these agencies are not dismissed, we cannot trust that there is somebody truly working on the Action Plan. I do not think that the war crimes' prosecutor should resign, because it is only recently that he became the coordinator. But the Director of BIA has not been recently appointed to this post, and the Minister of Interior has been long in office.

You were writing a lot about war crimes, about the need for the society to identify criminals within its own ranks, and to face this evil. However, no society found it easy to cope with this problem. And it was usually imposed from the outside. Were it not for the allies which pressurized Germany after World War II, who knows what the outcome would have been.

- Adenauer used to say: the German Army is maybe defeated, but the German people is not. Sometimes in the fifties there were long-lasting debates in the German parliament on whether or not the Nuremberg trial was just a victors' trial, or was it a true trial. Our present years remind me to a certain extent to this period in Germany. A defeated, devastated country is trying to find a way to stand up again.

Maybe I am only too optimistic, but I really do believe that here the process of democratization of the country can no longer be stopped. I do believe that Serbia is not the best of countries, but she also is not the worst one. It is a sobering process, look how different things already are in comparison to what they looked like only a few years ago. The better the life in Serbia is going to be, the more normal the society

will become, the more politics will penetrate the institutions, the more will this sobering process of the society develop at a bigger pace. Reason would bring democracy.

## Team

Of course, the documentary series "The Unit" is a result of genuine team work. We were working on it for two years. Special tributes for its completion go to my friend, co-scriptwriter and editor Radoslav Cebic. Then, there is also the chief cameraman Zoran Stojcic, the executive producer Slaven Kranjc, as well as others from the team.

While we are waiting for this normalcy to come, the role of the media would be of critical importance. How can the Serbian media, which themselves are in a deep crisis, influence the formation of a healthier public opinion? How can the patient cure the diseased?

- Of course, the media cannot differ substantially from the society and the state. Like state, like media – that is an old rule. However, I think that at present the media, with all their weaknesses, are somewhat ahead from the society.

Look at the state media, their number is declining. It is known that every government in Serbia wants to have critical control over them. Editorial boards of these media are aware that their survival and development depend on the degree to which they are helpful to the executive branch of power. They transfer their mentality of loyalty to their journalists and so you get this washed, beautified journalism. On the other hand, in private media, people who have invested their money into them are also close to the governmental circles, or would at least like to be close to them. This is because here you can make money only if you are close to the authorities, if you are close to the budget, etc. So this mentality of loyalty dominates also many private media because the "boss" must not displease this or that politician, party, the Government. On the one side you have a deluge of most varying colorful editions, most different radio and TV broadcasts which deal only with, say, the showbiz and sport, and on the other the room for investigative journalism is completely narrowed. People who control the capital in the media have a big interest vested in politics because if they would cease to be close to politics their business would be in a much poorer position. This is the biggest problem in our media. Our journalism is essentially not so bad, I have in mind the journalists, the problem are the circumstances in which we work. Actually, we have a completely wild ambiance in which it is expected that the journalists act professionally. It is possible, but it is very difficult and requires very much personal effort, personal self-sacrifice, a lot of nerves, fights. However, I do believe that something will have to change here. First of all, regardless of everything, Serbia is moving forward, slowly, but she is certainly not going backwards. We are gradually getting nearer to those standards which exist in peaceful and organized societies. For us in the media this means that it is the owner who gave the money, there are some shareholders, but the editorial policy is independent and this will have to be respected. Now, too, there are a few editorial boards in which the owners respect the editorial independence. The market itself will also, sooner or later, regulate these relations. Already now the readers know whom to trust and whom not, or to be more precise - since nobody is to be fully trusted - whom they trust somewhat less.

We have come out from a media situation in which there was always a turbo-sensation. Every day a new sensation: wars, bombardments, sanctions, such huge instability that it seemed we shall have what to write about in the next 50 years. A number of journalists emerged here, I myself do also belong to this generation, for whom it is questionable whether or not they remained genuine professionals. Our lives were also to much toyed with. Now again we have constant affairs, which is more or less normal. In democratic societies, too, and particularly in transition societies, there are constantly new affairs. However, our affairs do not end in a normal way, where they belong, they are only dragged in the media and actually do not come to an end at all, they only emerge, whether real or invented. One of our big professional problems is that in Serbia there was not some natural alteration of generations in journalism, these flows were rather forcefully interrupted at the beginning of the nineties. To the degree to which the society will be recovering, the media, too, will be of a bigger quality. In such a social and state backwater in which people must constantly think of how to live to another day, how to pay their rents and how to buy the bare necessities – nobody is anymore interested in what they are doing. They have no time to read, not even to watch TV, nothing that consumes more than two or three minutes of their time.

To write so many years about war crimes, special and paramilitary units, the Army, the State Security – this is not a safe source of themes even in peaceful and organized states.

- I cannot deny that these are dangerous themes, however, I had no particular problems in this regard, apart from some threatening messages by phone or electronic ones. After many years in which I wrote about such things I think that it is crucial that you remain, in a way, if I may say so, neutral – i.e. that you do not in any way side with either of the streams in this world. This world is neither monolithic nor

uniform, as people often think. For instance, State Security, even that one around Jovica Stanisic, was also not some monolithic agency that functioned perfectly. There were different streams, different ideas, people and clans. They had conflicts over different interests, money control, control over people or over power. When you approach this realistically and impartially, not siding with anyone, you can get a quite realistic picture, and they usually do not see you as an immediate danger. For them, immediate danger comes first of all from somebody inside, someone among their own ranks.

A part of my own biography is interwoven in such a choice of themes. By origin I am from Croatia. I belong to one of those unfortunate generations which, exactly at the time when they were supposed to enter the world of grownups, at the age 23-24, encountered war devastations. Everything that had been surrounding me in my life was disappearing – the state in which I was living, the friends who suddenly were at war. A normal carrier that I was visualizing was hindered. At that time I did not even think of becoming a journalist. I wanted to explain to myself and others what did really happen. It is probable, though, that I also have some inclination to these morbid and dangerous themes, I like to explore beneath the surface.

Many journalists paid for this. Do you think about that?

Of course that such an uneasiness is there the whole time, of course that sometimes I also fear, but again I think that this is normal in such a kind of work. I also feel uneasy because of the responsibility which I have, because some people can stand trial for what I wrote, some can end up in jail, some can have inconveniences, and there are also their families. I stick to the rule to write only about what I can also prove. However, the feeling of responsibility exists first of all in regard to the victims, to their sufferings and pain. I sometimes really do ask myself – why am I doing all this, why does somebody else not deal with this? And then some new story grabs me again, and I have actually learnt to live with this. After a while you are aware of everything, but you worry less and less. My greatest concern is how to get a new story.

Reporter: **Vera Ninic**, Filmske novosti

### Sketches

You were dealing with the main actors of "The Unit" for many years, you were researching events in which they took part, and tried to understand what and why had actually happened. How do you see them today?

- Legija joined the Foreign Legion when he was eighteen and everything that he knew in life was connected to the army, the barracks, the war. He was always under somebody's command, at the beginning of the sergeant in the Foreign Legion, later Arkan, then Jovica Stanisic, Rade Markovic. After 2000 Legija suddenly found himself in the open: Arkan was dead, Stanisic and Frenki withdrew to the political underground, Rade Markovic was in jail, Milosevic in The Hague. He remained alone, without the necessary experience from the street. He was obsessed with Arkan, he wanted to be like Arkan a wealthy man, a mafia man, a husband, a father of the family, and someone who is "using" the politicians. He simply broke under the burden of his own ambitions.

Jovica Stanisic was a man from the apparatus, a mighty man from the shadow. Only in 1995, with the hostage "crisis" in Bosnia, the public saw for the first time the face of the head of State Security. He was very able, intelligent, prudent, he was looking after his own interests. With Milosevic he shared, among others, the inclination to work beyond institutions. He began to manage the State Security apart from institutions. He was one of the pillars of Milosevic's regime for eight full years. He left like a simple street cop – one day Milosevic only thanked him for his services.

Franko Simatovic was, similar to Stanisic, a man from the legal structures, but with one big difference: while Stanisic was a cold person, who engaged in high politics and was creating it, Simatovic was a man of adventure. He enjoyed guns, expensive cars, he enjoyed to feel the power and to command over such a dangerous Unit about which nobody knew. In a way he and Stanisic were supplementing each other. Stanisic was the brain, and Simatovic the action in State Security. It was well known that the two of them were not identical and that Stanisic has an incomparably bigger weight.

Arkan deserves a Hollywood movie. This is a man with an incredible biography. He entered the world of crime already when he was a minor, and he ended with a bullet in his head when he was fifty, which for a mafia man is quite an age. He was a paramilitary commander who did not make army service. He was married to the top folk star, he was president of a football club, but basically he was a mafia man, he had a mentality and spirit of a mafia man. He always knew his place, he did not go beyond what the State Security and Milosevic's regime declared to be allowed.

When we speak of the sketch for a portrait, you were writing quite a lot about Milan Babic.

- I said my origins were in Croatia. In these years I was writing a lot about Krajina and these events. I knew Babic. We had quite a number of interviews and it was professionally very challenging to follow his dramatic transformation. He was a valuable source of information on everything that was going on at that time, not only in Krajina. He was a man of extremes. There was hardly anybody who was more for Milosevic than he was, there was hardly a greater "hawk" than he, he made Krajina with Jovica Stanisic and Frenki, he was drawing those borders Karlovac-Karlobag-Virovitica, and then, when he stood against Milosevic in regard to Vance-Owen's plan and when he "put him on ice" – a dramatic turn occurred. Babic, like Milosevic, was a pronounced man of power. For both of them power was everything. Babic saw himself to be in Krajina like a small Milosevic. Milosevic recognized this and a conflict occurred. Actually, the personal odium between the two of them was always there, because they had recognized each other, they were similar. Up to the end of his life Babic was afraid of Jovica Stanisic and Frenki, he was convinced they would kill him. As a man of extremes, when he parted from some idea, he would become its most energetic adversary. In The Hague Tribunal he was with equal honesty condemning everything he was previously standing for. A typical Manichean figure.