

# Serbian Media's New Freedom

## Journalists struggle to resurrect free press

By Theresa Agovino  
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BELGRADE — After last week's ouster of Yugoslav dictator Slobodan Milosevic, Gordana Susa, a respected journalist who had been harassed by the old regime, quickly went to work revamping the widely despised state owned broadcasting company.

The success of the democratic revolution led by new President Vojislav Kostunica depends in significant part on whether Susa and others like her succeed in their mission.

Susa, president of the Serbian Association of Independent Journalists, who resigned from Radio Television Serbia (RTS) in 1991 to protest Milosevic's policies, was brought in by a "strike committee" to run the station's central news operation.

"RTS was the biggest evil in the country," said Susa. "We must change RTS."

The strike began a week ago Thursday, after some 100 employees stopped transmitting Milosevic's xenophobic propaganda, which had led to a decade of war and international isolation. They demanded that the autocrat accept defeat in the Sept. 24 presidential election.

By late afternoon, the people who wrote, produced and broadcast the government's viewpoint for the only network seen throughout the republic, fell silent.

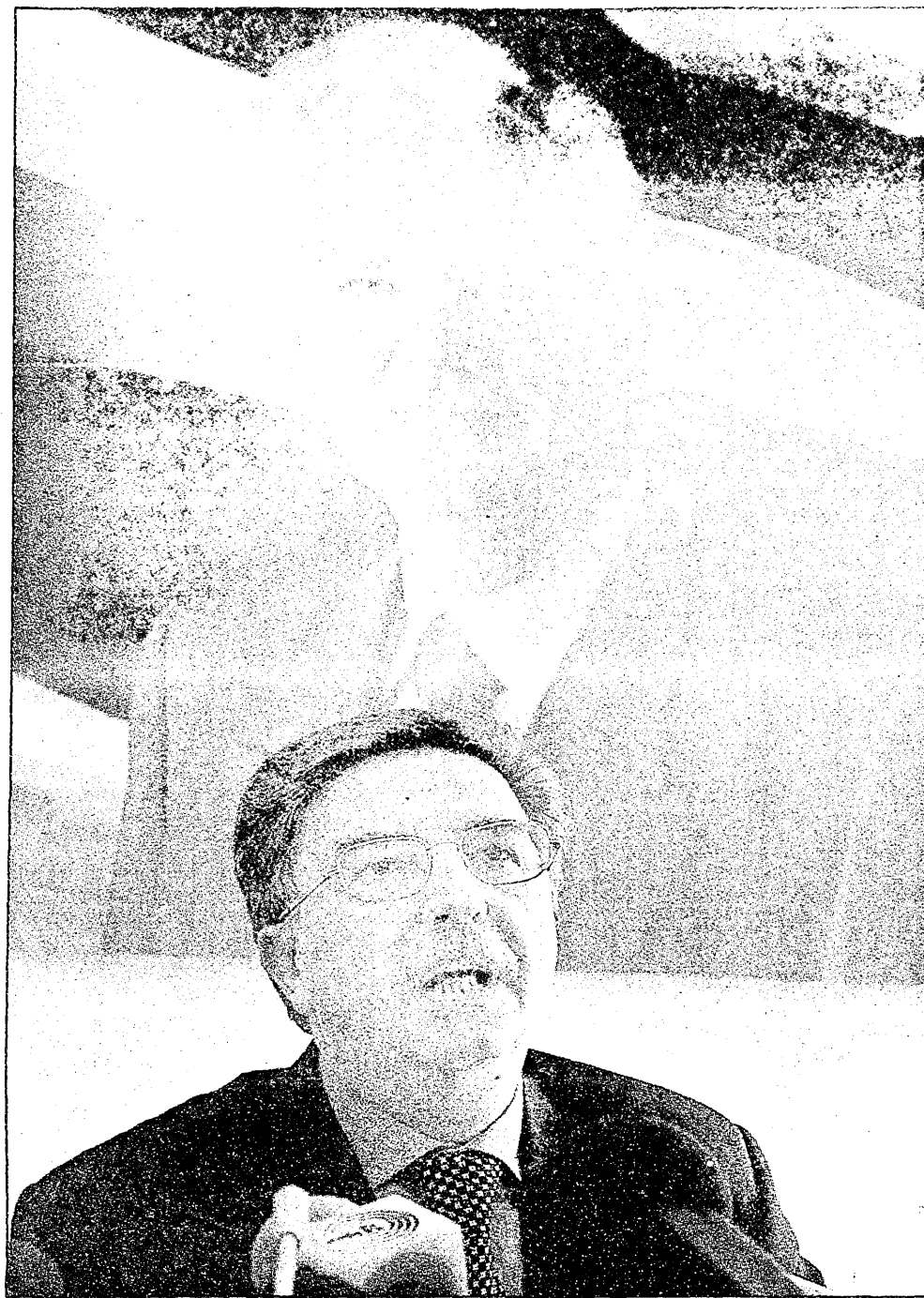
"That is when I knew it was over. That is when I knew we had won," said Radisa Petrovic, RTS' chief technician and a 21-year employee. "The strike was not a political decision, but a personal one — I had just had enough."

"I felt guilty for doing my job, but really no more than anyone else. We all had a role in keeping Milosevic in power."

That day, hundreds of thousands of Serbs pushed for Milosevic to accept the results of the election by jamming the streets of Belgrade and attacking the symbols of his brutal regime. The RTS downtown headquarters was burned and looted along with the federal parliament building. Dragoljub Milanovic, RTS' network director, was beaten so badly by an angry mob that he remains hospitalized.

By 9 p.m. that night, the station was back on the air under new, democratic leadership — and its first news guest was Kostunica.

"We had an obligation to our family and our friends to get the TV back on," said Petar Lazovic, a news anchor who was fired from RTS in 1992. "We didn't really have time to think. Only afterward did I realize



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Nikola Sainovic, spokesman for former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic's Socialist Party, spoke at a news conference in the shadow of a portrait of the ousted leader.

that the army or the police could have killed us all for conquering state TV."

Under Milosevic, journalism became a dangerous profession in Serbia. Critics were assaulted or imprisoned.

In 1998, the government passed a restrictive law that basically forbade criticism of the ruling powers. Slavko Curuvija, a prominent journalist and vocal Milosevic critic, was assassinated during the NATO bombing last year and his killer is still at large. Last Tuesday, journalist Miroslav Filipovic was released after spending five months in jail for reporting on atrocities committed by Serbian forces during the Kosovo war.

Now, journalists and editors agree that censorship is over and that no future topic will be off limits.

Even war crimes will be covered, but probably not immediately. Milosevic and four senior aides have been accused by a U.N. war crimes tribunal of crimes against humanity stemming from the conflict in Kosovo.

"There will be time for that. We are ashamed of that," said Lazovic. "But people here suffered under Milosevic, and it is our wish now to focus on the future."

Even though the strike committee that now directs the 7,000 RTS employees is only a week old, it is

already drawing criticism for its favorable coverage of Kostunica and because it has not aired any investigative pieces on the police, army, Milosevic and his cronies.

"The coverage is still one-sided. Now it is just the other side we are seeing," said Veran Matic, editor in chief of Radio B92 Belgrade and one of the nation's best known independent journalists.

"The writers keep running up to me asking if we can really say this," added Susa. "You have to teach them to use more than one source."

To be sure, even under Milosevic's iron-fisted regime, there had