

Global Journalist: Byron Scott explores difficulty of anti-corruption reporting

Abstract: This is a conversation on June 12, 2003 between Byron Scott and journalists discussing the difficulties of reporting in the Balkans in the midst of corruption and crime. Guests from Serbia, Croatia, and Montenegro weigh in on the lack of protections or rights for investigative journalists in different nations.

Host: Byron Scott

Guests:

- [Zlatko Minic](#) from Beta News Agency in Belgrade
- Ivan Lobachek (ph?), journalist from BBC Croatia in Zagreb
- Radomir Petric, freelance journalist and VST correspondent from Bar, Montenegro

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Byron Scott 00:10

Good evening, and welcome to Global Journalist. This is Byron Scott sitting in for Stuart Loory on the show that insists that even Americans are interested in international news. Tonight we're going to discuss a very difficult type of reporting in a very beautiful part of the world, the Balkans. I've spent a great deal of time in the last 12 to 14 years on the Balkan Peninsula. And I've made a lot of friends there and tonight we're going to talk to some of them. We're also among the best journalists in the region. These are reporters who are looking at both the good and the bad of the Balkans. And in particular, we want to chat tonight about efforts in the Balkans to report against corruption and that in that region, which is so beautiful, but it's still recovering from the effects not only of a political and economic transition, but also wars, embargoes, bombings, and all the difficulties that make fertile ground unfortunately for, for corruption and for crime. Our guests tonight are Zlatko Minic, deputy editor in chief of the Beta News Agency in Belgrade, Serbia, who is also supervisor of a an anti-corruption website called Clean Hands. Good evening, Zlatko

Zlatko Minic 01:41

Good evening.

Byron Scott 01:43

Also Ivan Lobachek (ph?), a journalist for BBC Croatia, speaking to us from Zagreb, Ivan how are you?

Ivan Lobachek 01:52

Good, good.

Byron Scott 01:53

And finally Radomir Petric, the VST correspondent freelance journalist from Bar on the beautiful Adriatic Sea and Montenegro. Montenegro was my host just a few weeks ago as was Rado for an investigative reporting workshop. Rado, it's good to hear from you.

Radomir Petric 02:14

Thank you, and good evening, thank you.

Byron Scott 02:17

We hope to be joined a little later in the show by a fourth journalist who is apparently out on assignment, but we'll, we'll go ahead and anyways Zlatko. Let's, let's begin by talking about the overall problem of anti corruption reporting in the Balkans in particular. Maybe you could tell us something about the Clean Hands website, including its URL?

Zlatko Minic 02:46

Well, there is a lot of reporting about corruption and corruption efforts, but honestly, there's not a lot of civic investigative journalism particularly. The basic problem is the law and access to public information hasn't been adopted yet. Next week, a month. And the other even more important problem is and that any media are capable of to afford a journalist team of journalists to focus on one issue for weeks and eventually enough coming out to the story. Those are two big problems about investigative journalism instead, instead of complete stories about some corruption or the corruption issue. Very often we have some sentiment products, something like speculation. So anything that can come to media, they're somehow forced to use it in an effort to increase deflation or with other basic problems in the area. And in such in such circumstances when we were about to start this intense project in May last year, we adapted, sort of adapted a different perspective for it. Because news agency doesn't have a separate investigative division or very often cannot afford a journalist to do on a project for several weeks for news agencies like a factory running all around the block. And instead, we decided, of course we don't whenever we can get, you know, on a trace of a real good story, we will do it, especially our correspondents from different cities often have more time was the time.

Byron Scott 04:37

So this is kind of a cooperative of investigative reporters is it?

Zlatko Minic 04:41

Yes, definitely. I'll come to it later for we are starting to work together with some other media in the region and one of our future partners, is also writing at the moment for contents project, and but instead

of dealing justice and scandals, we are trying to open a new perspective by showing people what things look like in other regions in other countries in the region. And also working on the on the prevention or actually trying to show what's wrong in certain in certain areas and how can it be made better?

Byron Scott 05:22

Good. I'll come back to you in a minute on that. Ivan Lobacheck (ph?) from Croatia, what can you give us some insights into the mentality of corruption in the in the Balkans? I know you've done some special work in that area.

Ivan Lobachek 05:41

Yes, of course. When you talk about corruption, there is always some kind of thing here in Balkan that this is the way of leading and I really done some, some work on that in our last year. So the In Croatia, I believe in the Balkans encourage people to view corruption as something completely normal. And sometimes I just explained that a part of Balkans mentality, and even a culture of the population that we can, we can see on some of the latest reports and some research is that almost 30 or 40% of stakeholders really think that corruption is unacceptable, but they still have some 50 or 60% of people who accept corruption is something quite normal in society. So I believe that the situation in Balkans is quite bad with corruption. It's, it shows the corruption become part of everyday life. And people use corruption in some from some very simple situations to the situations where they can, they can use it in a big business deals or something like that. So it is a paradox, more or less, because the same people who condemn corruption little bit later than me they would resort to bribery to achieve a certain goal. So corruption is still a very, very big problem in Balkans.

Byron Scott 07:23

Radomir Petric from Montenegro. Well, would you agree with that, and, and if so, what's to be done?

Radomir Petric 07:33

Of course, these Balkans areas are very similar in some cases and experiences from Montenegro are the same as my colleague from Zagreb, the set and talking about what is to be done, I would like to mention that from the position of the state at the state level of fight against corruption in his began is nothing and permanent voted public supply is low. But implementation of this law is going to be a very long and winding road just like our field work during writing and reporting about corruption.

Byron Scott 08:21

It is a it is a difficult form of reporting probably the most difficult form of reporting. And in the, in the Balkans, you don't have all the protections and all the laws that investigative reporters have here in the United States. As a matter of fact, it can be almost a dangerous profession or at least a dangerous type of reporting. Zlatko what, what do you think? Are the the openings for progress? In terms of the reporting of corruption, what do you, are there signs of progress? What do you think can be done to continue to give the Balkans clean hands so to speak?

Zlatko Minic 09:19

There's a problem I encountered over the past year working in the same time project, many colleagues that I actually asked to write for, for this website and for Beta News Agency were not quite aware of

what what is corruption? Now we all know what corruption is in the in that basic sense, you know, giving money to someone to do something he shouldn't do or something he should do, etc, etc. And the other many definitions, the most widely used one by all bank, but people are not aware of other very, very important forms of corruption such as subjects of interest and many other things. areas for corruption can happen. And one very important thing is to sort of raise awareness of journalists so they can they can work on raising awareness of public. And let me start talking a lot about something and then people get used to it. And somehow this thought to think about is that something that happens, as Radomir mentioned, opportunity Montenegro, something interesting that happened here. No one knew anything about public recruitment some few years ago. And then there was a very, very large campaign by non governmental agencies, especially for piracy Serbia, and the government also our public determines in the new world was adopted and, and the former president of the chapter in Serbia, was appointed director of police agency for public performance. The immigration rate progress was made in that field, everybody knows about about public procurement, how they should be done, and everybody easily can spot when something is done in a wrong way.

Byron Scott 11:06

You mentioned transparency. I assume you're referring to Transparency International, the International NGO, which rates the Balkan regions among the most corrupt in the world in terms of outside attitudes. Now attitudes and facts aren't quite the same, but they do affect things like international investment and tourism. Is there any real concern for that, for those sort of outside concerns in particularly along the Adriatic. What about first from Croatia, Ivan?

Ivan Lobachek 11:47

Yes there is a great concern, because corruption has the impact on tourism as well as the economy in Croatia. In some, some reports showing that almost almost 70% of businessmen are very involved in, in some somewhere in corruption. So it can show us that some sometimes you can get the best deal to bribe some if you bribe somebody So, so it affected the economy and we really had some problems in in recent years because of investments and some big foreign companies, which wanted to come to Croatia and invest some money. They ran out of the country because, you know some people ask them money for business and they they weren't prepared, of course, to pay the bribe, and they just said, we go. We don't want to have business in a corrupt country. So I think Croatia lost a lot, a lot of money in in that segment.

Byron Scott 12:56

What about along the Montenegrin coast, Radomir Petric? What is the, what are the fears about the effects on tourism and on foreign investment? Radomir? We may have lost, we may have lost Rato. Let's go, let's go on. Let's uh, let's talk a bit about what is the what are the big stories about in in firm of anti-corruption first of all in in Serbia and and then later in later in Croatia. Zlatko, can we go back to you? What are the current stories that that either show the effects of anti-corruption or on the other hand, on the bad side the spread of corruption.

Ivan Lobachek 14:03

The latest story we are having is about financing political organizations, political parties, the new law is being prepared and we had recently a discussion discussion on the issue and that's something we are

interested in at the moment that over the past few weeks a month there was a very interesting story about this expert panel actually probably has some special benefits from the European Union for exporting sugar and then it's turned out that it was a scam it is a sex boat and no one came out with with any with any with any solid information about who was involved in it was it's done actually on purpose and or if it was a mistake or very bad interpretation.

Byron Scott 15:00

We're going to, we're going to take a short break now. And we'll come right back. This is Global Journalists on KBIA. Welcome back. This is Byron Scott sitting in for Stuart Loory, on Global Journalist and reminding you that if you want to listen to this show later, you can listen to it on our website KBIA dot org. I'm talking with investigative journalists from the Balkans about the problems of corruption and reporting corruption in that region. Of course, we here in the United States don't exactly have clean hands in that regard either. With our current scandals involving Martha Stewart, Kenneth Lay, the Enron Corporation, and others and it's a so it's certain corruption is certainly not a a exclusive to transitional transitional nations. Ivan what's going on in Croatia in terms of, of current investigations and corruption?

Ivan Lobachek 16:08

We got some very, very big stories and concerned the problem corrupt corruption even to this day to the prosecutor's office. Can you hear me?

Byron Scott 16:20

Yes, I can hear you. You've got a bit of an echo. But we're working on it here, go ahead.

Ivan Lobachek 16:24

So there was a big scandal in the prosecutor's office. And there were lots of problems, of course in the sector economy. And I believe the greatest story right now at the state prosecutor's office is the prosecutors himself who was bribed in a few cases. And it was quite a problem for the government to explain why they have a man on such a high position. Police involved in corruption so badly. So I believe this is the main concern now in government. Of course, there is a problem in economy, permanent problem in economy codes. And there are a few very inconveniences going on now is the privatization of the church and national TV channel. And, of course, there's concern about national telecoms. So I believe that this will be much more clearer in in the next few months, because now the investigation is going on.

Byron Scott 17:36

I think it's a it's a general feeling worldwide that privatization is not only an invitation to corruption, it's may also long term be a solution to increase freedom in the press. So it's a it's a it's a sword with with many sharp sides. What, what's happening there, Ivan about the privatization of the media? What's, is that to take it away from state and local government control?

Ivan Lobachek 18:12

Yes, it is. Partly, it's quite transparently right now, or should I say it so far, because the contest is now opened. And there are eight big TV stations, even Europe's big TV stations like News Corporation from

more than one of the world's biggest media companies. And then we have the Europe Airtel and few other companies which are in the race for the third channel, and they're trying to do everything, which they can do to have this process as much as transparent as it could be. But they're always a speculations. The latest speculation Was that the people in committee who decides who will get the concession for the third channel will receive something like \$200,000 for their vote. But that was only a stipulation because of course, everybody said that's not true from the committee and from the government. It is very important, this media issue for the Croatia because this is one of the obligation in process of joining Croatia to the European Union. So the government really tries hard to do it as much transparent as it could be because it is one of the key questions joining in the European Union.

Byron Scott 19:43

Radomir Petric, Rado, we have you back.

Radomir Petric 19:47

Yes I'm back, sorry, it was a problem with the lines.

Byron Scott 19:51

We we were just talking about the situation of privatization of the media. And its relationship to this overall topic. I know that in Montenegro there is a law going into effect this fall for privatization of state and local government-run radio, television and newspapers. Could you tell us a little bit about that?

Radomir Petric 20:21

According latest media law, all municipality-owned radio stations and newspapers should be transformed into public service or are being sold to private enterprises. Here in Bar, our local municipality is called the radio station is about to be transformed into public service and counsel which you will around this radio station of will be choose from the participants of sectors and local industry, local newspaper should be sold. This is a pattern for the all other Montenegrin municipalities. On the state level of local Montenegrin Parliament call the daily newspaper Politika is is going to be sold to the most probably from Deutschland.

Byron Scott 21:37

So German investors would be coming in. I know that throughout the Balkans, German French English probably Mr. Rupert Murdoch or Australian turned American will is coming in there as well. At getting back to investigative reporting, can good investigative reporting be done by sponsored media by state by state media, Zlatko you you ought to be able to speak to that.

Zlatko Minic 22:10

You always have a problem no no no matter no matter who you're fine and I guess state media will have a pressure from the state of coarse to naturally investigating what's going on in a state you have any you have a private media and when is it all when you have an economical interests involved in it, you'll never be able to investigate in those areas that are interesting for for those who give you money. There's always a problem with funding any anti corruption media projects, no matter if its website or status or whatever. I mean, magazine or something like that. You'll always have a problem. You cannot accept money from anyone. Whoever gives you money. You'll be you'll you won't be able to write about

it in case something happens. The role is the problem. Most of the projects are rely on some foreign NGOs.

Byron Scott 23:17

We need some independence and what, what advice would each of you have for American journalists who are trying to look into matters of corruption? The reporting there is harder than anybody here would have but you gentlemen are among the best at reporting under difficult situations in this area. Let's start with it with Ivan Lobachev (ph?) and what advice do you have for American journalists who are trying to uncover corruption and to do anti corruption investigative reports?

Ivan Lobachev 24:03

Of course the preparation of this story is a very important segment. For my personal experience, it's the hardest thing is to get a story from from some common people. The story of corruption because people at least here in Balkans are, doesn't really like to speak about that, they don't even report corruption to the police or to the to the State Attorney's office because they're afraid we don't have a system which can protect people in this situation at least this system, judiciary system is still building identity, same process of transition, the transition. So it is one of the aspects here, which we are facing with and which is a problem. I can advise colleagues in the United States, just to just to work hard and these are investigative journalism, special reporting of corruption is a very long term writing, you have to take a long time and do a story. You can't do a story in a in a day or two, you have to investigate and take care of all the legal aspects of the realm of this one of the most important issues as well.

Byron Scott 25:21

Absolutely. And if there's anything that working in the Balkans breeds, I think it's patience. We have a two or three more minutes. Radomir Petric, your advice for us here in the states?

Radomir Petric 25:34

Differences between Montenegrin and American societies are so big that time afraid that my recommends will not help at all American colleagues, but in this field, you should be as much patient as strong but not as strong and ready for the very hard full experience. And of course, you have to take care about your sources and of course the good preparation is the root of the success.

Byron Scott 26:07

I agree and that's good advice. Finally Zlatko Minic from Belgrade.

Zlatko Minic 26:12

I might try something something we can have all the signs here in the paper document. This we haven't had only we don't have yet a little access to public information. So I guess in in other countries have adopted US law is much easier to come to the data that can be very important in the progress of investigative journalism investigation. And the other thing you can always rely on on some visual blood and have better protection essentially to organize in a better way.

Byron Scott 26:44

I think separating supposition rumor, accusations from facts is one of the hardest things in investigative reporting and, and finding documentation in places where the laws and procedures for set are not in place as something that, I think, really challenges, challenges reporting and reporting skills. Gentlemen, I want to thank you all for your participation. I think you've given us some insights into reporting in one of the most difficult areas of journalism as well as from one of the most beautiful areas of the world. And I thank you all for your participation and also wish that you have a very successful summer. Thanks again to Zlatko Minic from Beta News Agency in Belgrade, Ivan Lobacheck from BBC Croatian in Zagreb, Radomir Petric freelance journalists and VST correspondent from Bar and Montenegro. Special thanks to our co producers Sarah Catan and Yusuf Kalyango and to our sound engineer, Pat Akers, reminding you that you can listen to this show again at KBIA dot org. This is Byron Scott sitting in for Stuart Loory. Good night from Global Journalist.