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<http://www.rsf.org/slovenia-ostracized-and-threatened-20-years-16-03-2015,47682.html>

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Europe/Ex-USSR - Slovenia

Account

## Ostracized and threatened – 20 years of investigative reporting in the Balkans

16 March 2015

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A Slovenian freelance investigative journalist and an information hero for Reporters Without Borders, Blaž Zgaga is the co-author of "In the Name of the State," a bestseller about arms trafficking in the Balkans in 1990s, when it was a regional speciality. In 2000, he exposed the existence of clandestine US intelligence operations in the Balkans and was facing a five-year jail sentence for revealing "military secrets" until finally acquitted. Far from being discouraged, he went on to trigger a political earthquake in Slovenia by revealing that senior Slovenian officials had received kickbacks from a contract with a Finnish arms manufacture. The many public figures hit by the scandal include former Prime Minister Janez Janša, who received a two-year jail sentence in June 2013. Zgaga has received repeated death threats and has for years been hounded by intelligence services and many of his colleagues in Slovenia. In the following powerful account, he describes his career as an investigative journalist and how, as a result of his reporting, his country's leading newspapers nowadays refuse to publish his articles.

*The article in Bosnian was originally published at [MC Online \(LINK to BHS version\)](#). The English version was originally published at [Mediaobservatory.net \(LINK to ENG version\)](#) and translated by Kanita Halilović.*

### **The worst thing for a journalist is being cut off from his audience**

*"What? You would like to write about the military?" a strict man with the characteristic mustache once worn by most policemen and members of the State Security Service asked me, casting a piercing look into my eyes. "Blaž, then be aware you won't have privacy. We will know all about you. More than even you know about yourself," he added.*

At that time, 1995, I was just starting to write about military affairs for *Delo* magazine in Ljubljana. A friend of my family who knew me since I was a child was a military – actually a security – officer. He was among the first I went to when I started seeking sources in the military and intelligence structures. Most likely the fact that he knew me my whole childhood contributed to his honesty and openness. As far as I know, other than attempts of manipulation which all intelligence officers tend to make in contacts with journalists, he never did, nor tried to do me any harm.

As for pressure and attempts to influence my work, especially when I was investigating irregularities at the Slovene organs of repression, there were too many to list them all. This is particularly true of investigating lucrative arms trafficking which, with the approval of the country's top leadership headed by Milan Kučan, involved a whole range of ministers, military personnel, intelligence officers and policemen. Many of them later became "independence heroes", "prominent citizens" and wealthy businessmen who turned the once most developed Yugoslav republic into an Austrian-German province, i.e. a peripheral semi-colony. Some of them have today been convicted of grave felonies, but are still enjoying freedom or evading jail time.

But the worst forms of political pressure are direct death threats, acts of violence and – I hope it will never come to that – execution. The main goal of threats is of course intimidation aimed at

psychologically crushing the journalist and influencing their work.

The first time I was faced with the information that I was under threat of physical execution was during the "Sava" scandal. In June 2000, in the Slovene daily Večer I disclosed a covert intelligence operation led by the American DIA (Defense Intelligence Agency) which also unlawfully involved Slovene military intelligence officers. Pretending to be journalists, they tried to get to Serbian general Vuk Obradović, former chief of office of Veljko Kadijević. The goal of the intelligence operation was to penetrate the very General Staff of the Army of Yugoslavia.

A week after the article was published, police searched my apartment and office. The Slovene Prosecutor's Office charged me for disclosing a military secret and I faced up to five years in prison. Before the police search, a secret home search was carried out. As the intelligence cooperation which I uncovered had been taking place without an appropriate international agreement between Slovenia and the United States, the prosecution was halted in the pre-trial phase. Other than several stressful days related to the home search and reading through the files from the court proceedings which lasted three years, I did not feel I was under any serious pressure.

What drew my attention more was a memo from the prosecutor in charge in which he complained about the hastiness of the military investigative bodies which, in a hurry and wanting to instigate criminal prosecution as soon as possible, made several mistakes. At that time Slovenia's minister of defense was Janez Janša, today convicted for corruption in the Patria scandal and a major arms dealer in the territory of the former Yugoslavia.

But what really surprised me was a telephone call in the evening the day the article was published. That day, none of my journalist colleagues called me in person, with expressions of support – except one. I was already being cautious in conversations with him because I knew that he was fond of Janša's SDS party and that between 2005 and 2008 he held top positions in the biggest Slovene media, where he exerted political pressure and censored journalists who were not on the same line as the SDS and Janez Janša.

As we were talking, my phone rang. On the line was an experienced intelligence officer, a professional, whom I had known for several years and who had always been neutral or even benevolent toward my work.

*"Do you have more documents?"*

*"Why do you want to know? Are you too now interrogating me over the phone?"* I replied.

*"Listen. This is about you. They are interested most of all in whether you have anything more and if you are going to publish more articles. So tell me the truth, because this is a serious matter."*

I sobered up. I knew I had published all information that was important and interesting for the public. So I told him the truth.

*"No. I have no documents whose content I haven't already published."*

*"Where are you?"*

*"Why do you want to know?"*

*"Because it's about your safety. Are you alone?"*

*"I'm in the city with a colleague."*

*"Ask him to escort you home. And try to be in the company of other people as much as you can. Spend as little time alone as possible."*

*"Why?" What is it that is so serious?"*

*"Don't ask questions. Just listen to me and do as I told you."*

I asked my journalist colleague to escort me home. I asked myself multiple times after that if I had truly been in real danger. After all, I uncovered an operation conducted by the Pentagon and one should not fool with American military intelligence officers or special forces. Slovene intelligence officers could be dangerous too. After all, in Slovenia in the 90's there were quite a few unsolved murders and deaths with political background, connected with the arms trade and espionage intrigues.

I thought my interlocutor was exaggerating or that it might have even been a skillful attempt of

intimidation. I never checked his claims of the alleged danger threatening me. I later forgot that telephone conversation for many years.

Real direct threats came a year later. In February 2000 I published documents proving that Slovenia's Special Brigade Moris, a military unit directly subordinated to Defense Minister Janez Janša, in 1991 and 1992 had "loaned" weapons and ammunition to neighboring Croatian municipalities. Actually that was arms trafficking of course, as that was the main assignment of this military unit. Special Brigade Moris was a dangerous paramilitary and paraintelligence formation which eavesdropped and spied on both politicians and journalists. In 1994 an armed clash had almost erupted between the Moris members and special police forces. At the time, Slovenia had been on the verge of political violence, i.e. an attempt of coup d'état.

In January 2001 I also revealed that members of Moris brigade had in 1993 planted explosives under the car of the then president of the Parliament Defense Committee.

Several weeks later, outside a night club in Ljubljana, three men surrounded me. I knew the leader of the three. I knew that, as a member of Special Brigade Moris, he had been involved in a number of secret and unlawful operations. I knew another one only by sight. His face was familiar to me from military exercises, where I had noticed him among the special military troops. The third one was unfamiliar. Based on the way he was built, I assumed this tall muscle-man was also a former member of Moris brigade, which was disbanded in 1994.

*"If you write about Moris again, we'll kill you,"* the leader of the trio said directly to my face.

As I had heard and read that their main skill was arrogance, while it had been known to happen in real situations that even ordinary citizens disarmed and incapacitated them, I responded by laughing.

*"How will you kill me, you are clueless. Just try it, you will spend tens of years in jail,"* and I quickly retreated from the scene.

I took this conversation to be just an attempt of intimidation and I tried to forget about it and not dwell on it too much. However, the words "we'll kill you" unconsciously came to me in my dreams and woke me up many nights after the incident. Three days after the unpleasant encounter, I went to the police where I was given operational protection.

After that, a long period of "peace" from threats of execution followed, because due to political pressure and censorship I could no longer publish serious investigative articles in Večer where I was employed. The editor Mirko Munda who had resigned in protest because he could no longer perform his work professionally was replaced by editors with a much more flexible backbone.

The political pressure especially was stepped up in the period from 2004 to 2008 when Janez Janša was prime minister. Politicians operated skillfully, not wanting to get their hands dirty by directly putting pressure on journalists. Instead of them, pressure on critical and professional journalists was exerted by other journalists and editors, who were appointed to leading positions through politics. They are not even journalists; they are submissive servants who prefer to read their masters' minds and constantly worry that the truth will come out. I described in detail what I was going through at Večer in the article "Dobra Večer i laku noć" ([Good evening, good night](#)), in which I explained the reasons for my resignation, which I submitted in the spring of 2008 due to censorship and pressure.

Before that, in the fall of 2007, together with colleagues I drew up a petition against censorship and political pressure on journalists, which was signed by 571 journalists. The petition was handed to parliament right before Slovenia became the chair of the European Union in the first half of 2008, due to which [it had a big echo in international media](#), while Prime Minister Janez Janša in his public appearances portrayed the petition signatories as exporters of lies.

In May 2008 I established contact with the Finnish journalist Magnus Berglund. We investigated bribe-giving given in the Patria scandal together for several months. In August 2008 he was in Slovenia for a shoot. We were followed and spied on by unfamiliar people the whole time. Just a few days before arriving in Slovenia, Berglund had successfully avoided a traffic accident in Finland. Someone had, namely, unscrewed two bolts on the front left wheel of his car. Only his composure and instantly stopping the car after the first vibrations prevented the worst. If something had happened to him then, the Patria scandal likely would never have acquired such proportions.

I believed the investigation of bribe-giving in the procurement of Patria armored vehicles would be a good beginning for my new independent news career, which pressure and censorship had forced me to start. I could not be more wrong. In mid-August, two weeks before the agreed simultaneous

broadcast/publication of Berglund's documentary on [Finnish television](#) and my article, I went to two media outlets which were most critical of Janša's government in the then terror-stricken Slovene journalism world. "I have concrete names and numbers. Millions of euros in bribes are involved," I explained to the editors. But neither one dared to publish the article. One of them later found his mission in government chambers as a media representative, while the other in his editorial work continues to downgrade the credibility of his media outlet, testified by declining circulation figures.

The only one who dared to publish the article on bribe-giving in the Patria scandal was the alternative online media outlet [Vest.si](#), run by former *Mladina* editor Jani Sever. It was 1 September 2008. Then all hell broke loose.

After the simultaneous broadcasting of the documentary and publication of the article, Slovene newspapers devoted entire pages to the scandal, which was followed by an extraordinary parliament session, diplomatic notes to Finland, and real hysteria ensued. Some journalists close to Janša immediately started making up conspiracy theories and "investigating" my journalistic work. I only answered the phone when people I trusted were calling. Prime Minister Janez Janša started portraying me in the media as the one who had "guided the Finnish journalist around Slovenia" and "chosen his collocutors". Thus, virtually as the culprit for the scandal. At the same time, anonymous calls for my physical execution started appearing on internet forums. I reported the threats to police, which provided me with protection. It was quite tense, as the parliamentary election campaign was taking place at that time.

I felt relieved on 9 September 2008 when my colleague Berglund called me. His call came one hour before the beginning of the extraordinary parliament session over the Patria scandal, in which I expected new public attacks by the SDS. "To all of you listening to this telephone conversation: if anything happens to Blaž, the Finnish government and media will react," Berglund told me and those who were eavesdropping our conversation. Several minutes later, I got a call from the Office of the President of the Republic. His advisor nicely asked me what the situation with my safety was like and said if I observed any threats I should notify them and the responsible bodies.

As there was a lot of public psychosis at the time, fueled by Janša's SDS party, and as I believed the biggest threat to me came from various lone wolves with mental problems and blinded, mentally unstable supporters of the SDS, many of whom possessed weapons and criminal records, I changed my outer appearance. Long hair and a beard allowed me to move around Ljubljana unnoticed. My appearance changed so much that even people who knew me well did not recognize me at first glance.

Nevertheless, I was quite surprised when in front of a row of residential buildings, one of which was mine, an unfamiliar man who did not speak Slovenian stopped me. I assessed he could be of Albanian origin. "Do you know which building Blaž Zgaga lives in?" he suddenly asked me in Croatian. I calmly answered I did not know Blaž Zgaga and unfortunately I could not help him. Then I slowly moved on; however not toward my building, but in the opposite direction, toward a police station.

At that time I was living in a small town 100 kilometers from Ljubljana, where everyone knew everyone else, which made protection much more efficient. Due to numerous pressures and attempts of discrediting and vilification by many journalists, I withdrew for a long period and only kept in touch with people I completely trusted.

I tried not to pay attention to all these threats and to accept them as part of my work as a journalist. Quite contrary to what their goal was, they gave me additional motivation for my investigations and writing.

Anonymous threats again started to appear on forums after the publication of the trilogy *U ime države* ([In the Name of the State](#)). Unknown persons were writing that both authors should be "slaughtered", "shot", "drowned in their own blood". This time police were more successful and traced all three and interviewed them. As the injured party, I found out their names. I saw on social networks that all three were sympathizers of Janša's SDS.

Right then, in 2008, the SDS managed to amend the penal code which now prescribes stricter penalties for most felonies, allows journalists to be prosecuted more easily, while making it harder to prosecute those who threaten other citizens.

The previous penal code in Slovenia, namely, had prescribed that prosecution for this felony is instigated on the proposal of the injured person. After receiving a report, police investigate the felony and the state prosecutor prosecutes the suspect in court. With amendments to the penal code, prosecution is now only possible upon a private lawsuit. As I was an independent journalist

whose articles are not gladly published by Slovene media, I could not afford the money for lawyers and therefore did not file a private criminal lawsuit.

Slovenia thus became a real haven for those who love to make threats – they can be penalized only if the injured person sues them. In a large number of European countries, this felony is prosecuted ex officio.

I received the threat which I understood as the most serious one thus far while I was investigating an agreement between Milan Kučan and Slobodan Milošević from January 1991 which sealed the [fate of Yugoslavia](#).

Soon after I moved to Ljubljana in the fall of 2013, I met with an experienced and sharp intelligence officer who had been “covering” me for years and trying to exert influence on my work, while I, on the other hand, often tried to extract some useful information from him.

Our conversation in a catering establishment in Ljubljana was boring, as usual. Like a game of cat and mouse, in which we reversed roles several times. Suddenly, he asked me:

*“Where in Ljubljana do you live now?”*

*“Why do you want to know where I live?”* I responded and for a moment threw him off guard.

He answered unconvincingly that he was just asking and added that he actually was not interested.

But when the conversation moved to the events from 1991 and my investigation of then clandestine political agreements, he surprised me.

*“Be careful, if you write about that, the same could happen to you as in the Sava scandal”.*

I immediately remembered a telephone conversation 13 years ago, the day my apartment was searched, with another experienced intelligence officer who had warned me I was in danger, but I had not taken his message seriously.

I smiled and said:

*“And? What happened in the Sava scandal?”*

*“You barely got out alive,”* he said and shot me a cold look.

All the hairs on my body immediately stood up and the blood froze in my veins. I knew very well that my interlocutor had been involved in many intelligence operations, arms trafficking and had contacts with the Albanian criminal underground.

I could not understand his statement, although intelligently devised and formulated, in any way other than as a threat of physical execution.

I soon changed the subject; we talked a little longer and parted.

This time I really became frightened. All the more as the threat came from someone who had been neutral until then or had even looked favorably on my work as a journalist. The threat only confirmed my suspicion that the agreement between Kučan and Milošević really did exist. That was one of the reasons I resolved to complete the investigation as soon as possible and publish the article. Yet I temporarily pushed back the threat, thinking I had probably misunderstood our conversation.

Two weeks later, we met again. He repeated the threat in the same manner. I should be careful so the same would not happen to me as in the Sava scandal. He naively tried to convince me that I was wrong, that there had never been any agreement between Kučan and Milošević. As always, I would not let myself be persuaded and I responded with arguments. As we were saying good-bye, I got the feeling he was looking at me as an already dead man.

I had enough then. I severed all contact with him and I made sure domestic and foreign investigative bodies would know where to start to investigate should something happen to me.

Most of the threats I had received until then were from supporters and sympathizers of Janez Janša, but this time the threat came from the other end of the political spectrum – more skilled, more experienced, more efficient and more dangerous. Working for it are many hardened former members of the State Security Service who had devotedly served – and often continue to serve – former leaders or new brutal capitalists into which the once orthodox communists had transformed.

Most important in standing up to the threats is support from journalists and journalist organizations from other countries. Without the support of foreign journalist colleagues, I would have had a much harder time enduring the pressure and intimidation. If nothing else, I knew I was not alone.

A form of political pressure much worse than threats of execution comes from Slovene journalists themselves. Not from the few genuine journalists who serve the public interest and, unfortunately, all too often are rejected by the leading media, but from flunkeys who essentially belong to the political and economic elites created during the 25 years of plundering of what used to be a much better and more functional society. They do not serve the public interest and their readers, but – consistently and without conscience – the wishes of the media owners and politicians connected with them. That is why the latter do not even have to put pressure on journalists, because autonomous and critical journalists are pressured more successfully by other pliable journalists and editors, who are always “on the line”.

A bigger burden for me is the constant ignoring, excommunication and realization that, thanks to my previous work, I cannot find work in Slovene media at all. Even attempts to perhaps write a regular column have been met with firmly closed doors of some of the leading magazines. Even my latest important article on [the war for foreign currency](#), which I tried to publish in Slovene media, was not published anywhere. “*The article is not suitable for publication*”, the first editor replied. “*In my firm opinion, the article is not true,*” the second told me.

The article describing how Slovenia through its intelligence services in 1991 stole foreign currency in Croatia, with the help of Ibrahim Dedić, a banker who was later killed, and how it used budget dinars to buy marks with the help of Albanian criminal structures in the black markets of the former Yugoslavia, is not desirable in Slovene media space. Fortunately, it has been published in Zagreb, Sarajevo, Podgorica and Belgrade.

There is nothing worse for a journalist than being cut off from his audience. To me, that is even worse than the described execution threat.

The Slovene media “elite”, i.e. the journalistic “elite”, is to large extent a co-culprit for the deteriorating state of society. Unfortunately, it is obsessed with maintaining the myth of the faultless Slovene “independence” and with serving the corrupt masters. Meanwhile, journalists who act in the public interest and who want to show the truth of what their leaders, “heroes”, “honorable people”, namely their masters, were really doing, are consistently being excommunicated and ignored.

Cooperation with colleagues from the territory of the former Yugoslavia and other foreign journalists is, luckily, allowing the truth to slowly come out.

Blaž Zgaga

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