

BLAŽ ZGAGA

# Good Evening and Good Night!

I never liked reading paraphrases of the titles of Hollywood movies in the headings of newspaper articles. But now given the gloomy topic I am writing about in this article, I will use one myself. Instead of the proper translation of the title of George Clooney's acclaimed film about independent journalism and the pressures on it, "Good Night and Good Luck", I would rather entitle this text "Good Evening and Good Night". For those who have not yet seen the film, I should tell you that it portrays independent journalism in the service of the public, in other words journalism as it really should be.

Equally, I do not like writing articles in the first person. Even less about myself. Yet sadly this is being done by plenty of Slovenian journalists and even more columnists, who can obviously find nothing in Slovenia or even elsewhere in the world more important and interesting to write about than what is happening to them personally. Anyone who receives from the editor the privilege of publishing their own thoughts in elite newspaper columns should be focused primarily on the reader, and not on themselves.

Yet despite reservations, I decided to adopt precisely this method of writing. I therefore declare that what is in front of you is in no way "balanced", as people say now, but subjective text. It is a personal view of developments which have recently found their way into the pages of the newspaper *Večer*\*. And developments which, unfortunately, are gaining ground from day to day. Yet this does not mean that what has been written is not true or that in any way it does not hold water. So here is my personal story. I hope that I am writing such a story for the first and last time.

So why the title "Good Evening and Good Night"? In 1998, after five years of "germinating" under excellent mentors such as Marko Pečauer and Marko Jakopec, when I left the newspaper *Delo* to join *Večer*, I really did want *Večer* to become the number one newspaper in the country. It was with this goal that the then editor-in-chief Milan Predan invited me to join them. At first it was even the case that we were actually pursuing that goal, and in 1999 several reader number surveys showed that we were putting *Delo* in the shade. At *Večer* an optimism could be observed at that time, but with the turn of the millennium came a gradual turn back into the darkness, into the twilight zone. This was especially so after the owners replaced the leading duo of managing director Božo Zorko and editor-in-chief Milan Predan with the new managing director Boris Cekov and editor Majda Struc. The adoption of wrong decisions, and above all the failure to take necessary decisions, threw *Večer* off its good and obviously right path. The next duo of Marko Tišma and Darja Verbič tried to turn the trend around, but did not enjoy much success. When the current managing duo of managing director Milan Predan and editor-in-chief Tomaž Ranc took over in 2006, the twilight period had definitely passed. *Večer* was indeed caught up in such darkness that the only thing left to say was – good night.

## "Golden Age"

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\* Translation note: 'Večer' literally means 'evening' in Slovenian, hence the author's play on words.

Here there is no getting around a description of the period in which *Večer* regularly published investigative journalism. I first started my new job on 15 December 1998, and in subsequent years as a journalist I gave everything I could, writing a series of investigative articles which caused a stir at home and abroad.

In February 2000, for instance, I disclosed the receipts for materials taken out of depots of the special forces Moris brigade of the Slovenian armed forces at Kočevska reka. They showed that a unit under the command of Brigadier Anton Krkovič lent ammunition to the Croatian armed forces during the period of the armed clashes in Croatia. When and how this ammunition was returned, the state has of course never explained.

In June of the same year I wrote an article about the “Sava” spy operation, in which I revealed the unlawful collaboration of Slovenia’s Intelligence and Security Service of the Ministry of Defence with the US Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA). As part of this collaboration, agents intended in the guise of journalists to come into contact with certain important figures in the then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. This revelation was followed by house searches in my apartment and at the Ljubljana editorial office of *Večer*. The public prosecutor’s office instigated criminal proceedings against me, in which I was threatened with up to five years in prison.

Yet these proceedings were halted in the pre-trial stage. Indeed the court did not concur with the public prosecutor. The court would not even permit a judicial investigation, which is a sufficiently strong indicator that the case was politically motivated. This is also confirmed by the document in the court file, in which an important state official states that the proceedings were “expedited” by leading individuals at the defence ministry. Just for information – at the time this scandal was revealed, a centre-right government led by Andrej Bajuk was in power. Janez Janša was the defence minister.

The case found its way into the annual reports on attacks on press freedom by the influential American Committee to Protect Journalists (*Attacks on the Press*, 2001 and 2002). Upon the revelation of the Sava scandal, there was also a full-scale disinformation campaign waged against me. Indeed an individual well-known to journalists circulated the disinformation among Slovenian journalists that, as a result of the scandal, three American spies in Serbia and Hungary had died in car bombings. This was of course not true, but Radio Slovenia broadcast this disinformation without checking it. For this reason even today certain people still castigate me unjustly for people dying as a result of the scandal. And this is truly not a pleasurable thing to hear.

On 20 January 2001 I also revealed in the pages of *Večer* that in April 1993 members of the special Moris brigade planted explosives under the vehicle of the then chairman of the parliamentary defence committee, Zmago Jelinčič. Although I received and still receive accusations that in this there was an issue surrounding Major Ladislav Troha, who was the one who two days later publicly confirmed this criminal act in an interview, I must stress that Major Troha was not the chief source in the journalistic investigation. It is true, however, that he was the only one who dared to lay himself open in public. In addition to his confirmation, the planting of explosives by the Moris operatives was confirmed by a further five sources in the Intelligence and Security Service of the defence ministry, the Slovenian Intelligence and Security Agency and the criminal investigation police, as well as in the special Moris brigade, of course. Right from the establishing of Moris, Major Ladislav Troha was in fact the “right hand” of Moris commander Anton Krkovič. He was commander of the rapid intervention force, the only professional unit in the brigade, so he saw and heard quite a lot.

Some have also condemned me for later accusing Janez Janša of ordering the seizure of Major Troha, who disappeared for half a year following the interview. Even Janša himself declared this

accusation in the pages of *Večer*, by chance on the very same day that I was attending a funeral owing to a death in the family. I must therefore repeat that I never ever wrote such a thing anywhere. On the other hand, just recently Major Troha was acquitted for the second time by the court of committing the criminal act of false information, for which the police and prosecutors charged him. Indeed they had tried to prove that they had not seized Troha, but that he had hidden or sequestered himself. What really happened we will clearly never know. But as was explained to me by someone from the secret services, it is not impossible for whoever controls such a service to “withdraw” an individual for half a year and in that time discredit him. Later absolutely no one believes him any more.

At the same time, some have cited as proof that the assertions in the article of the planting of explosives under Jelinčič’s car were untrue, the lawsuit brought against Troha by the former commander of the special Moris brigade, Anton Krkovič. The latter did indeed win the suit against Troha, mainly owing to the assertions in one single sentence, where the court believed Krkovič over Troha. I was also a witness in those proceedings. When I met the other witness in the hallway outside the courtroom and I asked if he would say what he knew, with tears in his eyes he said he would not. “I’ll say that I don’t remember. They are threatening me and my family. I could also lose my job,” said the witness.

In June 2003 I also revealed the secret military exercise by the special Moris brigade codenamed “Manever” [Manoeuvre]. In February 1994 in the middle of the night special forces troops carried out a helicopter raid on the headquarters of the defence ministry in the capital, and motorised units also took part in exercise. However the military exercise was not announced in advance, nor was it even envisaged in the annual plan of exercises by the general staff of the Slovenian armed forces. Since I could not publish the article in *Večer*, since certain editors got cold feet when I showed them copies of the original plans and analyses of the exercise, the article came out under the name of another author in the weekly *Mladina*. The article supported by documentation clearly illustrated how certain individuals were capable of using even undemocratic means for getting to power or holding on to it. This was also confirmed on 27 November 1999 in an interview for the Saturday supplement of *Delo* by Janez Janša.

And the arms trade in the period from 1991 to 1993, whereby Slovenia broke the UN embargo on the export of arms to the republics of the former Yugoslavia, was another frequent topic of journalistic investigation. So, for instance, at *Večer* I revealed data from the handover documents between the commander of the 5<sup>th</sup> Army Region of the former Yugoslav People’s Army (YPA), Andrija Rašeta and the Slovenian negotiator Miran Bogataj. According to the YPA record, upon its departure from Slovenia, it handed over to the Slovenian armed forces (Territorial Defence) more than 20,000 tons of weapons and ammunition, while even during the ten-day conflict the Territorial Defence had seized several military depots with more than 3,799 tons of ammunition. A large portion of this quantity disappeared over the border in subsequent years. When there was a lack of ammunition and weapons to sell to Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, according to official data from the Security and Information Service a further 20 ships stopped at the Port of Koper. Loaded, of course, with weapons and ammunition for resale. Some containers full of weapons were simply declared as “medical equipment”.

There were consequences from all these articles. I received death threats. Since they were serious, for one period of time I was even under operational protection from the Slovenian police. Just how it feels to experience this kind of pressure first-hand is best indicated by the fact that I only started smoking at the age of 28, and just a few weeks later I was on two packs a day. Fortunately I gave up this harmful habit a couple of years ago. When I mentioned to one of the editors that I had received death threats, he just snapped: “Well watch out what you write.”

I published my most far-reaching article in May 2000 in the distinguished British paper *The Observer*. Together with Antony Barnett, an article was published entitled *British deal fuelled Balkan war*, in which we revealed that the British government, secretly and counter to its publicly stated policy towards Yugoslavia, had a week before Slovenia's independence sent to Slovenia modern military radio devices with coding capability. The article thus pointed out that foreign states were involved in the disintegration of Yugoslavia. In confirmation of the secret transportation of military equipment from Britain to Slovenia, we also quoted the words of the then defence minister Janez Janša, from his book *Premiki*. As I found out later, then too I came very close to having the defence ministry impose another house search and criminal prosecution on me.

There were similar revelations in the "golden age" of 1999-2001, when I could properly devote myself to investigative journalism, and the articles, plenty of them, were published regularly. The majority of the leads in these articles, which are important in terms of civil-military relations and the democratic social order, generally always led to one person – Janez Janša. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that he always tries (and has done) to silence me in one way or another. In recent years he has attempted to do this via the editors of *Večer*, and in this he succeeded. In so doing he silenced not just me, since now in *Večer* almost everything that is critical of the Government or of Janša personally no longer has any prospect of publication.

## The *Večer* triumvirate

The kind of atmosphere at the Ljubljana editorial office of *Večer* even in the period before the arrival of the current management duo is best indicated by the fact that the home affairs desk and the Ljubljana editorial office were headed by Peter Jančič. He was appointed editor by Darja Verbič, and he illustrated his kind of management and editing methods best in the position of editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Delo*. Here I must point out that his management qualities were displayed to their full extent only at *Delo*, while at *Večer* we were subjected to just a few. His editing of my journalism involved many approaches, including humiliation, pressure, raising his voice and even screaming and threats that he would make sure I was out of a job. The threats were repeated almost every week, and going to work with a boss like that held not the least attraction. The balance of power at *Večer* was in fact such that as an editor and in his relations with journalists, Jančič was practically untouchable.

In March 2006 there were tectonic shifts in the Slovenian printed media. On 1 March the position of managing director of *Večer* was taken up by Milan Predan, the former editor-in-chief of the paper and former ambassador of Slovenia to the Central European Initiative in Trieste. On 2 March the position of editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Delo* was taken over by Peter Jančič. Two months later, *Večer* also acquired a new editor-in-chief. Without any editorial experience in the printed media – he was a television journalist, a local correspondent from Koroška and anchor of the *TV Dnevnik* news programme – Tomaž Ranc became editor-in-chief.

As editor-in-chief he soon appointed a new editorial team. One of the most significant – and for the functioning of the paper *Večer* most burdensome – personnel decisions was the appointment of Darka Zvonar Predan to the position of home affairs editor. Indeed the question arises, how can the editor-in-chief wield authority and professional influence over a subordinate editor who is married to the managing director of the company, who in turn can appoint and dismiss the editor-in-chief? The question, of course, is rhetorical. At *Večer* this is functioning in practice very badly, and I am not the only one to make this observation. Although it appears sometimes that from the background they are supported by various centres of power from the circle of *Večer's* owners and the Government, the aforementioned troika – Milan Predan, Tomaž Ranc and Darka Zvonar Predan – are the ones who decide exclusively what, where and how anything is published in *Večer*. For this

reason, and for their methods of managing and editing, they have earned the epithet from ancient Rome of triumvirate.

## Bypassing the mission statement

*“The newspaper Večer is a non-party and non-religious newspaper which fulfils its mission of impartial, objective provision of information to the public independently of political parties and other interest groups, while its primary objective is to create the conditions for the free formation and exchange of opinions in a plural society. As a daily newspaper providing politically informative coverage, it retains a critical distance towards both the government and the opposition. It is open to various opinions and contributions written in accordance with professional principles, whereby it maintains its credibility and the trust of its readers.”*

Thus reads the main section of the valid programme plan [mission statement] for the newspaper *Večer* adopted on 20 May 2002 by the then executive editor and editor-in-chief Majda Struc. According to the Media Act, the programme plan sets out the purpose of publishing and the fundamental substantive principles for the operation of the medium, and as such it is also a constituent part of any contract for the employment of journalists.

Meanwhile, the difference between the programme plan and the actions of the management troika is increasingly evident in the pages of *Večer*. Indeed since 2006 *Večer* has become the most pro-Government and pro-regime daily paper. How else can one explain such a professional disgrace that on the visit of the Government to the Maribor region, the next day *Večer* published as many as 24 articles on it?

In this process, without the knowledge of the journalists, let alone with their consent, any information or opinion critical of the Government disappears from the articles. Certain topics are banned at *Večer*. For instance, the Croatian scandal over the arrest of General Zagorec and the related Slovenian arms trade. Moreover numerous opinion-makers have no access to the pages of *Večer*, while some are regularly repeated, almost every week. The latter of course are presented in the guise of independent analysts, and their articles advocate in particular the moves of the Government and the views of the ruling coalition parties.

Occasionally it has even seemed to me that *Večer* is actually being edited from Janša's office. In fact it has happened a number of times that journalists on *Večer* and other media under Government control have had to report on the same topics on the same day. When for instance the scandal broke about the irregularities in the air medical evacuation of accident victims, which the then health minister Andrej Bručan had contracted out – without a contract – to a private company, a journalist colleague covering health received the instruction from the editor-in-chief that she should write the article about how such helicopter evacuation is beneficial and how many lives it saves each year. She was not alone in this. Exactly the same demand was received from editors by her colleagues in television, radio and at *Delo* covering health.

Since a series of articles about the poor state of the Slovenian armed forces and defence ministry remained unpublished, I frequently thought to myself in jest that the general staff actually had a liaison officer in the *Večer* editorial board. Furthermore, editors often cited the weekly *Demokracija*, the former party organ of the forerunner to the Slovenian Democratic Party, as a credible and well-informed source of events in the country which journalists should read frequently.

At the Ljubljana editorial office of *Večer*, where there are a little over ten full-time and contractual

journalists, in the second half of last year we wished to improve the content of *Večer* and to aim towards the paper actually serving its readers. So in editorial office meetings we started writing comments in the minutes of the editorial board which we received every day by fax from Maribor. We offered suggestions for covering new, different journalistic topics, praise and criticism of individual authors, and sometimes also critical comments. Yet our suggestions were not taken with good grace in the editorial board. In fact, for this reason the editor-in-chief of *Večer*, Tomaž Ranc, preferred to decide simply to abolish the minutes of the editorial board for the paper *Večer*. As he explained later, he decided to do this because they were supposedly “counterproductive”.

So the journalists on were deprived of these minutes, and were left to the mercy and displeasure of various interpretations of the decisions by the editorial board. There is no written evidence of some decisions ever really being taken. How this affects normal journalism can be imagined by every reader or journalist themselves.

## The start of real censorship

Clear cases of censorship started a month after the appearance of the new editor-in-chief Tomaž Ranc. On 1 June 2006 the Government appointed Lt-General Albin Gutman as the new chief of staff of the Slovenian armed forces. As is always the case in a change to the military leadership, the editors instructed me to write a leader. With the working title *Unique general* I sent it off as usual to the editor’s desk, but only the following day I noticed with some surprise that my leader was not in the paper. Despite a request, I did not receive any explanation from the editors as to why it was not published. But I gave my unpublished column to colleagues at the Ljubljana editorial office to read. The majority thought that the column seemed good. Equally, they were amazed that it was not published, because in the end it worked as a “balanced” piece.

Yes, it truly did. In writing commentaries and practically every article of late, one major factor has been the consideration of “publishability”. What does this mean? That as a journalist I was aware that an article would have no chance of being published if it contained excessively disagreeable information or opinions regarding the Government. Or on the contrary, if critical information is suppressed or in whatever way mitigated, the probability of the article being published is greater. For this reason we always have (and had) to seek out the very last degree – that is still acceptable for the editors – of critical approach, which given the already demanding profession of journalism represents an added effort for the writer. There is also increasingly frequent writing of real messages “between the lines”, since there are simply no other avenues for publication.

A consideration of “publishability” is nothing other than self-censorship. I admit that every day I am faced with the difficult task of writing about the facts I discover and learn as a journalist, and which I would like to convey to the readers, in such a way that it will actually be published. It is even harder with opinions. Critical opinions and commentaries are indeed banned. Yet even self-censorship, although encouraged and expected by the editors, is in many cases at an insufficient level. And then the editors wade in with their own censorship.

I should add that I sensed censorship in exactly the same way the very next day, 2 June 2006. The editors ordered a leader to be written about the amendments to the law governing the Slovenian Intelligence Agency which extended the legal time limit for wiretapping citizens. But the leader entitled *Police state* was never published. And of course I received no explanation.

A month after the inauguration of the new leadership, a new wind swept through *Večer*.

## Establishing the bunker

Given that there were continually increasing numbers of censored articles, and since we learned at the Ljubljana editorial office that our colleague Boris Jaušovec at the *Večer* head office in Maribor had set up in his office a “Bunker” of censored articles, we started sending them to him by e-mail. Jaušovec then printed the articles and pasted them to one of the cupboards in his office. The articles that ended up in the dark of the *Večer* Bunker started to multiply.

For this very reason we set up a second *Večer* bunker, named “Bunker II”, in the Ljubljana editorial office. We had a big laugh over this. We even adopted internal rules which determined the roles in managing and tending the bunker. For instance, who was the founder, the chief secretary, the ideological issues officer, the expert for PR and corporate communications, the consultant for counselling and assistance to victims of the system and a contracted worker who had to make coffee for everyone else and change the yellowing sticky tape. This laughter and humour was a means of relaxation and self-defence against the increasingly severe censorship and political pressure. We used this as a way of being able to stay normal. For sticking the results of our own work to the wall of the bunker, aware that it would never be published owing to censorship, is not in the least bit amusing.

The bunker does not hold all the articles which were censored at *Večer* or changed without the author’s consent. It contains only those over which the journalist, upon noticing the censorship the next day, became so enraged that he would print it and stick it to the cupboard in protest. The bunker represents merely the tip of the iceberg of censorship.

illustration

PHOTO OF THE BUNKER

see in the attachment

illustration

Bunker II in the Ljubljana editorial office of *Večer*. The other side of the cupboard is also covered with censored articles.

## Greetings from the bunker

The censored articles of various journalists are languishing in the dark of the Ljubljana bunker. The articles are from the former president of the Society of Journalists of Slovenia Branko Maksimovič, the experienced commentator on economics and finance Jelka Zupanič, the former foreign affairs editor and editor of the *Večer* Saturday supplement Boris Jaušovec, the journalist Matija Stepišnik, the former colleague and current Mladina journalist Borut Mekina and others. The bunker also houses a letter from the Bishop of Celje, Anton Stres, in which he attempts to influence the journalistic work of a young colleague. The bunker is also home to “guest writers”, for instance the contribution by *Delo* correspondent Boris Čibej and the commentary from Radio Slovenia journalist Robert Škrjanc, for which reason he was banned from reporting on the Sova [Slovenian intelligence service] scandal.

Since a large number of my articles ended up in the bunker, some colleagues started joking that I had gone and become the *Večer* bunker correspondent. I am therefore taking this opportunity to let some censored articles see the light of day in this compilation.

Like numerous other warnings from opposition parliamentary deputies regarding important issues, taped up in the bunker was the article *Negative marks for the secret services*<sup>1</sup>, in which on 22

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<sup>1</sup>*Negative marks for the secret services*

*Security and Information Service also handled cash in the arms trade*

*BLAŽ ZGAGA*

*Two members of the parliamentary committee for oversight of the work of the security and intelligence services, Rudolf Moge (LDS) and Dušan Kumer (SD) publicly advise that they cannot be satisfied with the work of these services. “We expect the aforementioned state authorities in the coming year to do everything necessary to allow the committee to carry out its competences provided by law and the rules of procedure,” they wrote in a public statement.*

*On Wednesday, behind tightly closed doors the National Assembly debated the strictly classified report of the parliamentary committee for oversight of the work of the security and intelligence services regarding work in 2005. Deputies confirmed the report and proposed that the Government improve the cooperation between public prosecutors and the police. But the message from Moge and Kumer indicates that this is clearly not all.*

*The two deputies point out that these services fall under the exclusive jurisdiction of the executive branch, and as such they are “all the more enticing for being exploited as instruments of state abuse to achieve political or material goals, aggression, repression of human rights and corruption.” As the two deputies assert, a key role in overseeing this sensitive area is played by independent media. On the condition that information on current activities or the names of intelligence service operatives are not disclosed, in certain European parliamentary committees there is an established practice of being able to request all classified information. In Slovenia, however – given the Government’s interpretation of the law – this is currently impossible, they point out.*

*“Citizens expect the police to treat them with integrity, impartiality, predictability and success. However, as members of the committee that oversees the Slovenian police, we are not satisfied with the state of the force. This relates especially to its recent behaviour, where the police leadership has rather impeded than facilitated quality oversight,” write the two deputies.*

*“Negative marks are also merited by the Intelligence and Security Service of the Ministry of Defence. Although an intelligence service is a key element of any country and ensures independent analysis of information which is important for the security of the state and society and for the protection of its interests, this service has still not fulfilled the demand of the parliamentary committee for oversight of the work of the security and intelligence services that it provide information on the extent of the ready cash payment in the sale of arms.” As the two deputies assert, it is clear from the testimonies of witnesses to date that payment for the arms was also made in ready cash. The official record of the defence ministry also speaks about where the cashier’s office for this was located and who managed it. Similar statements exist in other documents, say the deputies. The arms trade was also pursued by the Security and Information Service (now the Slovenian Intelligence and Security Agency, Sova), which received cash that was recorded, although that service had no legal authority to trade in arms, they add.*

*“Within the two intelligence services considerable cash was flowing, yet right up to the present day the competent authorities have not been able to investigate this, which certainly casts a bad light on a service for which we should have the utmost trust. A situation where the intelligence service investigates itself and in so doing discovers nothing,*

December 2006 I summarised an open letter from two members of the parliamentary committee for oversight of the secret services. As a journalist covering this area, it seemed to me essential to inform the readers of *Večer* about it. In order for it to be more easily publishable, I deliberately “balanced” the article by giving the information in the sub-heading that in addition to the defence ministry, the Security and Information Service traded in arms. This failed.

How the editors remove from articles sentences that are disagreeable to the Government and prevent any writing about censorship and the pressures on colleagues in other media under Government control can be seen in the article *Fatal letters of deputy directors*<sup>2</sup>, written on 10 April this year. The text in bold was not published. Why, the editors never explained.

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*points to the suspicion that numerous irregularities were committed in the arms-selling operation. For this reason these services are unsuccessful and do not merit our confidence,” pointed out Moge and Kumer.*

<sup>2</sup>*Fatal letters of deputy directors*

***Former Vomo personnel at the top of Sova and in the prime minister’s office. Similar letters from deputy directors of Sova***

BLAŽ ZGAGA

*Today members of the parliamentary committee will discuss behind tightly closed doors the hottest topic to excite minds in the last month. They will debate the responses to more than ten questions from deputies provided to them last week by the director of the Slovenian Intelligence and Security Agency [Sova], Matjaž Šinkovec, and without doubt they will not even be able to avoid the discovery of the strictly classified intelligence centre, which occurred on 14 November last year, when the national security adviser to Prime Minister Janez Janša, Aleksander Lavrih, entered it without authorisation.*

*Sova then had to move the secret intelligence centre in the middle of Ljubljana to another location and break its cooperation with that branch of the network of covert collaborators. This has given the Sova scandal, which became public with the discovery of the secret establishing of a special Government working group to assess the work of Sova headed by justice minister Lovro Šturm, new dimensions.*

*The reason for the Government’s special interest in the work of Sova is supposedly two letters allegedly sent by the deputy director of Sova, Branko Cvelbar, in September to the public administration minister Gorazd Virant and finance minister Andrej Bajuk. In these letters he allegedly mentions primarily suspected irregularities at Sova, and while Virant supposedly received the letter, Bajuk’s office supposedly did not receive it. Here Cvelbar’s letter is strongly reminiscent of the letter by Roman Jeglič written in 1993 to the then prime minister Janez Drnovšek. On the one hand Jeglič was also at that time deputy director, his letter also supposedly spoke of suspected irregularities in the then Security and Information Service (VIS, the forerunner of Sova), and on the other hand it was then that the HIT-VIS scandal broke, filling the front pages of the media for some time after that. **One high point of the scandal was when the then director of VIS, Miha Brejc, now an MEP and one of the most prominent members of the SDS, brought two cases of strictly classified documents “to safety” in parliament. Brejc was then removed.***

*Deputy director of Sova Branko Cvelbar, who together with the prime minister’s national security adviser, Aleksander Lavrih, worked for many years at the Security Authority of the Ministry of Defence (Vomo) and then at today’s Intelligence and Security Service of the defence ministry, is today one of the most important members of the special Government working group to assess the work of Sova. These two, Cvelbar and Lavrih, supposedly themselves carried out the highest number of visits to the Sova headquarters and amongst other things interviewed certain Sova personnel about their past work.*

***According to unofficial information, Cvelbar is now supposedly one of the most influential persons at Sova, since right from the outset the current director Matjaž Šinkovec supposedly did not want to perform that function, although – after former director Dr. Iztok Podbregar following a long period of advance warning irrevocably resigned and gave his notice last autumn – he was virtually coerced. We may recall that Šinkovec was appointed in such haste that the Government forgot to resign him officially from his post as ambassador to the Nato alliance in the proper time, which in diplomatic circles aroused some consternation. Cvelbar arrived at Sova from the defence ministry after the elections of 2004 in the position of head of the personnel department. Upon the appointment of Matjaž Šinkovec as director, he became deputy director.***

*Cvelbar’s letters were more than obviously simply an advance notice of a “settling of scores” with certain employees at Sova who had been working there for a number of years. One of the main reasons for this is probably that these are employees who began their careers under the former State Security Service (SDV). In 2005, despite the fact that all the secret services have been increasing their staff owing to new threats, the Government adopted a decision whereby the number of employees at Sova had to be cut by one fifth. This decision has still not been fulfilled, and supposedly involved around 60 Sova employees. **Mainly the older and most experienced employees. Since some of them were***

The fact that the arms trade had become a proper taboo at *Večer* is indicated by the article *Will they also investigate Dragica?*<sup>3</sup> In that article, on 24 August 2007 I summarised a POP TV item and supplemented it with data which had already been published previously in the pages of *Večer*. The article was of course not published. And I received no explanation.

Where nothing else worked, the editors would shift a “problematic” article from the first five pages, which usually carried articles contributed from the Ljubljana editorial office, deep into the middle of the newspaper. Thus on 26 January this year the article *The Deerhunter*<sup>4</sup>, about how the commander of the 10<sup>th</sup> battalion of the Slovenian Army posed in uniform with the carcass of a deer taken as a trophy, was shoved back to page 17 of *Večer*. The editor explained that the subject was simply not important enough for the first five pages, which usually carry articles on home affairs. I

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*working at the time of Slovenia’s independence and even before that during the JBTZ trial – it was after all two members of the SDV who arrested the then Mladina journalist and current prime minister Janez Janša – it is obvious that they are highly vexing for the prime minister, since after the trial at the military court on Roška Street he had to sit out his time in prison.*

**BOX:**

*Sova without Škrjanc*

*After many years of accurate, professional and authoritative reporting on the work of Sova, today almost certainly there will be no reporting on it from the Radio Slovenia journalist Robert Škrjanc. Last week in his commentary for the broadcast Dogodki in odmevi [Events and Responses] he wrote: “The essence of the problem is that the Government commission has a weak legal base, and that because this involves the politically motivated proving of suspicions about wiretapping of a party, it constitutes abuse of the service. More than anything, though, by browsing through the archives they will start to destroy the network of their agents. All these things, therefore, if doubts existed, should be taken care of by the person in ultimate responsibility, that is the director of Sova... Setting up a Government commission means nothing other than a vote of no confidence in his work, and for the Government a means of proving the suspicions of wiretapping of one of the political parties and thereby the basis for discrediting people who were then in power and managing the service.” The director of Radio Slovenia, Vinko Vasle, who in the nineties set up the weekly magazine Mag with the current chairman of the board of the newspaper Delo, Danilo Slivnik, said for the web medium vest.si that they had stopped Škrjanc covering Sova, “which he should have covered properly but did not do so.” Here he said that they had taken this area away from Škrjanc not for political but for “working” reasons.*

<sup>3</sup>*Will they also investigate Dragica?*

*Croatian prosecutors demand access to the bank account through which the Slovenian arms trade was conducted*

**BLAŽ ZGAGA**

*The big Croatian arms-procuring scandal has lately crossed over to the Slovenian side of the border. In the investigation into the Croatian General Vladimir Zagorec, who fled from the Croatian prosecutors to neighbouring Austria, the Croatian prosecutors have demanded access to the account at the Klagenfurt bank codenamed “Dragica”. This is the name of the account which according to the assertions in the secret charges of Slovenian investigators in the nineties the interior ministry used for the purchase of arms. As POP TV reported yesterday, sources in the intelligence services have supposedly claimed that “a lot of business went through that account.” Večer’s sources have confirmed that this account was also used for business by the Security Authority at the Ministry of Defence (Vomo), the forerunner to the current Intelligence and Security Service of the defence ministry.*

*Both the former director of Vomo, Andrej Lovšin, now CEO of the company Interevropa, and the attorney for General Zagorec strenuously deny any business operations through this account as part of the arms trade. From 1990 to 1994 Vomo never had anything to do with that account, said Lovšin. Equally, Lovšin denied the claims of the Croatian media that he supposedly met recently with General Zagorec. “I last saw General Zagorec a few years ago, when I met him by coincidence at the Croatian defence ministry in Zagreb. Personally I have had no other relations with him,” he explained for POP TV.*

*It is the cash business in the never explained arms trade that is most important in clearing up who profited from it. As the former director of the criminal investigation police, Mitja Klavora, who headed the investigation into the arms-procuring business in the nineties, said, in the event of money orders being made from that account to legal or illegal Slovenian accounts, the “fallout” would implicate certain people in Slovenia. “The problem is that we are not hearing anything from the crown witnesses, in other words former ministers and former prime ministers, who know most about this,” advised Klavora. Slovenian criminal investigators then demanded access to business run through the Dragica account, but the public prosecutors did not approve this. At the public prosecutor-general’s office, which is headed by*

beg to differ. The article is in fact one of the first indicators of a subculture of violence that is spreading in the Slovenian armed forces.

The way in which people at *Večer* take care of the figure and reputation of Prime Minister Janez Janša is also clearly illustrated by the editorial intervention without the consent of the journalist in an interview with one of the most distinguished world experts in the field of public opinion surveys, Sir Robert Worcester. On 3 April 2007 I sent to the editor's desk an interview which read in part:

*You were invited to Slovenia by Prof. Dr. Slavko Splichal. How well acquainted are you with Slovenian experts in the field of public opinion surveys and communicology, and how would you assess their expertise?*

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*Barbara Brezigar, they still do not wish to explain their decision.*

*Despite the United Nations embargo on the export of arms to the republics of the former Yugoslavia, between 1991 and 1993 Slovenia was one of the biggest suppliers of arms and ammunition to the Croatian and Bosnian battlefields. Indeed following the departure of the former Yugoslav People's Army [YPA], there remained in Slovenian military depots more than 20,000 tons of ammunition and military equipment, which is confirmed by the record of handover signed by General Andrija Rašeta and by Miran Bogataj from the Slovenian defence ministry. In just the ten days of conflict with the YPA, for instance, the [Slovenian] Territorial Defence seized five depots with 3,799 tons of ammunition.*

*Much of this ammunition was transported in numerous lorry convoys through the border crossings into Croatia. At the same time, according to official data, 20 ships with arms docked at the Port of Koper during this time, while a further 524 containers of arms went through Slovenian territory to Croatia. A number of eyewitnesses and other witnesses, former officials of the police, Vomo and the former Security and Information Service have confirmed that the arms were sold for cases full of cash. Yet this money was never shown as revenue in the national budget. In 2004, for instance, former Vomo member Brane Praznik publicly admitted that in just one night at the Vomo headquarters he counted more than ten million marks in cash.*

*At the time of the arms trade, the defence ministry was headed by the current prime minister Janez Janša, and the interior ministry was headed by the current CEO of Istrabenz, Igor Bavèar. As was publicly admitted a few years ago by Janez Janša, arms were also sold for cash. Through this alone, as state officials and holders of office they evaded financial, customs and numerous other regulations, while also violating a number of laws and of course the UN embargo.*

*A look at orders made from the Dragica account would be likely to provide an answer to the never explained question of who profited from the arms trade, the purchase of which was paid for by all the taxpayers in the former Yugoslavia. It might also show how much money the arms trade involved. According to reliable information, certain members of Vomo took the cash obtained in the arms trade in cases to Austria, and placed it in secret accounts in Austrian banks. Is Dragica one of these accounts?*

<sup>4</sup>*The Deerhunter*

*Commander of 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion poses in uniform with carcass of shot deer in Hungary*

**BLAŽ ZGAGA**

*At the last major military exercise by the Slovenian armed forces abroad, which was conducted last year in Hungary, a very unusual photo was taken. Its existence was confirmed by the Slovenian armed forces press officer Simon Korez, president of the parliamentary defence committee Anton Anderliè and commander of the 10<sup>th</sup> Motorised Battalion Lt-Col Miha Škerbinc Barbo. During Wednesday's visit by the defence committee to the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, the deer hunt was also one of the main topics of discussion behind closed doors.*

*The photograph, taken at the camp of the 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion, which was on exercises from 23 October to 17 November last year in the Hungarian training ground of Varpalota, shows the commander of the battalion Miha Škerbinc Barbo with a 12.7 mm calibre military sharp-shooting rifle posing in uniform in front of his hunting booty – the carcass of a deer, which was laying across the bonnet of a Hummer military all-terrain vehicle. According to unofficial information, he even shot the deer with the military sharp-shooting rifle, although the army and Lt-Col Škerbinc Barbo both strenuously deny this claim.*

*“The commander of the battalion was invited to go hunting by the local organisation of reserve officers. He hunted with a hunting rifle lent to him by his Hungarian colleagues. The photograph, in which the commander is posing with a military sharp-shooting rifle with the carcass of the deer on the bonnet of a Hummer all-terrain vehicle at the battalion camp, is not in accordance with the rules of service in the Slovenian armed forces. The rules of service do not envisage such an event as inappropriate photography, and in any event this involves a morally contentious act,” said the Slovenian army press officer Simon Korez.*

*How the photo was actually made was explained in greater detail by the battalion commander Miha Škerbinc Barbo himself. “There is nothing unusual in senior officers going hunting with foreign colleagues on visits abroad. In*

*“I must admit that I do not know them all well enough to be able to give a professional assessment. But I would like to say that Professor Splichal is an internationally acknowledged expert, and as such is recognised to be one of the best researchers of the history of public opinion in the world. This is even recorded in the Encyclopaedia Britannica. I would like to state that he is also the one person to whom I show my manuscripts and ask for advice.”*

*I ask because recently the Slovenian Government has been highly critical of the public opinion surveys performed by the Faculty of Social Sciences.*

*“I can say only this, that that faculty was selected to carry out the European survey of values , to carry out the Eurobarometer survey ...So who is being critical? Which leader?”*

*Prime Minister Janez Janša.*

*“International experts in this field are observing his views.”*

But on 6 April, the name “Janez Janša” disappeared from the published article.

*I ask because some people in the Slovenian Government are highly critical of the public opinion surveys performed by the Faculty of Social Sciences.*

*“I can say only this, that that faculty was selected to carry out the European survey of values , to carry out the Eurobarometer survey ... So who is being critical?”*

*The Prime Minister.*

*“International experts in this field are observing his views.”*

A special case of transforming the messages of articles involves changes to headings which go beyond the professional editing of a newspaper. There are some obvious examples stuck up in the Ljubljana bunker.

For an article on the (un)environmental vehicles driven around by Slovenian ministers, my

*Slovenia, too, to date many senior officers from abroad have been invited to hunt. For this reason I accepted the invitation of my Hungarian colleagues, who also lent me a hunting rifle. I shot the deer as a tourist, I paid for it and I have all the necessary proof of that,” he said.*

*“After returning to the battalion camp I put the deer in the fridge. From there we then took it to a place where the battalion cook, who is also a hunter, showed scouts how to butcher a deer, which portions of meat are good and so forth. Since it weighed around 90 kilograms and since the distance was about 50 metres, we loaded it onto the bonnet of the Hummer to carry it there. At this point somebody thought to take photos. One of the men handed me a military sharp-shooting rifle, and that is how the photo was taken,” says Škerbinc Barbo.*

*“For me the photograph in the context in which it was taken – in other words outside a hunting context – is without doubt contentious. It is clear that hunting and military iconography do not belong together. The fact that this photograph was taken was a big mistake,” he said, adding that the photographs were intended for personal use. He did in fact pass a hunting exam in the USA, and can hunt anywhere with it except in Slovenia. “The taking of this photograph was a big mistake and I accept full responsibility for it,” added Škerbinc Barbo.*

*“Slovenian hunters have a written code of ethics governing how we behave. Game must be treated with all the proper decorum and respect. Displays in photographs of hunted game are not appropriate. Hunters know how to prepare and display a hunting trophy in an appropriate way. A photograph of hunted game on a civilian vehicle, let alone a military one, is inappropriate to the rules of behaviour for Slovenian hunting,” said the president of the Hunting Association of Slovenia, Bogdan Mahne, in criticism. “This is provocative behaviour. Especially if we are aware that in recent times increasing numbers of people regard hunters primarily as animal shooters, although alongside that we perform numerous nature protection tasks. For this reason we are constantly stressing among our hunters the need to behave appropriately. And we take steps against those who do not. Game must be treated respectfully, even though it has been hunted. Displaying on the bonnet of a vehicle is certainly not respectful,” added Mahne.*

*Meanwhile the 10<sup>th</sup> Motorised Battalion, under the command of Lt-Col Škerbinc Barbo is departing in two weeks for the biggest mission to date for the Slovenian armed forces abroad. This is the first posting of a battalion-sized unit abroad, and the Slovenian battalion will be responsible for security and stability in its own area with headquarters in Peæ.*

colleague Borut Mekina suggested the heading:

*“Janša the biggest polluter”* and the sub-heading:

*“Per kilometre travelled in his official vehicle the prime minister emits three and a half times more carbon dioxide than the wife of the foreign minister”*

But on 1 March this year his article was published under the following heading:

*“Zver’s audi pollutes least”* and with the sub-heading:

*“Largest amount of greenhouse gases released into the air by Janša’s official Mercedes, followed by Drnovšek’s 4x4”*

A similar change was imposed on the heading proposed on 27 February by Jelka Zupanič:

*“Latest on candidate for [central bank] governor Rant”* and the sub-heading:

*The latest statements from parties show that things are not looking good for the candidate proposed by President Janez Drnovšek”*

However, a day later the article appeared under the heading:

*“Things looking bad for governor candidate Rant”* and the sub-heading:

*“The parliamentary mandate and electoral committee will decide today on the proposal from head of state Janez Drnovšek that in its second attempt the National Assembly should appoint the current vice-governor, Andrej Rant, as governor of the Bank of Slovenia”*

Such changes have affected not only home affairs but also foreign affairs articles. The proposed heading by the former foreign affairs editor Boris Jaušovec was:

*“Republicans disgusted by Hillary”*

Instead of this, on 23 January 2007 his article was headed:

*“Attractive target for opponents’ shots”*

There have been so many such changes to headings over the last two years at *Večer* that I have lost count.

Special “gems” are the headings of articles which we have collected in a so-called “anti-bunker”. On the wall alongside the bunker we have pasted articles which were published in recent years in *Večer*, although they clearly constitute pro-Government propaganda. These articles have not just been “balanced”, they actually put the Government in the best possible light. We pasted up these articles in the “anti-bunker” in protest, and there they hang below a tragicomic catchphrase contributed by a colleague at the office: “I read your thoughts: Texts which should have ended up in the eternal dark of the bunker, but which saw the light of day!”

The headings include, for example, the following revelations:

*“Šturm: We did not look at the secret database”*

*“Janša: the Government does not staff itself with the politically loyal”*  
*“In this country we can live a Slovenian life”*  
*“Janša opens education centre with a robot”*  
*“We are establishing a normal situation”*  
*“Gathering of the team”*  
*“Indian ambassador visits Večer”*  
*“Janša convinced there will be an agreement”*

The content of these and numerous other articles with similar propaganda content is appropriate to the heading. At the same time, we did not stick up a multitude of articles with similar pro-Government content in the anti-bunker, simply because it no longer felt good. But if we had stuck them up regularly, we would have run out of space on the walls of the Ljubljana editorial office.

## From Sova to the first threats

With the incessant censorship and pressures, the situation at *Večer* got drastically worse following the discovery of the Sova [Slovenian Intelligence and Security Agency] scandal. Although it is well-known that the scandal was first revealed on 21 March 2007 by fellow journalist Rok Praprotnik at *Dnevnik*, on the same day an article on the Sova scandal also appeared in *Večer*.

On 20 March at around 1 p.m. the executive editor Darka Zvonar Predan called me and requested that I write an article about the deputy question from Zmagov Jelinčič, which also related to Sova. Since the question about associates of the head of state was at a very low level and since in my professional judgement it was about settling scores with the president via third persons, I declined to write the article. Before that I called Jelinčič, and in conversation with him I got confirmation that he was using the institution of the deputy question for purposes other than those for which the institution was actually intended.

A little later, around 2 p.m., Darka Predan again called me and reported that the situation was now different, since the Government had set up some commission. *Dnevnik* would publish some big scandal the next day, so in any way possible *Večer* also had to publish something, she added. Although I asked her to tell me whatever additional information she had, she was unable to help me.

I immediately thought, Rok Praprotnik is on the verge of a big story. Equally, it seemed weird to me that the editor was demanding so persistently that *Večer* must at all costs have something published about it. Whatever, after Predan's request I set to work. And although at the start I had virtually no information to write about, after four hours I sent off to the editor's desk an article headed *Audit of the work of Sova*<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup>*Audit of the work of Sova*

*Government sets up working group to assess the work of Sova – will they also look into sources and the special fund?*

*Just over a month ago, on 1 February, in its regular session the Government adopted an interesting decision under the item “proposals of the Government commission for personnel and administrative affairs”, one which will certainly aggravate events in the political arena. The Government has namely adopted a “decision appointing a working group to assess the work of the Slovenian Intelligence and Security Agency (Sova)”. According to unofficial information, the group will be supposedly headed by the justice minister Lovro Šturm, and will also include the education and sport minister Milan Zver, environment and spatial planning minister Janez Podobnik, state secretary in the prime minister's office Vinko Gorenak, the prime minister's national security adviser Aleksander Lavrih and deputy director of Sova Branko Cvelbar.*

*The prime minister's office has been very sparing with information about the establishing of the group. “In its 107<sup>th</sup> session the Government adopted a decision appointing a working group to assess the work of the Slovenian Intelligence and Security Agency. Since the material addressed by the Government and the decision are labelled with a level of*

The part of the article in bold, in which I set the information in a wider context, was not published. Meanwhile, I soon started encountering increasingly unpleasant consequences.

The day following publication of the article, at midday on 22 March, the editor Darka Predan called me and in a haughty tone threatened me with “serious consequences”. She said that if I continued in this way, she would “personally see to it that I felt serious consequences”. This threat was then extended to all members of the Ljubljana editorial office, to the effect that we were all working poorly, insufficiently and unprofessionally.

The cause of this outburst was probably the fact that I pointed out to my colleagues at the Ljubljana editorial office the censorship of part of the article. In her words the part of the article in bold was commentary and an unprofessional and poor product. On the day the article was published, I did indeed give the entire text to colleagues to read, and in the censored part they found nothing controversial, and talk of this obviously soon arrived in Maribor. Even the assertions that I had verified the legal aspect, despite pressures of time, with a distinguished professor of law, held no sway with Predan. I had indeed sent the article by e-mail to the professor before I sent it off to the editor’s desk. Owing to the time constraint I asked him to let me know if I had made any mistakes, and before I sent the article off he confirmed by phone that from the legal aspect there was nothing controversial in the article. “Of course, if your information holds up,” he added.

Reporting on the Sova scandal also became increasingly challenging because the editors expressly prohibited the use of anonymous or unofficial sources. But the prohibition applied only to certain journalists. Those who wrote agreeably about the Government could quote anonymous sources as much as they wanted.

The pressures then mounted. Every “erroneously” written word could be a reason for telephone harassment by the editor and for chicanery. For this reason – and also because anything more than a report had no chance of being published – I limited myself to simply reporting on the Sova scandal. So owing to the impossible circumstances I followed the scandal only passively, although a scandal of such dimensions merited active investigative journalism. Of course this kind of work without quoting anonymous sources, especially in the military or intelligence field, was simply impossible.

At the same time, I felt the “special attention” of the editors. The fact is, I could never quite shake off the feeling that I was singled out for such attention mainly because in the past I had revealed numerous irregularities in the military and security structures in which Janez Janša had been indirectly or directly involved. Obviously mistakes of this or that nature can befall anyone who works. A journalist, for instance, can slip up grammatically. Precisely for that reason, newspapers have an editorial system with proof readers, sub-editors and editors. But I noticed with increasing frequency how the editors could hardly wait for some mistake, and would then give it special

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*secrecy, we cannot provide more information,” communicated Rok Srakar yesterday from the prime minister’s office. The decision carries the lowest level of secrecy – internal. As we have learned from reliable sources, the working group will supposedly be entrusted primarily with checking the work of Sova during the period when it was headed by the current national security adviser to President Janez Drnovšek, Lt-General Iztok Podbregar, his predecessor Tomaž Lovrenèè and before him Drago Ferš. Amongst other things the group would be able to peruse the network of covert Sova collaborators and the use of funds from the special fund to pay them.*

***This raises the question whether this is a case perhaps of politics encroaching on the professional autonomy of the intelligence and security personnel at Sova. Nowhere do the Sova act, the act regulating parliamentary oversight of the work of the intelligence and security services and the act regulating classified data provide for the establishing of any kind of Government “working group” which would check the work of the secret services in the past, nor indeed its powers. This is quite patently an “ad hoc” working group set up to audit the work of Sova. In the event of such a group perusing without any basis in law the network of secret collaborators and the use of resources from the special fund, this would increase the possibility of revealing its collaborators, and in any event in such a case the standing of Sova, along with its credibility, would fall among foreign secret services. Since Sova exchanges secret data with numerous secret services, this could mean that in the future there would be less data of this kind, which could lead to a lowering of the level of national security in Slovenia.***

emphasis. Meanwhile it caused no concern to the editors that *Večer* was publishing the barely readable articles of those journalists whom the Government liked.

Under the pressure of such working conditions I then took part on 3 April 2007 in a round table entitled *Technology of media control*. Held at Cankarjev Dom, it was co-organised by the Slovene Association of Journalists, the Union of Slovene Journalists and the Peace Institute. Although I had not previously intended to, when someone from the public spoke and claimed that journalists were a “rabble”, I got and up started speaking. At this point I admitted that at *Večer* I was regularly exposed to pressure and that I was in fear every day. I said that conversations with the editors were arduous and difficult, and at the same time I called upon all those present to draw the attention of European governments and the public to the censorship in Slovenia.

And why did I even talk about fear? Because I felt it regularly at my workplace owing to the pressures and threats from the editors, since as a journalist I write according to my conscience. And also because owing to the constant stress caused by the editors I have certain chronic health problems. But mainly because I sensed that continued silence would not make matters any better. Rather the opposite.

## Mounting pressure

The Sova scandal acquired ever greater dimensions in public, while in reporting on it my “hands were tied”. On the other hand, self-censorship played its own part. Why should I push myself to investigate and write about something that did not have the slightest chance of being published, I thought. Nevertheless, on 7 April I did a major interview with the former director of Sova, Iztok Podbregar, for the Saturday supplement of *Večer*. The interview was quite demanding, since right from the outset it is hard to do an interview with someone who is professionally bound to silence. For this interview I received congratulations from colleagues in other media, and clearly it was one of the reasons why somewhere in the centres of decision-making it was decided that I had to be deprived of doing reports on intelligence and security activities and above all on the Sova scandal.

Owing to my appearance at the round table in Cankarjev Dom, on 19 April I had to go to Maribor to answer for myself. Prior to this, a disciplinary meeting had been held at the office of the editor-in-chief Tomaž Ranc and managing director Milan Predan only with Boris Jaušovec, who had written for the participants of the round table about why and how the *Večer* bunker had been created. His text was distributed at Cankarjev Dom. After the meeting, under the pressure of threats he had to physically remove the Maribor bunker. As far as I know, he saved all the censored articles from the bunker on CD.

The disciplinary meeting began with just the editor-in-chief Tomaž Ranc. First of all he said that I was not working enough, and that in terms of the norms for journalistic work I was always at the tail end of the *Večer* journalists. After my comment that the system of norms was not objective and reliable and that some people for no good reason got many points while others got few, he soon moved on to the main topic of the conversation – my appearance at the round table in Cankarjev Dom.

He said he was offended by the statement that I was “afraid”. I should not say this in public, since in that way I had damaged the reputation of the newspaper, he added. I replied that the statement should be understood as it was said. I referred to Spomenka Hribar, who in one of her essays wrote about the return of totalitarianism and authoritarianism and about fear among citizens. That “fear” was my subjective experience and I had the right to express it anywhere, I explained.

After about 20 minutes of conversation, the managing director of *Večer*, Milan Predan, entered the room and took over. He immediately said in a threatening and authoritarian tone that we “journalists are hired by the employer and we must care for the reputation of the company that pays our wage.” In no event should we say anything detrimental about it in public, he hammered home. He then explained that he and Ranc had considered whether to respond in the same way as they had done at *Delo* – with disciplinary procedures and firings – but they decided that *Večer* would adopt a gentler approach, without direct sanctions. “No employee can or should speak negatively about their employer in public, since after all we are now in capitalism,” stressed Predan, adding that this was a warning. Next time they would resort to formal measures. “If someone is afraid to go to work or if they are unhappy, they can find work elsewhere,” he added.

I affirmed that indeed anyone could look for a job wherever they liked. But I pointed out that employees also have rights which pertain to them by law. In response to his assertion that at *Večer* they had been kind to me, since they had not reacted as *Delo* had done towards the correspondents Rok Kajzer and Matija Grah, I said that I was also being kind to them, since at *Večer* there were continual unauthorised interventions in my articles, they were incessantly violating my authorial rights and the editors were not publishing articles which they had previously ordered, although I was not publicising this, I was not shouting and drawing public attention to this, although I could do so at any time. The laws are also clear in this regard, I added.

Since Predan repeated that journalists employed at *Večer* could not express their opinions in public about their employer, I mentioned the Munich declaration on the rights and duties of journalists, which states that journalists have a responsibility to the public before a responsibility to their employer or government, I referred to the constitution and the journalist’s code of practice, but he just switched off. Then in a conciliatory tone he repeated that they had not reacted harshly like *Delo*, that they had taken a step back and that they would rather calm the situation down. “I don’t have any desire to antagonise the situation either,” I replied. At the end of the disciplinary meeting Predan again threatened that next time there would not just be a warning, they would take action.

On the advice of the journalist’s union, which I had approached before the disciplinary meeting for legal assistance, I immediately wrote up a record of the meeting. This was just as I did after all further talks in which there was direct pressure and chicanery.

Despite the agreement on calming the situation down, the state of affairs at *Večer* did not exactly improve. Quite the opposite. The atmosphere became even more oppressive. Just under a month later, on 11 May, the home affairs editor Darja Zvonar Predan came to the Ljubljana office and criticised me for not covering the Sova area well. In the next sentence she said that I was clearly too familiar with the case, I was too professional and for this reason I “could not see the wood for the trees.” For this reason, in her words, the editorial board had decided that in covering Sova I would be helped by the journalist Vanessa Čokl. As she explained, her main comparative advantage was that she had established special relations with the justice minister and head of the working group for assessing the work of Sova, Lovro Šturm, to whom she also had exclusive access.

She did not respond clearly to the question who and when in the editorial board had taken the view that I was covering Sova badly. She said only that the editor-in-chief, Tomaž Ranc, had been very critical. When I requested being able to see the minutes of the editorial board meeting, she responded that I could not obtain them. I then protested that for more than ten years I had been covering the area of intelligence and security services, that I had an article published in one of the most distinguished world magazines in this field, *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, and that a few years ago I had revealed the illegal cooperation of the Intelligence and Security Service of the Ministry of Defence with a similar American service. To these arguments Ms Predan merely responded that the editorial board had made its mind up.

She ignored the request that she deliver to me a written decision taking coverage of Sova away from me. She pointed out that I could continue to cover the work of the parliamentary committee for oversight of the security and intelligence services. She made no response to the protest that I regarded taking this field away from me as political pressure and that they had done this because I was critical of the Government, while Čokl had good connections with the ministers.

A month earlier the same area was taken away from the experienced journalist on Radio Slovenia Robert Škrjanc, and this was no coincidence. Currently in the media that are under direct or indirect control of the Government – Radio and TV Slovenia, the Slovenian Press Agency, *Delo*, *Večer* and *Primorske novice* – there are no experienced journalists specialised in covering this demanding field writing about the Sova scandal. Even at the newspaper *Delo*, for instance, they have found no suitable replacement for fellow journalist Rok Praprotnik, who moved to *Dnevnik* a while ago. The Sova scandal, whose unpleasant consequences will no doubt be felt by all citizens in the future, is being covered today in Slovenia by a group of young, inexperienced or Government-friendly journalists.

## Managing director demands resignation

After taking this area of work away from me, the pressure was stepped up. Articles were censored with increasing frequency simply because some statement or initiative had been made by an opposition deputy or head of a parliamentary committee. In order for such an article to be at all publishable, it was obligatory to obtain a statement from someone in the ranks of the Government or coalition. So at all costs it had to be “balanced”. The editors also increasingly encroached on journalists’ reports. Despite the professional rules, the managing director of *Večer* started to interfere with journalistic and editorial work with increasing openness.

The worst pressure came in the first week of July. To begin with, on 4 July the editor Darka Zvonar Predan called and instructed me to obtain responses to the article by Vanessa Čokl, in which she wrote that the former director of Sova had the right to an attorney when speaking before a parliamentary committee. I refused the assignment, since I could not assent to such a degradation where first they take away my area of work, then demand that I become the assistant to a colleague who in my professional opinion was not up to the challenge of this demanding subject. Ms Predan then said to me in a very haughty tone that as editor she was ordering me to do this assignment and that as a journalist on *Večer* I was bound to carry out her orders. Since the conversation had gone pear-shaped, I also raised my voice and I answered that I was not Čokl's assistant or page-boy, and that – if she was already covering the area of the secret services – she should also cover those events that she otherwise had not time for. Then in an even higher tone Ms Predan threatened disciplinary procedures and said that she would tell the editor-in-chief and managing director about my refusal of work and that I would have serious problems. I shouted back to her, go ahead and discipline me. Then I hung up.

Just a few minutes later I was called by Milan Predan, the managing director and spouse of the editor. First of all he said in agitated tones “What do you think you’re doing talking to the editor like that, and what are you playing at?” After a few minutes I convinced him to listen to my side of the story, in other words that I felt her request to be professionally degrading. He repeated, what was I thinking, to talk to the editor in such a tone, and said that everyone at the editorial desk had heard how I had behaved inappropriately. In answer to the question, how could they hear what I said over the phone if the call was not put on speaker, he responded that the editor had told them. Predan also denied that they had taken away from me coverage of the secret services. I then suggested that I call Ms Predan and apologise to her for raising my voice. That was the end of the

conversation. Soon after that I called Ms Predan and apologised.

On that day I then wrote two separate, independent texts: the news from the meeting of the parliamentary committee for oversight of the secret services and an article on the responses of Iztok Podbregar, his attorney and the head of the parliamentary committee on the legal opinion whereby Podbregar had the right to an attorney before a parliamentary committee. Thus I did actually carry out the editor's assignment. I started the responses article with Podbregar's statement that the defendants in the JBTZ [four including Janša under Yugoslavia – transl.] trial at the military court also had the right to an attorney. Since some deputies doubted whether Podbregar could appear before the committee with an attorney, it seemed essential to put this in the introduction. But this was not the case in the published article. Without my knowledge, let alone consent, the two texts were merged and published as a joint article. Podbregar's statement was of course not published in the introduction, but somewhere in the middle of the article.

Then on 5 July I had to report from the meeting of the parliamentary defence committee. The first and most important point of the agenda was the report from the Court of Audit on public procurement of a classified nature, which comprises 60 percent of the defence budget. The debate on this lasted for almost the entire meeting, and at its conclusion the deputies briefly received the further information from the defence ministry about falsified diplomas in the Slovenian armed forces. The minister merely repeated the month-and-a-half old news about how many forged diplomas they had discovered, and for this reason they would be firing 75 servicemen. Equally brief was the discussion on the issue of the mounted unit at Lipica.

In my report I therefore devoted the majority of space to the report from the Court of Audit, and I mentioned the other points only in passing. I sent the article to Maribor as usual, but even before the expiry of the deadline for submitting the article I was called by the head of the editorial desk and asked why I had mentioned nowhere that 75 soldiers had been fired, since the Slovenian Press Agency (SPA) was reporting extensively on this. I explained that the discussion of that had lasted just a few minutes. "The SPA report seems like a pre-written text without the author even being at the meeting," I responded. At the same time I mentioned that in the run up to the meeting, the SPA had mentioned only the problem of the forged diplomas, although there were six points scheduled for the agenda, and that stressing just one point was highly unusual practice for the SPA. I emphasised that the report was a proper presentation of what was expressed at the meeting, and that as the author I stood squarely by what I had written. The head of the desk accepted my arguments, and in connection with the report no one called me any more that day.

Since the whole thing seemed to me really strange and since once again I sensed "trouble", I also sent to the editorial desk by e-mail an article from the website 24ur.com published on 27 May 2007. That article gave exactly the same number of servicemen fired from the Slovenian armed forces as the number given at the defence committee meeting of 5 July.

The report was published the next day. On the afternoon of Friday, 6 July, I was called by the editor, Darka Zvonar Predan. Out of the blue she started attacking me over the trouble they had had with the previous day's report. She asked why had I not emphasised that 75 servicemen had been fired. In her words, the editor-in-chief Tomaž Ranc even wanted to publish this information as the main news on the front page. She also launched into me about how I could dare to deal with that issue in just one sentence, while the SPA and other media were reporting so extensively on it. I replied that the numbers relating to the firings from the army were more than a month and a half old and that the discussion of that topic lasted just a few minutes. "As a journalist I judged that what was more important to the readers was the report from the Court of Audit about the spending of 60 percent of the defence budget," I said. She did not agree with this. She then went on to ask, "what about Lipica?" At least I could have mentioned the Lipica horses and the mounted unit, but I

dismissed that in just one sentence, she said in accusation. “In comparison with such a large share of the defence budget the mounted unit does not merit any more space, especially since that unit contributes absolutely nothing to the defence capability of the country,” I replied.

Then Ms Predan again raised her tone, with a who do I think I am to judge what is interesting for the readers. She repeated that they had had enormous problems with the article before they adapted it for publication. She accused me of writing too much as an expert, as if I was writing for some defence journal and not for a daily newspaper. “I’ve been writing in exactly the same way for *Večer* since 1998 and the readers have never had any difficulty understanding my articles,” I told her. “In the *Večer* report they most certainly discovered more important information than in the articles that talked about the old news of the 75 firings or the mounted unit.”

Ms Predan then further sharpened her tone and ordered me to come the next week to Maribor for talks about my work. At this point she repeated that I was working unprofessionally and badly. “The entire editorial board is of the same opinion,” she added. She also said it would be good if I no longer covered military topics. In support of this she asserted that in reporting on military affairs I had a problem similar to the one I had with the intelligence services. In other words that I was too expertly familiar with the issues and therefore could not see the wood for the trees.

Of course I did not agree with what she said. Once again I demanded to see the minutes of the editorial board. Since she continued the conversation in a threatening tone and again ordered me to come to a meeting in Maribor, I mentioned to her that it would clearly be best for me to come to the meeting with an attorney.

She immediately turned this around. Who was I to threaten her with attorneys, she said. I replied that I was not threatening, since an attorney was always involved in defence and not attack or accusation. I then proposed that we end the conversation and continue it on Monday and later in person in Maribor. She agreed with this, so I thought that a hard week and Friday was finally over. But I was seriously mistaken.

Ten minutes later I was again called by the managing director of *Večer* and the editor’s husband, Milan Predan. He asked, what was all this about that I was coming to Maribor with an attorney. I replied that his information was not correct, I briefly described the conversation with Ms Predan and said that I had mentioned only the possibility of coming with an attorney, since she had levelled charges at me that implicated my professional and personal integrity.

“If you come with an attorney, someone from the other newspapers will no doubt publish some big story about what we’re doing to Zgaga at *Večer* for him to have to come with an attorney,” he told me. But I repeated that I had mentioned this only as a possibility and not as a fact, as had been clearly misrepresented to him.

Predan then explained that I could come with an attorney only in the event of formal proceedings, such as determining incapability for the purpose of terminating employment. For the moment no such proceedings have been instigated against me at *Večer*. I replied that I was aware of this, but that I was constantly subjected to charges of bad work on the part of the editor Ms Predan. Whenever I want board minutes, I never receive them. Moreover she was constantly repeating that the editorial board felt the same. Predan then said that this would no longer be the case.

Once again I pointed out to him the controversial practice of *Večer* journalists not being able to see the minutes of the editorial board. This plus the fact that the constant repetition from Darka Zvonar Predan that my work was bad and unprofessional, while other fellow journalists and readers valued me as an expert in my field, bordered on chicanery. Predan merely replied in a sharp tone that I

should come next week to Maribor for talks. That ended the phone call.

And if I thought that the most stressful and arduous Friday, 6 July 2007, was now truly over, I was again mistaken. At 5.14 p.m. I received an e-mail from the managing director Predan with the following message:

*“Blaž, I demand a written explanation for the attached mail, which speaks about your denial of any authority of the editors and consequently also the editor-in-chief over your texts, which is at odds with logic, common sense and with the working hierarchy acknowledged by all other Večer journalists. A journalist who thinks that he is his own boss and that no editor has the right to change even his grammatical errors, let alone where necessary to shorten the text or correct inaccuracies, of course cannot work either at Večer or at any other newspaper which is not owned by him, but must set up his own newspaper. I don't know what is going on with you here and who is encouraging you in such irrational behaviour, I only know that this will no longer do and you must decide whether to stay at Večer and respect the fundamental rules of work and behaviour, or simply find another medium where you can work in the manner you see fit.”*

This e-mail relates to a brief news item I wrote on 2 July on the visit of the Schengen evaluation group at Brnik airport [Ljubljana]. Since I sensed that without my consent the editors would again interfere with the text and, for instance, change the name of Brnik airport to “Jože Pučnik Airport”, as all the media under Government control had suddenly started doing, I attached to the article the following request:

*“As author of the article I demand that no changes to the text should be made. Otherwise I withdraw the text.”*

When I came back from sick leave on 23 July, I sent the managing director the following response, to which he never replied:

*“Dear Managing Director Milan Predan,*

*Firstly may I apologise for the late response; until today I was on sick leave.*

*With regard to my request, for which you state that it supposedly denies all authority of the editors and consequently also the editor-in-chief over my texts, I would like to explain that I may indeed have written the actual request rather too sharply. It should by rights have stated that I withdraw my by-line from the text and not the text as a whole. I apologise for this excessively sharp message and the misunderstanding.*

*I wrote the aforementioned addendum to the article primarily because recently I have observed increasing changes and substantive interference in my articles, without as the author being at least apprised of them, let alone being asked for my consent.*

*In this connection I would like to point out Article 25 of the code of journalistic ethics, to which according to my knowledge all members of the editorial team at Večer are tied, including the editor-in-chief, and which states that no one “may alter the import of or revise the product without the consent of the journalist.”*

*With regard to authorial rights, however, it is clear that my material authorial rights have been*

*transferred to the Večer publishing company as part of my employment, while under the valid legislation and international conventions the moral authorial rights of every author are inalienable. Since moral authorial rights are inseparably linked to the by-line of the author under the product and relate also to the aforementioned Article 25 of the code, in the e-mail attached to the article I had in mind precisely this, although unfortunately at the time I wrote in an imprecise and slightly sharp form.*

*I should add here that the aforementioned text was very brief, since it was a news item. Equally, the aforementioned message with the article did not interrupt the working process, nor did it cause any kind of damage to the Večer newspaper.*

*The claim that I deny the authority of the editors is in no way true. To date I have fulfilled all working instructions and assignments from the editors, in accordance with my conscience, conscientiously, promptly and efficiently. I also intend to do so in the future.*

*I apologise for the aforementioned misunderstanding and offer you my best regards.”*

Although a few times I had already toyed with the idea of pointing out in public the kind of censorship and political pressure journalists are subject to in Slovenia and at the *Večer* newspaper, it was actually on that arduous and stressful 6 July that the die was truly cast. I knew that after such a decision there would be no going back. I then sent a letter to European leaders and citizens on 14 August, to around 350 addresses abroad. After this I took a few days' leave, to drink in the sea air and gather a little extra strength, since I knew that the autumn would be highly stressful. And on 29 August, when news of the letter arrived on the TV Slovenia teletext, it exploded.

## Black day for *Večer*

That was truly a tough day at *Večer*. Although the main media censored the letter in which I drew attention to the censorship, the letter started circulating among journalists. And on the same day, managing director Milan Predan started calling on his co-workers to state publicly their opposition to me.

*“(name), how would you comment on the letter of your colleague Zgaga which was published today by Media Watch? Will you, his co-workers, finally tell him where he stands, or will you wait for me to tell him, whereupon he will start playing the victim again, claiming the bosses are double-dealing with him, because he dares to tell the “truth”? I trust you can see what damage he is doing to all of us and the newspaper, and right at a time when we are gradually doing better – or is it that he is doing so under someone else's encouragement precisely because of this?”*

Thus read the e-mail which its recipient handed over to me on his own initiative. But these co-workers did not set themselves up against me. Instead, this was done by 13 editors, who the following day signed a “Statement on the journalist's letter”.

*“The editorial board entirely rejects the substance of the letter by journalist Blaž Zgaga, in which he mentions censorship at Večer. At Večer we are critical of state and local authorities and we write about everything, something which readers can verify every day. Editor-in-chief Tomaž Ranc will hold talks with the journalist in which he will attempt to find out what prompted his writing.”*

Nevertheless it was not 13 editors that signed this, as they communicated to the public. Despite the appeal from editor-in-chief Ranc, the features editor Mirko Lorenci did not sign the statement. Indeed Lorenci was himself a victim of censorship. At the end of last October for the Neuradno

[Unofficial] column, which comes out in place of the Monday commentary on page five of the paper, he wrote a commentary in which he wrote humorously about the note from *Delo* managing director Danilo Slivnik in the weekly *Mag*, that voters in the last local elections had actually made the wrong decision. But on Monday 30 October 2006, *Večer* was published for the first time without the Neuradno column. Lorenci's commentary arrived in the bunker.

So why was 30 August such a black day for *Večer*? Not at all because 13 signatories might have come out against me, but because 12 editors of *Večer* and one deputy editor signed their names to such a smear, which was supposed to be a public statement, yet they did not even dare advise the author of the statement about its errors or propose any improvement to the wording.

This was without doubt one of the blackest days in the history of *Večer*. Partly because it was obvious that the signatory editors were under great pressure. Indeed it was not enough for the leading troika simply to adopt a public statement from the editorial board. Instead of this they preferred to demand the actual signatures of subordinate editors. They demanded that the editors stand up and be counted, and show their loyalty. They wanted the editors to show them who was with them and who was against them. And when one editor was against them, they sought out and solicited the signature of a deputy editor.

Thus the signatories demonstrated publicly with their own hands their ethics, professionalism and even more so the elasticity of their backbones. In fact for years now at *Večer* the same old people have been circulating in the editorial jobs, hiring themselves out to one master and then another. Frequently some of them have clarified to me that this is simply the way it is and nothing can be changed.

illustration

**COPY OF STATEMENT WITH ORIGINAL SIGNATURES!**

see in the attachment

illustration

Through their signatures on the public statement they not only denied the assertions of censorship at *Večer*, but also the warnings about the restriction of media freedom in Slovenia which I included in my open letter. You will therefore of course not find the aforementioned 13 among the signatories of the journalists' petition against censorship and political pressure on journalists in Slovenia, which was signed between 10 September and 12 October 2007 by 571 Slovenian journalists.

Equally, you will not find many journalists from the Maribor headquarters of *Večer* among the signatories. I entirely understand my co-workers who are fearful for their jobs. Even those who are calculatingly waiting for their chance upon possible personnel changes. I understand that it is

possible to find a thousand and one reasons not to sign the petition, and each one is legitimate. I respect each such decision. Of course they must explain their actions, just like all other journalists, to the readers. It is for them, and for them to be informed, that we write. Journalists stand or fall with their readers.

Nevertheless the petition was signed by a handful of courageous journalists from the Maribor office of *Večer*. I am convinced that as soon as their signatures were known, they were subjected to pressure and accusations from the others. That is how things are at *Večer*.

It is also becoming increasingly clear that the owners of *Večer* are not seeking to develop or improve the quality of the newspaper. Last year's decision of the supervisory board to channel more than 90 percent of the profits into dividends cannot be interpreted in any other way. Meanwhile, the salaries of journalists at *Večer* have declined in real terms for eight years now. The newspaper is being abandoned by good journalists, and of course quality journalists to replace them cannot be attracted. Young and inexperienced ones are trying as hard as they can, but every journalist needs at least five years of experience to be able to cover their field independently and with authority.

The fact that there is a "chain of command" in the managing of *Večer* and its editorial policy was confirmed most illustratively in a letter of 12 June 2007 from the then state secretary at the Ministry of the Economy, Andrijana Starina Kosem. She then actually went on to become president of the supervisory board of the newspaper *Delo*. And who performs this function at *Večer*? A lawyer who carved out his professional career in the repressive state security structures. This is unpleasantly reminiscent of the personnel appointments in Putin's Russia, where people from the security structures or the so-called "siloviki" [strongmen] occupy all the more important offices in society. Just by way of illustration, in the very period when owing to the Sava scandal I was subject to "expedited" proceedings by the police, the current president of the *Večer* supervisory board was director of the criminal investigation police. In such a state of affairs it is hard to see any more bright light at *Večer*.

## Liberation

Given all the good and mainly bad things I have experienced in recent years at *Večer*, I have asked myself with increasing frequency, does it even make sense any more to stick with journalism? Is the situation really so inescapable that I have to change my profession, which has now sadly happened with several good Slovenian journalists and editors? Should we allow politicians and media owners, in contravention of all international rules, European democratic standards and the valid laws in Slovenia, to censor and pressure journalists, and instead of information and plural opinions to offer the public merely cheap political propaganda and the endless wellbeing of the consumer society?

On 6 July 2007, when the pressure from above reached its peak, I realised that I had no more time to lose. All previous equivocation vanished. It was in fact false. Should I, for a little over a thousand euros in pay, for which I must write more than an article a day, lie to the readers to suit the will of politically appointed editors, or should I rather draw attention to censorship and prepare myself – despite my education and experience – to have to work perhaps even as a manual labourer, if in Slovenia owing to political connections I will no longer be able to get any other work. Should I hand in my notice and quietly depart *Večer* and journalism, or should I still scream at the top of my voice and join the struggle for media freedom and a democratic society, and above all, for myself. For my own self. So I will be able to look at myself in the mirror each morning. And so I can look the readers in the eye.

For this reason I wrote the open letter to European leaders and citizens and sent it out on 14 August

2007 to around 350 addresses abroad. Although there was considerable stress in anticipating what would then happen to me at *Večer*, and I was actually even prepared for them to order – in contravention of the regulations – my immediate extraordinary dismissal, the decision was easy. Very easy. When it was done, I felt free in a way I had not done for a long time. Since then I have felt free from fear and shackles, since I knew that at *Večer* I had nothing to lose. Above all, I feel free because I am speaking the truth.

When the journalists' petition against censorship and political pressure on journalists in Slovenia, which I had co-formulated, was signed by 571 Slovenian journalists, I realised that in the struggle for media freedom I was not alone. With such a mass of signatures under the petition, the fear among Slovenian journalists has undoubtedly been overcome. I hope that now other journalists will also realise that their equivocation is false and they do not have much to lose. And that they will speak up.

I would also still like *Večer* to return to its normal course and once again facilitate professional and autonomous journalism. For if I moved to the newspaper *Večer* a few years ago because I wished to help create a good *Večer* [Evening], then today all I can wish it is – good night.

(Ljubljana, 20 October 2007)