

The propaganda and the image of Kumanova incident

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Abstract

Countries aim to create a positive image for themselves even through propaganda exerted by state actors, being presented as a victim of aggression, in order to gain sympathy from others. One such case of being presented as victims by demonizing the other party, was the armed incident in Kumanovo, Macedonia which happened at the beginning of the month of May; an event which had a great media coverage by international media. In this incident Macedonian side sought to present itself as victims of aggression caused by extremist citizens from Kosovo. International media widely reported the incident while a foreign public, uninformed in details about the Balkans developments, is often influenced by the primacy effect of the message, be that a false one. The paper will address the huge international media coverage on this armed incident where 18 people were killed seen from the perspective of the image of Albanians in general and Kosovo in particular.

The main hypothesis that arises here is that the incident in Kumanovo, despite great uncertainties and doubts about the event itself, has negatively affected the international image of Albanians to distant public. The paper aims to analyze the coverage of the powerful international media; the primary message that was given and whether later explanatory information were provided thus to clarify the uncertainties. The primary message, even if it is a propaganda message, is estimated to be more effective than subsequent correction, especially in cases when the receiver of the message is a hardly informed public with the developments or the public which does not show any specific interest to such developments.

Key words: *propaganda, agenda setting, image, global media, Kosovo, political communication*

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Introduction

The case of an armed incident in Kumanova, Macedonia, where 18 people were killed, mainly Albanians from Kosova and several Macedonian police officers, requires an interdisciplinary approach in order to explain the way states depending on their geopolitical circumstances, use the media propaganda as well to focus attention to some issues and shift the focus from other troubles they are facing. Before this incident, the situation in Macedonia was very tense between the opposition and the Macedonian government. Months before the incident happened, the opposition was continuously making public telephone recordings of Macedonian government officials conversations, including the prime minister, the minister of internal affairs, secret police chief etc, where the conversations heard showed the involvement of governmental high officials in economic crimes, concealment of assassinations and attempted attacks performed by the government ministers, election falsification etc¹. The scandal of massive wiretapping the government has conducted to more than 20 thousand Macedonian citizens, a part of which had fallen into the hands of the opposition, strained even further the situation between the opposition and the government, by the opposition protests, but also by the police violence and arrests of opposition protesters². The escalation of the situation occurred in May 5 with the protests as the telephone recordings proved that government leaders had concealed the assassination of a young boy committed by state officials in 2011 and the concealment of an alleged

¹ The Guardian, "Fears for Macedonia's fragile democracy amid 'coup' and wiretap claims", February, 27, 2015: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/27/fears-macedonias-fragile-democracy-amid-coup-wiretap-claims>

Voice of America, "New Opposition Protests in Macedonia Follow Violent Clashes", May 6, 2015. in: <http://www.voanews.com/content/ap-macedonia-protests/2752876.html>

² NYT, Protesting Macedonians Demand Government's Resignation, May, 17, 2015. In: <http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2015/05/17/world/europe/ap-eu-macedonia-protests.html>

attempted attack against a Macedonian journalist in 2013. The clashes were as severe as never before in the history of Macedonia and it caused a joined Albanian - Macedonian protest against the government waving both Albanian and Macedonian flags at the same place³. At this time of major clashes within the Macedonian state since its independence declaration in 1991, all of a sudden 18 people were killed in Kumanova, 8 police and 10 Albanians in a firefight. This happened only four days after violent protests against the government had started. Most of those killed were from Kosova, most of those arrested and leaders of the group were from Kosova as well.

The methodology

This commentary has no intention of dealing with the reason that the citizens came from Kosova to fight in Macedonia; whether they were or were not manipulated or betrayed? The question whether this group from Kosova was paid to come to Macedonia and such other questions are not a matter of interest. What matters here and is raised as a research question is only whether the incident of Kumanova could have damaged the image of Kosova considering what international media broadcasted about this incident.

Among these monitored media are the global BBC, CNN, then Euronews and Al Jazeera. The first two have broadcasted 2-4 reports within the first two days after the killings in Kumanova, whereas Euronews and Al Jazeera two coverages each. Not counting here the repetition of reports depending on the news editions. The reason these media were distinguished is because during monitoring was noticed that many other media have broadcasted their reports, or were referred to these media. Besides that, these media were reviewed because they fulfill an informative and multicultural mosaic.

What global media reported over Kumanova?

³ BBC, Macedonia protests: Anti-Gruevski rally in Skopje
<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32771233>

On May 10, CNN announced that several Macedonian police officers were killed by a group called terrorist in a city inhabited by both Albanians and Macedonians, whereas civilians were evacuated⁴.



Fig. 1. CNN Report about incident

Later on that day, CNN referring to the governmental official sources in Skopje, announced that five people have been killed and they were Macedonian police officers. This happened during a firefight between the police officers and a terrorist group consisting of about 70 people. It all occurred in the city that, as CNN describes, “Kumanova is a residence of Albanian ethnic minority, who are mainly Muslims. Macedonia is orthodox Christian majority”⁵. There is also mentioned that this country experienced an interethnic armed conflict between Albanians and Macedonians in 2001. During another coverage from Skopje, CNN announced that more than 22 people have been killed in a firefight against a terrorist group, in the country with interethnic problems between Albanians and Macedonians. Moreover, in this live appearance, Macedonian diplomat Nikolla Dimitrov was pronounced saying that Macedonia has remained a neuralgic spot in the Balkans after the war between state armed forces and the Albanian rebels in 2001⁶.

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EFQJy8oOoz8>

⁵ <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/05/10/europe/macedonia-police-raid-balkan-flashpoint/>

⁶ <http://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2015/05/11/exp-macedonia-unrest-leaves-22-dead.cnn>



Fig. 2. CNN Report about Kumanovo's incident

Under the headline “Macedonian police officers killed in a firefight against terrorists”. May 10, BBC announced that five police officers were killed by a terrorist group, who, according to the Macedonian internal affairs ministry, came from a neighbour country. Later on, the report highlights that it all happened close to the Kosovar-Serbian border, adding that a month ago about 40 Albanians from Kosova had entered into Macedonia attacking and destroying the Goshinca station near the border⁷. This report cited Macedonian internal affairs minister, Gordana Jankullovska, who expressed that Macedonian police officers were killed by bombs and automatic weapon attacks, by people coming from abroad whose aim was to attack state institutions in Macedonia as well. She called killed police officers “heroes who gave their life protecting the Republic of Macedonia”, adding that some of the attackers have been killed whereas 20 others were surrendered⁸.

A day later, most of the western media broadcasted the AFP’s report, which says that out of 30 people being charged for terrorism, 18 caught by the police officers in Kumanova are from Kosova who illegally entered into Macedonia⁹. Same day, BBC also broadcasted

⁷ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32674121>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-05-12/macedonia-charges-30-with-terrorism-after-kumanovo-shooting/6461990>

AFP's report which referred to the Macedonian News Agency (MIA) saying, "Macedonia charges 30 with terrorism after Kumanovo clashes"¹⁰. Same day again May 11, under the headline "Macedonia blames Kosovars for the lethal firefight in Kumanova", BBC reported that macedonian authorities have identified the leaders of the armed group who are citizens of Kosova. Citing Macedonian authorities, according to BBC, Sami Ukshini, Beg Rizaj, Dem Shehu, Muhamet Krasniqi and Mirsad Ndrecaj, were the leaders of the armed group, citizens of Kosova, whereas 14 corpses in uniforms were from Kosova was said as well¹¹. Al Jazeera made a similar report, adding to its report taken from Reuters, that *Kosovars were guilty for the loss of 22 lives in Kumanova*. This Arab television, English language program, cited Macedonian authorities saying that this was "an extremely serious incident and where Macedonia was the target of a terrorist attack...., whereas the attackers were Albanians, former KLA members"¹².

During the first two days after the killings, the information mainly forwarded to the international public by these global media, was that in Macedonia five police officers have been killed from a terrorist armed attack, whereas the total number of victims is 22¹³. It is about a terrorist attack against the police, whilst the terrorists, according to the Macedonian authorities that cited international media, had come from Kosova. After the armed group surrendered, two days later, these media made no more reports about Kumanova, even though this incident was called by the opposition, international factors and others as a staging of the Macedonian government in order to shift the focus from the opposition protests and the scandal of massive wiretapping.

¹⁰ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32695909>

¹¹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32680904>

¹² <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/05/macedonia-policemen-killed-battle-armed-group-150509213341943.html>

¹³ Only after few days macedonain internal affairs ministry proclaimed that there have not been killed 22 people but 18, and that the mistake, accordin to them, was made because some copses were count twice

The reporting effects

It generally happens that the effect of impactful message is more influential and remembered rather than a latter possible explanation. In this case, the news that an armed attack occurred in a European country where 18 or 22 people have been killed, mentioning terrorists, clashes between Muslim Albanians and orthodox Macedonians, is so attractive to the western public at this time of uncertainty, religious terrorism, wars in Arab territories, after Charlie Hebdo. Reporting 22 people killed in European continent is of a special interest to the international media, where five among them were police officers and the rest were, as it was said, terrorists. But, later developments explaining the incident, are of course not a matter of interest either to international media or even less to international public. Moreover, even if, in the future it would be confirmed that the group that entered from Kosova into Macedonia was manipulated by Macedonian governmental segments, it presents no possibility to invert the effect of the initial news that “ a terrorist group from Kosova entered into Macedonia and killed police officers, in a incident where 22 people were killed..”. By this media coverage of the incident the negative effect was achieved, the image of Albanians or Kosova was stroked. Thus, the primacy effect¹⁴ has made its way.

In the cases where the receiver of the message is not informed and the event is sudden and in this case the receiver is diverse public over the world, the repeated effect that in this case would possibly be “the group was tricked, manipulated by the secret police for internal political purposes”. Again a possible denial that has little chances to happen would not have the improving effect of the damaged image.

¹⁴ Massive communication theoreticians have asked questions whether the initial arguments supporting a situation are more efficient, or the subsequent or final arguments supporting an opposite situation? The issue here is about those known as primacy effects, if verified that the initial arguments and recency effect are more efficient if the final arguments result more efficient. It usually happens that the primacy effect has more impact to the audience rather than the recency effect.

The first news is striking and always has a greater effect rather than a latter denial if it occurs¹⁵.

However, even if this occurs, it would hardly get a media coverage comparing to the negative previous news about the image of Kosova that “22 people have been killed in Macedonia in a firefight against Kosovar terrorists”. This would not happen because of another practical reason as well: the news about *the killing of terrorists* in this global social context are more attractive and striking to the foreign public rather than even if there is a denial in the future that *the time ago killings in Macedonia have been instrumentalized by the state government itself*.

In other words, despite the contemptuous attitude we might have by the philosophical and metaphysical traditional attitudes, however, the industry for a good image formation or others image damaging depends on a series of measures and communication strategies, engagement of public relations specialists and often the propaganda as well etc¹⁶.

Conclusion

These media, dealt with Kumanova only first two-three days after the incident, only when talking about the number of killed people, when the Macedonian authorities claimed that the armed group from Kosova aimed the destabilization of Macedonia, that they are terrorists etc. Later on, when the Macedonian opposition expressed doubts about the incident and the arrested themselves started to say that they were manipulated by the Macedonian secret police in order to shift the focus: from the tensions within Macedonia – the risk that comes to

Macedonia by the Albanians from inside and by Kosova from outside, international media had no more interest over the

¹⁵ Hovland, C.I., Lumsdale, A.A. & Sheffield, F.D, *Experiments on Mass Communication: Studies in Social Psychology in World War II: Volume III*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1949.

¹⁶ John Hartley, *Communication, Cultural and Media Studies*, Routledge, 2004. f. 108.

developments in Macedonia. In other words, international public has already received the message that Macedonia was a victim of an invasion by an Albanian armed group from Kosova, helped from Albanians from Macedonia.

Moreover, those two days after the incident international media reported, citing Macedonian authorities, saying that it was all about a terrorist group who came from Kosova, adding explanations in their reports that the Albanians are Muslims, whilst Macedonians are orthodox. In other words, concerning the incident in Kumanova, some foreign public was generally informed that there are armed disorder and victims among people in Macedonia, and this happened as a result of an armed group who entered from Kosova, inhabited by Albanian Muslims and attacked orthodox Macedonians in order to destabilize this unstable country which went through an interethnic armed conflict in 2001.

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