

Lulzim Shala

Journalist, Radio-Television Kosovo

Kosovo

Can you introduce yourself and the work you do as a journalist?

I'm Lulzim Shala, I've been working as a journalist since 1999 and I've mainly covered various political, historical, cultural and educational events, shall we say.

Describe the most important cases of surveillance of journalists in your country.

Journalism, Kosovo journalism I mean, has been having problems since the 1980s when the wiretapping and harassment began. Most of the Kosovo journalists had to be very careful about what they were doing and what they were writing. In practice, they were under surveillance for what they were saying in their articles and in their reporting. These were major problems at that time. They began at that time [in 1980] and then they got more difficult and went on for a long time. Until the time of Kosovo's liberation [from Serbian rule in 1999], how to cover, write about or edit [a story about] an event in the controlled media environment of Kosovo was a big problem for journalists. This was going on all the time. It was a big problem for all us who were working at that time, especially in the 1990s when there were extraordinary problems.

When did you start to feel you were under surveillance?

The surveillance started in 1998-99 at Radio-Television Pristina. I was put under surveillance and started being monitored there. It was only the beginning of the problem. Then there were the challenges of reporting some of the big events at that time like the miners' strike, we faced problems while reporting because we were being controlled all the time. We at Radio-Television Pristina were under

serious surveillance in terms of what we were writing and what we were saying about those political events. These were challenges. These were the troubles that dogged us constantly. But then came an even more serious situation for us reporters. There was a mass poisoning of Albanian students all over Kosovo. I was in Podujeva. It was random there because I was there for a different story when the poisoning of students happened. And that's where the whole problem started. I returned to Pristina with recorded statements, including from the police officials who were in Podujeva at the time. I brought the recordings to Radio Pristina. Agim Mala was director of radio and television at that time. I handed over my recorded material about the people who were supposed to have done the poisoning. The pupils suffered a lot that day from poisoning. They were constantly ill. At first the director told me that all the material would be edited soon and I should go and prepare the report. But when I returned after I'd finished the report, the director told me to not broadcast it because someone from above had intervened, and the report was not broadcast that day. This was the first phase, when what was going on and what was going to happen in the future was openly revealed, because we were going to be constantly controlled.

What happened to you then?

Following the mass poisonings, I came under surveillance by the then State Security Service. My telephone started to be tapped and my family knew this. There were also two people who followed me from the Radio Kosovo building to my flat in the Pejton neighbourhood. At the entrance to my flat was a police officer and a few metres away were two people in a car. I was followed for around three to four months. Then they came to put me in prison. I was imprisoned four months after the poisoning. We knew this would happen because I was under surveillance all the time. It was clear it would happen one day. But it was my duty to report on that situation, which was frightening at that time. Those who remember the poisoning in Podujeve, Prizren and all around Kosovo, a Yugoslav province at that time. Then these problems continued and my court case was retried three times. In the group [of defendants], I was with my brother Blerim and my other colleagues, Halil Matoshi and Edmond Hoxha, and some members of the Parliamentary Party from Podujeva.

First Blerim was arrested in the street. I remember it was early Saturday morning. I was informed by my family members that Blerim and Halil had been arrested and now they are coming to you. They first went to Radio Pristina. A police special unit came to arrest me. They didn't find me at Radio Pristina and they went to my flat. I went to a lower floor to my aunt's husband, Abaz Dula, because at first I thought I wouldn't surrender. But considering that my brother Blerim had been arrested, I said to myself this could worsen his situation if I escape. Then they came to arrest me and I surrendered. They took me and sent me to the State Security Service, and it was an Albanian person who arrested me. In the meantime, my flat was raided. After I was released from prison, my wife told me that even one of my daughter's toys was torn apart to see if it had anything inside. That means the hatred against us was at that level. In the meantime, State Security interrogated me non-stop for 48 hours.

There was a State Security officer from Novi Sad who questioned me. He said to me: "We know that a day before the poisonings in the city of Podujeva, you insisted on broadcasting a news story which was a call for students not to go to school because there would be poisonings."

Unfortunately, after I was arrested, an editor and a female typist later testified and said that Lulzim Shala pushed to include that news story in the news broadcast at 10pm, a day before the poisoning in Podujeva.

Was there other evidence of surveillance?

We knew about this issue [bugging] because the phone we had in the house never had a clear signal when you were trying to call someone or the voices got scrambled. We knew this. In my house from 1988 to 1999, the phone was constantly tapped. This was the beginning, and the biggest proof of the wiretapping was when I started working for the Spanish news agency EFE. For this agency, I did an exclusive interview with Mahmut Bakalli [president of the League of Communists of Kosovo] related to the events in 1995 to 1996 and 1997 in Kosovo. But the entire interview I sent to EFE was broadcast by RTS [Radio-Television Serbia] in the evening without any author's name. Imagine. Mahmut Bakalli called me, saying: "Lulzim, everything that I said was just broadcast by RTS on its TV programme." I said to him: "Believe me, Mr. Bakalli, the phone is

tapped.” He suspected what had happened with the interview. This was a clear-cut case of phone-tapping and of what they were doing at that time.

Were there any specific reasons for the surveillance?

This was the aim of the state at that time, it wanted people to be afraid and leave Kosovo. As I said earlier, the investigation into us was repeated three times and the main goal was to make us leave Kosovo.

What did the surveillance achieve?

First of all, fear was sown among journalists, and then there was the closure of media outlets such as ‘Rilindja’ and RTP [Radio-Television Pristina]. The goal was to create an information black hole so the public here and the world wasn’t informed about what was happening in Kosovo. This was their main goal. But we found ways to report on various events, such as forgiveness for blood feuds or other developments. There was fear in all of us and our family members were also afraid because we were usually followed. This affected our life, every aspect of our life. But I think we managed to do our job. There were jailings of journalists, murders and various kinds of persecution of journalists. But I think we managed to carry out our mission as journalists.

The main aim was to silence the media, to create an information black hole order to kill people and not let anyone outside know about it. It's important to say that most of the events that were covered at that time [by the Kosovo media] were covered covertly by individuals. For example, the coverage of the declaration of the Kosovo constitution in the city of Kacanik [in September 1990]. I was not there that day, but journalists went there secretly. Many other events were covered in unusual ways, including killings. But the domestic and international public was informed in a timely manner. This was the main goal.

Interview by Serbeze Haxhiaj, 2023

