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This is a story of Estonian media and their failure to act ethically and morally at the time of genocide. It is also a personal story of how academics are treated if they voice controversial points of view. The story is not just about my experience as an academic in Estonia but finds wider relevance in the face of genuine oppression faced by the academic and civil societies who dare to criticize Israel across Europe and the world. It is somewhat long, so I hope you will find time to engage with this.

This past Saturday morning (July 26th), I saw that Delfi, a prominent Baltic tabloid, published an article about the pro-Palestinian movement in Estonia and my own involvement with it. The article, ominously titled “Did Tallinn University lecturer call for embassies to be burned down?” set a stage for an attempt at delegitimizing my voice and indeed for the attempted political murder of the pro-Palestine movement in Estonia.

Why would someone do this? The reasons are not entirely clear, but I will try to unpack them here.

According to the article, Taavi Minnik, the journalist behind it, received a “tip off” from someone about pro-Palestinian sit-ins at Tallinn University. Minnik decided to investigate. This is somewhat intriguing since we have been organizing peaceful awareness events – like movies for Palestine – for the public since at least October last year, and the peaceful and silent sit-in at Tallinn University since early March. No journalist has, to my knowledge, visited us before.

Minnik visited us in early June, and I spoke to what I assume was his photographer about our sit-in. Minnik **did not say a single word** to me, nor, as far as I recall, to anyone else at the sit-in. He just stood silent, observing the room around him as I spoke to the purported photographer, accompanied by my friend and colleague Dr Benjamin Klasche. We spoke for about 5 minutes before I had to go and continue my work, and Dr Daniele Monticelli kindly took over and finished the conversation.

The Anonymous Tipper

Before I describe the article and discuss some points in it, I want to say that I have my suspicions as to who the tipper was because the person reached out to me. Apparently, it was Heikki Paltser, a self-styled “concerned citizen” (and, based on open search, an EKRE supporter). The situation gets very convoluted here. This Saturday I felt as if I suddenly found myself in the magical world of Murakami or some such author.

Paltser saw it fit to e-mail **Milorad Dodik**, the President of Republika Srpska, an entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H), deploring my “Islamist” actions and informing him that I had written a critical article against him for Estonian national broadcaster ERR. He Cc-ed me in the e-mail, which is how I realized that he might be the informant. Paltser somehow thought that sending an e-mail to the Ministry of Interior of Republika Srpska and to its President is a reasonable course

of action in the case where he disagrees with my article and my involvement with pro-Palestine activism.

Paltser e-mailed Dodik's cabinet at around 9am B&H time the same morning that the story 'broke,' even before I found out about the article. The article was posted to Delfi's website near midnight the night before. He dutifully included the link to the Delfi article in the e-mail. I find this indicative.

Paltser claims in this e-mail that my attitudes "may harm Serbia's reputation abroad and incite division and hostility in foreign societies." He also says that: "With this message, I simply wish to express my personal support for the Serbian people and urge awareness of activities abroad that may undermine your nation's dignity and interests." According to Paltser, I also sympathize with Islamists and apparently discredit "Serbs and Serbia's political leadership" in the eyes of Estonians.

Milorad Dodik does not represent the Republic of Serbia, nor is he a politician who holds any formal roles there. His whole political career has existed within B&H. Nevertheless, Paltser intentionally frames me as an anti-Serbian activist. Clearly, the framing ignores the existence of B&H for the purpose of tarnishing me.

More importantly, Mr Paltser seems to completely ignore the fact that Milorad Dodik is an internationally sanctioned politician who is supportive of Vladimir Putin. As my ERR article documents, Dodik has visited Putin dozens of times since February 2022, when the imperialist-fascist state of Russia invaded Ukraine. He uses every photo-op opportunity possible to express his support for Putin and has actively supported Lukashenka of Belarus too.

Why is this not a problem to Mr Paltser? Dodik is a homophobic, sexist and corrupt individual – an active denier of the genocide in Srebrenica, for which he is currently on trial in BiH – whose leadership is actively undermining any active democracy-building in Republika Srpska, while simultaneously creating its own oligarchical cronies. Somehow that does not matter to Paltser, who presents himself as a lover of freedom and multiculturalism. If this pathetic attempt at intimidation were not so sad, it would be ideal for a stand-up show. But crucially, it did not matter to Minnik either, who followed Paltser's lead without questioning it.

My question: Why would a random person – whom I have never heard of before – e-mail me at 10 am (Estonian time) on a Saturday morning, the morning after the article's publication, if they did not somehow already prepare for this?

Reading his e-mail to Dodik is where my suspicion grew that it was Paltser who tipped Minnik off. I might be wrong, but I hardly believe that a person who went so far as to e-mail a president in a foreign country, and one of its ministries of interior (B&H has many such ministries), did not have anything to do with it.

But let us return to the Delfi article.

The Farcical Article

The article describes problematically how "A few dozen students and lecturers, mostly from abroad" came together to call out the Israeli genocide in Gaza. These 'foreigners,' continues Minnik, were "watched from the corner of their eyes by Estonians" at an event across from the sit in. I wonder what his proof is that it was only Estonians watching us, but we can skip this for now. The only Estonian worth mentioning to Minnik was the inimitable and courageous Dr Birgit Poopuu, who has suffered a lot of the same racist, sexist and generally discriminatory treatment from the Estonian media.

The framing here is clear. Foreigners come to an Estonian university – a supposedly politically neutral institution where 'children' go to study – and use it as a political platform. Estonians are 'rightly' skeptical of this. The conclusion – amplified by reams of abusive and racist comments in Delfi's unmonitored comments section (certainly something that Estonia's journalism ethics board should examine) – is that the foreigners should be kicked out. Funnily, it is Estonian citizens who form a majority of our group, but Minnik does not care about that.

The article does not stop there. Neither our sit-in nor the genocide in Gaza play any role in the story except by providing some context for Minnik's knowledge on what we, as a group, are doing. This is because the following intervention matters the most to Minnik.

Minnik claims in the article that the same anonymous tipper alerted him to a panel that Birgit, Benjamin Klasche and myself participated in on June 8th, about a week before his visit to our sit-in, which was organized by Progressiivne Liikumine. The panel thematized responsibility of citizens and scholars during genocide. There were five speakers in total. During the excellent two-hour panel, we discussed all sorts of issues, focusing primarily on the lack of activism by most parts of civic society, academics and students in Estonia regarding Palestine.

At one moment, wanting to contribute a historical context to the panel, I decided to make a historical analogy by bringing into the discussion the 1961 Yugoslav student protests against Belgium. In 1961, when Patrice Lumumba, the first PM of the DRC and an anti-colonial leader, was assassinated, the Belgian embassy in Yugoslavia was attacked and, in parts, burned by the protesters who blamed the Belgian regime of colonial violence.

Apparently, this became the crux of the problem.

According to the article, the tipper alerted Minnik to what I had said. Here is Delfi's report of my words:

"But one thing I do want to say is that I have been a little disappointed by the students. You know, in 1961, when Patrice Lumumba was assassinated by the CIA and the Belgians, Lumumba was the first president of the independent Congo and leader of the resistance movement, and the Yugoslav students burned down the Belgian embassy in Belgrade. They literally set fire to the embassy. And I miss that... I really miss that kind of thing. I really miss it. Of course, I don't want anybody here to think that I'm calling for somebody to burn down the Israeli embassy."

Broadly speaking, this quote is an accurate transcription of what I said, but Minnik later contributed to a total misrepresentation of both my words and intent by claiming that it incited violence. Let me briefly clarify.

My statement – which took place in the context of a panel discussing activism and protesting – was in no way a call to violence. It was an analysis that I presented prompted by the discussion at the panel. The 1960s are a classical example of student activism and the culture of protest against political oppression, including imperialism and colonial violence. The reason I chose Yugoslavia as an example is because I come from that part of the world and because we usually draw from the West to legitimize and form an ideal image of what a ‘democratic’ protest looks like (Fichter 2016). But Yugoslavia was not a democratic society and yet it still had such protests. I will elaborate on this below.

I indeed miss the courage of the 1960s. This is exactly why I said “I miss this shit” – which Minnik did not relay to his readers, probably because ‘shit’ is too offensive for him – to the laughter of the audience. Omitting the ‘shit,’ Minnik loses the funny aspect of my intervention, a Derridian *différance* to a clear-cut *difference*. Minnik, as it were, interprets the laughter as the audience – the ‘foreigners’ – supporting violence. Nothing could be further from the truth. Those were parents of children who can no longer watch others’ children dying while we tiptoe around a state that is actively perpetrating genocide: Israel. They were therefore receptive to the comic aspect of my intervention – the ‘shit.’

I want to emphasize one thing. I find Minnik’s allegation of incitement odd because if we wanted to commit violence, I and others had had many other opportunities to do so, including at several very public protests in central Tallinn. Nothing like that ever happened. Furthermore, we never would incite violence because all we want is empathy, care and standing up for international law and international human rights. We do not want violence against anyone. We do agitate for an end to Israel’s genocide against Palestinians in Gaza, and an end to its illegal occupation of Palestinian territories, which has continued contrary to the international law since 1967.

Minnik decided to write his article, sensing accurately that this statement could be something inflammatory. He reached out to me unexpectedly earlier in July – around a month after the panel - with a set of loaded questions. He asked me how I felt about my comments on ‘burning embassies’ and suggested to me that I could be held criminally liable for what I said. The questions were intimidating, and I decided not to engage them, instead replying to Minnik that I had nothing to say to him because he had obviously determined what he wanted to write. I also added that I did not condone any kind of violence, nor would I ever want to instigate it.

Minnik also reached out to my employer, Tallinn University, trying to fish for a reaction from Tõnu Viik, the Rector. In his e-mail to my employer, he falsely claimed that the event had taken place at the University premises and expressed outrage at this. As the article suggests, it was the tipper who told Minnik that the panel had taken place at the University premises. It was only after the University asked for my input that I managed to correct Minnik, who did not even bother to fact-check his own source before making such allegations, and the University could write its response.

I find that Minnik's reaching out to my employer for a reaction is further intimidation. He reached out to them before me and his e-mail portrayed me as a deeply problematic figure. I can only thank the Rector and the University for consulting myself and my colleagues before writing their response.

To add fuel to fire, Minnik decided to support his thesis with 'expert analysis.' He reached out to three 'experts' to assess my statement.

One expert from Croatia, Josip Mihaljević, was apparently shocked by my statement. He made a claim that Yugoslavia was not a democracy and that therefore my historical analogy was incorrect – as if protests happen only in democracies. For my part, I never mentioned that Yugoslavia was a democracy, so I do not understand why Mihaljević felt the need to elaborate on that. Besides, being a dictatorship, Mihaljević argues, it was Yugoslav authorities who organized the protest which got out of hand, which to him is a further proof of their illegitimacy. Mihaljević concludes that he hopes no incidences of violence will occur in Estonia.

The second 'expert' – according to Delfi, a known criminologist in Estonia – called me a "provocateur." The third, Head of Centre of Ethics at Tartu University – Margit Sutrop – said that this was an unethical statement and called me "manipulative."

I want to take a moment to address two of these 'experts,' Mihaljević and Sutrop, because I find them unethical and emblematic of a culture of silencing in academia.

The Opportunistic Experts

According to Delfi, Josip Mihaljević is the associate director of the Croatian Institute of Memory. I do not think this is correct since Mihaljević's website states that he is Associate Director of the Croatian Institute for History. But Minnik makes mistakes, like failing to fact-check me regarding Lumumba, who was never DRC's President but Prime Minister. This does not matter to Minnik, so I fact-check myself here. That notwithstanding, Mihaljević's expertise is apparently on Yugoslavia in the 2nd half of the 20th century: good!

What Mihaljević does for the Delfi article is argue that, according to the article: "the 1961 arson attack on the Belgian embassy in Belgrade was not a spontaneous student protest, but a mass demonstration organised by the Yugoslav Communist Party that got out of hand." He then stressed that Yugoslavia "in the 1960s was not a free civil society, but a party state, where all social structures - from trade unions to academic institutions - were subject to the ideological control of the party."

While Mihaljević is, very strictly speaking, historically correct, he is unaware of the Estonian context, where mentioning a socialist country in anything but negative light is frowned upon due to the history of Soviet oppression against Estonians, and indeed of my own words. I never once said that Yugoslavia was a democratic country, nor did I ever say it had a civil society in the modern sense.

But what did happen in Yugoslavia, which is what I was hinting at, were the 1960s. Unlike the USSR – under whose occupation and yoke Estonia existed until it regained its independence – Yugoslavia was open to the West and as such its students were actively participating in protests throughout the 1960s, including against the War in Vietnam (meaning, the US's aggressive and illegal invasion of Vietnam, hardly a historical precedent), Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination and the assassination of Lumumba. Even in 1968, during large-scale student protests that took place across the world, Yugoslav students took to the streets, prompting Josip Broz Tito, the Yugoslav leader, to say that he would deal with their concerns. He also added that: "Moreover, if I am incapable of resolving these questions, then I shouldn't hold this position any longer." (Fichter 2016, 99). I cannot judge if he did, but I certainly find it hard to imagine Khrushchev, Brezhnev, or Ceausescu saying this.

As Madigan Fichter has argued, Yugoslavian society was deeply enmeshed in the global anti-colonial and protest movements. Unlike the Soviet Union, the empire that has unfortunately formed Estonians' image of other socialist states of that period due to its violent oppression of anything non-Soviet, especially during the Stalin years, Yugoslavia had a vibrant civil intellectual climate, and students played a major role in challenging state socialism. The various protests were spearheaded by Yugoslavia's students in Belgrade, Zagreb and Sarajevo.

Mihaljević's argument was that the official rally or protest had "got out of hand" and that it could not be "seen as an example of democratic student activism." But I never made this claim! I never said that this was 'democratic' student activism. I implied that it was 'student activism,' which it patently was. The difference is crucial since it is used to supposedly destroy my argument.

Like Mihaljević, Fichter argues that the protest in front of the Belgian Embassy was 'official,' meaning organized, but that the students broke away from it and vandalized the building (Fichter 2016, 102). But unlike Mihaljević, Fichter argues that this is because Yugoslav students had tended to break away from the official party line and openly challenge the regime. What is more inspiring than that? What is more inspiring than Russian students, or Chinese students, or German students, or American students, protesting against their regimes, including at official rallies?

Following Fichter, in Yugoslavia of the 1960s: "Organization around international events also became one means by which young people began to suspect the state of not taking its commitment to socialism seriously enough." (2016, 105). Precisely on this note, I found it fascinating that students in a non-democratic country fought against their own police to show their dissatisfaction with colonial violence. At the panel, I merely asked myself: Where is that spirit today?

My intervention was explicitly framed as a metaphorical critique of civic passivity. It asked: Where is our commitment to international law and human rights?! When our states selectively apply international law – as I discussed in the case of Ukraine, whose freedom and independence I wholeheartedly support – is it not up to the civil society to force them to reconsider? Why is Gaza an exception and a limit of our ethical horizons? The audience

understood this very clearly since many asked me about this after the panel. If Minnik had attended, he might have heard me further explain this.

Yugoslav students – and Serbian students today – show us the spirit that I miss. I miss students and citizens breaking away from ‘official’ parades and the pathetic culture of complicity and showing their dissatisfaction in legitimate ways. But how they show it is up to them! I cannot determine that, nor would I want to.

There is no romanticism here: this is very real, and it is happening now. If Minnik had asked me, I would have provided him with this explanation, which in other ways was tackled during the panel (e.g., via Ukraine). Alas!

My second point concerns Sutrop’s unfortunate analysis. Sutrop’s point was that I as a lecturer have “an ethical duty to set an example for students and to consider responsibly how their speeches affect their audience - especially students.” According to her, I also referred to burning embassies as a “desirable act” – which I did not – whereby my disappointment with student activism for Palestine in Estonia is taken to signify my desire for students to burn embassies. I do not know what state of mind a person must be in to make such abstract inferences, but clearly Sutrop – the ‘Denker von Gewerbe’ - as Hannah Arendt called philosophers, was at home here.

Sutrop’s analysis, like that of the other experts, is completely acontextual and predicated on the small video cut-out. It is also presumably influenced by Minnik’s questions in their correspondence, to which I have no access. Sutrop somehow assumes that I acted as a lecturer on the panel and therefore had an ethical responsibility towards my ‘students.’ But my students did not attend the panel, nor did I promote it to them because the panel took place after the school year had ended. I did speak about students in general, but that is as far as this went.

I assume I have some freedom as an intellectual to act and provoke people into thinking about the world around them. Sutrop treats me as if I were an elected official who normalizes indecent behavior, which is obviously false. She further claims that I manipulated the students and used them “merely as a means to an end.” Means to what end? This is not clarified but left suggested. Enough for the reader to think that I am a ruthless and careless provocateur, an unscrupulous foreigner who is poisoning Estonia’s students.

I believe that both Sutrop and Mihaljević were misinformed by Minnik. There was no rigor in their comments. I can safely assume that neither one of them has seen the full video. They did not attend the panel either. They were given Minnik’s perspective, followed by a cut-out of 2 or so minutes, and rushed to make their claims, supporting his attempt at delegitimizing my voice.

This is the most unethical thing in this whole situation!

One might hope that, out of collegiality (what even is that today?), the academic ‘experts’ would have e-mailed me, the person in question, and discussed the statement. Nobody did so in my case, nor in the case of the pro-Palestinian movement in Estonia. I would at least expect them to have put in a bit of effort and watched the whole panel. But no. They were both quick to

express their dismay at my words. They were “shocked,” convinced that my attitude called for violence and encouraged normative ambivalence.

I certainly leaned into the important historical context in which violent protesting develops. Let us remember that the people we celebrate today, like Nelson Mandela, were violent protesters once. Establishing this publicly is not an incitement to violence but a presentation of historical fact that an academic must be able to do! We as academics, in the words of Farhana Sultana of Syracuse University, have a duty to ask questions informed by scholarly rigour: this is the essence of academic freedom (Sultana 2018). It is precisely what I did.

I regret if someone might have taken my comment as an incitement to violence. I recognize that my example is controversial, but it is factual and evidence-based. If someone took it as a call to violence, they completely missed the mark. Furthermore, I cannot be held responsible for what someone might have taken away from my words. Expecting this would put academics in an absurd situation that would effectively mute any free scholarly expression. Most importantly, judging by the state of the panel and audience’s laughter, nobody took my words as an incitement to violence.

It is also important to note that the panel took place almost two months ago, with no violent acts happening in Estonia in its aftermath. In fact, most people would not have even heard of my words if Minnik had not so sensationally reported on them. But this sensationalism is a major issue in the media everywhere, especially in Estonia, as I discuss below.

On Estonian Media at the Time of Genocide

Minnik’s article is rushed. After quoting the experts, he concludes that my comments are a “borderline case” that “raises the question of where the line is drawn between academic freedom, ethical responsibility and political provocation.” But the article does not treat me this way. In the article, I am not a ‘borderline case’ that provokes us to think about the mentioned lines. I am not someone who prompted a journalist to reflect on my words either critically or affirmatively.

I asked myself the following as I was reading the piece: Did Minnik comment on Gaza? Was there any context or valuable information provided surrounding our sit-ins and other events? Did he even discuss the panel we were on? And how about the complexities of navigating activism for Palestine in Estonia? Did he perhaps interview or talk to anyone from the movement? What did the panelists think of my statement? Could he have talked to any academics about academic freedom and free speech?

Did Minnik engage with me, whose reputation he so vigorously attempts to harm, in good faith? No. His questions to me were intimidating, and I knew that if I had responded to anything, he would have spun it to his own ends, so I refused. Minnik thinks of this as me telling him how to do his job. It begs the following question: If I am not qualified, how is the ‘anonymous’ tipper qualified?

Minnik had no clue this kind of activism was happening until he was ‘tipped off.’ I am clearly identified and presented as an unethical provocateur whose words pose danger to the public. I was metaphorically charged, convicted and sent to jail. The article pretends to care for the public good, but it fails to show substantive engagement with the genocide in Gaza, which was central to the panel. Hence, Minnik’s article is an example of straw-manning, a problematic practice intended to generate sensation where there is none.

Based on his mistakes, Minnik clearly did the tipper’s bidding without giving his claims or his background much thought. I wonder how he feels about his anonymous tipper praising pro-Putin leadership of a secessionist part of BiH.

But Minnik’s case is not an outlier.

His article is characteristic of the Estonian media during the time of genocide. Many colleagues, most prominently Dr Birgit Poopuu, have been bullied and mocked for their stringent scholarly activism. Bullying is often followed by open threats. For women activists, these threats often include calls for ‘gang rape’ and teaching them their place in the society. ‘Foreign’ activists and public intellectuals are subjected to the framing of *persona non grata*.

Traditional Estonian media has stopped caring about actual reporting and thinking about who might contribute original and informed insights into various issues. Instead, we get soundbites and cut-outs that are meant to buttress public opinion. Investigations are reduced to tip offs, as if journalists are police officers who have their informants, and there is a climate of mistrust and fear.

Working in this climate is reminiscent of communist and fascist-era informer economies, where neighbors, colleagues, friends, and family members would report on each other for ‘controversial’ activity. This is a sign that Estonian media still operates in transition from socialist to democratic ways of thinking.

Minnik is likely satisfied with himself because he feels like he did a good job. To me, he only confirmed that there is a serious lack of dialogue in the Estonian media on Gaza and scholarly activism around it. He also strengthened my view of Delfi as a tabloid. I do hope for a meaningful shift concerning the terms of the dialogue on Gaza in Estonia. Until that happens, Estonian media and academics will remain ill-disposed towards each other.