

## **“Political influence on intelligence organisations and ethics”**

*Leszek Soczenica (Poland)*

*Major General (Ret.), former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs,  
until 2018 Polish Ambassador to Slovakia*

The topic – how to compromise between IDEALISM and BANALITY.

My presentation is going to be short, because people normally do not listen carefully long speeches, as they do not read too long papers.

It is based on my own experience, since I happened to be *almost* on both side of the “barricade” – although I have never been, never planned, and never will be a politician.

I use an adverb *almost* because a decade ago I retired from the Army, after 35 years of service, and then I spent nearly 5 years at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) – dealing with a crowd of politicians, both Polish and foreign.

A direct political influence on intelligence organisations means mainly 4 basic prerogatives:

1. Imposing the legal frameworks of intel services functioning
2. Defining a scale of budget
3. Indicating candidates for the highest leadership positions
4. Defining specific tasks for the services and then controlling a proper implementation

Intel services receive tasks from controlling institutions that implement government policy based on current needs and demands, primarily regarding national security.

The most destructive form of political influence on intelligence services activity is an attempt to subordinate them to the immediate goals of a political entity/party, that is currently responsible for supervising the services.

Such an exploitation of intel services is a direct road to losing their apolitical character and objectivity. It often results in some sort of operational game with your own government – it means the political masters receive info according to their expectations but may also become a target of disinformation and, frankly, manipulation.

On the other hand, when it comes to a sick situation that intel services favor only one political option, it often leads to a change of their leadership after political power changes. Furthermore, such a situation will inevitably result in the creation of a group of officers who have lost their positions and influence.

These individuals represent a significant pool of potential candidates for recruitment by foreign services.

Let me spend some time on new democracies, re-created in our part of Europe when the Cold War system collapsed, some 35 years ago.

I will focus – for obvious reason – on my own country, where a lot of experiences are historical and...hysterical.

It is an excellent school, simply because it is free of charge and you can learn from someone else mistakes – which is always nice.

I would argue there are 3 different kinds/groups of politicians in the context of their influence/approach on intelligence organisations:

*Firstly*, “Fascinated” by intel services – their knowledge is often based on books they have read and films they have seen about spies (including James Bond), and they tend to use the services instrumentally for their political goals. This is, in my opinion, the biggest and potentially the most dangerous group.

*Secondly*, “Neutrals” – they are distrustful, even suspicious of intel services, they do not value and appreciate this kind of activity. But, thanks God, they even do not care, which means they usually do not disturb business as the first group does.

*And the final group*, “Partners” – state-oriented, trying to co-operate with the services and task them according to the well-understood country’s interest. This is, unfortunately, the smallest group and the previous 2 consider them naive.

It is a truism/cliché that politicians tend to use intel services, and vice-versa. But trying to be fair let us admit that intelligence organisations – all over the world – have a peculiar tendency to work only for themselves. They often try to justify such a situation using a syndrome of “black hole” – i.e. they deliver info and there is no feedback from their political masters’ side.

Hence *feedback* is the key word, as far as we care about proper co-operation between politicians and intel community.

Let me give you an example of our Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where chief/deputy of the national intel agency always participates in weekly leadership meetings, being part of a decision-making process.

On the other hand, there was a time when the MFA was almost completely alienated, since government was using intel services as communications channels abroad, also with countries that are not exaggeratedly friendly.

It is important to bear in mind that people who work in the intelligence services are strictly selected and have been in the business for a long time (often a lifetime career).

You can't say that about politicians in general, who occupy their positions temporarily, often without any substantive preparation.

That brings us to the notion of *ethics*.

In my conviction a moral attitude of intel services officers, especially their leadership, decides how the job is done. Whether it is in the legal frameworks, or – under the pretense of pro-state activities – the applied methods are ethically doubtful (or at least ambiguous).

Anyway, choice is always yours.

Sometimes, a moral discomfort can be justified by so-called “higher necessity” (for instance securing the country's safety) – in such a situation, the responsibility for non-legal activities usually goes firstly to an intel organisation's leadership, and only later to political decision makers.

At the end, let me offer 3 practical recommendations:

1. Being an intel officer always try to co-operate, in a good faith, with politicians abstracting from the fact whether you like them or not. Remember: your job is an honorable service for the country, so proudly fulfilling duties be prepared to openly advice your political masters, and ready to disagree if you feel it is needed.
2. Politicians do not act effectively without intel services, but the services wouldn't exist without them. So, it is an inseparable bond/relationship which can be either of love or compulsion, but the most desirable would be a marriage of convenience.  
Having said so, let me warn you: do not believe in politicians' sense of humour, which means never try to make fun of them – they have very sensitive ego.
3. Finally, and I am referring here to a professional, intel life – never lie (sounds idealistic, I know, but it is very practical, believe me). In this job you do not have to tell the whole truth, sometimes is simply better to say nothing, and that is OK. But if you start lying, you will be in trouble, rather sooner than later.

Let me leave you with a useful proverb, well-known in diplomacy:

*It's better to think twice, or three times, before you choose to say nothing.*