Media manipulator Joey Skaggs has confirmed that the world championship was a hoax

Matjaž Rogelj has obviously also hoaxed the hoaxer

Ministry of education has granted Matjaž Rogelj almost 14 million tolars

LJUBLJANA, 28. – The Matjaž Rogelj affaire was exposed by Dnevnik with the question whether he has really become the world computer championship in a competition that is unknown to local experts or foreign media.

The only reports about the championship were the same ones that the STA press agency forwarded on basis of news reported by Rogelj himself. All later conclusions of the Slovene media, that followed our trail, only proved, that the Slovene "success" in Brazil was questionable.

A hoax planned for a long time

Yesterday the truth was revealed about the hoax that Joey Skaggs had already planned four years ago. This is the case of a media manipulator who has fooled many media, including The New York Times, Washington Post, Boston Globe, CBS and even CNN. Whenever he prepared one of his hoaxes, everything was masked with almost impeccable facts. When everything was published and the public in an uproar, he would tell them his message: that the media are frequently prepared to publish anything just to attract the audience.

"It is true, I am behind all this media hoax bout the world computer championship. I must say that it hurts a little that you have discovered it already, since we have planned it for years and years – and I must say, quite extensively. We had hoped that the hoax would run for quite some time," said **Joey Skaggs**. He also admitted that some aspects were intentionally left incomplete as they represented the "key" to the solution of the puzzle. "This is the

very proof that I actually always hope that the media will catch us in the act, since if they do, they are doing their job," says Joey Skaggs whom we have dragged out of bed in early morning hours (his local time) in Hawaii.

But this time the hoax has acquired a more sinister connotation since Matjaž Rogelj has received a total of over 10 million tolars for his participation at the inexistent world championship. "I must stress that I never do my hoaxes for payment or to con money out of somebody. So far I have not earned a single cent from any of my hoaxes. I do not know whether Matjaž has earned money from this as you say, but I do know that he has not spent the money on this hoax. If he really received funds, I am very angry, since I have never permitted that a fraud would be a part of my hoax, " master of hoaxes Joey Skaggs told us yesterday.

He also admitted that several people have helped him with the hoax, including Matjaž Rogelj whom he met at the "Jožef Stefan" Institute. "Now I feel as if Matjaž Rogelj has hoaxed me. The whole affair has become unpleasant for me too, since I have obviously attracted people into my media hoax who hade a completely different agenda. If what you say proves true, Matjaž will have to answer some unpleasant questions from the Slovene authorities. But I must stress again that I do not condone criminal activities. Any idiot can be a crook, but only a few of us can execute a media hoax," says Skaggs. He also added that Rogelj probably will not want to call him any more after this… Anyway, Matjaž Rogelj no longer answers our calls either.

Alkalaj holds silent

We have already experienced a Skaggs hoax in 1998 when the Ljubljana IJS supposedly performed unethical biogenetic research on people. Even at that time we at Dnevnik have doubted the veracity of the news, which did not resound around the world but only in Slovenia. The great global media manipulator Joey Skaggs is obviously not above undertaking very local hoaxes, since he carried out the performance with **Mišo Alkalaj**, computer expert and publicist. Even before that they have agreed on the present media hoax, which is running from 1996, from the time of the virtual European computer championship organized by the inexistent Sat 5 Institute from New York.

At that time, they have acquired the cooperation of the young Matjaž Rogelj who suddenly became the European computer champion. The hoax had no serious response four years ago, but it was

planned for the long run, until this year's "world championship" in Rio de Janeiro. There is where the "European champion" travelled and he himself reported to the Slovene media on the happening in Brazil and about his victory. Mišo Alkalaj did not want to answer our questions yesterday, he said only that he "does not give statements to anybody about this" (world championship and Matjaž Rogelj).

Unfortunately, the national press agency was again involved in this hoax by publishing the unchecked information about the Slovene victory in Brazil. **Tadej Labernik** confirmed to us that they have published the first news about Matjaž Rogelj's participation in the world championship without checking it, which makes him "very angry", and that he told his editors and journalists that this should be a good lesson for them for the future. On the other hand, he thinks that Joey Skaggs should concentrate on media hoaxes in America and leave us alone.

Ministers did not verify

The question is also what was really happening at the Ministry of education and sports during the offices of Pavle Zgaga, Lovro Šturm and Slavko Gaber. The admission that the Ministry has financially assisted Matjaž Rogelj on basis of verified information, which have now turned out to be a hoax, will certainly demand a thorough answer from the Ministry. One also wonders how many similar requests for financial assistance were granted by the Ministry, if all other requests were processed in a similar manner as Rogelj's.

Ministrstvo za šolstvo, znanost in šport (MŠZŠ) (Ministry of education, science and sport) has financially assisted Matjaž Rogelj – as evident from the contracts – for "expert training for world competition in computer science". According to the opinion of sources within the Ministry – who wish to remain anonymous due to the great "brouhaha" – the written applications were a veritable "patchwork" that should not warrant a serious consideration, much less financial assistance.

"Contracts were granted on basis of recommendation from the director of (Rogelj's) high school and documentation of the (inexistent, e.c.) SAT 5 Instituta from New York. We assume that - apart from written proof - the former ministers have acquired appropriate information from other sources (the gentleman had in the year 1996 cited coo organizers and sponsorship of eminent companies as references); also, they founded their decision on the "undivided media support for the young genius": a number of articles,

appearances in radio and TV shows is available, and the fills rouge of all of them since 1996 to last year was why doesn't the state support this proven computer genius of international rank", the Ministry of education, science and sports stated yesterday.

"On basis of three contracts the Ministry has paid out to Mr. Rogelj: the tolar equivalent of 15,000 US$ by the contract of 1997; 5 million tolars by the contract of 1999; and 5 million tolars by the contract of the year 2000. Today, February 27, the Ministry has sent to the address of Mr. Rogelj a demand that he should within 7 days provide proof that the funds were expended in accordance with the contractual intent, since the contracts contain a clause providing for return of these funds with interest "should expenditure not in accordance with stated intent be determined", the representatives of the Ministry stated sharply yesterday.

Where is the money?

The company Hermes Softlab confirmed that based upon his application they have financed Rogelj's trip to Australia in 1997, since they believed that was a young expert (worthy of support). Details remain undisclosed since the people responsible are either unavailable or are no longer with the company. In any case, they (Hermes) were not satisfied with Matjaž Rogelj's work (at Hermes) during his vacation and have also ignored his application to sponsor his trip to the world computer championship in Brazil. The company Delo Revije only printed a written statement in their Stop magazine that they have co financed Rogelj's trip to South America.

Certainly, most of the answers will have to be provided by Matjaž Rogelj himself when he reappears in the public. Over 50,000 US$ have to be accounted for, and apologies should be made to the president of the state who had immediately sent him congratulations on (Rogelj's) "victory". In the meantime, (the text of) congratulations was removed from the president's web site.

Of course, Joey Skaggs has every right to fool the media with his manipulation, and consequently, to misguide the public. But the matter "looses its virginity" once suspicion of possible fraud enters. Even if Matjaž Rogelj refunds the money, several issues will remain open: not because of the interest or the shame of the Ministry or the companies involved, but because of the moral lesson. What if Matjaž Rogelj, the unsuspecting student, is not the only one who participated in this fraud? Too many questions have surfaced with the disclosure of the truth about the computer champion, we at Dnevnik are satisfied just with the

fact that we were the first to uncover the truth and served it to our readers.

Researchers “envy” Rogelj

What do some people from the scientific community think about this latest hoax from computer world, since they so frequently (unsuccessfully) compete for state funding?

Dr. Vito Turk, the director of the Jožef Stefan Institute: “Joey Skaggs has never officially visited our Institute, I do not know whether he was here privately. As far as allocation of taxpayer’s money is concerned, these are usually assigned on basis of procedures, though it might happen that in extraordinary cases stipends are granted on basis of certain document, and it may be that these are forged. In this had in fact happened, then the matter is now a case for organs of prosecution. Therefore, I would not assign all the blame to the Ministry of education.”

Dr. Peter Tancig, Association of researchers of Slovenia: “The whole case is so absurd that I do not wish to comment it. Large sums are involved (if the Ministry has really granted them). It is only the merit of the professional work of journalists who were not satisfied with the content of the first news about the “happening” that the case was researched with the assistance of the latest technology.”

Dr. Danilo Zavrtanik , the president of the Polytechnic Nova Gorica: “I could say that is characteristic of Slovenia that only those who came from abroad are (considered to be) of some value, while those at home who know something are never even asked: obviously Joey Skaggs realized this too and has again performed a hoax at the expense of Slovenia. If the people from the Ministry of education had asked somebody from the Faculty of computer science, they would have received the answer that they have not heard about this championship, or maybe they would have learned even more. Until it becomes clear that there are some smart people living in Slovenia, such a case can repeat itself. I know what sieves a research project of 300 research hours must pass through to get the funds from the Ministry, and that is the right way.”

Dr. Oto Luthar, director of ZRC SAZU: “If the Ministry has truly granted 40,000 US$ to Matjaž Rogelj and this is not another hoax, than it is a large sum of money. As one of the compilers of the programme for pre- and postgraduate studies abroad, which has found its place in the budget memorandum of 2001 and also in the program of

LDS, I am very pleased that gifted young people will have the chance to study abroad. But the procedures should be conducted in a strictly formal manner and there are problems in this area since procedures are not carried out systematically. Because of cases like this one the people will loose even what little confidence they may still have towards the state apparatus. The message of this case is: it can be done, why shouldn't I try it too? Even in public tenders the funds are not granted on basis of the quality of programmes proposed, but on "uncle principle", on basis of political or other association. This is only one of the most evident cases that shows how matters are not in order."

Dnevnik's journalists are world champions too

Since Rogelj's naughtiness was performed on the web, the e-zines have carefully monitored the affair. This is how Dnevnik's exposure was commented yesterday by Gambit Online: "Brane Šalamon and Domen Caharijas of Ljubljana's Dnevnik newspaper probably will not become as famous as Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein in the Watergate affair, but they do have the satisfaction that they are the world champion in the speed of uncovering Joey Skaggs' hoaxes"

BRANE ŠALAMON, DOMEN CAHARIJAS, (av)

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