

ENJOY YOUR ENEMY OR HOW THE KOSOVO (MEDIA) WAR BROKE OUT

SANDRA B.
HRVATIN
MARTINA
TRAMPUŽ

Abstract

The article analyses modes and reasons lying behind media construction and production of war in Serbia and Kosovo. By using the film *Wag the Dog*, the authors reveal the role of media including not only reporting about but the construction of wars as well. Media have power to create events that state authority needs for operation. Serbian media have nationalised, mobilised and emotionalised the public sphere by the use of techniques of so called "patriotic journalism" and by making historical myths a topical subject. The prevailing belief of media being the real trigger for war in Kosovo does not hold true. Its roots should be traced back to the eighties when Serbian authority deliberately started to spread Serbian nationalism and to the nineties, when implementation of the new media legislation took place and when the abuse of media started.

Sandra B. Hrvatin is Assistant Professor at the Department of Communication, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, e-mail: sandra.hrvatin@uni-lj.si.

Martina Trampuž is Research Assistant in the same department, e-mail: martina.trampuz@uni-lj.si.

Introduction

It was not the Nato intervention from 1999 that gave birth to the war in Kosovo, its roots are much deeper and go back to the eighties. 1981 brought demonstrations in Kosovo and demands of Albanians for independence of Kosovo from Serbia, 1986 saw the Serbian Academy of Science and Art publish its Memorandum, 1987 was marked by a visit of president Slobodan Milošević to Kosovo Polje. A common denominator of all those events was a revival of Serbian nationalism. Kosovo has always been Serbian, a sacred place of Serbian community and could therefore not exist outside of Serbia. Memorandum emphasised the unjust position of Serbs in Yugoslavia — their imagined role of victims of Albanians, Slovenians, Croats and Muslims. Fight for the rights of Serbs has turned into a fight against their enemy: Albanian, Slovenian, Croat, and Muslim. Techniques of this fight against enemy found expression in ethnic wars that flooded the area of already former Yugoslavia in the nineties. Serbian media (in a similar way as Croatian) played a decisive role in the construction of Serbian enemy. Serbian intellectuals used Memorandum for providing “scientific” grounds to prevailing nationalistic ideologies. The period of liberalisation of media sphere in the eighties was followed by a period of increasing intrusion of nationalism in media. Demands for a change of till then political system turned into demands for solution of national questions. The governing party that assumed nationalistic ideology media supported populism in its platform was not ready for changes in the political system. By adopting the new media legislation in the nineties the Serbian authority restored complete control over the media. Serbian media saw a revival of Serbian myths (myth of Kosovo Polje), new heroes appeared who adopted the features of Serbian epic heroes and many old, traditional songs were restored for military purposes. Absence of media autonomy was the cause of turning the language of nationalism into the only acceptable way of explaining political events.

The impact and power of modern propaganda is to support the “belief in all and nothing,” and that “all is possible and nothing is real.” This is how the media “saw and believed in” bombing at the time of Nato intervention in Kosovo, but did not “see or believe” in the columns of Kosovar refugees that were stretching for kilometres. Similar, official Serbian politics denied any kind of military involvement in the events in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Therefore Serbia officially was not at war. But on the level of everyday life the state and its inhabitants were more than just involved. In the films “Rane” (Wounds) and “Lepa sela lepo gore” (Nice Villages Burn Nicely) of Serbian director Srdjan Dragojević we see crowds of enthusiastic inhabitants of Belgrade, greeting a convoy of Serbian tanks and army vehicles headed for Vukovar with songs and flowers.

A similar function of “selective” view of the war is evident from the use of target symbols. Radio and Television of Serbia (RTS) replaced its official identification sign with the sign of the target, the same one worn by the announcers and demonstrators. The night before the RTS building was bombed a journalist Tatjana Lenard “called” the gentlemen from Washington, Brussels, Paris and Bonn, to let them know they were ready and waiting for them on Takovska street no. 10 (see the documentary film “The First Victim,” produced by Media Centre of Belgrade). Serbian state media and their journalists could present themselves as victims only until it became clear they were hit by the bombs by error. People from Vukovar and

Sarajevo did not wear the target signs, for they were the real targets themselves. How can public attention be directed was demonstrated by the film programme of RTS during the time of the last demonstrations that opposition organised in Belgrade. At the time of the demonstrations, the Serbian national television was showing some of the best-known movies of American A-production, such as "American Beauty."

Our analysis does not focus on mere treatment of the role of media at the time of war through media reports but originates in the fact that media can also construct wars. This can be best exemplified with Berry Levinson's film "Wag the Dog" that was also broadcast by RTS during the time of Nato bombing. The main idea of this film is that war can be created for the sake of media reporting and vice versa and that media themselves can create war they will report about afterwards. This post-media approach has roots in the presumption that media attention does not only define events but due to our incapability of defining the context of communication, it can also create events. One may not see the war and there may be no verifiable proofs that the war is actually going on, but there is a world far away from the media that cannot be verified and where things like this can be going on, even if we cannot see them. Simply — media do not reflect the world but the world projects media contents. This is exactly how Serbian national media have been operating.

Strategies of War Propaganda

In the former Yugoslavia, particularly in Serbia, "media war," especially the one presented in television news broadcast by the opposing sides, prepared ground for the real war, as Bugarski (1995, 96) states. For the purposes of war propaganda, political messages made in national, folkloristic key, appeared in Serbian and other media in former Yugoslavia. Political speakers have often used literary forms, motives and figures of national literature with the purpose of reviving patriotic and military feelings. The basic function of folkloristic forms and themes present in political speaking was to suggest that messages reflected voice and the expressed of the people's will. The most often used word in the so-called "rallies of truth" in Serbia and Montenegro during 1988 and 1989 and published by Serbian media, appeared to be the word "people": "People are the best judge." "People cannot endure this any longer." "Do not shut your ears to the voice of people." "People have spoken, listen to them." "Even the deaf can hear the voice of people" (Čolović 1994, 26).

Apart from calling people by name there were also other ways of saying that people were the real senders of the message. This was accomplished by assortment of expressions that were a conventional mark of national colour, e.g. Serbian flat cake (*srpska pogača*), round national dance (*kolo*), soft-soled shoes with ankle straps (*opanak*), or brothers (*braćo*). Names of "fathers-kings" from Serbian history and mythology also appeared in the messages at meetings. Tito was to be replaced by Slobodan Milošević: "*Slobodane sad se narod pita, ko će nama da zameni Tita*" (Slobodan, now the nation is wondering who will replace Tito); "*Srbija se stalno pita kad će Slobo mjesto Tita*" (Serbia is wondering when is Slobo going to take the place of Tito). Besides Tito and Milošević also other heroes of national epic were being named (Miloš, Dušan, Lazar, Vuk Branković) and verses taken from folk songs appeared (Čolović 1994).

To incite combativeness, hostility against opponent and to praise national virtues also other, for political situation suited old or newly composed popular songs in traditional folkloristic style were being used. Politicians used citations from national songs to adorn their speeches and to call upon personalities — symbols of national identity (Vuk Karadžić, Njegoš). According to Žanić (1998, 16-18), traditional folk epic poetry and oral (singing) history are the most important mass media for spreading of tradition. Tradition represents something old that is never going to get really old or will never become obsolete. Tradition in connection with “hajduks” (partisan fighters against Turkish occupation) mythology is the source of important identification and explanation of the world. It informs its audience that the events, which are happening today, have been happening all the time (Žanić 1998, 47). To the Serbs, war in Croatia did not represent but another episode of eternal war with their mythical enemies.

During the Second World War in Yugoslavia, partisans and chetniks demanded the most famous national songs for themselves. Lots of the songs heard back then had two versions: one praised the achievements of Tito and his partisan brigades, while the other praised the successes of chetnik units and their commander in chief Draža Mihajlović. “War of songs” found expression in former Yugoslavia. This is the case of two kinds of propaganda speaking the same language while senders and receivers of propaganda messages on both sides of the battle-line share a common historical and cultural experience. That is why the messages are so similar and made of many common motives and forms, in some cases even of the same texts. At the time of war in Croatia the opposing sides used the same forms, geographically marked terms and texts taken from popular literature in their propagandist messages. An old march, for example, had two — the Serbian and the Croatian — versions. In the former, “March of King Peter’s Guard,” Serbian boys are marching to accompanying looks of ladies from Belgrade, while in the latter march, “Step after Step” the quick march of Croatian guard soldiers is being glorified, while the ladies have turned into fashionable girls. Refrain of the former is: “Fight is raging, raging/heroic banner is fluttering/for freedom of Serbia,” while the refrain of the latter is: “Fight is raging, raging/Croatian banner is fluttering/for freedom and for home/Croatian home” (see Čalović, 1994a).

There is another group of propaganda procedures that have the goal of achieving a different kind of effect, transforming war killings into pleasant, amusing or at least normal activities. Thus the war is being presented as amusingly relaxing activity full of humour, friendship and sports competitions. Photos of smiling, embracing soldiers in company of brave reporters, with a dram of strong liquor in hand and the enemy’s flag under feet were used to assert the idea that war is great. Beside this, war has been presented as something tempting. This had a direct bearing on the presentation of military heroism as personification and creation of virility. To be brave and intentionally face the dangers of war presented the greatest test and prove of masculinity. For example, a commentary published in newspaper *Javnost* (November 12, 1994) was about a part of Sarajevo that was particularly dangerous for the Serbs who went there regardless of the danger for “they knew what was between their legs.” In addition, war propaganda, especially in military call-up, often equated the joining of the army with the initiation to the manhood. That is how a Yugoslav national army (JNA) officer was inciting his sol-

diers at the beginning of Croatian war to cross a mine field before the camera eyes with words: "Let us go all who feel we are men!" Or, as Čolović explains (1997, 50), *Hrvatski vojnik* in September 1993 published an article about the use of "manly argument" by the Croatian Army to recruit as many soldiers as possible. The main slogan was: "Tiger, volunteer if you are a man!"

For those who were not affected by stories of war parties and virility, the idea of the war being a highly organised, rational operation and technologic process managed by highly professional staff did the trick. This was another strategy of war propaganda and it was effective as well. In accordance with this idea a figure of the new Serbian war hero, Kapetan Dragan was created. War was his profession and he attended to his duties thoroughly. He had nothing against the Croats. He was on the side of the Serbs because they were right. If it were the opposite, he would be on the side of the Croats. The mechanism of propaganda strategies may not seem difficult to deconstruct, but it is difficult to fight against their influence on people especially when media are controlled by the state.

"Patriotic Journalism"

During the war in Croatia (1991-1992), both Serbian and Croatian national media practised the so-called "patriot journalism," which was fostered by mythology, history, and tradition of Serbian and Croatian nations, and forced by state control over the media. During the 1990s, the Serbian authorities intensely enhanced attempts to "discipline" the media. The law on information and the law on universities that were adopted in Serbia at the end of 1998 made clear the intention of the State to control the entire intellectual and media sphere. According to the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (IJAS 2000, 1), penalty has been imposed upon media for 47 times since 1998 in the total amount of 24 million dinars. Only during the first three months of 2000, eight court sentences were proclaimed based on a highly repressive law that enables the judges in cases of media offence to inflict penalties even higher than defined by the law. Journalists and the media are facing severe obstacles, from threats of physical liquidation to more subtle ways of financial exhaustion, such as constant paper price increases, higher printing costs for the independent media (prices can be ten times higher than the ones for the state owned media), pressures on advertisers (advertisers in independent media have constant check-ups by the finance police), state monopoly over the distribution network, bans on credentials, and extremely high penalties. More than half of 480 existing radio and television stations in Serbia do not meet the criteria for legal operation due to non-defined procedures for the acquisition of radio licences. The regime is constantly changing or abrogating frequencies or simply confiscating equipment of private stations literally overnight. In addition, the state has a complete monopoly over the national radio and television (the only one covering the whole area of Serbia, Kosovo and Montenegro) and the newspapers *Politika* and *Borba*. Consequently, the media are closed to any kind of alternative interpretation of political events. However, as IJAS is warning, the opposition (where in power) is often trying to exert a similar kind of pressure on media.

National isolation and mutual inaccessibility of media in Serbia and Croatia also fostered nationally restrained (nationalistic) media analyses, such as the analyses of Serbian and Croatian national media reporting during the war in Croatia

(1991-1992) published in *Media and War* (1999) and the analysis of news programme on Serbian state-owned media in 1998 (Milivojević 1999; Todorović 1999). Reporting in 1991 in both Serbian and Croatian media presented a strong influence of the so-called “patriotic journalism” — domination of collective (national) anonymous over public and personal journalism (Ćurgus 1999, 128). Traditional journalistic articles, signed by the journalists, were replaced by editorials or agency news and comments. Over 60 % out of the total of analysed articles published in *Politika* from 1991-1992 were supplied by Tanjug or the editorial staff (Ćurgus 1999, 133). Journalists were also replaced by historians, politicians, economists, linguists, cultural workers, writers and all those that helped reconstruct the national collective myths in the media and, at the same time, provided a “scientific” explanation for impossibility of a co-existence. Texts about the “glorious history” helped substantiate the myth of historical superiority of Serbian (Croatian) nation in relation to others and forge the sense of national pride and patriotism.

Croatian reporters in the state-owned media used similar forms of “patriotic” journalism. From 1991 to 1992 the Croatian national daily *Vijesnik* applied various methods of public mobilisation. Serbia and the Serbs were presented as the unacceptable “others,” as the nation of an alien culture and civilisation. Serbian state authorities and president Milošević, in particular, were presented as the personification of the pure evil. In order to emphasise Serbian moral inferiority in military combats Croatian media carried out a systematic dehumanisation of the opponents. A method of “historising” was being used, connecting the symbolic universe of the Second World War with the events of 1991. Croatian media spoke about “chetniks” (and the Serbian media about Croatian “ustashas”), thus creating a kind of historical continuum of Serbian imperialism and practice of “ethnic cleansing” (Zakošek 1999, 167-170).

The editorial policy of the Croatian National Television (HRT) was similar to that of *Vjesnik*. Hrvoje Turković found significant differences in news reporting between the time of the 1991 war (Vukovar news) and time of peace in 1993, when the focus of military combats shifted to the area of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The main feature of “war” transmissions was emotional bias when talking about the opponent. The “war-time” news programme described the enemy with historical connotations and attributes, such as Chetniks, Serbian terrorists, Serbian-chetnik mob, or occupiers (Turković 1999, 400). The analysis of HRT’s news programmes also revealed an absence of information and visual material related to everyday life in Serbia and Srpska Krajina. If such information were presented to Croatian public, that was done with the intention of showing the “tortured,” “inhuman” or “bizarre” life somewhere far away from Croatia — on the other side (Turković 1999, 408).

In 1998, one quarter of reports in the Serbian dailies *Politika* and *Borba* were not signed by their authors and had no source of information stated, the most common origin of information being rumours or unverified information. If we stick to the saying that “word-for-word report represents the first metaphor” (Laclau 1987, 94), we can state that it is not the journalists who write the newspaper articles, but the “sources close to power” or the state itself. Media were being used by the authorities as a kind of political traffic lights that dictated the only right direction of political life (Čolović 1994a, 86). Media showed what was allowed and what was

not, what was being rewarded and what punished by the state, who were enemies or friends, what was black or white and, above all, they gave rise to fear and “caution” among population (Salecl 1991, 62). They did not report, they did not inform; their sole function was to validate the politics of the governing party. For those that read, listen to or watch the national media, Yugoslavia still was a conflict-less society, a kind of ideological perpetual motion that did not stop despite sanctions, unemployment, wars, international and national traitors and enemies.

Television news programming has been the most effective means of the mobilisation of the public in the last decades. “The language of television is the language of the authority, and television as an institution is its important factor” (Milivojević 1999, 11). RTS respected above all the state protocol in which the traditional news values have no importance. RTS is still a kind of “oral television” where most of news is *read* to a collective audience; only one fourth of news is visualised. More than a half of news stories in the analysed period presented the authority talking to and about itself (Milivojević 1999, 15).

Serbia of 1988 will be remembered by “happening of the nation” and “mass meetings of truth,” as Veljanovski says (1996, 616). Programmes of Radio and Television Belgrade (RTB) became the means of spreading military and national news. “We want arms,” “We are all Serbs” were the exclamations often heard at gatherings and broadcast by national television. Besides that, television brought the whole iconography of the gathering into the homes of their viewers: accompanying paroles, pictures of Slobodan Milošević, uniforms and flags from the past. Myths about “heavenly Serbia” and eternally discriminated Serbian nation were revived by electronic media, television in particular.

Since the new broadcasting law (1991) was adopted immediately after the war broke out, it is not difficult to see that the Serbian authorities used it for the implementation of controlled, censored journalism on RTS. Programmes, especially news on politics, were prepared according to the rules of war propaganda. Radio and television reporters were sent to war areas to report of the threatened Serbian nation, Serbian refugees, houses levelled to the ground, crimes committed on Serbs. Nobody mentioned the dead Croats and Muslims, refugees and children of those nations, crimes committed on them and their property. A Radio Belgrade’s documentary show “Red is the Sky” on August 1991 was based on statements by Serbs from Slavonia and Barania about their exile. It was a drama about the “exodus of the Serbs from Croatia,” as radio critic Jovanović put it. TV Belgrade broadcast various shows featuring excavation of pits where victims of ustashas terrors — the Serbs — were buried during the Second World War (Veljanovski 1996, 611).

The “Kosovo question” made the Serbian national media reach a kind of a national consensus. (There is even a mutual consensus between the regime and the opposition as far as Kosovo is concerned. In a rally organised by the opposition in Belgrade demonstrators shouted “Go to Kosovo!” to the policemen.) The Kosovo crisis is the centre of political life and the paradigm of its representation. Media define the “Kosovo problem” as crisis and excess, but it represents simultaneously something quite normal and ordinary. Regardless of the fact that a 52.6 % of media contents of news programme is dedicated to Kosovar problems, causes for the conflict have never been exposed. State representatives talked about Kosovo in half of their appearances on national television. Media presented opinions, suggestions

and evaluations of the Kosovo crisis, but they did not reveal what was really going on in Kosovo. Language of war and violence was becoming normal and part of everyday talking, which was additionally supported by intentionally selected “public” in polls. Every time this simulated public was asked to perform in public it produced a kind of (media) plebiscite, aimed at supporting and praising the authority. On the streets, people selected by following a stereotypical demographic pattern (students, peasants, workers, educated men and women, “honest” Albanians) performed in front of RTS’s television cameras. They all answer the same questions with the same arguments — literally summing up the answers brought to them by RTS in its news programme.

The analyses conducted in Serbia and Croatia clearly present the characteristics of national media reporting, ways of enemy construction, mobilisation techniques and public discourse emotionalisation. By using the techniques of exclusion of the other, dehumanising of the opponent and historicising and mythologising of the present, Croatian and Serbian media succeeded in creating conditions for the development and expansion of nationalistic ideologies, and a special form of “ethnic cleansing” in the media. Ethnically pure media cannot but produce ethnically pure public. “God made man in His own image, but the Public is made by Newspapers,” were the words written by Benjamin Disraeli in 1844.

Conclusion

The prevailing belief that the Kosovo war was provoked by the media reflects incomprehension of the complexity of formation of national identities that followed the dissolution of former Yugoslavia. War in Kosovo did not start in 1999 with the Nato’s military intervention. Police units of the former federal state had intervened already in 1981, and ethnic separation of Serbian and Albanian population has been going on ever since. By writing their “Memorandum,” Serbian academicians and intellectuals gave a “scientific background” to mythology and quasi-historical explanations of the past. Media merely transformed those “scientific findings” into everyday explanations of events. Milošević needed nothing but to adopt what resulted from “recycling” of history and was attributed the status of his political programme. The media technique of “patriotic journalism” used by both Serbian and Croatian media, enabled nationalisation, mobilisation and emotionalisation of the public sphere.

References:

- Bugarski, Ranko. 1995. *Jezik od mira do rata*. Beograd: Slavograf.
- Čolović, Ivan. 1994. *Bordel ratnika: folklor, politika i rat*. Beograd: Biblioteka XX. vek.
- Čolović, Ivan. 1994a. *Pucanje od zdravlja*. Beograd: Beogradski krug.
- Čolović, Ivan. 1997. *Politika simbola: ogledi o političkoj antropologiji*. Beograd: Radio B92.
- Ćurgus, Velimir Kazimir. 1999. Oblačenje novina. In N. Skopljanac-Brunner, A. Hodžić and B. Krištović (eds.), *Mediji i rat*, 121-159. Beograd: Mediji.
- IJAS. 2000. Independent Journalists’ Association of Serbia: Dossier on Repression 1, 1 <<http://www.nuns.org.yu>>.
- Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe. 1987. *Hegemonija in socialistična strategija*. Ljubljana: Partizanska knjiga.
- Milivojević, Snježana. 1999. Radio-televizija Srbije: “Volimo te, otadžbino naša...” In S. Nedović (ed.), *Odsutne partije. Slika političkog života Srbije u državnim medijima mart-oktober 1998*, 6-

48. Beograd: Centar za slobodne izbore i demokratiju.
- Salecl, Renata. 1991. *Disciplina kot pogoj svobode*. Ljubljana: Krt.
- Todorović, Mirjana. 1999. Politika i Borba: Sve je Jul osim avgusta, a i on je – ako nije glup. In S. Nedović (ed.), *Odsutne partije. Slika političkog života Srbije u državnim medijima mart-oktobar 1998*, 48-66. Beograd: Centar za slobodne izbore i demokratiju.
- Turković, Hrvoje. 1999. Analiza televizijskih emisija vijesti HRT. In N. Skopljanac-Brunner, A. Hodžić and B. Krištofić (eds.), *Mediji i rat*, 379-441. Beograd: Mediji.
- Veljanovski, Rade. 1996. Zaokret elektronskih medija. In N. Popov (ed.), *Srpska strana rata: Trauma i katarza u istorijskom pamćenju*, 610-636. Beograd: BIGZ.
- Zakošek, Nenad. 1999. Legitimacija rata: politička konstrukcija nove zbilje. In N. Skopljanac-Brunner, A. Hodžić and B. Krištofić (eds.), *Mediji i rat*, 159-173. Beograd: Mediji.
- Žanić, Ivo. 1998. *Prevarena povijest: Guslarska estrada, kult Hajduka i rat u Hrvatskoj i Bosni i Hercegovini 1990-1995 godine*. Zagreb: Durieux.