

# **Media and Revisionism about the 1990s' Wars in Serbia**

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# Abstract

Following the regime change in 2012, the new authoritarian regime under the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) put memory politics high on its political agenda. The revisionist history of the 90s' wars now constitutes the primary source of its political legitimization. At the same time, the new government established a firm grip over media, leaving a few independent outlets still critical of the new memory politics. A majority of mainstream media operate in symbiosis with the regime, actively contributing to the new revisionist narrative. These narratives are further supported and accelerated in tabloid and alternative media, offering an even more radicalized version of the past. In such a mediascape, actors working on critical memory are limited to a few independent media outlets. At the same time, they are under constant threat from the regime and tabloids alike.

The report analyzes historical revisionism about the 1990s' wars in Serbian media, from the end of Milošević's regime in 2000 until today. It distinguishes between two phases in the mediatization of the past: (i) the period until 2012, when the media contested the war narrative albeit within the 'spiral of silence' media model, where dramatic discoveries about the crimes fell into a deafening silence; (ii) the period after 2012 with the rise of revisionist narratives under the new authoritarian government, consolidated within the state-controlled media and ever-growing tabloid press. The new revisionist history, dominant in the second period, builds on a heroic memory of the Serbian army serving as a source of national pride. At the level of discursive strategies, it employs a reversal of perpetrators and victims, a revival of Serbian victimhood, and a rejection of any responsibility for the criminal past.



# Introduction

"Crime is the question of all questions," writes Srđa Popović in his book "One gorke suze posle." (The bitter tears in the aftermath)<sup>1</sup> In her foreword, historian Dubravka Stojanović explains: "Crime was both the cause and the consequence of the events that has shaken Serbia in the last twenty years. Crime was both the source and origin of ruling political ideas. Crime was both the means and the goal of the ruling circles. Crime is a continuity that unites apparently different regimes, it is a link between the government and the opposition, the government, and citizens."<sup>2</sup>

The attempt to break the spell of the crime, which started after the regime change in 2000, is neither the history of the radical, revolutionary break nor the uncontested continuity of the Milošević regime's war narratives. Instead, democratic governments introduced different, often contradictory measures and policies, simultaneously denouncing and supporting the former regime and their war engagement, creating much confusion and resentment. Media rarely took the leading role in critically investigating atrocities from the past. More often than not, media followed other actors - political parties, International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia (ICTY), human rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs), or state investigations in reporting about the criminal past. Apart from a few exceptions in independent media, journalists did not actively address the past and request justice for victims. At the same time, the war propaganda persisted in tabloid media, presenting Serbs as innocent victims while silencing the atrocities, ethnic cleansing campaigns, and genocide during the 1990s wars. This narrative, reiterated and actively pursued after 2012, has created a backbone of historical revisionism in Serbia until today.

This report addresses historical revisionism in Serbian media from the end of the Milošević regime until 2022, focusing on the role of media in its creation and dissemination. The

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1 Srđa Popović, *One gorke suze posle* (Beograd: Peščanik, 2010), 102.

2 Dubravka Stojanović, foreword to *One gorke suze posle*, by Srđa Popović. (Beograd: Peščanik, 2010), 8. [„Zločin je pitanje svih pitanja“. (...) Zločin je bio i uzrok i posledica događaja koji su potresali Srbiju poslednjih dvadeset godina. Zločin je bio i izvor i ishodište vladajućih političkih ideja. Zločin je bio i sredstvo i cilj vladajućih krugova. Zločin je kontinuitet koji spaja naoko različite režime, on je spona između vlasti i opozicije, vlasti i građana.“]

report distinguishes between two main phases: (i) the period until 2012, marked by the liberalization of mediascape and reluctance to deal with the memory of the 1990s wars; (ii) the period after 2012 with a return to right-wing populism and the rise of revisionist narratives. During the first period, dramatic discoveries about the crimes committed during the wars had little long-lasting effect due to the lack of political support and prevalent media silence. Contested and ambivalent narratives about the past characteristic of the media reports from the ICTY resembled the lack of official memory politics about the 1990s, creating a sense of confusion and ambivalence about the past. In the second period, under the new regime's memory politics and the state-controlled media, the new consolidated narrative about the past emerged, created around the heroic memory of the wars, revival of Serbian victimhood, and heroization of war criminals with denial of atrocities and rejection of criminal accountability. In contrast to the contested and ambivalent narratives in the previous period, the new revisionist narrative is clearly defined and promoted by the state and majority of state-controlled media.

The report first introduces historical revisionism as a common component of the memory politics of right-wing populist regimes and their relation to media. In the second part, the paper provides a short overview of the changes in Serbian mediascape from liberalization, following the end of Milošević's regime, to the recent tabloidization of media. The third section deals with the first phase of mediatization of past, during democratic governments. This phase is characterized by the "spiral of silence" media model. The final, fourth part of the paper, deals with the second phase, following the regime change and gradual turn toward authoritarianism in 2012. Its main characteristics are the return of state-controlled media and consolidation of historical revisionism within the "media capture" model.



# I Populism, historical revisionism and media

Revision of history, as a standard part of historians' work, includes any re-evaluation of the past driven by new evidence or change in the evaluation of significance or values.<sup>3</sup> Historical revisionism, on the other hand, subjugates historical narratives to the therapeutic values needed by their groups - nation, class, ethnicity, or race. They provide an alternative explanation by casting doubt, relativizing facts, creating conspiracy theories, and disrupting the very possibility of knowledge. Historical revisionists rewrite the past in order "to legitimate essentialist, racist, sexist, ethnocentric, nationalist and heteronormative beliefs. These beliefs, indeed, lie at the core of what we now recognize as fascism."<sup>4</sup>

The current wave of historical revisionism is closely related to the rise of right-wing populism and illiberal democracies worldwide. Populism transforms complex societal and political processes into struggles between people and elites based on nativism (a combination of ethno-nationalism and xenophobia) and authoritarianism.<sup>5</sup> The creation of the crises and inflation of existential threats, often located in the national past, are a trademark of the populist project and a paranoid perception of the world.<sup>6</sup> Populist

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3 Aviezer Tucker, "Historiographic Revision and Revisionism the Evidential Difference," in *Past in the Making*, ed. Michal Kopeček (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2008), 17–38.

4 Louie Dean Valencia-García, "Far-Right Revisionism and the End of History" in *Far-Right Revisionism and the End of History: Alt/Histories*, ed. Louie Dean Valencia-García (London, New York: Routledge, 2020), 7.

5 Cas Mudde, *The Populist Radical Right: A Reader* (London, New York: Routledge, 2016).

6 Jeffrey Herf, "The 'Jewish War': Goebbels and the Antisemitic Campaigns of the Nazi Propaganda Ministry," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 19, no. 1 (2005): 51–80.

memory politics, envisioned as a rejection of past humiliations, is based on a heroic memory and national pride, defending the nation from deterioration and decline.

To the extent the media are producing the paranoid worldview centered around the past humiliation, it is the central pillar on which populism strives. As a thin ideology or communication style, populism is a unique pattern of communication that focuses on scandal, personalization, simplification, dramatic emotions, hate speech, and enhancing tabloidization of media.<sup>7</sup> The symbiosis between right-wing populism and media provides a fertile ground for historical revisionism. Rejection of humiliation and promotion of illiberal memory relies on different discursive strategies. Rosenfeld points out the normalization of the criminal past, rejection of guilt, self-victimhood, rehabilitation of perpetrators, and demonization of victims.<sup>8</sup>

Media have a twofold function in creating memory: they can be seen as a platform or public arena mediating different views about the past or as an active memory actor.<sup>9</sup> In the first case, media are a mediator, providing a space for debates about the past. In contrast, in the second case, media actively contribute to the mediatization of the past by creating new stories, investigating issues, or discovering unknown facts about the past. This report looks at media in both functions, asking how media participated in historical revisionism about the 1990s wars from 2000 till today.

I used discourse analysis to analyze Serbian media and their work on historical revisionism. Understood as a textual analysis that insists on the specific relation between the text and society, discourse aims at capturing language as part of social practice.<sup>10</sup> The study included the following media from different parts of the political spectrum: dailies (*Politika*, *Danas*, *Blic*, *Kurir*, *Večernje novosti*, *Informer*, *Alo!*), weeklies (*Vreme*, *NIN*, *Pečat*), TV channels (*RTS*, *Pink*, *B92*, *TVHappy*), and internet portals (*Peščanik*, *Radio Free Europe*, *BalkanInfo*, *SrbinInfo*). The paper distinguishes between

7 Jovanka Matić, "Medijski populizam i politički populizam," in *Populizam*, ed. Zoran M. Lutovac (Beograd: Institut društvenih nauka, 2017).

8 Gavriel D Rosenfeld, "The Rise of Illiberal Memory," *Memory Studies*, (2021): 1–18.

9 Motti Neiger, Oren Meyers, and Eyal Zandberg, *On Media Memory: Collective Memory in a New Media Age* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

10 Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power*, Language in Social Life Series. (London, New York: Longman, 1989).

- (i) independent, liberal media like *Danas*, *Vreme*, and *TV B92*, with editorial policy nominally dedicated to justice and dealing with the past;
- (ii) state-owned or state-controlled media like *Politika* and *RTS*, as well as commercial media like *Blic* (I will address this media as mainstream media) balancing their reporting within the politically set boundaries and careful not to galvanize the public;
- (iii) tabloids like *Večernje novosti* and *Kurir*, openly promoting ethno-nationalism and revisionist version of the past.

The material from media was collected from the Ebart archive and online repositories, while I also relied on the extensive archives collected in the previous research. In addition, I conducted a set of interviews with journalists, NGO activists, and intellectuals who provided their perspectives on the mediascape in Serbia and historical revisionism.

# II From liberalization to tabloidization of Serbian mediascape

State-controlled media during Slobodan Milošević's regime promoted ethno-nationalism and xenophobia, with hate speech and conspiracy theories serving as an engine of the war politics. Controlled media were spreading lies and disseminating hate while demonizing members of non-Serb ethnic groups. The public service broadcaster *RTS* and daily newspapers *Politika* and *Večernje novosti* were directly under the regime's control, which suppressed and censored media, expelling dissenting journalists from work and closing disobedient media companies. The slowly emerging independent media like *Radio B92*, *Naša Borba* daily, and *Vreme* weekly, which were challenging the war propaganda, were constantly persecuted by the regime.<sup>11</sup>

The regime change in 2000 generated high expectations from media liberalization and broader democratization processes. During the rule of Democratic Party (DS) and the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) from 2001 to 2012, attempts to make media and journalists accountable for the war propaganda failed. Due to the lack of political will, the 2003 Lustration Law remained a missed opportunity. In 2009, the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (NUNS) pressed criminal charges against journalists and responsible persons in *RTS* (then *RTB*), *Politika*, *Večernje novosti*, and other media active in the war propaganda. Instead of criminal charges, the Office of the War Crimes Prosecutor

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11 Milan Milošević, "The Media Wars:1987-1997," in *Burn This House: The Making and Unmaking of Yugoslavia*, ed. Jasminka Udovički and James Ridgeway (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

published a detailed report evidencing media practices in spreading lies, disseminating hate speech, and dehumanizing the enemy.<sup>12</sup>

Contrary to enthusiastic predictions, the privatization process did not lead to media liberalization. Instead, it fostered the dependence of the media on political and financial powers that be disguised under the non-transparent ownership status.<sup>13</sup> New newspapers with foreign ownership, like *Blic* daily, emerged, while former state media underwent privatization (*Politika*) or transformed into a public service (*RTS*). The tabloid press, well-known for its clear ethno-nationalist editorial policy, provided an essential media space for the reiteration of war propaganda and historical revisionism.<sup>14</sup> After 2008, following the return of the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) to power, this block became stronger with a new weekly magazine *Pečat* established by former member of the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) and wartime director of the *RTS*, Milorad Vučelić. Like *TV Happy*, founded as *TV Košava* by Milošević's daughter in 1998, *Pečat* is a meeting point for radical ethno-nationalists and revisionists, creating a positive image of the 1990s wars and heating nationalist anger and paranoia.

Following the regime change in 2012, there was another shift in the mediascape toward right-wing populism, with the establishment of *Sputnik Srbija*, and the increasing influence of Russia on the media in the region.<sup>15</sup> *Russia Today* launched *Sputnik International* in 2014 and *Sputnik Serbia* in 2015. In the same year, the internet platform *BalkanInfo* was established, following the model of alternative media already set by *SrbinInfo* as a hub of the far-right ideology on the internet. Both platforms excel in their focus on conspiracy theories, the criminal underworld, and war criminals, offering uncensored versions of the revisionist narratives.

After 2015, the state consolidated its grip over the media, mainly through financial support from the regime and its cliques. At the same time, the process of tabloidization reached a peak as journalists from tabloid press like *Informer* and infotainment televisions like *TV*

12 Ivan Boljević et al., *Reči i nedela. Pozivanje ili podsticanje na ratne zločine u medijima u Srbiji 1991–1992*, (Beograd: Centar za tranzicione procese, 2011).

13 Irina Milutinović, "Media Ownership and Democratic Capacity of Transitional Society: The Case of Serbia," *European Journal of Communication* 32, no. 4 (2017): 367–80.

14 Aleksandar Roknić, "Uticaj žute štampe na radikalizaciju političke scene Srbije," *Hereticus* 1, no. 2 (2006): 89.

15 Thomas Brey, "Russische Medien auf dem Balkan" (Belgrad: Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung, 2021).

*Happy* and *TV Pink* began forming dense informational networks, saturating the public space with fake news and fabricated crises. The intensive tabloidization of the Serbian mediascape unfolds with the tacit support of the regime, providing a fertile ground for right-wing populist politics. The revisionist narratives about the 1990s wars flourish within the mediascape dominated by the state-controlled media and tabloidization, void of criticism and dissenting voices.

# III Spiral of silence: forgetting difficult past

The inability of Serbian media to challenge the war propaganda and deal with the past after the regime change in 2000 represents an effect of the "spiral of silence" in media. Elisabeth Nolle-Neumann introduced the concept to explain the prevalence of dominant discourses and conformity to majority opinions in public. Societies are always searching for a "sufficient level of agreement on values and goals," and ostracism threatens individuals violating common convictions and norms.<sup>16</sup> The spiral of silence ensures conformity within society, silencing minority opinions and breaches of dominant norms. Applied to the media discourses about the past, the "spiral of silence" model explains the tendency of media not to engage in a critical examination of the past. Critical memory, based on the human rights paradigm proposes that societies should deal with the past, acknowledge the crimes, and provide justice for the victims.<sup>17</sup> With political elites avoiding a clear and decisive break with the past, media reiterated existing narratives about the war. Eric Gordy identifies three moments that shook denialism in Serbia: the arrest of Slobodan Milošević in 2001, the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić in 2003, and the broadcasting of the murder of six Bosniak captives by Scorpions paramilitaries in 2005. His analysis shows that these moments "lasted a short time before discourse descended into relativism, distraction, and trivia."<sup>18</sup> To understand this process and how it unfolds via media, the report distinguishes between three types of media:

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16 E. Noelle-Neumann, "The Theory of Public Opinion: The Concept of the Spiral of Silence," *Annals of the International Communication Association* 14, no. 1 (1991).

17 Lea David, *The Past Can't Heal Us: The Dangers of Mandating Memory in the Name of Human Rights*, Human Rights in History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

18 Eric D. Gordy, *Guilt, Responsibility, and Denial: The Past at Stake in Post-Milošević Serbia*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 172.

- (i) independent, liberal media, which aimed to challenge the dominant discourse about the past;
- (ii) mainstream media, including both state-controlled and commercial media balancing their reporting within the politically set boundaries;
- (iii) tabloids openly promoting an ethno-nationalism and the 90's wars as wars of defense.

## The failure of liberal media

Independent media with the liberal editorial policy failed to change the dominant discourses about the past and establish a clear alternative to the narratives promoted during the wars. The wartime regime insisted that Serbia was not in the war but was only defending the Serbian people. In the ICTY courtroom, Slobodan Milošević most vividly propagated this narrative. He presented himself as an embodiment of the Serbian people, exploiting the populist bond created during his time in power. Liberal media often reiterates his defense, insisting on the equal responsibility of all sides in the conflict while portraying Milošević as a charismatic, exceptional politician, and admiring his acting in the trial as performing wit, intelligence, order, and power.

Journalist of weekly *Vreme* Nenad Lj. Stefanović reported from the ICTY trial to Slobodan Milošević with an unhidden sympathy for the accused, showing great distrust toward the Tribunal and international justice. He portrayed Milošević as "kapitalac" [capital hunting trophy] bringing to the ICTY much needed finances and publicity.<sup>19</sup> Stefanović is highly critical of the political elites promoting cooperation with the ICTY and skeptical of any claims about justice. This kind of worldview, combined with the sympathy for the accused as a victim of the new international order, had little, if any, empathy for the non-Serb victims.

Many journalists working for independent media, from Ljiljana Smajlović to Ljubica Gojgić and Nenad Lj. Stefanović shared this perspective. Ljubica Gojgić, reporting from Milošević's trial for *TV B92*, explains such reporting by adherence to professional norms, fulfilling the obligation to be "objective," and allowing both sides of the story to present

19 Nenad Lj. Stefanović, "Navikavanje na kapitalca", *Vreme*, 19 July 2001, <https://www.vreme.com/vreme/navikavanje-na-kapitalca/>.



their case.<sup>20</sup> Hence, media allowed the perpetrators to perpetuate lies and insult victims in public without any sanctions. The outcome of the alleged "neutral and objective" media stance was the treatment of all positions - factual and counterfactual - as equally valuable and legitimate. With such reporting, Milošević's narrative appeared as a reasonable and legitimate position about the past.

At the same time, several journalists actively pursued critical accounts about the 1990s. In *Vreme*, Dejan Anastasijević and Tatjana Tagirov continuously reported about war crimes in Croatia, from the mass murder in Ovčara to the minefields in Lovas. Their articles provided a detailed account of the atrocities, taking the victims-centered perspective and identifying the criminal responsibility of the perpetrators as well as the political responsibility of the previous regime. During the trial of Slobodan Milošević, while other media were writing about the former president, Miloš Vasić wrote about "Pritvorenik broj 039 (Inmate no.039)."<sup>21</sup> His articles challenged the moral justifications of the perpetrators and their supporters, pointing out the responsibility for the criminal past. The discovery of atrocities, from the mass graves in Batajnica to the Srebrenica genocide, is a salient topic in this media outlet. For example, Tamara Skrozza narrates the war crimes, creating a connection with the victims and inviting empathy.<sup>22</sup> Through critical accounts of the wars, these journalists have served as memory actors on their own.

In addition, the critical media played an essential role during the moments that challenged the previous regime's narrative about the wars, like the discoveries of the Scorpions footage or mass graves in Batajnica. Independent media used these opportunities to produce a series of articles, documentaries, and TV shows detailing the accounts of the crimes and giving voice to the victims. TV *B92* broadcasted documentary movies about the Scorpions unit: "Spomenar (Memory Book)" directed by Lazar Stojanović, "The Unit" by Filip Švarn, and "Patriots" by Brankica Stanković. These documentaries testify to the journalist as active memory actors in media and their direct contribution to the creation of critical memory of the 1990s wars. However, a few silence-breaking moments produced scattered, fragmented stories which did not turn into a shared narrative about the past.

20 Ljubica Gojčić, Interview with the author, Belgrade, 9 April 2015.

21 Miloš Vasić, "Slobodan Milošević pred Haškim sudom - Pritvorenik broj 039", *Vreme*, 5 July 2001, <https://www.vreme.com/vesti/slobodan-milosevic-pred-haskim-sudom-pritvorenik-broj-039/>

22 Tamara Skrozza, "Tragovi prikrivene smrti", *Vreme*, 10 July 2003, <https://www.vreme.com/vreme/tragovi-prikrivene-smrti/>

## The ambiguity of mainstream media

Serbian mainstream media mainly served as a platform for other actors, from politicians to members of civil society dealing with the 1990s wars. Instead of talking about the atrocities and criminal responsibility, they focused on the legal and political aspects of the cooperation with the ICTY. Even after the details about the atrocities appeared in the public, the mainstream media continued silencing the past. This happened in the cases of the discovery of the mass graves in Batajnica near Belgrade, where the previous regime buried the bodies of Albanian victims from Kosovo in 1999. Two and a half years after this discovery, *Politika* published an article under the title "Neglected war crime," noting how media "forgot" this crime.<sup>23</sup>

Instead, the mainstream press focused on delegitimizing the ICTY, removing moral grounds from the cooperation and rejecting - in advance - any version of the past from the ICTY as acceptable history. Several articles in *Politika* repeatedly denounced history written in the Hague, formulated by politicians from the Serbian Radical Party (SRS), academics, and journalists. This media ridiculed the prosecution and the accusations about the common Greater Serbia plan of the Serbian leadership, dismissing them as unfounded in empirical facts and ignorant of the region's history. Articles describing atrocities used dry, legal language, avoiding personalization and empathy with the victims.<sup>24</sup> There is a lack of victims' voices and no attempt to provide detailed accounts of their suffering. Journalists do not pose the questions of truth and justice for the non-Serb victims. Hence, reports about mass graves in Batajnica did not serve as moral grounds for the arrest of Serbian police and military generals. Instead, the request for their arrest and extradition by the ICTY appears as a very hard decision. The conviction about own innocence and criminal responsibility of the enemy is so ubiquitous that both media and politicians, instead, requested the arrest of Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) leaders.

The distrust toward the ICTY remained prevalent. Media routinely described witnesses as "false witnesses," who lied about the events and wrongly accused Serbs of crimes.<sup>25</sup>

23 Milan Galović, "Zanemareni ratni zločin", *Politika*, 28 October 2003.

24 "Iz optužnice Tribunala u Hagu protiv bivšeg predsednika SRJ i četvorice njegovih saradnika", *Politika*, 29 June 2001.

25 Ljiljana Smajlović, "Lažni svedoci u Haškom tribunalu", *Politika*, 8 October 2007. <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/5336/Lazni-svedoci-u-Haskom-tribunalu>

Journalists in mainstream media actively promoted an anti-Hague discourse, undermining the indictments, denouncing witnesses and politicizing trials, providing a smoke screen for the open denial of atrocities and justification of war crimes, common in tabloids like *Večernje novosti* and *Kurir*.

Even the small initiatives by the democratic government in addressing the past received harsh criticism. For example, *Politika* strongly criticized the Serbian parliament for adopting the declaration about Srebrenica in 2010. Political analyst Đorđe Vukadinović saw the declaration as a national humiliation and another step toward the political dismantling of Republika Srpska.<sup>26</sup> Wartime reporter and *Politika* journalist Miroslav Lazanski published a series of articles that discussed the responsibility of foreign secret services for the genocide, reviving conspiracy theories about the wars.<sup>27</sup> *Politika* continued to perpetuate revisionist history based on Serbian victimhood, deliberately confusing the facts with conspiracy theories and inventing a constant threat to the Serbian people. At the same time, *Politika* was publishing several detailed victims-centered reports from the annual commemorations in Potočari, sending contradictory messages about the past.

Despite the noted ambiguity and undermining of the critical accounts of the wars, the mainstream media were at least open to the critical voices. In 2009, the return of the former president of Republika Srpska Biljana Plavišić, convicted for war crimes and crimes against humanity, sparked a debate in *Politika* daily about her responsibility and role in the society. Human rights activist Miljenko Dereta criticized the normalization of war criminals upon their return.<sup>28</sup> Miroslav Lazanski, on the other hand, defended Plavišić as a free person who had done her prison time.<sup>29</sup> In their reporting, *Politika* mainly sided with Lazanski while opening for the criticism served as lip service to the image of a neutral, objective media outlet.

26 Đorđe Vukadinović, "Crvena linija", *Politika*, 14 April 2010, <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/131142/Pogledi/CRVENA-LINIJA>.

27 Miroslav Lazanski "Ko je režirao Srebrenicu?", *Politika*, 19 March 2010, <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/128187/KO-JE-REZIRAO-SREBRENICU>; Miroslav Lazanski "Čija i kakva istina?", *Politika*, 2 April 2010, <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/129912/CIJA-I-KAKVA-ISTINA>.

28 Miljenko Dereta, "Suočavanje sa Plavišićevom", *Danas*, 04 November 2009, <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/110422/Pogledi/SUOCAVANJE-SA-PLAVSICEVOM>

29 Miroslav Lazanski, "Bunda u građanskom društvu", *Politika*, 06 November 2009, <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/110711/BUNDA-U-GRADANSKOM-DRUSTVU>

## Revisionism in the tabloid press

Reporting about the 1990s wars in right-wing media rested on four main elements: the establishment of equity between accused war criminals and "the people," fabrication of existential threats and enemies, and proliferation of conspiracy theories. These media portrayed the ICTY as the anti-Serbian, kangaroo court, and a part of a Western conspiracy against the Serbian state and people. In media discourses, war criminals become an inseparable part of the organic people, with each trial and each judgment presented as an insult or a tragedy for the Serbian people. Media continued with the denial, minimization, and relativization of crimes portraying them as incidents in the righteous defensive wars. Tabloids disseminated the defendants' messages as the truth about the past by directly quoting their statements in the headlines ("Lukić: I'm not a murderer", Milošević: "Wars were not mine", Stanišić: "I'm not guilty")<sup>30</sup>. Journalists routinely accuse victims-witnesses of lying in court ("Alive after the execution", "Witness hear-say") while quoting the defense witnesses as reliable sources ("Civilians were not killed", "A hero falsely accused").<sup>31</sup> Siding with the accused and a lack of empathy for the victims often resulted in ridiculing the survivors and their testimonies in court.

Tabloids reported about the discovery of atrocities, like the broadcast of the Scorpions video, by listing the reactions of politicians condemning the crime. However, they framed the broadcast of the video as an attack on Serbia.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, claims about the video's fabricated nature and the crime's relativization were rare. Instead, the focus moved toward

30 "Milan Lukić: Nisam ubica, volim Muslimane", *Kurir*, 15 September 2011, <https://www.vesti.rs/Hag/MILAN-LUKIC-NISAM-UBICA-VOLIM-MUSLIMANE.html>; Miroslav Zarić, "Treći dan izlaganja Slobodana Miloševića pred Haškim tribunalom: Ratovi nisu bili moji", *Večernje novosti*, 19 February 2002; 'Nisam kriv', *Večernje novosti*, 13 June 2003, <https://www.novosti.rs/%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8/%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%81%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%BD%D0%B0/%D0%B4%D0%BE%D1%81%D0%B8%D1%98%D0%B5.407.html:147853-Nisam-kriv>

31 M. Zarić "Suđenje Slobodanu Miloševiću u Hagu vratilo se na ispitivanje svedoka 'baze zločina' - Živ posle streljanja", *Večernje novosti*, 4 July 2002; "Svedok rekla-kazala", *Večernje novosti*, 25 April 2002; V.N., "Civilni nisu streljani", *Večernje novosti*, 26 October 2005, <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/dosije/aktuelno.292.html:175422-Civili-nisu-streljani>

Ekipa novosti, "Junak lažno optužen", *Večernje novosti*, 30 January 2005, <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/dosije/aktuelno.292.html:166173-%D0%9F%D0%A0%D0%95%D0%93%D0%9E%D0%92%D0%9E%D0%A0%D0%98-br-%D0%97%D0%90-%D0%9F%D0%A0%D0%95%D0%94%D0%90%D0%88%D0%A3>

32 "Ovo je hajka na Srbiju", *Kurir*, 06 June 2005; V.N., "Civilni nisu streljani", *Večernje Novosti*, 26 October 2005, <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/dosije/aktuelno.292.html:175422-Civili-nisu-streljani>

challenging the relation between the execution and the Srebrenica genocide, in parallel to the constant reminders and details about crimes committed against Serb victims.

Tabloid press was an active promoter of revisionist narratives about the past. *Večernje novosti*, for example, published excerpts from Biljana Plavšić's memoirs and Veselin Šljivančanin's diary, providing space for the apologetic narratives of the convicted war criminals in the Serbian public. Following their return to the country, the tabloid press publishes texts about their whereabouts like shopping, family visits, and plans, presenting them in an intimate, familiar, and personalized fashion. By trivializing their responsibility, silencing or denying the crimes, tabloid media denounced any responsibility of Serbia for the atrocities. War criminals appear as heroes and defenders, sharing "the long-awaited truth" about the past.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, Milošević war propagandists continued to promote historical revisionism after 2000. The wartime director of RTS 1992-1995, Milorad Vučelić, in his editorials in *Pečat*, reiterates hate speech, designating democratic regime and human rights NGOs as traitors while condemning the new history forged by the ICTY.<sup>34</sup> Vučelić depicts the apocalyptic consequences of the democratic regime and its destruction of the Serbian state, national identity, and culture, listing events from the pride parade in Belgrade to Muslim extremists introducing sharia law in Sandžak.<sup>35</sup> The paranoid worldview in his writing combines the idea of the Western conspiracy with a never-ending chain of threats to the Serbian people, which serves as a simple recipe to explain any political event.

## Conclusion

During the first phase analyzed in this report, from 2000 to 2012, media mainly dealt with the past by addressing the ongoing ICTY trials and the question of cooperation with the Tribunal. Independent media played a double role: they excelled as an actor of memory,

33 "Knjiga Veselina Šljivančanija (sic!): Dugo čekana istina", *Večernje novosti*, 5 April 2012, <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/kultura.71.html:374189-Knjiga-Veselina-Sljivančanija-Dugo-čekana-istina>

34 Milorad Vučelić, "Sve je pošlo đavoljim tragom", *Pečat*, 18 December 2010, <https://www.pecat.co.rs/2010/12/sve-je-poslo-davoljjim-tragom/>

35 Milorad Vučelić, "Odgrizak jabuke", *Pečat*, 25 July 2010, <https://www.pecat.co.rs/2010/07/milorad-vucelic-ogrizak-jabuke/>

breaking the denial and challenging claims about equal responsibility of all sides during the wars. At the same time, they were reiterating apologetic discourse about the past, mainly through the exaggerated criticism of the ICTY and international justice.

The mainstream media, on the other hand, hardly engaged in challenging the criminal past of the 1990s, instead balancing the opinions of those condemning the crimes and those defending them. They quickly forgot the atrocities and the moral and political responsibility they entailed. The "spiral of silence" media model explains the larger societal silence which persists despite the incentives, the opening of topics, and taboo-breaking moments of knowledge about the war crimes.

Finally, tabloids continued promoting ethno-nationalist narratives about the wars, dominant in the 1990s, based on the heroic role of Serbian soldiers and the unprecedented victimhood of the Serbian people. Their reporting perpetuates the denial of crimes, dehumanization of the other, and rejection of accountability. In the following period, this narrative, which further developed and which the SNS regime actively pursues, would turn into the dominant interpretation of the 1990s wars in Serbian media.

# IV Media capture and revival of state-controlled media

The political change of 2012 and the coming of SNS and SPS coalition to power marked a gradual shift toward authoritarianism as the SNS increasingly consolidated its power.<sup>36</sup> The incumbent regime promotes the revisionist narratives about the 1990s wars, with state-sponsored commemorations and financial support for different cultural production projects about the 1990s.<sup>37</sup> The political changes also reflected in the media sphere, with the revival of state-controlled, censored media, blurring the line between mainstream media and tabloids and shrinking the space for critical accounts of the past.

The state control over the media is decisive for a new revisionist narrative about the 1990s wars that the regime has promoted since 2012. Florian Bieber notes that such authoritarian regimes exercise media control via a "combination of loyal media owned by businesses with murky and convoluted ownership structures, economic pressure on independent media, and threats and censorship of journalists and media."<sup>38</sup> Anya Schiffrin uses the concept of "media capture" to describe the control new populist regimes obtained through economic and political factors, securing political influence over the editorial policy and neglecting public interests.<sup>39</sup> In the case of Serbia, "media capture" can be applied to the innovative strategies of the regime to suppress media pluralism and freedoms by hidden ownership and unregulated media market.<sup>40</sup>

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36 Florian Bieber, *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*, (London: Palgrave, 2020).

37 Jelena Đureinović, "Politika sećanja na ratove devedesetih u Srbiji: Istorijski revizionizam i izazovi memorijalizacije" (Beograd: Fond za humanitarno pravo, 2021).

38 Bieber, *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*, 129.

39 Anya Schiffrin, "Introduction to Special Issue on Media Capture," *Journalism* 19, no. 8 (2018): 1033–42.

40 Jovanka Matić and Dubravka Valić Nedeljković, "Serbia," in *Media Integrity Matters - Reclaiming Public Service Values in Media and Journalism*, ed. Brankica Petković (Ljubljana: Peace Institute, 2014).

The state-controlled media enabled the uncontested establishment of the revisionist narratives, with *RTS* and *Politika* vehemently promoting the official memory politics while excluding dissenting voices. The pro-regime media allow space for the actors previously confined to the tabloid press, and for sentenced and released war criminals who now dominate the discourses about the 1990s wars.

While the historical revisionism before 2015 had strengthened the regional isolation of Serbia and clashed with the ICTY judgments and European Union accession processes, it did not receive substantial international support. Following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the revisionist narrative became part of the broader anti-Western, anti-globalist project shared between the two states perceiving themselves as attacked and humiliated by liberal capitalist globalization. Historian Milivoj Bešlin sees the year 2015 as a watershed in official memory politics, shifting from historical revisionism into revanchism.<sup>41</sup> This concept captures the aggressive style of the dominant memory actors in this period.

## State-controlled media and historical revisionism

The official memory politics of the SNS-led regime operates under one imperative: turning the 1990s wars into a memory that Serbian people can be proud of. It includes the exaggerated image of heroism and military strength of the Serbian armed forces and the compatible, equally exaggerated, image of victimhood. The latter includes the civilian victims of Operation 'Storm' and the 1999 NATO intervention and its consequences. The heroic narrative builds on the glorious battles and military leaders, providing a flattering image of the nation. Its dominance is an outcome of successful symbiosis between media and state memory politics, creating what Jelena Đureinović called the "the memory industry."<sup>42</sup>

State-controlled media are central for the revisionist narratives about the 1990s wars, providing unlimited space to their promotion. Yearly anniversaries and commemorations

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41 Milivoj Bešlin, interview with the author, 31.08.2022.

42 Đureinović, "Politika sećanja na ratove devedesetih," 26–30.



of NATO intervention and Operation 'Storm' are the main elements of the state-sponsored memory politics featured in the media. RTS broadcasts the commemorations live while other media report about them at length, turning the commemorations into media events on their own.

In addition to the central role in mediating state-organized manifestations, Serbian media engage in the initiatives of discovering unknown stories about the bravery of the Serbian armed forces. The narrative of the battle of Košare, now one of the central elements of dominant narratives, could be traced to the two texts by Milan Galović in *Politika* in 2013.<sup>43</sup> Galović introduces the Košare battle as an "untold war story" about Serbian fighters on the Albanian border. Bringing forth the voices of three retired military officers, he depicts the "hell in Košare," where joint Albanian and NATO forces attacked a Serbian outpost. In the following years, there were hundreds of articles and TV shows about the so-called "heroes of Košare", creating one of the central narratives about the Kosovo war.<sup>44</sup> The Košare battle is an exemplary case of the media as a revisionist memory actor, discovering details about the battle, biographies of the commanders and soldiers, interviewing the relatives, and successfully creating a new site of memory in nationalist history. In contrast to the discovery of Scorpion footage and mass graves in Batajnica, which quickly fell into oblivion, the story of the Košare battle serves as an unlimited reservoir for the media memory production.

When writing about the 1990s wars, media use government officials and military leaders as the most quoted sources. President Aleksandar Vučić dominates the headlines in *Politika* ("Vučić on NATO aggression: they attacked Serbia to take Kosovo away"; "Vučić: No justification for NATO aggression", "Vučić: Just do not ask from us to forget"; "Vučić:

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43 Milan Galović, "U paklu Košara – neispričana ratna priča", *Politika*, 25 March 2013, <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/252821/Drustvo/U-paklu-Kosara-neispričana-ratna-prica>. Milan Galović, "Posle vojnika na Košare se vratili – novinari", *Politika*, 03 April 2013, <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/253716/Posle-vojnika-na-Kosare-se-vratili-novinari#!>.

44 Jelena Jovanović, "A Battle for Remembrance? Narrating the Battle of Košare/Koshare in Belgrade- and Pristina-Based Media," *Comparative Southeast European Studies* 70, no. 2 (2022): 337–57.

They attacked us to defeat us, kill us and take a part of our territory")<sup>45</sup>. Both politicians and media present the NATO intervention as a crime of aggression with the political goal of establishing independent Kosovo with no moral or legal justification. The crimes of Serbian forces do not exist in the narrative, while those convicted for war crimes in Kosovo serve as reliable sources to talk about the past. In contrast to the previous phase, when mainstream media partially contested their return, politicians and media alike now welcome the sentenced war criminals. In the city of Niš, in 2015, the state organized a welcoming ceremony for the return of General Vladimir Lazarević from prison, while media reported about it. In the following years, Lazarević became a regular commentator on the NATO intervention and war in Kosovo in *Politika*, where a "legendary military leader" describes the heroism of the Serbian army in preventing a land invasion of the country.<sup>46</sup>

The production of documentary films, broadcast by RTS, is another example of the active role of state-controlled media in creating and promoting revisionist history about the 1990s wars. The twentieth anniversary of the NATO intervention in 2019 served as an occasion to produce documentaries about it. In cooperation with the Ministry of Defense, RTS produced several documentaries about the war in Kosovo, including "War Stories from Košare" and "The Battle of Paštrik." Documentaries presented the Serbian army through the lens of the emotional personalization of the soldiers and their tragic destinies.

In addition to the *RTS* audience, the Košare battle documentary has more than 7 million views on the official *RTS* channel on *YouTube*.<sup>47</sup> In cooperation with the *Vreme Film*, *RTS* co-produced three sequence documentary "Bombardment" about the political circumstances which led to war in Kosovo and NATO intervention, war operations, and victims. *RTS* 2

45 "Vučić o NATO agresiji: Tukli Srbiju da bi joj oteli Kosovo", *Politika*, 24 March 2020, <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/450735/Vucic-o-NATO-agresiji-Tukli-su-Srbiju-da-bi-joj-oteli-Kosovo>; "Vučić: Nema opravdanja za NATO agresiju", *Politika*, 23 March 2022, <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/502902/Vucic-Nema-opravdanja-za-NATO-agresiju>; "Vučić: Samo ne tražite od nas da zaboravimo", *Politika*, 24 March 2015, <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/322737/Vucic-Samo-ne-tražite-od-nas-da-zaboravimo>; "Vučić: Napali su nas da nas poraze, ubijaju i da nam oduzmu deo teritorije", *Politika*, 24 March 2021, <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/475654/Vucic-Napali-su-nas-da-nas-poraze-ubijaju-i-da-nam-oduzmu-deo-teritorije>.

46 T. Todorović, "General Lazarević: Na Košarama sprečena kopnena invazija na našu zemlju", *Politika*, 9 April 2022, <https://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/504449>

47 "Ratne priče sa Košara", *RTS*, 9 April 2019, <https://www.rts.rs/page/rts/rs/rtspredstavlja/story/267/najnovije/4300115/dokumentarna-serija-ratne-price-sa-kosara-24---26.-marta-rts-2-20-casova.html>.

broadcast these documentaries daily during the 20th anniversary of the intervention in primetime, and they are still available on the *RTS YouTube* channel.<sup>48</sup> Finally, *RTS* dedicated special attention to NATO's attack on the state television on 23 April 1999, and produced several documentaries about the attack.<sup>49</sup> The intensity of documentary production, their number, and scope are exemplary outcomes of the "memory industry" in Serbia.

State-controlled media are an active and engaged memory actor, with an important role in the creation and dissemination of the revisionist narratives about the 1990s wars. Media produce the content and are innovative in finding individuals who can testify about the past: from pilots, soldiers, and policemen to survivors, civilian victims, and their families. The tragic narrative includes many perspectives of Serbian witnesses, their memories, and detailed description of tragic events. At the same time, *Politika*, *RTS*, and other state-controlled media leave out the atrocities committed by the Serbian forces, and the revisionist narrative excludes the voices of Albanian, Croatian or Bosniak victims. The intellectuals and human rights activists critical of the heroic memory are invisible, creating a closed, politically controlled, and censored mediascape.

## Tabloids, infotainment televisions, and alternative media

Tabloid media have increased in numbers and their audience reach since 2012. Still, they remained faithful to the production of scandals, fabrication of crises and threats, dissemination of lies, and promotion of conspiracy theories. The main frame of the 1990s wars as defensive wars, fought by brave and morally spotless Serbian political and military leaders, is dominant. In their search for sensation and scandal, tabloid media show no moral or legal considerations. While state-owned media and politicians justify the presence of released war criminals by their served sentences, tabloid media publish interviews with the prisoners counting on the sensationalist effects. Former Yugoslav

48 "Bombardovanje - put u rat", *RTS*, 22 March 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-LmVChsiaQ8;>

"Bombardovanje - kako se vodio rat?", *RTS*, 22 March 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tlAmN5s6otY;>

"Bombardovanje - žrtve rata", *RTS*, 22 March 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4vYg3NEP8qM&t=2877s>

49 "Hronika najavljene smrti", *RTS*, 23 April 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3J-qDr6UpOM&t=25s;> "Tišina u Aberdarevoj", *RTS*, 23 April 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eoFeDIETFow>

Army general Nebojša Pavković, serving a 22-year sentence in Finland for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed during the war in Kosovo, gave several interviews from prison to *Pečat* weekly and *Balkan.Info*. In these interviews, he reiterated Milošević's script of the war "against terrorists" and the heroic defense of the Serbian army.<sup>50</sup> Former commander of the Republika Srpska Army, Ratko Mladić, convicted for genocide in Srebrenica to a life sentence, went live from prison in the morning program of *TV Happy*.<sup>51</sup>

The nationalist intellectuals support the revisionist war narratives of the war criminals in tabloid media. Milivoj Bešlin explains: "First, war criminals present their ideas on *TV Happy* morning program, while in the evening, my colleagues, historians, legitimize this worldview, providing a scientific stamp to what was said in the morning."<sup>52</sup>

Additionally, tabloid media is open for the underworld criminals and paramilitaries from Yugoslav wars, like Dragoslav Bokan, leader of White Eagles, and Mihailo Ulemek, member of the Serb Volunteer Guard, both known for atrocities during the 1990s wars.<sup>53</sup> Their statements revolve around the heroism and strength of Serbian soldiers while openly voicing hatred and contempt toward others while claiming biological and cultural superiority of the Serbian people. Hate speech, aggression, and explicit valorization of violence and crimes constitute common themes in the tabloid press.

Production of enemies, crises, and dissemination of fear is the daily bread and butter for the tabloid press. In the analysis of tabloid press in 2018, Stefan Janjić, the editor of portal *Fake News Tragač* counted 265 wars announced on the front pages of tabloids, most often in *Informer* and *Srpski telegraf*, "fought" against "Ustashas" and "Shiptars."<sup>54</sup> The tabloids also target human rights activists for their memory activism, especially for the acknowledgment

50 Stefan Karganović, "General Nebojša Pavković: Svetski moćnici nisu želeli mir na Kosmetu", *Pečat*, 11 December 2015, <https://www.pecat.co.rs/2015/12/general-nebojsa-pavkovic-svetski-mocnici-nisu-zeleli-mir-na-kosmetu>; Aleksandar Pavković, "Intervju: General Nebojša Pavković - Bili smo spremni da damo život za odbranu Srbije!", *Balkan.Info*, 06 October 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dTVFJLg2Zj4>

51 Jelena Dimitrijević, Milomir Marić, "Dobro jutro Srbijo" *TV Happy*, 16 November 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILHfcl\\_Ytul](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILHfcl_Ytul)

52 Milivoj Bešlin, Interview with the author, 31.08.2022.

53 Iva Martinović, Miloš Teodorović, "Paravojne formacije - Dušan silni, Beli orlovi, Srpski sokolovi", *Radio Free Europe*, 11 April 2010, [https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/plp\\_paravojne\\_formacije\\_dusan\\_silni\\_beli\\_orlovi\\_srpski\\_sokolovi/2008829.html](https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/plp_paravojne_formacije_dusan_silni_beli_orlovi_srpski_sokolovi/2008829.html)

54 Katarina Živanović, "Koje su sve ratove najavljivali tabloidi u 2018. godini?" *Danas*, 01 January 2019, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/koje-su-sve-ratove-najavljivali-tabloidi-u-2018-godini/>

of the Srebrenica genocide, as anti-Serbian traitors financed by the West.<sup>55</sup> For the tabloids, the recognition of genocide is a yardstick for identifying traitors, enemies of the people, and haters of the Serbian nation.

In addition to fake news and the creation of enemies, the tabloid press is fabricating and disseminating a whole set of conspiracy theories based on the Western plot against the Serbian state and the people. One of the most successful examples is the claim about the harmful effects of depleted uranium bullets, which received growing attention in Serbia after 2015.<sup>56</sup> In the following years, tabloids intensified reports about the depleted uranium by interviewing medical and military experts like Milan Čikarić or army general Božidar Delić, both confirming the cancer pandemic in Serbia. In addition, cancer patients, like the mother of Milica Rakić, the girl killed during the NATO intervention, or war criminal Vojislav Šešelj, publicly connect their illness with the NATO intervention.<sup>57</sup> Mainstream media do not ignore this topic or criticize the hyper-victimization it entails, but follow the lead instead. RTS organized a round table discussion about it, with guests promoting "the genocidal character of the bombing" and "ecocide" of Serbia and all its citizens, as the neurosurgeon and SNS politician Danica Grujičić claimed.<sup>58</sup>

This spill-over from tabloid press to mainstream media is another characteristic of the post-2012 media landscape. War propagandists and revisionist journalists have also moved from tabloids to the mainstream media. Milorad Komrakov, the public face of the RTS war propaganda removed after 5 October, returned in 2022 as an anchor of the morning program on the newly founded *Tanjug TV*.<sup>59</sup> His public rehabilitation is symbolic support

55 Ivana Žigić, "Pljuju za keš! Drecun: Biserko i Kandićka dobile 109.000 dolara za priču o genocidu i proglašavanje Srba genocidnim narodom", *Kurir*, 10 August, 2021, <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/3745213/jadno-biserko-i-kandicka-dobile-109000-dolara-za-pricu-o-genocidu-i-proglasavanje-srba-genocidnim-narodom>.

56 Astrea Pejović, "Social Life of Depleted Uranium: Legacies of the NATO Intervention in Serbia" (20 Years after the NATO Intervention in Yugoslavia: Local, Regional and Global Aspects of 'Humanitarian Interventions,' Leipzig, 2019).

57 Jelena Đondović, "Bivša vlast zataškala sve o NATO agresiji!", *Alo!*, 23 August 2019, <https://www.alo.rs/vesti/drustvo/bivsa-vlast-zataškala-sve-o-nato-agresiji-istrazivanje-koje-sam-vrsio-na-vma-prisilno-ukinuli/248279/vest>

58 Olivera Jovičević, "NATO bombardovanje - zločin koji ne zastareva", *RTS*, 17 October 2017, <https://www.rts.rs/page/tv/sr/story/22/rt-svet/2906910/upitnik.html>.

59 Katarina Živanović, "Ko je Milorad Komrakov: Ozloglašeni urednik iz 90-ih koji je posle 5. oktobra 'sklonjen' na misteriozno radno mesto", *Danas*, 29 June 2022, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/ko-je-milorad-komrakov-ozloglaseni-urednik-iz-90-ih-koji-je-posle-5-oktobra-sklonjen-na-misteriozno-radno-mesto/>

for the revisionist accounts of the 1990s wars he has been popularizing for years in *Večernje novosti* and his books.<sup>60</sup>

Denial of the Srebrenica genocide is a central topic of the revisionist narrative in tabloid press and alternative media. Several journalists are excelling in this context, like Stefan Karganović, director of the so-called Historical Project Srebrenica, Milivoj Ivanišević, and Ljiljana Bulatović-Medić, to name but a few. In books and articles in the tabloid press from *Kurir*, via *Pečat*, to *Večernje novosti*, they pursue factual denialism of genocide, reducing the number of killed and rejecting the criminal label. They see the genocide label as a tool to humiliate and politically defeat Serbia. In 2020, the International Commission headed by Gideon Greif, appointed in 2019 by the Republika Srpska government, published the report in general agreement with the denialist discourse. The report reduced the number of victims and rejected genocide charges, although acknowledging that the crimes happened.<sup>61</sup> In *Kurir daily*, the report featured on the front page, stressing that "neither an individual crime of genocide nor genocide in general" took place in Srebrenica.<sup>62</sup> Tabloid *Informer* followed with the printed supplement about the report, announcing the triumph of the scientific truth about Srebrenica.<sup>63</sup> Internet portal *Srbinfo* published Greif's invitation "to delete Srebrenica from history" since genocide did not happen.<sup>64</sup> Normalization of the large parts of radical-right discourse and the constant overlapping between tabloid and mainstream media make the distinction between the two fluid and blurred.

60 Komrakov is the author of four books about the regime change in 2000 and the NATO intervention. In 2019, in *Večernje novosti*, he authored a feuilleton about the NATO intervention.

61 Gideon Greif, "Concluding Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Suffering of All People in the Srebrenica Region between 1992 and 1995," 2020, 30, <https://incomfis-srebrenica.org/report/>.

62 Katarina Lazić Simić, "Objavljen Grajfov izveštaj o Srebrenici", *Kurir*, 21 July 2021, <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/3733445/objavljen-grajfov-izvestaj-o-srebrenici-zakljucuje-se-da-se-nije-dogodio-niti-pojedinacni-zlocin-genocida-niti-genocid-uopste>.

63 M. Dobromirović, B. Vukčević, "Ne propustite, samo danas u štampanom izdanju Informera - detaljan izveštaj Gideona Grajfa o Srebrenici", *Informer*, 26 July 2021, <https://informer.rs/vesti/politika/624415/najava-dodatak-informer-srebrenica-genocid>.

64 "Gideon Grajf: 'Genocid u Srebrenici' treba izbrisati iz istorije - nije se dogodio", *Srbinfo*, 16 June 2021, <https://srbinfo.politika/gideon-grajf-genocid-u-srebrenici-treba-izbrisati-iz-istorije-nije-se-dogodio/?lang=lat>

## Liberal media: silenced critics

The official state-sponsored commemorations are media events and, as such, they are equally present in the independent media. State officials, like Aleksandar Vučić and Aleksandar Vulin, appear as the leading voices of the revisionist narrative, requesting justice for Serbian victims and memory of the heroic defense of Kosovo. In *Danas* daily, headlines like "Vučić: Serbia will not forget crimes committed by 19 most powerful states!", "Vulin: NATO bombardment as the hardest moment in our history", Vučić: They wanted to destroy us, but we saved our pride"<sup>65</sup> hardly differ from similar reports in other media.

At the same time, unlike state-controlled media, liberal media provide some space for the critical voices questioning the inflated Serbian victimhood and obliteration of non-Serb victims from the official memory politics. They publish statements and press-releases from the human rights organizations and follow anniversaries of war atrocities.<sup>66</sup> In their commemorative reports about the NATO intervention, they do not erase Albanian victims, like in state-controlled media. Instead, the public can read about 600,000 refugees from Kosovo or massacres like the one in Mala Kruša.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, they publish human rights activists who criticize the culture of forgetting and decontextualization of the 1990s' wars. The same is true for the intellectuals confronting historical revisionism, like historians Milivoj Bešlin and Dubravka Stojanović, who publish their appeals in *Danas* daily, *Peščanik*, and *Radio Free Europe*. Although in some cases they might reach mainstream media, like *Blic* daily and *NIN* weekly,<sup>68</sup> they are invisible in the state-controlled media,

65 Fonet, "Vučić: Srbija neće zaboraviti zločine 19 najmoćnijih zemalja", *Danas*, 24 March 2020, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/vucic-srbija-nikada-nevere-zaboraviti-zlocine-19-najmocnijih-zemalja-nad-srbijom/>; *Danas* Online, "Vulin: NATO bombardovanje najteži trenutak naše istorije", *Danas*, 10 June 2019, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/vulin-nato-bombardovanje-najtezi-trenutak-nase-istorije/>; Fonet/RTS, "Vučić: hteli su da nas unište, ali mi smo sačuvali ponos", *Danas*, 24 March 2017, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/vucic-hteli-su-danas-unište-ali-smo-mi-sacuvali-ponos/>

66 S. Č, "Rekom odgovara Vučiću da su sva deca vredna i važna a ne samo naša", *Danas*, 12 May 2022, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/rekom-odgovara-vucicu-da-su-sva-deca-vredna-i-vazna-a-ne-samo-nasa-101-detertva-nato-66-albanske-nacionalnosti-25-srpske-i-10-romske/>; Snežana Čongradin, "Živa Lomača - paradigma stradanja Bošnjaka u Višegradu", *Danas*, 17 June 2022, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/suocavanje/ziva-lomaca-paradigma-stradanja-bosnjaka-u-visegradu/>

67 S.Č, "Navršava se 21 godina od početka NATO bombardovanja na SRJugoslaviju", *Danas*, 24 March 2020, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/suocavanje/navrsava-se-21-godina-od-pocetka-nato-bombardovanja-sr-jugoslavije/>

68 Marko Lovrić, "Političari na skejtborđu", *Blic*, 11 July 2020, <https://www.blic.rs/nin/politiciari-na-skejtborđu-na-balkanu-na-vlasti-elite-iz-ratova-oni-nas-dave-i-ne/j5f8vly>

while targeted and demonized as anti-Serbs by tabloids.<sup>69</sup> According to Milivoj Bešlin, this censorship, ironically, serves as a protecting shield: "the fact is that there is not even a minimum freedom of the media, so we cannot enter the mainstream media and even get the opportunity to provoke the public opinion."<sup>70</sup> Paradoxically, the last protection from verbal attacks and violence against those challenging historical revisionism is the censorship in Serbian media.

Contrary to the tabloid press and state-controlled media, independent media like *Danas* or *Vreme* criticize the heroization of war criminals and their normalization in public on both political and moral grounds. Despite this openness for the critical accounts, liberal media are no longer actively pursuing critical memory of the 1990s' wars. With the exception of *Peščanik* and *Radio Free Europe*, they serve more as a platform for other memory actors like human rights activists and critical intellectuals. Even such minimal openness for the counter-narrative presents a threat to the SNS and its political allies. Journalists and human rights activists questioning revisionist history about the 1990s wars are under constant threat from radical-right politicians and tabloids alike. In 2019, for example, Vojislav Šešelj attacked *Danas* daily's journalist Snežana Čongradin in the parliament, for her text about the commemoration in Potočari, requesting that anyone who claims genocide in Srebrenica be sentenced to 20 years in prison.<sup>71</sup> With no response from the government or legal protection, these attacks create an insecure environment and significantly affect already limited media freedoms.

## Conclusion

The dominance of revisionist narratives about the 1990s' wars in Serbia since 2012 builds upon the symbiosis between the mainstream media and the political regime. The

69 Fabricated affairs which are then turned into the official memory politics like the one surrounding Blagoje Jovanović, which served as a background for a persecution campaign against historian Dubravka Stojanović in: "Skandal! Anti-srpski profesori žale za ubistvom osnivača Jasenovca!", *Informer*, 26 July 2020, <https://informer.rs/vesti/politika/537034/skandal-anti-srpska-profesori-zale-ubistvom-osnivaca-jasenovca>

70 Milivoj Bešlin, Interview with the author, 31.08.2022.

71 M.R. Milenković, "Šešelj izvredao novinarku Danasa Snežanu Čongradin", *Danas*, 16 July 2019, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/seselj-izvredjao-novinarku-danasa-snezanu-congradin/>



dominant media discourses revolve around the uncritical promotion of state actors and state-sponsored commemorations, the active contribution to constructing war narratives, and the complete exclusion of critical voices.

After the overthrow of Milošević and his regime in 2000, tabloid media represented the continuity of denialism and war propaganda. With the regime change in 2012, many revisionist narratives from tabloid press shifted into the mainstream media, reflecting the official memory politics promoted by the SNS regime. Tabloids and far-right media outlets accelerate the revisionist narratives about the 1990s' wars, pushing further radicalization through scandals, lies, and conspiracy theories. Weaken and threatened liberal media still provide a space for the memory activism of human rights organizations, albeit with very limited active work on memory or investigation about the wars.

The revisionist narrative combines an exaggerated image of heroism and the military strength of the Serbian armed forces with the inflated image of self-victimhood. It provides a flattering image of the nation through a reversal of perpetrators and victims, unrestricted self-victimization, and blatant denial of atrocities. Created by the "memory industry," these war narratives are almost uncontested in public. Those critical of the dominant narratives, on the other hand, face censorship in the mainstream media and persecution by the state actors and tabloids alike. In such surroundings, combating historical revisionism in media might require broader mobilization, widening the space for critical memory and strengthening journalists as active memory actors.

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