

Received: 28.2.2023.  
Acceptance: 24.4.2023.

**Review paper**  
UDK 659.3:3411.3.(497.6)  
DOI 10.7251/SVR2326145Đ

## **CIVIL WAR AND DEMOCRACY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE MEDIA: THE CASE OF BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA**

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**Abstract:** *The focus of this paper is on the media portrayal of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which took place at the beginning of the last decade of the 20th century, as well as the consequences that arose from it. Although the media in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the twilight of socialist Yugoslavia, decently accompanied the establishment of a multi-party system, as one of the preconditions of democracy, the insistence on political communication by the actors of public life within the media failed to prevent, stop or even reduce the production of national hatred, which resulted in war. Not even a quarter of a century after the end of the war, the situation is not great, the media still serves to bribe, maintain a state of latent intolerance and manipulate citizens.*

**Keywords:** *war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, media, democracy*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Formerly respectable and unique, at least at first glance, SFR Yugoslavia went through a process of national homogenization at the beginning of the last decade of the twentieth century. Until then, the multi-confessional, multicultural and multinational former Yugoslavia was polarized into national fiefdoms. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, due to its complexity, the situation was particularly uncertain and complicated. The national parties that won the elections tried, each for themselves, to win positions in the media and thus gain additional legitimacy among the people. Many media have changed tutors, from the sphere of communist authorities they have passed into the hands of ruling national parties. Although new media were launched, especially print media, which nurtured a critical word, in which a new generation of young journalists,

who had a developed critical perception of the existing situation, made their active contribution, the war completely stopped development and almost destroyed the media infrastructure. Most of the media has become a tool of propaganda that the authorities and other centers of power have used liberally.

Bosnia and Herzegovina confirmed the thesis that war situations bring the media into special and ungrateful situations and challenges. On the one hand, in the war period, interest in the information that abounds in the same increases. On the other hand, the process of gathering that information is very difficult not only because of the direct threat to journalists, but also because of the warring parties' awareness of the importance of public opinion, and therefore journalists have difficult access to information while the parties in conflict use the media as propaganda levers in order to gain public support in to their own and foreign countries, created an image of the enemy, demoralized the opponent or influenced the situation on the ground through misinformation. Some of the warring parties in the Bosnian war whirlwind used the power of the media more successfully, while others, perhaps enamored with their military power, refused, or even loathed, using the media to gain the support of international public opinion. Since the hilly Balkans were mostly ignorant of purposeful and intelligent propaganda, in order to achieve the same strategy, private public relations agencies were often engaged, which "baked their craft" in numerous conflicts, preparing wars by creating images of the enemy. The machinery of war propaganda culminated in BiH.

Although the media, as the "watchdog of democracy", initially accompanied the establishment of a multi-party system decently, as one of the preconditions of democracy, the insistence on political communication by the actors of public life within the media failed to prevent, stop or even reduce the production of national hatred that resulted in war. Quarter of a century after the end of the war, the situation is not great, the media still serves to bribe, maintain a state of latent intolerance and manipulate citizens.

The focus of this paper will not be so much on the civil war in Bosnia and Herzegovina as on the media portrayal of it and the consequences that arose from it.

## Media in the service of war

*The public, just like oxygen, is a natural need of every individual. Rule over the tongues, brains and eyes of citizens must not be allowed. Freedom of the press is a natural right, given by God and not subject to expiration. He must not be trampled by any worldly force, especially not by a corrupt government trying to save its own skin* (Kin, 1995: 12, 13). Natural law, given by God, which John Keane mentions in his work “Media and Democracy”, has obviously acquired completely wrong connotations in Bosnia and Herzegovina. After the one-party single-mindedness that was the only window to the world for the peoples of the former South Slavic community for almost fifty years, the suddenly “chosen” freedom of thought and speech seemed to cloud already fragile and intolerant minds. Instead of the path of discussion and consolidation, they took the path of confrontations. Initially treated and viewed as a “fight” and a one-sided representation of national interests that, according to the actors of the public scene, were endangered, political communication degenerated into intolerance, threats, and finally into an open call for “lynching”. *The result of the war was the division into three completely separate media systems, between which, in the most literal sense of the word, there was no correspondence.* (Kukić, 2009: 64). Those three media systems were almost to the same extent under the direct influence of the three ruling national programs and policies of the three ruling national philosophies (SDS, SDA, HDZ)..

Media under the control of the then ruling Serbian party SDS became centers of nationalist indoctrination during the war. In the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina controlled by the Croats (so-called Herceg-Bosnia), there was media of mainly one political option, the one represented by the ruling HDZ. In the territory under the control of the Bosniak government, the media were part of the propaganda apparatus of the SDA and the local military and civilian authorities. The language of hatred has greatly dominated the public scene of Bosnia and Herzegovina. *There was an objective basis for the neighborly balance of fear; if neighborly love had not already dried up, in that the Muslims had a numerical majority, as well as the financial support of the Islamic and media of the Western world, the Croats - the wealthy diaspora, the solidarity motherland and the Catholic Church, and the Serbs - the protection of the JNA and the support of Serbia and Montenegro* (Кецмановић, 2007: 45, 46).

According to the research of the Society for the Reconstruction and Development of the media MEDIA PLAN, which was carried out immediately after the war, intolerant speech could be recognized on all warring sides, which caused an additional development of antagonisms. The Serbian side was led by Risto Đogo, who tried to insult and humiliate the opposing side, primarily the Bosniak side, with inappropriate comments and gestures. Journalists in the Serbian media did not use the term “Bosniak” at all, but “Muslim”, which represented a certain attitude that denied the existence of that nation, maintaining the claim that Muslims/Bosniaks were an exclusively religious group. Serbian journalists called the Bosniak side various derogatory names: “Alija’s Mujahideen”, “Turks”... For the then Serbian Radio Television (SRT), Bosnia and Herzegovina was always “former”, calling it “Alija’s state” or “Islamic state”..

The identification of the Sarajevo Bosniak government with the “Muslim government” was a characteristic of the Croatian media until the moment of the formation of the Croat-Muslim Federation. The eastern part of the divided Mostar was always called “Muslim Mostar”. By the way, the Croatian media and Croats in general, before and during the war, were more focused on Croatia due to the impossibility, as they claimed, of expressing their views equally in Sarajevo. Thus, just before the war, one of the members of the BiH presidency, Stjepan Kuljić, *went to Zagreb to hold a press conference without previously complaining to either Izetbegović or Krajišnik, or even his own Pelivan, that it was allegedly not possible for him in Sarajevo because of the information blockade of the HDZ* (Kećmanović, 2007: 25, 26).

When it comes to the Bosniak side, the public discourse was also aggressive. They used the term “Chetniks” for the Serbian army and the Serbian authorities, while they called the highest officials of the Serbian authorities “war criminals”. Members of the Serbian nation were addressed as “rebellious Bosnian Serbs”, “Serbian separatists”, “Karadžić’s Serbs”, “Serbian aggressors”, “Serbian criminals”... When naming the official Serbian and Croatian institutions in BiH, they used various terms: “so-called”, “self-proclaimed”, “self-called”...

After the war, the use of derisive and offensive prefixes gradually disappeared or changed. For the Serbian media, the federal community of Croats and Bosniaks was the “Muslim-Croat Federation”. The Republika Srpska was addressed as a “Serbian entity” on the state RTV in Sarajevo. In most cases, however, in the post-war period, offensive terms survived in colloquial form. The expressions “temporarily occupied territories”,

“terrorist Serbian regime from Pale”, “Serbian aggressor authorities”, “collapsing terrorist regime from Pale”, “Serbian rural authorities” could be heard in the Sarajevo media... while on the Serbian side there were the terms “Muslim enemies”, “former BiH”... Those who wanted to avoid unpleasant and offensive names used the terms “those over there” or “the opposite side”.

Media expansion during the war in the territories that today belong to the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, according to the Association for Reconstruction and Development of the Media, was encouraged by significant foreign support. The Soros Foundation, the European Commission, the Council of Europe, USAID and a number of other international and national foundations provided the greatest assistance to alternative and independent media. The government organizations of several Islamic and European countries provided assistance to the state Bosniak media. The media in Republika Srpska did not receive any significant international aid, with the exception of aid from the then FR Yugoslavia. The assistance of international organizations and foundations to independent and alternative media in Republika Srpska began after the end of the war.

### Consequences of “war” journalism

Regarding the role of the media and journalists in spreading the ideas of war in the countries of the former Yugoslavia, Bosnia and Herzegovina above all, it has not yet been criminally determined, although their role is mentioned in a series of indictments and verdicts for war crimes. In countless trials before the International Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, evidence was presented about the negative role of the media in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but none of the journalists and editors were held accountable. Many analysts and experts warned about the role of the media in the war. In 1994, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, special rapporteur of the United Nations Human Rights Commission, warned about the ways of information in the media in Serbia, Croatia and BiH. Mazowiecki compiled a special report on the media in December 1994, in which he emphasized that *the information published by the media in the former Yugoslavia essentially consisted of nationalist discourse and ubiquitous attacks and insults directed against other nations* (Mazowiecki, 1994: 35). On the basis of the research carried out by Renaud de la Brosse at the request of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, it was concluded that the nationalist regimes in the territory

of the former Yugoslavia *ensured control over television, radio and the press by combining propaganda, partial (and biased) information, false news, manipulation, failure to inform about certain facts. The climate of mistrust and then hatred towards the other, which fed on age-old fears and played on the card of extreme nationalism, gradually, from the end of the 1980s, began to manifest itself in all the republics of the former Yugoslavia. Each government in its republic tried to dominate the media in its territory, especially television, turning them into instruments of propaganda with the task of winning over the population to their political ideas and actions* (de la Brosse, 2003: 4).

In war, information had a threefold role: it served as a tool for military forces, then it was the environment, that is, the infosphere, in which the war takes place, and finally, it was the goal of warfare. *Information warfare is conducted with information, within information and for information* (Klun, 2000: 80).

The case of the former Yugoslavia, especially Bosnia and Herzegovina, is an example of a country, that is, an area where the mass media still play a key role in the creation and presentation of ethno-national identities that have retained very important ideological functions in the region. *Ethnonational ideology is and still is the dominant ideology through which the media present social reality* (Džihana; Volčić, 2011: 8, 9). Today's situation in BiH media is not at all enviable. With the exception of a few "independent" media, most follow the national matrix set up during the war. The question is, how much do these media really want to "take sides" in the media and, above all, social stratification in Bosnia and Herzegovina? The current position of the media in BiH is such that they are *exposed to fierce pressure from the ruling political oligarchies and are mainly in the function of protecting and promoting their nationalist and criminal interests* (Pećanin, 2009: 61).

Whether they are under pressure, whether they independently and consciously produce and maintain a kind of situation of "latent antagonism", the media in Bosnia and Herzegovina are heirs and zealous guardians of intolerance. The same is most present and most obvious on the eve of marking important dates for national groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Thus, for example, on the eve of the commemoration of the crimes in Srebrenica, the entire "probosniak" media scene rises to its feet in accusing and denigrating the Republika Srpska, often crossing the line of political correctness and journalistic ethics by allowing itself to identify the crimes committed by individual members of the Republika Srpska army with the Serbian people as a whole. On the other hand,

in the “Serbian” media, one can still find certain cynical cancellations and disparagements of the Bosniak victims in Srebrenica. Aggressive approach and almost warlike discourse, on the one hand, and indirect disparagement of the victims, on the other, are a consequence of the unclear picture of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina created by the same media that still successfully maintain a kind of antagonistic status quo of public opinion in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

### **“Others” through the prism of the media**

During the war, the main protagonist of war propaganda was television, however, the same propaganda matrix can also be found in the press. The form of creating war had a social, political and institutional basis - from various memoranda through the media glorification of the national interest, its defense to the definitive political institutionalization of the nation and the media construction of the enemy ([www.aimpress.ch/dyn/pubs/archive/data/199411/41120-004-pubs-beo.htm](http://www.aimpress.ch/dyn/pubs/archive/data/199411/41120-004-pubs-beo.htm); time of viewing the text 02/17/2023).

The applied manipulation strategies were based on a combination of the following elements: 1. *nationalization of the discourse* with the aim of reducing the various layers of national identity to national, i.e. ethnic affiliation, whereby the individual becomes relevant only as a member of a collectivity, nation, i.e. ethnic group, which becomes the main actor, in which the name and for which one should fight; 2. *mythologizing of discourse*, which implies the revitalization of national myths and their use in the creation of new national identities; 3. *reinterpretation of history and its instrumentalization* for daily political purposes; 4. *creation of a victim cult*, that is, an image in which one party has always been the victim of the other party; 5. *emotionalization and militarization of discourse* through the use of bipolar stereotypes and attributes with a strong emotional charge in building a counter-polar image of the opposing sides (Skopljanac Brunner, 2000: 141, 142).

The political propaganda by which the media created ideas about the enemy and incited war was based, therefore, on the ideological abuse of the historical context, the denial and placement of half-truthful information, the wrong and false value system, as well as the extraction of events and information from the context. The exclusivity and observation of events and phenomena from a “black-and-white” angle, in which enemies are clearly distinguished from friends, represents a general informational pattern that allowed the audience a free interpretation, at first glance,



and essentially only supported the creators of public opinion. In this way, an appearance of neutrality was created, as well as an appearance of unanimity based on supposed mutual understanding and trust. On the other hand, the real creators of hatred and war were all the time in the background - they were leaders, the media, local politicians... People were told the story of ideologising history, returning to national tradition and imposing an attitude of national vulnerability.

Based on everything, it is pointed out that one of the basic postulates of media manipulation was the presentation and interpretation of the attitude towards the “other” that was extreme and ethnically motivated. The most impressive manipulative approaches used by the media in that period were *polarization, simplification, disavowal and silencing of everything that violates the given frame of We - Them or comes out of it* (Đerić, 2008: 261). The perception of a relationship in which there are two sides, “us” and “them”, is related to the archetypal dichotomy that distinguishes “good” from “evil”.

The main goal of the propaganda was to strengthen the national identity and improve the collective consciousness while preventing any critical consciousness and turning the individual into a part of the mass. That was the period in which the already mentioned image of the “other” was created. Also, the media attacked and “demonized” all external and internal enemies. The external ones were other nations, while the internal enemies were all those who did not accept the interpretation of the national interest as presented by the ruling option. The government spread propaganda with the intention of discrediting any suspicion that its policies were wrong. This kind of discourse resulted in the fact that the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina are still polarized and trust mostly only “their” media, i.e. media that follow the national matrix and represent the views of mainly one option.

## CONCLUSION

Although Bosnia and Herzegovina, i.e. the media that exist in it, are neither the first nor the only ones that, through manipulation and propaganda, influenced the perception of citizens as well as the factual situation during the war and after the war, they still represent one of the most drastic examples of abuse of the power they had in public sphere. Perhaps only the media in Rwanda and some other countries were more active and radical in calling for and inciting crimes. However, journalists from Rwanda were held accountable in court for their actions,



while journalists from Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as international journalists who reported from war-torn areas, were never brought to justice. And they caused both the creation of intolerance, antagonism and aggression, on the one hand, and the creation of an exclusive public image of victims and aggressors, on the other.

Therefore, the exclusive attitude about “us” and “them” was not reserved only for the local media, but the world media also followed the same matrix, certainly not for reasons of national “grouping”, as was the case with the domestic media, but from the drive for sensationalism and viewership, and an objective attitude certainly could not attract the audience in the number in which the story about “good” and “bad” guys did. In this way, circulations and viewership grew, news houses, agencies and sponsors invested money in journalistic “excursions” to the hilly Balkans. Everyone was, if not satisfied, then certainly “enchanted” by the live war. All except for the unfortunate victims who were manipulated, both during their lives by the domestic and foreign media, as well as by counting the mass graves and calculating the real numbers of victims who were “ours” and “theirs” even in death.

Since time immemorial, man has had a repulsive attitude towards something that is foreign to him, that is “different” from him, he has always felt fear towards “others”. That fear and revulsion turned into intolerance, eventually into aggression. The most obvious examples of fear turning into hatred are civil wars because, usually in a small space, several different groups, national, religious, class or some other, were in direct contact which turned into anxiety due to the latent fear of the “other” who would prevail over “us”. Information in such an environment was of vital interest, whoever had more relevant information had an advantage over others. Ever since the time of hordes and semi-savage tribes, people have used false information, i.e. manipulation, with the aim of gaining advantage and conquest. A good word spreads quickly and far, and a bad word spreads even faster and further.

With the development of the media, manipulation took on a more sophisticated, comprehensive and massive form. As man is a creature of conflict, conflicts and wars were an excellent training ground for spreading fear. Manipulations were especially dangerous in multi-confessional, multinational and multicultural environments, as was the case with Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the fear of the “other” produced by the marketing of false and unverified truths resulted in one of the most disastrous outcomes in history. Tens of thousands of dead, hundreds of thousands of refugees and displaced people, the hatred that has been

created, greatly affects the “souls” of the media and journalists who encouraged stratification and intolerance instead of being the “port” of truth and tolerance in the “sea of madness” that washed over the public space of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

## **GRAĐANSKI RAT I DEMOKRATIJA IZ UGLA MEDIJA: SLUČAJ BOSNE I HERCEGOVINE**

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**Abstract:** U fokusu ovog rada je medijski prikaz rata u Bosni i Hercegovini, koji se odigrao početkom posljednje decenije 20. stoljeća, kao i posljedica koje su iz njega proizašle. Iako su mediji u Bosni i Hercegovini u sutonu socijalističke Jugoslavije, pristojno ispratili uspostavljanje višestranačkog sistema, kao jednog od preduslova demokratije, insistiranje na političkom komuniciranju aktera javnog života unutar medija nije spriječilo, zaustaviti ili čak smanjiti proizvodnju nacionalne mržnje koja je rezultirala ratom. Ni četvrt vijeka nakon završetka rata situacija nije sjajna, mediji i dalje služe za podmićivanje, održavanje stanja latentne netrpeljivosti i manipulaciju građanima.

**Ključne riječi:** rat u Bosni i Hercegovini, mediji, demokratija

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