

The role of media in transitional justice processes: the case of Serbia

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The implementation of transitional justice procedures are key tools for society's relationship with its past. Designed as a mechanism for reconciliation, transitional justice measures often mobilise divisions over the interpretation of historical events. The role of media in these processes is often neglected (Price & Stremlau, 2012), although media can become significant political player in the contestation over the interpretation of human rights violations occurred in the past. This paper aims to fill this void by focusing on the media coverage of the events triggered by the arrest of the former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic and his extradition to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in 2001. This case caused strong political and societal polarisation, initiating public debates on the legacy of Milosevic's regime, the peace building process in the Balkans and the role of the international community in public acceptance of the cooperation with the Tribunal (Bideleux & Jeffries, 2007; Scharf 2003).

In order to investigate how the conflict was mediatised, we draw on the results of a content analysis of four national Serbian print and broadcast media, conducted within the EU-FP7 funded project "Media, Conflict and Democratisation" (www.mecodem.eu). Media coverage focused mainly on disputes between Milosevic's supporters, new democratic ruling coalition and the international community (ICTY, EU, NATO and the USA). While media attention shifted from the legality of Milosevic's arrest to the question whether or not the country should cooperate with the ICTY, the three-month public debate reflected the tension between international pressures and domestic controversies over the country's recent past. For example, the American financial support to Yugoslavia at the donor's conference in Brussels in late June 2001, which was made conditional on the country's cooperation with the ICTY, was represented as "the Washington pressure" and heavy interference in domestic affairs.

Therefore, the aspect of media representations of international political actors in domestic polarisation over transitional justice is particularly addressed in this paper, explaining the conflicts between the country's pro-European forces and those of a more nationalist orientation through the lens of the mobilisation of the past. More specifically, this paper will question the role of the media in shaping the public debate on transitional justice process in new democracies where media professionals tend to "apply the norms and rules they are familiar with from their professional life under the old regime" (Voltmer, 2008: 28) and therefore may lack qualities in promoting inclusive politics.

Bibliography

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