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“The Balkans’ butcher” and “dignified hero”: the Serbian media coverage of Slobodan Milosevic's arrest and extradition to The Hague Tribunal

The former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic was arrested by Serbian authorities in April 2001, six months after having been removed from power. He was transferred to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (the ICTY) in The Hague in June 2001 and indicted for crimes against humanity committed during civil wars in the Balkans. His arrest and extradition to the ICTY brought about a strong political polarisation in the country (Bideleux/Jeffries 2007) and initiated debates on legality and constitutionality of the actions taken by the new political elites (Magliveras 2002). Debates also tackled with the peace building process in the Balkans (Scharf 2003) and international constraints that encouraged public acceptance of cooperation with the ICTY (Grodsky 2010: 127). The inner-country polarisation over Milosevic’s arrest and extradition was extensively communicated by the Serbian media. During the first weeks, the media kept a vigilant eye on the conflict between the newly elected democratic government and Milosevic’s supporters. During the months that ensued, the institutional conflict between the pro-European forces and those of a more nationalist orientation became the main focus of media reporting. However, the role of the media is often neglected in transitional justice processes (Price/Stremlau 2012). In non-Western settings, the media may be crucial to set the agenda for a political debate and alternative interpretations of the ongoing events (Jebril et al. 2013: 7). Moreover, the media influence may be further increased by the lack of consensus between political elites (Robinson 2002). On the other hand, journalists in new democracies 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 the qualities in promoting inclusive politics (Voltmer/Rawnsley 2009). For example, after the fall of the Milosevic’s regime, nationalistic discourses dominated the Serbian public sphere (Erjavec/Volcic 2007: 71).

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the existing scholarship by tracing the patterns of Serbian media coverage of political polarisation initiated by Milosevic’s arrest and extradition. Therefore, content analysis of national print and broadcast media articles and reports, dating from April-June 2001, was carried out. In line with the codebook developed within the EU FP7-funded project “Media, Conflicts and Democratisation” (www.mecodem.eu) that aims to identify general patterns of media coverage of democratisation conflicts, this paper particularly focuses on four specific variables: media bias, reference to emotions, polarising speech acts of the main conflict parties and the language used to label the opponents and their actions. The main results show that inclination towards one of the sides in the conflict very often occurs and that the speech acts of the main conflict parties are more emotional and polarising than moderate. The paper identifies multilayered patterns embedded in the media coverage, regarding positive and negative evaluation of Milosevic’s strengths and weaknesses, personal and collective guilt in the Balkans context, the Government’s decisions, cooperation with the ICTY and the role of the United States, as well as the religious discourse related to specific political challenges.

Keywords: Slobodan Milosevic, transitional justice, media coverage, conflict parties, polarization, label of “the other”, Serbia

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