

The Yugoslav Wars as a Taboo in the Western Balkans

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Disclaimer: Radovan Karadžić is a convicted war criminal. There are factually no two truths or competing perspectives on this. Neither does the concept of 'one man's freedom fighter is another man's terrorist' have any place here. This paper delves into the different perceptions in the Western Balkans and the competing story lines of the Yugoslav wars, but it does not mean to paint Radovan Karadžić as anything but what he is, a war criminal.

Introduction

The closing of the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia (ICTY) on the 31st of December of 2017 marked a point of closure on the turbulent decade that brought the kind of bloodshed back to Europe that it had not witnessed since the Second World War. However, as the continued regional tensions and appeals of the sentences given out by the tribunal show, the closure of the ICTY does not mean closure for the victims, the perpetrators, and the civilians of the Western Balkans. Yet, in the course of the 21st century, little academic emphasis has been put on the narratives of the 1990s in the countries that experienced it themselves. Are the Yugoslav wars discussed in the contemporary societies of Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Croatia, and North Macedonia? To what extent are the contemporary societies of these post-conflict nations free to express their opinions of these events? To what extent are they given an opportunity to form those opinions? Altogether, in the case of the Yugoslav wars what is the relationship between free speech and post-war reconciliation?

This essay is a short and undeniably insufficient answer to a very big question. It focuses on a single example in the form of a contentious figure in the region to show the major cleavages that still exist in the region. As such it hopes to open a door for many further discussions of the freedom of speech in the Western Balkans.

There are several means through which it would have been possible to investigate the freedom of speech in relation to the topic of the Yugoslav wars. The several questions to answer would include:

1. How do governments discuss the events of the Yugoslav wars, and when are the events discussed?
2. Is it possible to engage with the topic in academia with no censorship? Has this freedom manifested itself in a plurality of published literature in Balkan academic circles?
3. Does the level of the freedom of press in the Western Balkans allow for an open discussion of the Yugoslav wars and events that have followed since?
4. Does social media create a safe space for civilian dialogue on the topic?

All of these questions require an answer in order to fully assess the state of free speech in the Western Balkans vis-à-vis the Yugoslav wars. Given its constraints, this essay zooms into the freedom of press as a means of discussing the taboo of these wars within Western Balkan societies. It entails a discourse analysis of the coverage of three leading news: *Politika*, *Novi List*, and *Oslobodjenje* in Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia & Herzegovina respectively.

Radovan Karadžić

Given the sheer volume of content the focus of the study was Radovan Karadžić (hereon referred to as Karadžić), the President of Republika Srpska, the majority Serbian province of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Instrumental in the Yugoslav wars, as he led a faction which sought the reunification of Yugoslavia, Karadžić was indicted for war crimes and spent 12 years hiding from local and international police forces. In 2008 he was arrested in Belgrade, found hiding under the disguise of ‘Dr Dragan Dabić’. In 2016 he was found guilty of genocide in Srebrenica in 1995, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. Finally, in 2019 his appeal was rejected with his sentence increased to life imprisonment.

There are many debates around the arrest, life, and specific role played in the wars by Karadžić, not the least ones he strung out himself in the Hague tribunal during his hearing. But rather than delve into a discussion of Yugoslav history and the abilities and commitment of the Serbian intelligence services in the search for him, this essay focuses on the story of Karadžić; more importantly, how it was told by the Western Balkan press. As one of the highest-ranking figures to be arrested, alongside Ratko Mladić Karadžić has been amongst the most popular topics of the Yugoslav wars. He is also one of the most polarising figures in the region, as opinions of him vary greatly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Serbia. Whilst many call him a war criminal, some openly state that he is a war hero. Whilst nothing of the sort, Karadžić incites a relativist “one man’s hero, another man’s freedom fighter” sentiment amongst nationalist Serbs and Bosnian Serbs.

Enduring Cleavages

So, how does a region carry the weight of an event for 25 years, paralysed by it, unable to go forward or backwards no matter what political cycle is in place, what external influence is exerted, what carrot or the stick the European Union (EU) and the international community offer? The answer, as often, lies in the discourse. A quick Google search of Balkan history quickly reveals that the Western Balkans grappled with regional cleavages long before the 1990s conflict. These countries have since the wars experienced both democratisation and a plunge into democratic decline both apart yet simultaneously. Tensions amongst the states have gone up and down, as various events unfolded – from the declarations of independence of Montenegro and Kosovo, to trade disputes and so on. Yet the most enduring regional vulnerability lies not even in the decline of democracy or socioeconomic decline, but in the staggering differences of perception of the not so recent past. The lack of open and appropriate conversation and education on the painful violent history of the Western Balkans has left room for baseless stories instead of history books to fill.

In fact, an entire generation has now grown up, having not been around during the Yugoslav wars. Instead of discussing what they missed in history lessons, the 1990s are recounted as old wives tales, anecdotes and romanticised notions of brotherhood in the trenches against an enemy that no longer exists. Or does it? Recovery, reconciliation, lasting peace and stability are empty words without open and public debate, not the least because most Western Balkans countries are still trying to convince the EU that they are ‘free enough’ to join it. Probably the most institutional embodiment of the issues around discussing the Yugoslav wars are the difficulties that the former Yugoslav states are still experiencing in establishing a regional fact finding commission, [RECOM](#).

To study these difficulties through the prism of the freedom of speech, this essay has been based on an examination of how the Western Balkan press uses their position in society to portray the events of the 1990s. But first, do they play a role at all? In what way are they relevant amidst a decline in democracy?

How Free is the Balkan Press?

The continuous attacks on journalists Eastern Europe reveal a feeble if at all existent freedom of press in the region. Just last month a Serbian journalist, Slobodan Georgiev, was targeted through social

media campaigns, while more extreme examples include the investigative journalist Viktoria Marinova from Bulgaria who was killed in 2018. It is to no surprise that the NGO Reporters Without Borders ranks the Western Balkans so low on their [World Press Freedom Index](#):

Country	World Press Freedom Ranking
Bosnia-Herzegovina	63 rd
Croatia	64 th
Kosovo	75 th
Albania	82 nd
Serbia	90 th
Republic of North Macedonia	95 th
Montenegro	104 th

To put things into perspective, Dunja Mijatović, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, recently stated that the “state of media freedom in the Balkans today is worse than after the 1990s wars”.

Meanwhile according to Freedom House, most of the Western Balkan region is overall either free or partly free. But their Freedom of Press Index reveals far worse figures. In fact their [2017 report](#) showed Serbia to be one of the countries experiencing the greatest decline in the freedom of press (alongside Burundi, Turkey and the Democratic Republic of Congo).

Freedom House Freedom of Press Scores (0 = most free, 100 = least free):

Country	Freedom of Press Score
Albania	51
Bosnia and Herzegovina	51
Croatia	41
Kosovo	48
Montenegro	44
North Macedonia	64
Serbia	49

For context, all of their neighbours in the EU score at least below 25, if not below 10 on the Index. The poor scores of the Western Balkan states are explained by the increasingly tightening grip of governments over independent press, numerous attacks on journalists and an increasing depiction of journalists as foreign-backed conspirators against the state.

The newspapers examined for the purpose of this study for selected carefully to fulfil the following conditions to make them comparable:

- Being a daily publication;
- Being a long-standing source of news, not a medium that has sprung up since the turn of the century;
- Having had at one point a contentious relationship with the state;
- Being at least *relatively* not sensationalist, as such that their unique selling point is not in all caps titles. In this sense, fitting at least somewhat into the form of a broadsheet.

While for the sake of context a brief history of each medium is given, alongside its development during the Yugoslav wars, these newspapers were selected blind of their political leaning. This is because like in most post-communist states, political orientation in the Western Balkans is based a spectrum of ideologies defined by the experience of socialism for a good half of the 20th century. As such, apart from the fact that nationalist parties are more openly aggressive about towards their neighbours, political orientation of a given newspaper is no guarantee that it will be more or less free.

Serbia – *Politika*

Politika is one of the oldest newspapers not only in Serbia, but in the entire Western Balkan region. Founded in 1904, the daily is classified as of a ‘centre/centre-right’ political leaning. It goes without saying that political leanings did not count for much under the regime of the former Yugoslavia – not only was *Politika* under state control then, but it was also so during the actual Yugoslav wars. The then President of Yugoslavia, Slobodan Milosevic, held a firm grip over *Politika* alongside the state-owned TV broadcaster RTS (Radio Televizija Srbije). As such, during the 1990s *Politika* became well-known for being used as a propaganda tool by Belgrade. Despite all of these controversies, *Politika* maintains a reputation as being relatively ‘highbrow’ as it is one of the few remaining broadsheets in the country. They do not release all caps titles and they tend to keep overt sensationalism down to a minimum. When politicians speak of the Belgrade elites which vote against populist leaders, they speak of the *Politika* readership. So as a medium that is neither openly pro government nor pro opposition, it is a particularly good case study for examining how the Yugoslav wars are portrayed in Serbia.

A search for ‘Radovan Karadžić’ finds 373 results in the *Politika* online archives. The earliest is from July of 2006, while the latest from April 2019. The specific spread can be broken down as follows:

Year	Articles about R. Karadžić
2006	21
2007	53
2008	200
2009	38
2010	23
2011	23
2012	15
2013	5
2014	10
2015	22
2016	29
2017	0
2018	0
2019	24

While it is difficult to make any judgements on the total number of results alone, it is more fruitful to look at the spread of articles. The frequency of articles follows a natural timeline around the arrest, sentencing, and appeal of Radovan Karadžić – peaking in years of 2008, 2016, and 2019. Even more interesting is to see the drops in the number of articles from 2009 onwards. While *Politika* most definitely became increasingly digitalised during this time releasing more and more online articles, beyond his arrest Karadžić quickly seems to have become fairly irrelevant to the media. A deeper look into the articles reveals other trends about their focus and rhetoric.

When analysing the 373 articles, it is difficult to find a single opinion expressed by a *Politika* journalist on the matter. In fact not a single article is from the ‘pogledi’ (views) column which contains opinion pieces. Instead, *Politika* follows a simple formula when covering Karadžić, they will quote officials, family members and witnesses. And that is all. On the one hand this could look as if *Politika* is keeping to the journalists’ oath of staying objective and detached. Yet, instead this restraint reeks of self-censorship. Moreover, any analysis of sentiments in the coverage of Karadžić boils down to reading between the lines and the choice of quotations. An analysis of the 373 articles reveals the following:

Articles containing positive statements about Karadzic	Articles containing negative statements about Karadzic	Articles containing a mix of negative and positive statements, or seemingly neutral ones
160	74	139

Unsurprisingly, the majority of articles give voice to a favourable representation of Karadžić. Yet a formidable number of articles still does relay sentiments of those who condemn him and his actions. Moreover, the number of mixed, neutral and seemingly detached articles is very high. Even more revealing is the search for any value judgements or opinions present in articles about Karadžić written by *Politika*:

Instances of explicit value judgements about Karadzic made by the author	0
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Examples

1. The article ‘Did the Hague Tribunal Bring Justice or Prove Bias’ from the 21st of March of 2019 was one of the most promising in delivering some form of opinion about the sentencing of Karadžić. Yet, it truly so in name only. This article discusses the sentencing of Radovan Karadžić, and without taking a clear stance on the issue purely recalls a list of statements by EU, Bosnian and Croatian officials who criticised the hearing. In a fairly defensive tone, the article states that “[\[t\]here were those who thought that even a life sentence is an insufficient punishment for one of the leaders of the Bosnian Serbs.](#)” A notion of Serbian victimhood is clear, yet no comment is made on the events and Karadzic’s culpability.
2. Meanwhile, a perfect example of the presentation of a single set of positive views about Karadžić is the article ‘The Sentencing of Karadžić has in the RS Been Experienced as Political and Unjust’ from the 24th of March, 2016. Expressing the views of the inhabitants of Republika Srpska who still support Karadžić, the article states that “[\[i\]n the judgment of the Hague tribunal which was read out to the first president of the RS \[Republika Srpska\] and the qualifications which are found in it, the officials and the citizens of Republika Srpska find mainly more political than legal argumentation.](#)” Here again, the *Politika* refrains from making any value judgements of the sentencing. Nevertheless, their outline of all the defendants of Karadžić leave the reader with little choice but to make up their own mind based on the reiterated statements.
3. Finally, a third example sees a subtle victimisation of Karadžić. The article ‘Another Search of Karadžić’s House’ from the 2nd of December 2008 reports on the search of the house Radovan Karadžić’s daughter, Sonja Karadžić -Jovicevic. “[As the media relayed, the search began three hours after midnight and lasted several hours. Karadzic’s daughter Sonja Karadzic-Jovicevic told journalists that this operation against her family represents the continuation of pressing of her family and an indirect obstruction of the defence of her father in the Hague.](#)” The tone, once again, reveals a strong bias. While it is not one that *Politika* takes on its own, their willingness to show it guides the reader in the direction of sympathising with Karadžić.

Croatia – *Novi List*

Novi List (New Page) is also a veteran newspaper in the region, having been founded in Croatia in 1900. In the 1990s they were known as being the only Croatian newspaper to keep a critical distance from President Franjo Tudjman. Today, it is considered a centre-left newspaper.

A search for ‘Radovan Karadžić’ yielded 255 results on *Novi List* between 2010 and 2019. The earliest article being from December 2010 and the most recent published in April 2019. The specific spread can be broken down by years as follows:

Year	Articles about R. Karadžić
2010	3
2011	32
2012	28
2013	31
2014	28
2015	23
2016	35
2017	23
2018	37
2019	15

Unlike *Politika*, *Novi List* is more consistent in coverage over the years. An issue that comes up here is that as there is no access to digital articles from this newspaper from 2008 (the year of Karadžić’s arrest) it is not possible to compare the frequency of articles to that particular turning point. Much like *Politika*, *Novi List*’s articles are chiefly based on reporting key events of Karadžić’s hearing and sentencing. The depictions of Karadžić head in a predictable direction, that being the opposite of *Politika*:

Articles containing positive statements about Karadzic	Articles containing negative statements about Karadžić	Articles containing a mix of negative and positive statements, or seemingly neutral ones
22	174	59

The majority of articles depict negative statements made about Karadzic, mainly because *Novi List* focuses on statements made by Croatian politicians and EU officials. However, unlike *Politika* in Serbia, *Novi List* can be seen making value judgements about Karadzic from the editorial perspective. In fact, an analysis of the 255 articles reveals the following:

Instances of explicit value judgements about Karadžić made by the author	12
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Topics related to Karadžić’s allegations of Croatians helping smuggle Iranian weapons to Bosnia.

Examples

1. A prime example of a value judgement about Karadžić is an article that only briefly touches on him, ‘Ratko Mladić, Symbol of Brutal Politics of Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing’ from the 26th of May 2011. It states that “[Ratko Mladić led with his brutal military campaign the politics of which the main protagonist in Bosnia and Herzegovina was Radovan Karadzic, which was based on genocide and ethnic cleansing.](#)” Indisputably, the author of the text makes it clear that they consider Karadžić a war criminal, and in fact go on to recall the events of the Yugoslav wars in the remainder of the article. Such an opinion piece stands in such direct contrast to brief and vague pieces by *Politika* in Serbia that it is a perfect embodiment of the difference in narration of such events in different countries.
2. An even more explicit expression of opinion can be found in an article like ‘Radovan the Mellow, Milorad the Clear Headed and Dragan Č.’ From the 17th of October 2012. In an ironic reference to Karadžić, the author states, “[I bet that you don’t know which humanist said “I am](#)

[a mellow man, full of understanding. Instead of being accused for the crimes in our civil war, I should have been awarded because I did everything humanly possible to ensure that it doesn't come to that civil war.](#)” The article continues in the tone of dark humour to finally arrive at the conclusion that the ‘humanist’ is Karadžić. It stands in even greater contrast to *Politika* than the first example, as this article depicts little restraint – it is perfectly plausible that the author wrote it with complete freedom.

3. Finally, in the article ‘The ICTY Prosecutors Are Seeking the Most Severe Punishment: Karadžić Was the Moving Force Behind the Genocide’ from the 29th of September 2014 briefly gives the microphone to Karadžić himself. The article relays that, “[Karadžić, who is defending himself is throwing out the authority of the Hague court, because as he says it is “a weapon in the hands of NATO” whose strikes helped bring the war to an end.](#)” Unlike the majority of articles which depict statements against Karadžić, this one relays several by the man himself. It goes even further to discuss the proceedings of the hearing in detail yet does not delve deeper into the events of the 1990s than recalling the charges against Karadžić.

Bosnia and Herzegovina – *Oslobodjenje*

Oslobodjenje (Liberation), is a daily newspaper in Bosnia and Herzegovina founded during the Second World War by Yugoslav partisans much like *Novi List*. While not attracting as much attention during the Yugoslav era, after the beginning of the Yugoslav wars and amidst strife in Bosnia, the *Oslobodjenje* building was destroyed in 1992 by Serbian forces. While in the beginning of the wars the newspaper represented an anti-nationalist, left and liberal position winning even the Sakharov Prize for Human Rights in 1993, as the war progressed critics noted an increasing influence of nationalism on the daily’s publishing. Today, however, the newspaper is, unlike *Politika*, considered to be of centre-left orientation. As still one of the most highly regarded newspapers in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it sees beyond all caps titles and keeps sensationalist catchphrases to a minimum.

A search for ‘Radovan Karadžić’ on *Oslobodjenje* yielded 651 results between 2012 and 2019. Having scraped the results, it was revealed that only 441 of the results were articles about Karadžić. Notably, in the smallest time space *Oslobodjenje* yielded more results than both *Politika* and *Novi List*. This is a symptom of the heavier weight that Karadžić and his sentencing carries in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Given the fact that he carried out war crimes in Bosnia, Karadžić has been the most common topic there of all three countries. The spread of the articles (following the scrape) can be broken down as follows:

Year	Articles About R. Karadzic
2012	34
2013	35
2014	29
2015	12
2016	60
2017	86
2018	97
2019	88

The higher frequencies of articles in 2018 and 2019 reveal a trend of cross-referencing articles that further digitalization has brought. A deeper look into the articles reveals other trends about their focus and rhetoric.

Articles containing positive statements about Karadzic	Articles containing negative statements about Karadžić	Articles containing a mix of negative and positive statements, or seemingly neutral ones
136	269	36

Much like their Croatian counterparts, the Bosnian press seems more likely to cite those expressing negative views about Karadžić. However, unlike *Novi List*, *Oslobodjenje* is much less likely to produce an article with neutral statements. Once again, this depicts just how polarising and still present Radovan Karadzic still is in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Moreover, although not as openly opinionated as *Novi List*, *Oslobodjenje* has notably made value judgments in a small number of articles. This sets them aside from the restrained *Politika*, but still reflects the overall tensions and lack of freedom of press.

Instances of explicit value judgements about Karadžić made by the author	4
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Examples

1. In the article ‘The Former Hague Justice: Karadžić and Mladić Could be Released’ from 30th of January 2019, *Oslobodjenje* publishes a clear value judgement. In this piece about their interview with the former ICTY justice, Christoph Flügge, the author states that “[Karadžić and Mladić are amongst the biggest war criminals, and for years they were on the run from the Hague tribunal.](#)”
2. Meanwhile, the article ‘Ahead of the Final Judgement for Karadžić: The Largest Set of Crimes Processed in the Hague’ from 18th of March 2019 constitutes one of the most thorough analyses of the 1990s of the entire population of articles. Alongside maps showing the extent of crimes committed by region, the article reflects on three crimes: the genocide in Srebrenica, the terrorising of civilians in Sarajevo and the banishing of people from 20 Bosnian municipalities. It quotes the ICTY prosecutors saying that, “[When these three actions are taken as a whole, they constitute the biggest and most horrific set of crimes that a person has ever been accused of in the Hague. This weight of crime surpasses the framework necessary for a life sentence.](#)”
3. Finally, the article which shows the most positive sentiment towards Karadzic is ‘Student Dorm on Palamas Today Named “Dr. Radovan Karadžić”’. It cites the leader of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik in praising Karadžić as he named an educational institution after him. The article relays that, “[Dodik said that this student home has a strong symbolism in the moment when the first President of Republic Srpska is awaiting a sentencing in the Hague tribunal in a process that is demeaning for \[Republika\] Srpska.](#)” Moreover, the article quotes Dodik explaining why Karadzic is important to him and making further comments on his hearing in the Hague. It even goes as far as to comment on the student dorms and them being “to a European standard.” Together with the first two examples, this article best showcases the polarised communities of the Western Balkans when it comes to Radovan Karadžić, and with him the Yugoslav wars. They represent those cleavages which although they are prominent across the region, continue to show most within the national borders of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Conclusion

Much research is being done into the discourse in the Western Balkans. As practitioners and academics alike note the plateau of democratisation, if not outright backsliding, they are beginning to ask questions. Where are the Western Balkans headed if not towards reconciliation? Will we see consolidated democracy in the coming decade? Is there room for the freedom of speech? Or will the

'Balkan Strongman' syndrome stick? The staggering gaps where discussion of the Yugoslav wars should be occurring currently leave little room for open public discussion. Instead it takes place in the comment sections of YouTube videos, where Serbs refer to Croatians as 'ustase' and Bosniaks to Serbs as 'a genocidal nation'. The institutional silence on the Yugoslav wars will continue to paralyse the Balkans. Amidst the 'Balkan Strongman' syndrome, it leaves an ominous space for state control over information for the purpose of political power.

The BiEPAG study of the freedom of press in the Western Balkans outlines many important trends. "Although, unlike other communist countries, Yugoslavia did not have a formally instituted system of censorship, there were numerous methods through which political authorities could de facto suppress unwelcome activity... The fragmentation and absence of formal censorship meant that much of the control occurred through self-censorship and state (officially social) ownership, rather than outright intervention." What we witness today with the subject of the Yugoslav wars is a continuation of such self-censorship. This inability to discuss the events of Srebrenica, Sarajevo, Kosovo etc. in any manner apart from referring to statements made by government officials has many layers.

foreign owners of media in the region largely withdrew their investments, as profits were meagre and declining with the economic crisis.

Arguably, the key to successful reconciliation after the bloody strife of the 1990s, is not merely justice for the victims, but also dialogue within and amongst the post-conflict societies. Only by confronting the horrors of the past can the Western Balkan societies ensure the future does not come to resemble it. Instead, what we witness today is that the Yugoslav wars are by the large a taboo in Western Balkan societies.

This analysis of the press coverage of Radovan Karadžić has shown how the lack of freedom of speech and press are intertwined with the Yugoslav wars. An analysis of these three newspapers has clearly revealed important patterns:

- 1) Balkan newspapers stray away from value judgements. Op-ed opinion pieces or editorials are rare at best and in Serbia they are non-existent on this issue;
- 2) Newspapers stick to the national 'bottom lines' – Serbian newspapers stray away from calling Karadžić a war criminal, whereas Bosnian and Croatian struggle not to. This dichotomy probably best encapsulates different visions of history.
- 3) Newspapers hand pick statements to tow the right line – a large part of their articles centre around specifically human stories and morality, which denote either a high ground for Karadžić as a victim or his actual victims.

While there have been many papers discussing state ties to the newspapers analysed, and the resulting corruption and lack of freedom of press – this paper is the first to investigate what the effects of this are on the coverage of the Yugoslav wars. It urges the opening of dialogue on the Yugoslav wars and the establishment of a joint fact-finding mission in form of [RECOM](#).

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