

“Screening’ Transitional Justice in Serbia. ICTY Representations and the Memory of War Crimes in Serb Television Media” (Anna Geis, Katarina Ristić, Vladimir Petrović)

Abstract of the project

The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), located at The Hague, has been a central but controversial element in the transitional justice processes in former Yugoslavia, representing a form of ‘remote justice’. The legitimacy of the ICTY is much disputed, in particular in Serbia. However, the perspective of becoming a member of the European Union has put the Serbian leadership under political pressure to cooperate with the Tribunal since the European Union has insisted on the extradition of suspected war criminals. The research project examined how Serb TV channels have reported on selected ICTY trials: How exactly have the accused persons and the activities of the court been represented in TV prime time news? To what extent have media sources represented the ICTY as an illegitimate institution or as a reliable source of judicial and historical ‘evidence’?

The project analyzed TV footage on six trials (Gotovina, Haradinaj, Milutinovic et al., Oric, Perisic, Stanistic) in three Serb TV channels (RTS, RTV Pink and B92) across the time span of more than 10 years. The multimodal discourse analysis was complemented by conducting six focus groups interviews with students in Serbia and by expert interviews with human rights activists, journalists, political foundations, legal professionals and ICTY staff in The Hague and Belgrade.

There is hardly any research on the role of audio-visual material in transitional justice and in Peace and Conflict Studies in general so that the project developed a new theoretical and methodological framework. The visual presentation of the Serb accused in TV news was rather ‘reduced’, based on iconic images of the accused combined with symbolic images of the state and its power (Serb flag, uniforms, governmental buildings), with nearly complete absence of visuals of atrocities and victims. This creates disbelief about the crimes, shielding Serb public opinion from notions of shared responsibility for the acts the person had been indicted of. In contrast, the visual presentation of the Croatian, Bosniak and Albanian accused persons was rather ‘rich’, drawing meaning mainly from syntagmatic connotation created through sequences with iconic (accused, victims, dead bodies), symbolical (flags, funerals) and indexical (war destruction, attacks) images as ‘palpable’ proof of crimes. This supports a sentiment of collective victimhood of the Serb population and creates the impression of the indicted persons’ guilt even after their acquittals by the ICTY. Since the research project has been limited to the Serb case, comparative work on TV media in other states of former Yugoslavia would be required in order to assess how ‘special’ the case of Serbia is regarding these visual strategies.

The much disputed legitimacy of the ICTY and the important role of media have also become obvious in focus groups interviews with students in Serbia: The students displayed a striking lack of knowledge about war crimes and dependence on mainstream media; they also strongly rejected the ICTY as a biased institution. At the same time, they were perceptive of new facts and interpretation, showing that they have a genuine need to understand the past and obtain neutral, objective information. A major problem is that in their perception there are few, if any, objective, neutral institutions which to put trust in.

The expert interviews, conducted in Belgrade and The Hague, underlined the critical state of mainstream media in Serbia: They were assessed as not really independent, as driven by entertainment formats and as failing in their watchdog functions. The interviewees also expressed a widespread disappointment about the state of affairs of transitional justice in Serbia, the declining interest of international actors in supporting (and funding) transitional justice and the rather instrumental or superficial nature of many transitional justice measures in former Yugoslavia – satisfying the European Union’s demands seems to be more important than fulfilling genuine needs for reconciliation.