

PEACE AND SECURITY

THE MEDIA AND THE CULTURE OF REMEMBRANCE

Brief Remarks After the Discussion on Media Role
in the Culture of Remembrance in Bosnia - Herzegovina

Lejla Turčilo, Ph.D.

Adnan Rondić, M. Sc.

August 2020.



The media themselves didn't complete the process of catharsis, i.e. didn't go through the process of dealing with the past and did not question their own role in the past.



The media find it very difficult to leave the matrix of „us“ and „them“, in which the pictures are only black or white, that is „us“ are only heroes and „them“ are only criminals



The relativization, even the glorification of crimes, and the revitalization, rehabilitation and glorification of criminals are returning to the public space more and more, not only when it comes to the wars of the 1990s, but also from before.

PEACE AND STABILITY

THE MEDIA AND THE CULTURE OF REMEMBRANCE

Brief Remarks After the Discussion on Media Role
in the Culture of Remembrance in Bosnia - Herzegovina

Lejla Turčilo, Ph.D.

Adnan Rondić, M. Sc.

August 2020.

Content

| | |
|---|----------|
| THE MEDIA AND THE CULTURE OF REMEMBRANCE | 2 |
| IMPRESSUM..... | 5 |

THE MEDIA AND THE CULTURE OF REMEMBRANCE

On July 29, the Foundation Friedrich Ebert organized an online discussion **“Media Role in the Culture of Remembrance in Bosnia - Herzegovina – in Memory of the 25 Years of the Genocide in Srebrenica”**. Participants in this discussion were Dženana Husremović, Ph.D. professor at the Faculty of Philosophy in Sarajevo; Lejla Turčilo, Ph.D. professor at the Faculty of Political Science in Sarajevo; Vedran Džihic, Ph.D. senior researcher in the Austrian Institute for International Politics and a lecturer at the Faculty of Political Science in Vienna; Hariz Halilović, Ph.D. professor at RMIT University in Melbourne and a guest professor at the University of California; Srđan Puhalo, a social psychologist; and Aleksandar Trifunović, editor in chief of the online magazine 'Buka'. Moderator and host of the discussion was Adnan Rondić, a journalist of Al Jazeera Balkans. (More information about the discussion at: <https://www.tacno.net/nasigradovi/medijska-kultura-sjecanja-u-znak-sjecanja-na-25-godina-genocida-u-srebrenici/>)

After two hours of discussion about the role of the media in building the culture of remembrance in Bosnia - Herzegovina, it seems rational to point out the key aspects, which should be taken into consideration, and the concepts, which should be developed, when it comes to culture of remembrance and the role and the effect of the media in this process. Although some of these aspects were mentioned only partially or indirectly during the discussion, they should be taken into consideration in future discussions on these issues in order to see the role of the media more clearly and more systematically, not only when it comes to building the culture of remembrance, but also when it comes to peace-building in Bosnia - Herzegovina and Western Balkans.

THE CULTURE OF REMEMBRANCE AND DEALING WITH THE PAST – SOME KEY TERMS

Fundamentally, pointing out the differences between the terms the culture of remembrance and dealing with the past is of great importance, regardless of their relatedness and inter-connectedness. The approach of this brief paper is not an academic one, and therefore we are not going to define and discuss these terms scientifically. Preferably, we take a quite simple, to some extent profane, approach when it comes to these terms, based on resources such as Kardov, Lalić, Teršelić (Zagreb 2010) and Assman (2005), which can

help our better understanding of the context of the media role in building the culture of remembrance and dealing with the past. Thus, dealing with the past, put in the simple words, can be described as the “processing” violent past and building relation towards the violence committed against all victims, regardless of their ethnic, political, or any other origin. Certainly, dealing with the past takes place at all levels: individual (questioning the individual role in the past), community (amongst friends, neighbors, acquaintances), and the institutional one (political parties, religious communities, non-governmental sector, international organizations), and in all these processes media, undoubtedly play a significant role. The culture of remembrance comprises a set of mechanisms by which the remembrance is transferred, and, as a specific content, is circulating through the society. Culture of remembrance in every society becomes actualized through processes of communication and identification and, as such, fully includes and entails dealing with the past. The role of media in these communication and identification processes in society is of great importance.

If we understand the culture of remembrance as a societal process and a phenomenon, there is unquestionably an intertwined relation with some other societal processes (thus, for example, we are witnessing a political manipulation of remembrance and/or revitalization of specific events from the past at an appropriate moment for specific societal actors). Undoubtedly, the division of society or “fragmentation of the societal field” is reflected in the interpretation of the past as well.

THE CULTURE OF REMEMBRANCE AND MEDIA IN BOSNIA - HERZEGOVINA

How is all above mentioned reflected in the media sphere? Are there any specifics or differences in Bosnia - Herzegovina regarding these issues, when one compares B&H situation to determined theories and practice? This paper tries to answer these questions in brief.

Above all, societal (mis)use of the culture of remembrance and dealing with the past in the media sphere is reflected in several processes:

- A request for remembrance versus the requests for oblivion (the oblivion requests agenda follows the logic: “forgive and forget” or: “we need to look into the future”, and the remembrance request agenda follows the logic:

“forgive, but do not forget” or: “there is no future without the attitude towards the past”);

- True vs false interpretation of the past (determining the facts and adhering to the facts regardless of the dominant political or any other narratives and agendas versus “retailoring” the facts for daily-political, ideological, or any other purposes);
- Bureaucratization and/or making a spectacle of remembrance (tendency to speak about specific events only in specific moments, mostly at specific dates, ceremonially and spectacularly).

All listed narratives are present in Bosnia - Herzegovina (B&H), so we can say that we are witnessing the direct intertwining of the remembrance and the contemporary societal (particularly political) processes. There are several reasons for that:

- In B&H we have frozen conflict, but not permanent peace;
- In B&H we have administrative and territorial divided state, but also a divided society;
- In B&H we have political elites (and some other elites as well) manipulating the remembrance for the purpose of achieving their goals;
- In B&H we have the victims' families and the survivors, neglected and in many cases left on their own, without any support to face traumas and continue with their lives;
- In B&H we have some segments of civil society that perceive the culture of remembrance and dealing with the past only as a topic of project activities, but not as a broad phenomenon, which shall be developed systematically;
- In B&H we have international actors who balance among various interpretations of the past from time to time (the direct example is the reluctance of the international community to impose a law on banning genocide denial);
- In B&H we have the educational system completely divided by ethno-territorial principles, without any consensus about events from the past (not only those from 1990s, but also the World War II, and even before);
- In B&H we have, to a great extent, uneducated public, easy to manipulate by (mis)using the past.

If we add to all the above, the fact stated several times during the discussion, that that media are part of the system and in B&H are also a direct reflection of political, economic and societal relations in B&H, it is clear that more often media are a part of a problem, rather than a solution, when it comes to dealing with the past and building the culture of remembrance. Thus, it would be difficult to expect that the media in B&H could do what should be their real task, which is:

- To face themselves (for a great number of the media, particularly in the Republic of Srpska, the genocide denial is a part of the editorial policy and the media agenda);
- To face the dominant narratives and determine media attitude towards them (it is unforgivable that every “truth” that is every interpretation of the past has equal value, since it is precisely by media transfer of that truth, the truth is established and legitimized in the public and in the society);

To establish the principles and the codes of transpositioning

of the culture of remembrance through the media narratives (what, when and how the transmit, who are their interlocutors, where is the line they do not cross etc.)

All these may seem difficult at first glance, if we take into consideration the media landscape in Bosnia - Herzegovina. However, the basis of the mentioned processes is returning to professionalism and the public interest, i.e. “revival” of the ethical standards in the media. Certainly, we have to mention that there are still the media in B&H implementing these standards, yet they are more the exception than the rule.

WHAT CAN HAVE AND INFLUENCE THE MEDIA NARRATIVES?

As it has already been said, as with any other issue, process or phenomenon, nor when it comes to the culture of remembrance and dealing with the past, the media do not build dominant narratives solely on the basis of their agenda and their interpretations. Many other actors and elements of the system shape the (dominant) media narratives. Therefore, when considering the media role in dealing with the past and building a culture of remembrance, it is necessary to consider the media and non-media causes of the relation to the past that we currently have, or try to see what is up to the media and what to non-media (or other societal) actors. Again, our intention is not to give a complete, final answer about what can have an influence on media narratives (because for that, we would need more space and a detailed analysis of the media discourse). Thus, at this point we will make a brief list of some of the reasons:

- The media themselves didn't complete the process of catharsis, i.e. didn't go through the process of dealing with the past and did not question their own role in the past. Boro Kontić, a journalist and a publicist, explained this phenomenon in the documentary *Godine koje su pojeli lavovi/Years Eaten by Lions*, which depicts how some of the biggest instigators during the wars of '90s (re)transformed into prominent journalists, editors, or even professors of journalism;
- The media find it very difficult to leave the matrix of „us“ and „them“, in which the pictures are only black or white, that is „us“ are only heroes and „them“ are only criminals;
- The relativization, even the glorification of crimes, and the revitalization, rehabilitation and glorification of criminals are returning to the public space more and more, not only when it comes to the wars of the 1990s, but also from before. The most visible examples are the attitude towards Draža Mihajlović and his glorification by some media and public figures, or the family of Željko Ražnatović Arkan, which some media portray as a celebrity family whose every step is followed;
- The culture of remembrance is often misused in the media, and the families of victims and survivors are further victimized and traumatized. This category of people (who, as Hariz Halilović noted in the discussion, are still called “victims”, although the correct term is “survivors”) is, as already mentioned, mostly marginalized

and traumatized, and after almost thirty years from the beginning of the wars on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, they are often faced with the futility of the victim, because, as one of the demobilized fighters pointed out once, "the society in which they live is not the society they fought for." In the media, this population is often portrayed with large doses of pathetic, manipulation and superficiality, and sometimes it even seems almost impermissible for them to get out of that position of victim and start / continue a normal life. The media often forget that survivors and victims' families have a number of other identities in addition to those of survivors, and that it is important to report on their lives, successes, problems, and not just their relationship to the past. It is intolerable for the media to keep the survivors "captured" in the past.

When it comes to non-media actors, in the discussion some of the (controversial) approaches to the culture of remembrance in society in general were listed. Thus, we can agree with Vedran Džihčić, who recognizes reducing the relation towards the past, particularly the one towards genocide, to only generational responsibility, as one of the problems, since this issue is the concern of all generations. It is the temporality in public space (discussed by V. Džihčić in the discussion), ie the creation of a "softened" attitude towards, say, genocide deniers (that is the result of non-opposition in the media and in public to such phenomena), that is problematic, because it takes us steps back when it comes to the culture of remembrance. What was inadmissible a few years ago, such as the denial of genocide in the parliamentary benches, for example, is becoming normal today (because we have become accustomed to that over time due to not opposing such narratives) and this shows the wrong societal relation towards dealing with the past and the culture of remembrance.

Furthermore, it is essential to emphasize the following trends when it comes to culture of remembrance in media: a trend of diminishing the importance of establishing and strict relation to the facts versus a terror of opinion (what someone thinks of the fact that the genocide was committed in Srebrenica does not matter, what matters is the court verdict and supporting evidences which confirmed the genocide, but in the public space equal, or sometimes more space is given to opinions than facts, which Hariz Halilović defines as „terror of opinion“); plus a patronizing tone towards the survivors and the victims (who were “seized” to some extent, and somebody else would like to speak, think, and decide on their behalf, instead of empowering them to think, decide, and act on their own); along with a triumphalism of the perpetrators of the most heinous crimes, who are glorified as heroes and are given space in the media and society. All above mentioned processes and phenomena directly influence the media narratives. Lack of societal sensibility, a very problematic and controversial societal and political sphere (in which the instigators of wars, perpetrators and supporters of crimes have become the agents ie. guardians of peace and those who define the coordinates of the societal relation towards the past) in a post-genocidal society, such as this in Bosnia - Herzegovina, which also has trans-generational traumas, makes dealing with the past extremely

complicated. If we add to all stated above the political control of the media, the media's acquiescence to the discourse of ruling politics, the absence of sensibility, and the general trend of sensationalism, tabloidization, and trivialization of the media content, it is clear why the media are often seen as part of the problem rather than the solution when it comes to culture of remembrance in Bosnia - Herzegovina.

CAN THINGS BE DONE DIFFERENTLY?

At the end of this brief overview of the role of the media in dealing with the past and building a culture of remembrance in Bosnia - Herzegovina, it should be noted that this type of generalization in noticing trends and dominant narratives in the media does not aim to portray the media role as exclusively negative, controversial and problematic. As already stated, in all parts of Bosnia - Herzegovina and within all segments of its society, including the media sphere, there are great examples of responsible, dignified, fact-based, and human relation towards the past, and examples of uncompromising fighters for the truth, people who think and work differently, in spite of imposed fetters and clamps of society. Although, as we have heard in the discussion itself, they are often running out of energy, since after twenty-five years they are facing an increasingly shrinking space for public action, no systematic support (more precisely, they have more problems and are exposed to dangers for opposing dominant narratives), and although they often lack the support of the general public (which is often easy prey for manipulation, due to underdeveloped media literacy and generally low level of education in society), individuals, intellectuals, certain civil society actors etc. boldly stand in public trying to correct all anomalies, such as those which we mentioned in this brief paper. The media continue to be their natural allies in building narratives that establish dealing with the past and a culture of remembrance as steps toward true reconciliation. Many of the media and journalists have been persistently and courageously fulfilling this task for years, no matter how marginalized they sometimes are and how tired sometimes they are by the apparent futility of the job. Their work is never in vain, it is never unnoticed by (at least part of) the public and it is never finished. And that, it seems, is the happiness and the curse of working in journalism in our region.

ABOUT AUTHORS

Dr. sci. Lejla Turčilo is a full time professor at the Department of Communication Science/ Journalism at the Faculty of Political Science, University of Sarajevo, where she teaches courses in Media Theory, TV Journalism, Online Journalism and Media and Politics at the undergraduate and master's degree level and Creation of New Public by PR and Online Media at the Doctoral Study. She has published three authored books, three co-authored books, as well as one manual and five research publications. She has published more than forty scientific and professional papers in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro, France, Belgium, Germany, USA and Colombia. She has participated in several scientific and professional conferences, symposia and congresses in Bosnia and Herzegovina and abroad. She is the head of the Center for Lifelong Learning at the Faculty of Political Sciences of the University of Sarajevo and the head of the Department of Communication Science/ Journalism. Her fields of interest are: online communication, intercultural communication, media literacy and media freedom.

Television journalist **Adnan Rondić** was born in 1971.

He obtained a BA in communication studies, and then an M.A. in political studies at the Faculty of Political Science in Sarajevo, where he has been part of the interdisciplinary doctoral studies programme.

He has worked as a journalist since 1992, when he started his career at Hayat TV. He subsequently worked as a correspondent for the Voice of America from Bosnia and Herzegovina, before joining Al Jazeera Balkans in 2011.

He has also worked concurrently as a media coach for more than fifteen years.

Adnan Rondić is the author of the study *Povratak između privida i stvarnosti /Return to between illusion and reality/*, published by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in 2007, a media industry handbook *Medijski nastup(ati): Smjernice za rad s medijima /Media appear(ance): Guidelines for working with the media/*, also published by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, in 2014 and book "Živjeti Srebrenicu/Living the Life of Srebrenica, published by the Heinrich Boll Foundation (2015)

IMPRESSUM

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung - Sarajevo office
Kupreška 20, 71 000 Sarajevo

For publisher: Dr. Peter Hurrelbrink - Direktor, FES BiH

Tel.: +387 33 720 010

www.fes.ba

Reading and translation: S. Vojvodić and L. Turčilo

DTP: Aleksandar Aničić

All rights reserved by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung BiH.

The views and opinions expressed in this publication are authoritative and do not represent the explicit views and opinions of the publisher. The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung does not guarantee the accuracy of the data presented in this publication. Commercial use of the issue is not allowed without the Foundation's written consent.

