

Serbian Youth Appreciate Mladic Coverage

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Youngsters in Belgrade say they preferred IWPR's reporting on his arrest to that of the Serbian media.

IWPR's June coverage of the arrest of the Hague tribunal's most wanted suspect Ratko Mladic was seen by some young readers in Serbia as much better informed, objective and wide-ranging than the local media's reporting of the story.

After 16 years as a fugitive, Mladic, the former commander of the Bosnian Serb army, was finally arrested on May 26 in northern Serbia, then transferred to The Netherlands and handed over to the Hague tribunal.

Mladic's arrest, transfer to the tribunal and first appearance in court sparked huge interest in the local and international media. At the end of May and beginning of June, IWPR provided in-depth coverage of these events, not only through news reports, but also analytical and comment pieces.

Young readers in Serbia said they had followed IWPR's coverage of Mladic's arrest and related developments because they felt the local media's reports failed to grapple with the significance and context of the story.

Miki Nikolic, a Belgrade medical school graduate, said the Serbian press dwelt too much on the likelihood that Mladic's arrest will now strengthen Serbia's bid to join the European Union.

"They mainly attempted to present this event as an important step for Serbia on its road to the European Union membership and dedicated very little time and space to the terrible crimes Mladic was charged with," Nikolic said. "This created an impression among the Serbian people that Mladic was innocent and sacrificed only so that Serbia could move forward.

"IWPR's coverage was different. It was much more informative and professional than that of the local media. It's a pity more people couldn't see it, because not everyone has access to the Internet."

Milos Ciric, a Belgrade university political sciences graduate, said IWPR's stories on Mladic's arrest and subsequent developments "had all the markings of intelligent journalistic reporting".

"With their articles, IWPR journalists have contributed to what Timothy Garton Ash, professor of European studies at the University of Oxford and Guardian columnist, calls 'a global movement toward responsibility'. Reporting on Mladic's arrest, IWPR provided coverage that was skilful, thorough, informative, educational, and, above all, serious," Ciric said.

According to him, "responsibility and professionalism were lacking in most Serbian media reports on this issue".

He said that instead of focusing on the crimes Mladic was charged with, the majority of Serbian media outlets reported on "utterly insignificant and banal details about Mladic's life, his health, arrest and details of the house he was hiding in".

Ciric pointed out that although Serbian state television, RTS, offered relatively fair coverage of events, print and electronic media close to right-wing organisations and political parties in Serbia openly glorified him.

"This has to a great extent ruined all chances of Mladic's arrest - which is so significant for victims and their families - being used to change the policy of denial in Serbia and raise awareness of the crimes that were committed in the former Yugoslavia during the wars of the Nineties, especially in Srebrenica. This opportunity has, unfortunately, been missed," Ciric said.

He agreed with Nikolic that people who had access to the Internet were able to read much more informed reports from outlets such as IWPR and other progressive online news services. According to Serbia's bureau of statistics, around 39 per cent of people have access to the Internet.

"Apart from a few local news portals, I found IWPR's website to be the most relevant and most objective sources of information on Mladic," he said.

"In the articles IWPR published in the days and weeks following Mladic's arrest, I found everything I was not able to find in the local press: details of Mladic's indictment, reactions from Bosnia and Hercegovina to his capture, reactions of victims' families, analyses of the local media reports on this event, reactions of local and foreign analysts and politicians, and reactions from the Hague tribunal etc.

"I also found there some information that was completely new to me, such as opinions of leading experts in international law and those familiar with the history of the wars in the former Yugoslavia on what this arrest will mean for the Hague tribunal and the Balkans in general."

Jasmina Lazovic, an activist with the Serbian Youth Initiative for Human Rights, applauded the fact that "there was no sensationalism in IWPR's coverage of Mladic's arrest, nor too much dwelling on his poor health, as was the case in other Serbian media".

She said she particularly liked Aleksandar Roknic's article, **Chasing Mladic's Accomplices**, which assessed Serbian president Boris Tadic's pledge to reveal details about the alleged network of people that allowed Mladic to remain at large for 16 years.

"This was a very interesting subject and not many journalists in Serbia have written about it. It is very important for the Serbian public to know who Mladic's accomplices were all these years and whether state authorities are serious in their promises to track them down," Lazovic said.

She said she also liked the fact that in every IWPR article on Mladic there was brief mention of charges against him, "something Serbian media very often omit, so very few people in this country even know what Mladic is accused of.

"I also found Edina Becirevic's comment **Mladic Arrest Hasn't Ended Denial in Serbia** very intriguing, because it really hit a nerve. Becirevic rightly pointed out that Mladic's arrest unfortunately did not put an end to denial in Serbia. It is indeed a great shame that the local media did not use this event as an opportunity to inform their audience more about the crimes committed in Bosnia during the war, which Mladic has been charged with and which the Serbian public knows very little about."

Lazovic said that for a few days there was a lot of fuss in Serbia about Mladic's arrest, but as soon as the dust settled, "people started to forget both Mladic and the reason why he was arrested in the first place".

Dragan Popovic, the director of the Policy Centre in Belgrade, said he was particularly impressed with Rachel Irwin's article **Should Mladic Charges be Cut?**

"Writing this article required an excellent journalistic technique of presenting a very complex issue to the audience in a manner that would be easy for them to understand. Irwin discussed this subject from different points of view - that of the prosecution and that of the victims. She also touched upon the dilemma the prosecutors were faced with - to cut the charges in order to achieve a more expeditious trial, or leave the indictment as it is, so that the victims do not feel disappointed," Popovic said.

"Comparison between IWPR and the media outlets in Serbia clearly reveals some deep-rooted problems in the latter and their undefined position on the crimes committed in the recent wars. Unlike IWPR, Serbian media did not feel the need to look at the whole thing from the point of view of victims or ask for their opinion on Mladic's arrest and what it means for them. This was unusual and unprofessional to say the least, and probably quite immoral, too."

Iva Martinovic is an IWPR-trained journalist.

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