

UNIVERSITY OF BELGRADE

Faculty of Political Sciences

Belgrade, 6. 09. 2018.

The Department of International Studies at its meeting held on February 20. 2018. appointed Prof. dr. Siniša Atlagić, Prof. dr. Radmila Nakarada (academic supervisor) and Assistant MA Goran Tepšić as members of the Master Thesis Defense Committee for the candidate Uroš Mamić. His thesis is entitled “*Deconstructing the Coverage of the Syrian Conflict in Western Media – Case Study: The Economist*”. After reading the Master thesis the Committee is submitting the following Report.

#### REPORT

The MA thesis of the candidate Uroš Mamić (1992), entitled “*Deconstructing the Coverage of the Syrian Conflict in Western Media – Case Study: The Economist*” has 128 pages. Besides the Introduction, and the Conclusion the thesis has three chapters, and an extensive (7 pages) list of references.

In the Introduction, the candidate lays down the research design. He provides the statement off problem and presents the topic of the research. In the *Introduction*, the candidate sets up the hypothetical framework for the study. General hypothesis of this study is formulated in the following manner: “*The narrative on the Syrian conflict in the British magazine The Economist in particular, as a selected representative among the Western mass media, and in the Western mass media more generally – has been one where cultural violence is promoted and reproduced. The Economist has a complex, active and performative role in reproducing a narrative of the conflict as a fight for freedom and democracy against the brutal regime – which makes it a representative Western mass media outlet.*” The hypothetical framework consists of five special hypotheses which are related to some of the key assumptions the author makes about the topic of the study and, if proven, he argues that would be enough to confirm his general assumption concerning the promotion and reproduction of cultural violence in media and the active and performative role of the mainstream media in this.

The aim of the research is to problematize the coverage of the Syrian case and analyze a large sample of news articles during the period of six years of the conflict in order to understand the narrative of the conflict presented to *The Economist's* readers and identify and analyze tools used for the narrative construction. *The Economist* has been chosen by the candidate because of its professional standing, wide readership, international reach, and because it is a credible voice of the political mainstream. The candidate adopts an interdisciplinary approach to the topic of the study and sets the content analysis as the baseline for his methodological approach. The specific theory and methodology of content analysis he employs is critical discourse analysis. He argues for the suitability of this approach for gaining understanding of the communicational agency of *The Economist* with regards to the Syrian conflict – also providing evidence for generalization and drawing conclusion about the way Western media at large cover this conflict. He identifies some of the key theoretical concepts he would use in the critical discourse analysis approach such as the concepts of peace and war journalism developed by *Johan Galtung* and Edward Said's concept of *orientalism*.

The first chapter "*Major Themes of the Syrian Conflict in The Economist*" in fact consists of six thematic subchapters, covering the empirical part of the study. It is the central, most extensive chapter, the backbone of the thesis – a foundation on the basis of which the author attempts to validate his assumptions. The content analysis is structured around five major themes and events of the conflict, well chosen because they combine chronology and substance. The candidate analyzes the roots of the conflict, the initial phase of the conflict including the protests and the early phase of armed insurgency following the downward spiral of violence, the internal and external actors taking part in the Syrian war, the battle of Aleppo and the peace efforts and initiatives. In his analysis of the roots of the conflict he reaffirms the importance of understanding the historical background of the conflict, the consequences of the traumatic colonial experiences, the conflict potential built in the regional borders drawn by the Sykes-Picot Agreement – by and large overlooked by the writings of *The Economist*. Concerning the initial phase of the conflict, the author again points out to the missing dimensions - the social consequences of the prolonged drought, influx of migrants internal and external from Iraq, battle for energy corridors in the background. The internal and external actors are presented in a by and large a standard binary fashion. The devil is the regime of Assad, while the opposition is the positive actor. Shifting images are constructed in relation to IS, Kurds, Al Nusra, al Qaeda and their mutual relations. On

the same line, external actors Russia, Iran and more or less Turkey are portrayed as negative actors while the countries of the West are positive, if weak and inconsistent because they resisted to intervene militarily. The Aleppo drama is presented primary as Assad's bloodbath against civilians, and the violence of the government forces are in focus while the opposition and its guerilla strategy are not the object of critical scrutiny. As to the peace initiatives, efforts, very little support was extended in the writings of *The Economist*, mostly scepticism, mistrust was articulated and a leaning toward military intervention.

The content analysis covers a period of six years of conflict and the author conducts a comprehensive empirical work, citing a total of just over 130 different articles in this first chapter alone. Choosing the topics as he did and confronting the writings of the weekly with the complex reality enabled him to develop a well-structured scheme for analyzing the conflict.

The second chapter is entitled "*Peace Journalism or War Journalism?*" Here the candidate uses the theoretical framework of peace and war journalism conceptualized by Johan Galtung and Jake Lynch as an analytical tool of critical discourse analysis. The author argues how this theoretical framework offers clear guidelines and operationalized indicators for content analysis of news coverage of conflicts. First, he compares the body of empirical conclusions against a set of defined biases which serve as a baseline of newsworthiness. He argues that all five factors of newsworthiness (threshold, frequency, negativity, unexpectedness, unambiguity) factor in how *The Economist* covers the Syrian conflict. Next, he utilizes peace and war journalism as two models of covering conflicts. He perceives them as two competing narrative prototypes that lie on different ends of the same spectrum. Using the theoretical setup developed by Galtung and Lynch, he identifies the mechanisms used in narrative-building – placing *The Economist's* coverage of the Syrian war much closer to the war journalism concept. He problematizes issues such as the simplification of the conflict landscape, the zero-sum way of thinking and the usage of us-vs.-them logic. He also looks into *The Economist's* focus on effects of direct violence and dehumanization of certain actors. He argues that the "rhetoric of blame" is an essential rhetorical mechanism in preserving the narrative from critical inputs, as well as *The Economist's* strong inclination towards officialdom as an ultimate "anesthetization of critical reflection". Lastly, in this chapter, he tries to identify the underlying presence of several conflict-fueling claims which he understands as the effort of *The Economist* in generating public support

for military interventions, as well as legitimizing the official position of the government. He argues for a need for journalist training for conflict-sensitive reporting, adding a prescriptive element to his research.

In the last chapter entitled “*The Economist’s Narrative of the Syrian Conflict – Deconstructed*” the candidate reexamines his initial assumptions concerning the topic of his research in order to determine if the empirical material had produced sufficient evidence to support them. The chapter has five subchapters related to the designation of the conflict, degree of critical reflection, presence of stereotypes, analogies and reach of historical understanding. He perceives the ideas raised in this chapter as being building blocks of *The Economist’s* overall narrative of the conflict. He argues that the basic thrust of *The Economist’s* narrative is that the conflict in Syria is a fight for freedom and democracy waged against Assad, a brutal autocrat who is responsible for the conflict. With the emergence and strengthening of the Islamic State, the narrative is complemented with a strong subjacent narrative of the war against terrorism – but nevertheless remains strongly focused on the internal conflict between the Assad forces and the Syrian opposition at large as its single most important dimension. Offering a register of possible alternative narratives in relation to the nature of the war such as it being also an Islamist vs. secular regime conflict, or a regional sectarian war, the candidate argues that the identified narrative and the discursive consistency is an expression and consequence of a conscious editorial policy. He further argues that this consistency is safeguarded through moral delegitimization (“alternative narratives justify crimes”) of possible different narratives. U. Manić, goes on to identify some of the most common stereotypes (for example, the regime of Assad presented as shady family business, Putin depicted as a scorpion) and historical analogies (for example, between Damascus and Bucharest under Ceausescu, Assad and Qaddafi, Aleppo and Grozny) employed in *The Economist’s* coverage of the conflict as instrumental in constructing the narrative. Interestingly, the candidate makes his point by referring to some of the most common unconscious biases that are developed among Western media public in informing their knowledge about the Syrian conflict. Moreover, he points to the fact that historical and legal background often provided to the public is usually simplified and distorted with a purpose. His last assumption is that there is a subtle underlying trace of orientalism in *The Economist’s* coverage. The candidate in the last part of the chapter argues that *The Economist’s* coverage of the conflict in Syria in fact, relies on the reproduction of orientalist historical, cultural and

religious images and ideas. He refers to Said's concept of orientalism as a conceptual framework for seeing emphases, exaggerations and distortions of perceptions of the Middle East in the eyes of the West. In doing this, he argues that the way *The Economist* covers the Syrian conflict is part of a long history involving Western exceptionalism and civilizing mission, pointing to a more fundamental issue of general misunderstanding of Middle Eastern politics and way of life in Western culture.

All of the empirical research conducted and assumptions tested feed into the *Conclusion* chapter. His conclusions are related to how *The Economist's* editorial digresses from the standard of objective and balanced reporting. One of the aspects of its coverage is the inability to grasp the complexity of the Syrian conflict, which results in simplification amounting to distortion. This is also understood by the candidate as one of the reasons for employing established paradigms of representation like orientalism and ultimately essentialization of actors in the conflict. On the other hand, one of the more important conclusions of the study is around *The Economist's* inclination towards what Galtung defined as war journalism. The overall narrative is identified as strongly focused on direct violence and its manifestations. Moreover, the philosophy of journalism of attachment is shown to be strongly manifested in *The Economist's* narrative. It propels strong emotional attachment to certain actors in the conflict as sole victims. As a consequence, it dehumanizes other actors and reinforces the antagonism between the conflicted sides. Consequentially, it reduces space for conflict resolution by peaceful means.

The members of the Committee would like to point out that the MA thesis of Uroš Mamić, has satisfied all formal criteria required by the existing procedures. The thesis is the result of a comprehensive empirical research and well argued critical analyses. No preconceived notions directed the conclusions; therefore the author was capable to fairly estimate the reach of his own hypotheses. The presented analysis demonstrated the capacity of the author to recognize, in line of the best tradition of Peace Studies, the complexity of the Syrian conflict and its internal and external actors and their interaction, and at the same time shed light on the political role of the media, distinguish between (subtle) propaganda and objective reporting, between peace and war journalism, and contextualize the character of prejudices, stereotypes present in the reporting of prestigious *The Economist* in a broader cultural framework - orientalism. The thesis is well written and demonstrates a high level of English proficiency.

Having in mind all that has been said, the Committee concludes that the master thesis entitled „*Deconstructing the Coverage of the Syrian Conflict in Western Media – Case Study: The Economist*” written by Uroš Mamić fulfils all preconditions for the public defence.

Committee:

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