

UNIVERSITY OF BELGRADE

Faculty of Political Science

Belgrade, June 2026

At the meeting of the Department of International Studies, held on January 15, 2026, the Master Thesis Defense Commission (hereby the Commission) for the candidate Milica Đoković was formed with the following members: assist. prof. Tijana Rečević, prof. dr Goran Tepšić and prof. dr Nemanja Džuverović. The Council for the Second and Third Cycle of Studies has accepted the proposal made by the Department.

After reading the master thesis, the Commission is submitting the following report.

## **R E P O R T**

The master thesis of Milica Đoković entitled "Heroes or Traitors? ICTY's Legacy and Nationalist Narratives in Serbian Political Discourse?" is 77 pages long and comprised of five chapters, along with the Introduction, the Conclusion and accompanying list of references. The master thesis is checked with the plagiarism software Turnitin with the result of 4% of match. After further inquiry it was established this match was not result of plagiarism and that the thesis is written taking into consideration all relevant academic procedures.

The master thesis investigates the contested legacy of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) by employing a single-case study approach, centered around Biljana Plavšić. Through her case, the candidate analyses how the ICTY's legal attempt to individualize guilt was received and reinterpreted within the dominant Serbian political and media-mediated discourse. The research focuses on the relationship between international retributive justice, nationalist narratives, collective victimhood, and limited potential for reconciliation in the post-Yugoslav context.

In the Introduction, the candidate first defines the primary research problem and situates it within the more general aftermath of the Yugoslav wars. The thesis begins by observing that, even though the ICTY managed to produce an extensive legal record, its judgements were not met with social acceptance nor a common understanding of responsibility. In Serbian discourse, the Tribunal was frequently depicted as selective, politicized, and hostile towards Serbs, which produced a discursive environment in which legal findings could then be reinterpreted and

resisted. The candidate goes on to introduce Biljana Plavšić's case as a particularly illustrative example of these tensions as it brings together a guilty plea, formal acceptance of responsibility, later withdrawal of remorse, and symbolic rehabilitation through nationalist discourse.

In the first chapter, the candidate reviews relevant literature mainly on transitional, retributive justice and the ICTY, but also on nationalism, victimhood, and memory politics. This chapter opens with a discussion on the ICTY's disputed legacy, while highlighting the contrast between its formal, legal achievements and its limited impact on reconciliation and acknowledgement of crimes in the Yugoslav successor states. After that, the candidate turns to scholarship on nationalism and collective memory, thus showcasing how narratives of collective suffering, external threat, and moral exceptionalism essentially shaped post-Yugoslav political identities. The last part of this chapter addresses the existing literature on the Plavšić case, most notably inquiries into her guilty plea, remorse, plea agreement, memoirs and later denial. Based on this, the candidate then identifies a gap in the existing scholarship, i.e. a need for a more detailed analysis of the discursive mechanisms through which individual guilt was transformed into nationally resonant narratives of betrayal, sacrifice, and victimhood.

In the second chapter, the candidate sets forth the thesis' theoretical framework, elaborating that the theory on transitional justice is utilized as the primary conceptual foundation, with a special focus on the distinction between legal accountability and societal understanding and recognition thereof. The candidate proceeds by critically examining the core assumption behind retributive justice mechanisms, that is, that criminal trials can, on their own, produce reconciliation and dismantle nationalist interpretations of the past. Additionally, this theoretical chapter draws on several other analytical concepts stemming from the studies on nationalism, securitization theory, and literature on victimhood, martyrdom, and politics of memory. A particular emphasis is placed on the complex relationships between legal responsibility, collective identity and social legitimacy, as well as to the ways in which the notion of accountability can be reinterpreted in a post-conflict setting marked by political contention.

In the third chapter, the candidate outlines the research's methodological design. The thesis is based on a single case study approach and it employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its main methodological tool for the purpose of examining legal, political, autobiographical, and media texts. By providing an overview of Biljana Plavšić's trajectory, it explains how her case was chosen as a distinct, yet highly illustrative, symbolically charged one, being the first Serb leader to plead guilty before the Tribunal, whose remorse was later publicly withdrawn and reinterpreted in multiple ways. The corpus encompasses ICTY's

official documents, Plavšić's statement of guilt and sentencing materials, her memoir, interviews, political reactions, and selected media texts, with the main timeframe covering the period from her voluntarily surrender in 2001 to her early release in 2009, together with a handful of later references which are used trace the persistence of the key narrative patterns identified. This chapter also defines the limitations of the research which, among others, include the availability of the sources from the early 2000s, interpretive nature of CDA, and the single-case approach.

In the fourth chapter, the candidate conducts the analysis. The first subsection reconstructs dominant framings of the ICTY in Serbian political discourse, focusing on narratives of anti-Serb bias and external threat, as well as on the role of the political elites, in this manner establishing the broader discursive context in which Plavšić's case was received. The following subsection analyses her guilty plea and sentencing, demonstrating how the formal admission of individual criminal responsibility was accompanied by underlying rhetorical elements that preserved the Serbian collective as the main moral community. The third subsection investigates the shifts in the representation of Plavšić, from a figure who was first marked as a traitor and was later recast through a language of suffering, dignity, and sacrifice. The next subsection identifies the recurring lexical fields, discursive tropes, and narrative patterns that enabled this transformation, such as injustice, national burden, external hostility, collective innocence, etc. The final subsection touches upon the enduring relevance of these patterns in more recent public debates on the ICTY.

In the fifth chapter, the candidate presents the thesis' main findings and discusses their broader implications. The first finding is that the ICTY's legal individualization of guilt remained socially unstable once it was translated into nationalist public discourse. Instead of separating individual accountability from collective identity in a durable way, Plavšić's case was frequently reinterpreted through narratives that brought back the nation to the centre of the moral story. The second finding is regarding the shift from betrayal to sacrifice – the same guilty plea that was initially depicted as treason could later be reframed as an act of burden-bearing on behalf of the Serbian people. The third finding is about the role the language played in this process. The candidate demonstrates that, in this case, the discursive transformation did not just take place through explicit denial, but also through narratives of injustice, suffering, martyrdom, dignity, and national loyalty. The candidate deduces that these lexical fields are what made it possible for guilt to be morally resignified instead of simply rejected. The fourth finding concerns the wider implications for reconciliation. The thesis argues that although

international justice may establish legal truth, its social meaning is highly dependent on the political, historical, and discursive context in which it is received.

In the conclusion, the candidate summarizes the thesis' central argument: the Plavšić case demonstrates the limits of retributive justice in cases where legal accountability is mediated through nationalist narratives of victimhood. The ICTY may have succeeded when it comes to producing legal findings and formally assigning individual responsibility, yet it could not control how those findings would be interpreted in domestic discourse. Moreover, the candidate concludes that the case of Biljana Plavšić reveals an overarching dilemma in the relationship between international justice and post-conflict reconciliation, i.e. legal truth does not necessarily become a social truth. When political and media actors reinterpret accountability as injustice, treason, suffering, or sacrifice, the criminal justice's reconciliatory potential is significantly weakened. Therefore, this thesis contributes to the studies of transitional justice, nationalism, and memory politics by showcasing how a legally established narrative can be absorbed into, and transformed by, nationalist discourse.

Based on this report, the Commission concludes that the master thesis "Heroes or Traitors? ICTY's Legacy and Nationalist Narratives in Serbian Political Discourse?" by Milica Đoković fulfils all the formal criteria for the public defence.

The Commission:

assist. prof. dr Tijana Rečević

prof. dr Goran Tepšić

prof. dr Nemanja Džuverović