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THE BATTLE OF KOŠARE 25 YEARS LATER: MEDIA AND POLITICAL NARRATIVES***

Abstract

The Battle of Košare was fought in the border area between the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Albania. It began on April 9, 1999, and lasted 67 days. Although many young lives were lost in this battle, it was precisely this battle that prevented the deeper penetration of the terrorist KLA, supported by the regular Albanian army and NATO, into Kosovo and Metohija. However, as is often the case, military events are one thing, the political implications are another, and the media and political narratives surrounding the events themselves are yet another. "The Heavenly Guard of Free Serbia" or "sacrificed youth", a feat that is remembered or a battle that is not mentioned so as not to offend foreign "partners"? The aim of this paper is precisely to investigate how the media and political elites in Serbia see the Battle of Košare 25 years later. In this sense, we will analyze the content of television news programs and other special programs (if any), online media reports, as well as media statements and social media pages of political parties and actors in Serbia during the period when the 25th anniversary of the

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Battle of Košare was commemorated. With this analysis, we will try to determine whether and within which narratives the media and political elites commemorated this anniversary and spoke (or did not speak) about the battle itself and its implications, and whether there are differences between different media and different political actors in this sense, and what we can conclude from these differences.

Keywords: Battle of Košare, media narratives, political discourse, culture of remembrance, nation brand, communication, media content analysis.

INTRODUCTION

In 2024, we marked a quarter century not only since the North Atlantic Treaty Organization – [NATO aggression against Serbia⁷, but also since the Battle of Košare – a battle that has already been sung by the people and around which a myth of heroism is woven. This battle was fought in the border area between the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Albania in 1999. It began on April 9 and lasted a full 67 days. Although many young lives were lost in this battle, it was precisely it that prevented the deeper penetration of the terrorist Kosovo Liberation Army – KLA, supported by the regular army of Albania and NATO, into Kosovo and Metohija.⁸ However, as is often the case, military events are one thing, the political implications are another, and the media and political narratives surrounding the events themselves are yet another.

While on the one hand we have a strengthening of the collective memory of this heroic feat through graffiti and popular culture, through literature and narratives about the “heavenly guard of free Serbia”, on the other hand the question of whether we “sacrificed our youth” in that battle in vain is being raised, and even the silence about this and other military feats of the Serbian army so as not to offend foreign “partners”.

⁷ The secession of Kosovo and Metohija, which was repeatedly supported by the NATO alliance, and NATO aggression removed obstacles to its future implementation, had significant effects on the national security of Serbia. See Gaćinović 2017.

⁸ One of the relevant aspects of the importance of the Battle of Kosare is related to the security challenges posed by the illegal secession of Kosovo and Metohija, due to changes in the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the size, shape, and borders of the Republic of Serbia, which affect the defensive sensitivity of the area. See Lukić 2024. On the security strategies of the modern state of Serbia, see Gajić 2020.

What remains as a dilemma is whether, as a society, we have a common “picture” of what happened at Košare in 1999 and what it means for us. The aim of this paper is precisely to investigate how the media and political elites in Serbia view the battle at Košare 25 years later, that is, which narratives and discourses are dominant and which are opposing them, and what conclusions can be drawn from them.

MEDIA AND LANGUAGE AS A MIRROR: A METHOD OF RESEARCH

“In political communication, the ‘image of the world’ is considered starting from the role of the mass media that contribute to its development – formation, consolidation or change” (Atlagić 2018, 30). The collective “image” of a specific topic or event is mediated by the placement of different narratives, either by the media, by “public opinion leaders” (Jensen 2016), or by a trusted environment. In this case, “public opinion leaders are not mere transmitters of messages and information, but rather load them with their own values and meanings” (Vujanović 2021, 345). Lou (*Eric Lou*) points out that certain values and views on events are created through “linguistically constructed images” (Lou 2013, 164) that are transmitted and “implanted” into the subconscious.

To investigate what kind of “images” about the Battle of Košare are constructed by the media in Serbia and political actors, as a specific group of “public opinion leaders”, and whether the language with which they build these “images” reveals their political and ideological background (Fairclough 2013), we will analyze the content⁹ of television news and other special programs (if any) and other media reports, as well as media statements and social media pages of political parties and actors in Serbia during the period when the 25th anniversary of the Battle of Košare was commemorated. As key dates for the analysis, we used the dates of the anniversary from the beginning to the end of the battle (i.e., April 9, 2024, and June 10, 2024), along with a period of +/- seven days from these dates. “Qualitative content analysis involves an orientation towards discovering the meaning of ‘what the communicator wanted to say’, relying primarily on the context of the expressed content” (Atlagić 2018, 32), and the discourse within which the content is expressed.

⁹ For more information on research methodology in political science, see Arežina 2021.

Discourse is understood in this research as “a set of ‘contextually dependent semiotic practices’ that are ‘socially constituted and socially constitutive’, ‘linked to a macro-topic’ and to argumentation” (Reisigl and Wodak 2008, 89, according to Pešić 2024, 259). Discursive macro-topics are therefore understood as the thematic contents of discourse. Each discursive macro-topic is a set of related topics and subtopics presented through content-related argumentative schemes and discursive macro-strategies (Reisigl 2018). Through discourse analysis, we will examine whether and within which discursive macro-themes the media and political actors in Serbia commemorated the anniversary of the Battle of Košare and spoke (or did not speak) about the battle itself and its political implications, and whether there are differences between different media and different political actors in this regard, and what we can conclude from these differences.

MEDIA AND POLITICAL IMAGE OF THE BATTLE OF KOŠARE: 25 YEARS LATER

Our research has identified the presence of four discursive macro-themes in the approach of the media and political actors to the commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the Battle of Košare: 1) The macrotheme of heroic defense; 2) The macro-theme of the continuity of the glorious battles of the Serbian Army; 3) The macro-theme of Košare as sacrificed youth; 4) The macro-theme of relativization through “objectivity”.

The first two macro-themes are intertwined and dominant. They were identified in the reporting of public services (Radio Television of Serbia – RTS, Radio Television of Vojvodina – RTV), national frequency media (Pink, Happy, Prva TV), and various media outlets, including *Informer*, *Večernje Novosti*, *Politika*, *Blic*, and *Kosovo Online*. When it comes to state actors, they were identified among government representatives (Serbian Progressive Party – SNS, Socialist Party of Serbia – SPS, *Zavetnici*) during the state commemoration of the beginning and end of the Battle of Košare and during their guest appearances on TV shows on that occasion (*Informer TV* 2024), as well as among the opposition nationally oriented New Democratic Party of Serbia (Novi DSS) and their coalition partners, the Movement for the Restoration of the Kingdom of Serbia – POKS. Within these macro-themes, the Battle of Košare is viewed as a continuity of Serbian

military and heroic history and a significant political and geopolitical event that should be part of the collective culture of memory, shaping the consciousness of future generations and part of Serbian “nation branding” (Novčić and Štavljanin 2015), or “national branding” as a form of “soft power” (Mirović Janković 2023, 520). When we talk about the culture of memory, we are talking about “how individuals, societies and states interpret the past from the position of the present” and how they “overall” publicly use it (Radojković 2024, 73).

The third and fourth discursive macro-themes, although significantly less prevalent, appear as opposing ones and are identified in media reporting, such as N1, Kossev, and BBC in Serbian, as well as among pro-EU political actors.¹⁰ They sometimes even build on the argumentative schemes (Reisigl 2018) of some of the first two macro-themes, e.g., in the form of asking questions like “The soldiers who defended Košare are heroes, but the question is whether their sacrifice makes sense”, or they give them opposing “present meanings” (Pešić 2024, 252) and a sense for the future. Within these macrothemes, the battle of Košare is viewed almost as an “accident”, and the participants in the battle as objects of “bad policies”.

The macro-theme of heroic defense

When it comes to media content, the discursive macro-theme of the Battle of Košare as a heroic defense was constructed in newspapers and on internet portals primarily through headlines in which this battle is presented in a highly positive emotional charge as *a symbol of heroism, a symbol of love for the homeland and a symbol of the defense of the homeland*, with calls to remember and celebrate that heroism. Examples of the construction of this discursive macro-theme are headlines such as: “A heroic epic that never fades” (Kosovo Online 2024); “Heroes from Košare on eternal guard” (Janjić 2024); “The day when the youth of Serbia showed how to love the homeland: 25 years since the Battle of Košare” (Blic 2024); “The hardest battle in the recent history of the Serbian army and a symbol of the defense of the homeland!”

¹⁰ Given the different political positions of opposition actors such as the Movement of Free Citizens – PSG, Democratic Party – DS, Freedom and Justice Party – SSP, Green Left Front – ZLF – we took their foreign policy orientation towards the EU as a common denominator of this group of actors, and at the same time what distinguishes them from another opposition group of national/sovereignist actors.

(Informer 2024); “What would have happened to us if it weren’t for that impenetrable wall” (Tanjug 2024a); “We have a duty to remember the sacrifice of heroes” (Politika 2024).

In television broadcasts on the anniversary of the battle, this discursive macro-theme was deepened by emphasizing the political and geopolitical significance of the defense of Košare, by characterizing the enemy and calling for action – that is, by constantly commemorating this battle and incorporating its symbolic values into the education of future generations and the political future of the country. Thus, heroism is emphasized despite suffering and a more numerous enemy (Prva TV 2024), which is characterized as a “terrorist organization” (RTS 2024b) and emphasizes the importance of this defense as a defense against NATO aggression (RTV 2024). Similarly, this macro-theme was shaped in the reports in the RTS and RTV news programs that were broadcast on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the beginning/end of the Battle of Košare, with emphasized optimism and assigning this heroic defense the role of an example to younger generations and a foundation for the future.

At the state level, the 25th anniversary of the Battle of Košare’s commencement was commemorated in April 2025, and a commemorative academy was held on June 14, 2025, marking the 25th anniversary of its conclusion. Political actors – state officials and members of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (Nikola Selaković, Petar Petković, Miloš Vučević, etc.) in their statements referred to the significance of this battle in the defense of the homeland and the importance of the culture of remembrance, calling it the “impenetrable bulwark of our sons” and the soldiers who participated in this battle the new Obilić’s (Politika 2024; RTV 2024). When it comes to opposition political parties represented in the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, by reviewing and analyzing the content of statements by representatives of these parties and posts on their social networks during the period of commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the beginning and end of the Battle of Košare, we recorded statements and posts by representatives of the New DSS and their coalition NADA, as posts that also construct the discursive macro-theme of Košare as a heroic defense. Thus, their posts, through a “scheme of arguments” (Reisigl 2018) about the importance of this battle for stopping the “West and NATO aggressors” and defending the

state, celebrate the heroism and chivalry of our soldiers at Košare¹¹ and call for its remembrance and transmission to future generations.¹²

Here, and among the aforementioned media and political actors, we observe a tendency for the values that the Battle of Košare symbolizes for them (heroism, defense of the state, love of the homeland) to become part of the national culture of remembrance, and for sovereignism and resistance to NATO and separatism to become part of the political “legacy” and “memory” (Vankovska 2013) of this battle and calls for shaping future policies accordingly.

Macro-theme of the continuity of glorious battles

Intertwined with the first macro-theme is a second one – the creation of an “image” in which the Battle of Košare is not a single feat but represents the continuity of the glorious battles of the Serbian army throughout history. This macro-theme was established in TV shows through comparisons of this battle with battles against the Turks, references to the “age-old glory” of the Serbian army, and the continuous fight for freedom. The battle for freedom and the courage of the Serbian soldier appear as the central motif around which a discourse is created through various linguistic stylistic figures (Fairclough 2013). It is emphasized how the “115 young men” illuminated the “glory of our army” (RTV KV 2024), how “the fight with the UCK and the mujahedin was like the fight with the Turks” (Informer TV 2024),¹³ how the soldiers at Košare fought for freedom, “as it was in all wars” and how they are worthy successors of the Serbian knights (RTS 2024).

During the commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the Battle of Košare, state officials complemented this discursive macro-theme by shaping the myth of the existence of a “Serbian gene of love for freedom” and emphasizing that “Serb and soldier have almost always been synonymous” (Tanjug 2024b). Within the opposition corps, representatives of the NADA coalition and the New DSS contributed

¹¹ “Glory to the heroes of Košare. At Košare, the West and NATO aggressors were stopped, and the border of our state was defended”, reads a post by the New Democratic Party of Serbia on April 9, 2024, on social media.

¹² “Insert the fierce battle for Košare into primers, so that Serbian pupils know where heroes died”, reads a post on the Instagram page of the New Democratic Party of Serbia on June 14, 2024.

¹³ Informer TV, during the period marking the 25th anniversary of the start of the battle, had several special programs on this occasion.

to the creation of this discursive macro-theme, especially MP Ljubinko Đurković, who himself participated in the war events of 1999 and emphasized that the Battle of Košare was a symbol of the invincibility of the Serbian soldier (Informer TV 2024). In both the first and second discursive macro-themes, we see an active approach of certain media and political actors and the intention to make the Battle of Košare part of the “nation brand”. For “successful national branding” what is important is “the specificity of national identity characteristics” (Mirović Janković 2023, 965). Only “brand management, as a component of national policy, is aimed at building a unique identity, using one’s own history, heritage and contemporary values, as a marketing tool to generate increased awareness of the state” (Dinnie 2008, 25 according to Pešić 2024, 253). According to one study, in Serbia, “glorious history” is part of the brand culture for 93% of respondents as an essential element of the national identity brand (Novčić and Štavljanin 2015, 271), and in this sense, the discursive macro-themes of Košare as a heroic defense and Košare as a continuity of glorious battles complete the construction of the dominant view of the Serbian national “brand”.

The Macro-theme of Sacrificed Youth

Unlike the first two discursive macro-themes that unambiguously positively interpret the Battle of Košare and together create a narrative not only about the heroism of the soldiers, but also about the importance of the battle in political and geopolitical terms, as well as the upbringing of future generations, we have also noticed a slightly different discursive macro-theme that can be called the discourse of sacrificed youth.

Namely, through our research, we have observed that some media and political actors do not deny the heroism of the soldiers who participated in this battle, but rather deny its significance. Within this discursive macro-theme, a story is built about Košare as a “slaughterhouse of Yugoslav/Serbian youth” (Kossev 2024), and resistance is indirectly presented as a “mistake”. Through “linguistically constructed images” (Lou 2013, 164) of soldiers who were “just old enough to serve their military service” (Anđelković 2024) and who were “unnecessarily sacrificed” and “sent to their deaths” at Košare,¹⁴ a narrative is imposed about the “guilt of the Serbian state leadership” and the “senselessness

¹⁴ See, for example, the posts of PSG officials on social media X in the observed period.

of warfare” (even when it comes to resistance and defense of the state). This “transformation of the process” and the subjects of the actions into static “entities” reveal the “ideological potential of the language” used (Billig 2008, 783). Instead of glorifying and presenting this battle as historically significant, it is indirectly portrayed as part of “bad political decisions” and the soldiers themselves are presented as “objects” rather than “subjects” of the action.

This discursive macro-theme is present to a significantly lesser extent than the first two, and unlike them, it is not present in media with a national frequency nor among political representatives of the state leadership or nationally oriented political options. It is primarily observed in media outlets connected to Western European countries (such as the BBC, N1, and Kossev), as well as among political actors with a pro-EU orientation.

Macro-theme of relativization through objectivity

Connected to the third is a fourth discursive macro-theme that is built either through silence, i.e., ignoring the very dates of commemoration of the anniversary of the battle’s beginning or end, or through relativizing the significance of the battle itself by creating a discourse of “objectivity”. Within this discursive macro-theme, the starting point is not the significance of this battle from the Serbian perspective, but rather the media presents itself as “neutral”. Some by publishing short texts without any determinants or qualifications about the battle itself, its participants, or its outcome – except for the note that it lasted until the signing of the Kumanovo Agreement and that Košare is now an “empty village” (Srna 2024). Others relativize its significance by discussing the existence of different cultures of memory and various interpretations (Anđelković 2024). The fact of “two sides” is emphasized, which “25 years after the Battle of Košare still celebrate their heroes” but which share “one suffering” (Kossev 2024). In this way, both the reasons for the battle and the balance of power are completely relativized, creating an image of the existence of multiple truths and denying the need for a culture of remembrance and the transmission of collective values, such as courage, sacrifice, and the defense of the homeland. The sides are presented as equal in value, and the battle is almost an “unfortunate combination of circumstances”. Moreover, KLA soldiers are not referred to as terrorists and separatists, but in some of

these texts, they are even referred to as “Albanian rebels” who did not clash with the FRY/Serbia, but with the “security forces of the Slobodan Milošević regime” (Fund for Humanitarian Law, according to the BBC in Serbian in 2024). In this way, the battle itself is attempted to be given a completely different political context, and the reader is suggested that it is not “his battle” or “his heroes” but rather a conflict between the rebels and the “evil” Milošević. The categories of good and evil completely change sides, albeit indirectly, and under the guise of neutrality, a narrative of Serbian guilt is established, countering the dominant and authorized “heritage discourse” (authorized heritage discourse – AHD) (Thouki and Skrede 2024). In this way, it not only opposes the dominant narrative about the Battle of Košare, but also its geopolitical significance, but also the consequences and collective actions that are built on it in the future, because “our understanding of the past has strategic, political and ethical consequences” and “struggles over the meaning of the past are also competitions over the meaning of the present” (Pešić 2024, 252). The tendency to relativize the significance and context of the Battle of Košare seeks to impose a different way in which that past will influence our current political actions, as well as a different way in which we interpret the past and transmit it to future generations (Vankovska 2013).

When it comes to political actors, a review of social media pages and statements by relevant political party representatives during the period marking the beginning/end of the Battle of Košare shows that those who contributed to this macro-theme most often did so by ignoring the dates themselves and not attaching importance to them. This primarily concerns pro-EU parliamentary political actors, whose social media pages contained no content related to the Battle of Košare during the observed period.

CONCLUSION

In the year when we commemorated the 25th anniversary of the Battle of Košare, we asked ourselves whether there is a unique media and political discourse within which its significance is discussed in Serbia. In this sense, we used content analysis and discourse analysis to cover the content of television news and other special programs (that we could find), online media reports, as well as media statements and social media pages of political parties and actors in Serbia in the period

of +/- seven days from the date when the 25th anniversary of the Battle of Košare was commemorated.

Our research has determined the presence of four discursive macro-themes in the approach of the media and political actors to the commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the Battle of Košare: 1) The macro-theme of heroic defense; 2) The macro-theme of the continuity of the glorious battles of the Serbian army; 3) The macro-theme of Košare as a sacrificed youth; 4) The macro-theme of relativization through “objectivity”.

With none of these macro-themes do the media and political actors deny the heroism of the soldiers who participated in the battle itself; however, they assign different meanings to their participation, the battle itself, and its political and geopolitical implications. While within the first two macro-themes, soldiers are presented as subjects of a historical event, and the battle as not only the heroism of individuals, but also the continuity of Serbian military tradition and a symbol of the politics of resistance and sovereignty, within the second two macro-themes, soldiers are presented as objects (and even victims) of bad political decisions. While the first two emphasize the importance of Košare for the defense of the state (both from the KLA and NATO) and the need to incorporate the values of such resistance into the collective culture of memory (Radojković 2024), the second two relativize its importance and, instead of a national culture of memory, attempt to impose the understanding of “multiple truths” of equal weight that need to be “reconciled”, but within the framework of a particular ideological reading.

Given that we pointed out in the theoretical part that actors, through language, or the way they talk about events (Lou 2013), can contribute to the “formation, consolidation or changes” (Atlagić 2018, 30) of a certain “picture of the world”, it can be concluded that the first two discursive macro-themes are part of the continuity and consolidation of the dominant stream of the Serbian national culture of memory, while the other two macro-themes are part of the opposing discourse and tend to change the dominant picture.

The conclusions should certainly be interpreted and re-examined in more depth in further research. We particularly emphasize the need for research that would be more detailed in terms of the broader period covered, and in this sense, by deepening the conclusions and examples, since this research is narrowly focused on periods of +/- seven days from

the date of the commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the beginning and end of the Battle of Košare.

Finally, we will also present a personal conclusion. Although scientific research and even an “objective approach” always require considering multiple sides and multiple facts (which was done in this research), we believe that the first two discursive macro-themes are and should be part of a “constructive macro-strategy” that constructs and strengthens “national identity by affirming unification, mutual solidarity and identification with jointly adopted values” (Pešić 2023 according to Pešić 2024, 269). This entails strengthening the culture of remembrance of the Battle of Košare, selecting values that need to be transmitted to future generations through narrative identity, the story of national heroes, and building a national brand (Mirović Janković 2023; Novčić and Štavljanin 2015). And such values, when we talk about the brand of the Serbian nation, as Marko Miljanov (Miljanov 2014) would say, are “humanity and heroism” (which were shown by the soldiers at Košare), that is, the readiness to resist the stronger and defend the sovereignty of one’s own state.

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БИТКА НА КОШАРАМА 25 ГОДИНА ПОСЛИЈЕ: МЕДИЈСКА И ПОЛИТИЧКА СЛИКА***

Резиме

Битка на Кошарама вођена је 1999. године на граници између Савезне Републике Југославије и Албаније. Иако је у овој бици изгубљено много младих живота, управо је то спречило дубљи продор терористичке ОВК, коју је подржавала регуларна албанска војска и НАТО, на Косово и Метохију. Али, као што је често случај, војни догађаји су једно, политичке импликације су друго, а медијски и политички наративи о самим догађајима су нешто сасвим треће. Да ли је ова битка била „небеска стража слободне Србије” или „жртвована младост”, херојски подвиг који треба памтити или догађај који је прећутан како би се избегла увреда страних „партнера”? Овај рад је испитао како су српске медијске и политичке елите доживљавале битку на Кошарама 25 година касније. У том циљу, анализирали смо телевизијске вести и специјалне емисије, извештаје онлајн медија, јавне изјаве и садржај друштвених медија политичких странака и актера током периода обиљежавања 25. годишњице битке. Истраживање је имало за циљ да утврди које дискурзивне оквире су медијске и политичке елите користиле када су се бавиле (или се нису бавиле) битком и њеним импликацијама, и да ли постоје разлике међу медијима и политичким актерима. Наши налази открили су присуство четири дискурзивне макротеме у медијском и политичком приступу: 1) Макротема

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херојске одбране; 2) Макротема континуитета славних борби српске војске; 3) Макротема Кошара као жртвоване младости; 4) Макротема релативизације кроз „објективност”. Ни у једној од ових макротема медији и политички актери не поричу херојство војника који су учествовали у бици. Међутим, они дају различита значења њиховом учешћу, самој бици и њеним политичким и геополитичким импликацијама. Док су у прве две макротеме војници представљени као субјекти историјског догађаја, а битка не само као херојство појединаца, већ и континуитет српске војне традиције и симбол политике отпора и суверенитета, у друге две макротеме војници су представљени као објекти (па чак и жртве) лоших политичких одлука. Док прве две макротеме истичу значај Кошара за одбрану државе (и од ОВК и од НАТО) и потребу да се вриједности таквог отпора уклопе у колективну културу сећања (Radojković 2024), друге две релативизују њен значај и, умјесто националне културе сећања, покушавају да наметну разумевање „вишеструких истина” једнаке тежине које треба „помирити”, али у оквиру одређеног идеолошког читања. С обзиром на то да смо у теоријском раду истакли да актери, кроз језик, или начин на који говоре о догађајима (Lou 2013), могу допринети „формирању, консолидацији или променама” (Atlagić 2018, 30) одређене „слике свијета”, може се закључити да су прве две дискурзивне макротеме део континуитета и учвршћивања доминантног тока српске националне културе сјећања, док су друге две макротеме део супротстављеног дискурса и теже промјени доминантне слике.

Кључне речи: Битка на Кошарама, медијски наративи, политички дискурс, култура сјећања, бренд нације, комуникација, анализа медијског садржаја.

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