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ORGANIZED CRIME IN SERBIA – MEDIA CONSTRUCTION AND SOCIAL REACTION

The main aim of the paper is to analyse how organised crime is represented in Serbian (printed) media during the year 2003 and how this representation is connected to broader social and political processes. The paper is based on the analyses of papers published in daily newspapers, Blic and Politika, and in the magazine Vreme, in the period between January, 1 and September, 30 2003, as well as the selected articles published in some other daily and weekly newspapers and magazines throughout 2003. Qualitative (content) method is used as main one, while quantitative method is used as supplementary one. The analysis deals with two main themes: crime inventory and (media and control) reaction. The paper suggests that Serbian media's image of organized crime is predominantly consisted from murders, at first place those with political background, illegal drug trade and kidnappings of, predominantly, businessmen and criminals. In the conclusion, the author argues that it is impossible to understand organized crime in Serbia without being aware of it as an integral part of economical and political structures of Serbian state created during 1990s. Moreover, the author argues that the proper reaction to organized crime needs to be based on the explanation of structural causes which led to its creation and clear and decisive concept of transitional justice, including both transformation of institutions and development of rule of law.

INTRODUCTION

The paper is based on content analyses of articles on organized crime published in printed media in Serbia during 2003, i.e. during the year for which, when crime is concerned, main features were the assassination of Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic and "war against organized crime", as immediate state reaction to it.

The main aim of this paper is to show how organized crime is represented in Serbian (printed) media and how this representation is connected to broader social and political processes. Articles about organized crime (291) published in daily newspapers, Blic and Politika, and in the magazine Vreme, in the period between January, 1 and September, 30 2003,¹ as well as the selected articles published in some other daily and weekly newspapers and magazines throughout 2003, are analysed. Articles published until September 30, 2003, are used for the analyses of all topics covered in this paper, while articles published after that date 30 are mostly used for getting, as complete as possible, the picture of media and state control reactions to organized crime. For the analyses of media representation of organized crime in Serbia qualitative (content) method is used as main one. However, quantitative method is used as supplementary one as well.²

CRIME INVENTORY: IMAGES AND RELATIONSHIPS

Inventory of organized crime in Serbia, as represented in Serbian media, includes various crimes, such as murders, documents and money forgery, racketeering, corruption, kidnapping, illegal possession of weapons, car theft, burglary, robbery as well as

smuggling and illegal trade in different goods. Also, relatively big part of articles (17,9%) deals with organized crime in more general way, not specifying crimes.

Most of the articles report about murders (141 or 48,4%). A bit more than a half of all reports about murders (55,3%) deal with political murders, including elements of terrorism and state terrorism, while a bit less than a half mostly include killings in criminal groups' clashes. Politically motivated murders are mostly presented as professional murders (liquidations), ordered by political actors. Most of politically motivated murders dealt by media during 2003 are committed in the period 1999 – 2003. The similar frequency of media's dealing with political murders and those which resulted from criminal groups clashes contributed to the creation of two parallel and competing images of organized crime victims: politicians and political opponents, on one side, and criminals, on the other. This is, as we will show later, largely misused for political struggles in Serbia during 2003.

Different forms of smuggling and illegal trade are on the second place in the frequency of their appearance in media (57 or 19,6%), while kidnapping (23 or 7,9%) is on the third place. Among articles dealing with smuggling and illegal trade, the most numerous are those which deal with drug trade - 56,2%, while those about other forms, such as smuggling of cigarettes and fuel, and trade in people, stolen cars and weapons, are much less present in printed media coverage.

It is, however, worth mentioning that, although articles about trafficking in people have being quite often present in Serbian media in the period under examination, they are only sporadically addressed as a form of organized crime and, consequently, are mostly excluded from the media's image about organized crime. Thus, the above mentioned participation of articles about this crime in Serbian media relate only to those articles which treated trafficking in people as a form of organized crime and in connection to the activities of criminal groups which were the target of the police action "Sablja".³

It is obvious that the Serbian media's image of organized crime is predominantly consisted from murders, at first place those with political background, illegal drug trade and kidnappings of, predominantly, businessmen and criminals. As a consequence, media's images suggest that organized crime in Serbia has both economic and political aims. Moreover, information about organized crime provided by media suggest that perpetrators of organized crime and those who were aiding and abating them are largely members of special police units and intelligence services, as well as criminals working for the police (so called para police). On the other side, apart from criminal groups members, victims of murders and kidnappings are predominantly high rank officials or financial supporters of political parties, MP-s, businessmen, journalists or owners of opposition newspapers during Milošević, politicians, but also policemen and high rank officials of police and intelligence service, who were involved in clearing up of murders committed during 1990.s.

Those who were suspected for aiding criminals in different ways are also corrupted prosecutors and judges, military personnel, as well as defence lawyers suspect that they were members of the same criminal groups as their clients. Among those accused for inciting for the cruelest political murders are former Serbian president Slobodan Milošević and high rank intelligence officers who were on duty during Milošević's regime. Many of police and intelligence service members as well as many of criminals working for the police during Milošević's rule also have long criminal history and were participating in the wars in the former Yugoslavia. Many of them are notorious

for war crimes against civilian population.⁴ However, apart from police and intelligence service members from that time, many of those accused for organized crime in general, and for political murders in particular, were active members, and sometime on high positions in police and intelligence service in Djindjić's Government as well.

Having all that in mind, media's image of organized crime in Serbia clearly suggests continuity between war crimes and state terrorism of Milosevic's regime, on one side, and present day organized crime, on the other side. Moreover, it also suggests close links between organized crime and political opponents of the new regime, and, as a consequence, its increasing activities toward destabilization of country and return of old political elite.

REACTION

When reaction to organized crime is in question, there are two important agencies, whose reactions are worth to be considered: media and state control. In that regard, the analyses of printed media in Serbia shows clearly the existence of four phases, each of them coinciding with and are shaped by crucial political events and broader political processes.

These periods are:

- I. Period before the assassination of Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Djindjić (January - 12 March 2003);
- II. State of emergency – one month and a half after the assassination;
- III. Period between the end of state of emergency and the starting of trials for organized crime (May – September 2003)
- IV. Trials: Media and control reactions in each phase have specific and interconnected patterns.

PERIOD BEFORE THE ASSASSINATION OF SERBIAN PRIME MINISTER ZORAN DJINDJIĆ

The main features of media's coverage in the period preceding the assassination were frequent analyses of the crimes committed during previous year, warnings and predictions of new crimes and the pressure on the Government to undertake decisive action against organized crime. In addition, as a consequence of the Government's lack of appropriate response, media reacted with undertaking their own "inquiries". Thus, printed media coverage from that period is full of articles resulting from organized crime "investigations" done by journalists.⁵ This is very well shown in the statement of Slobodan Orlic, at that time co-president of Social democratic party, published by the daily newspaper Blic, that "state prosecutors and police should "take back the job from the journalists, who are the only ones who investigate these cases these days".

In this period, the media largely served as a kind of messenger for members of two leading Belgrade based criminal groups – "zemunski klan" and "surčinski klan", transferring their messages to both state organs and Serbian public.⁶ Their own messages largely overshadowed the messages delivered by the Government, which announced reconstruction of police and other decisive measures against organized crime. The most extreme examples in that regard are media which were themselves controlled by organized crime, such as *Identitet* and *Nacional*. The day before assassination, the former one even announced the assassination of Prime Minister on its front cover: "Djindjić target of free shot, Serbs from the Hague ordered assassination".

It is obvious that, in this period, the reaction of state control, including both police and judiciary, was slow, vague and contradictory, and, thus, inappropriate for the obvious

threats coming from organized crime and jeopardizing both Prime Minister and Serbian political stability. The media images from that period suggest severe tensions between the Government and control institutions,⁷ reflecting political conflicts within the state institutions themselves, i.e. between supporters and opponents of the former/new regime, both being among those employed by them.

The tensions between two political options are reflected in media addresses of representatives of two organized crime groups as well: Milorad Ulemek Legija as a symbol of queasy patriotism, the "guardian of national proud", and the opposition/threat to the Government, and Ljubisa Buha Cume,⁹ as a source of evidences about notorious political murders and potential ally of the Government in its struggle against organized crime. However, one of striking features of one longer period before the assassination of the Prime Minister was the predominantly negative representation of his work (Curguz Kazimir, 2004), very often including the accusations for his own involvement/connections with organized crime.¹⁰ This, at first glance, may seem to be in contradiction with above mentioned opposed political options and their attitudes toward two opposed criminal groups. However, this apparent contradiction is not unusual since both media images and control reactions from that time mostly represent deeper structural contradiction and political conflicts. It seems that all above-mentioned tensions and more or less hidden or disguised political conflicts emptied the space,¹¹ which leaders of the most powerful organized crime group "zemunski klan", headed by Legija, tried to fill. They, of course, used crime as a means for achieving their own political aims. In that regard, very illustrative is the comment of Nenad Milic, at that time Serbian deputy Minister of internal affairs, who said that "both in 2000 and at the beginning of 2003 'zemunski klan' thought that they are stronger than state", and, this, including their financial power which enabled them to corrupt both media and state bodies, together with the public image of Prime Minister as it was (negative), led them toward the assassination and attempted coup d'etat.¹²

STATE OF EMERGENCY

The media coverage during state of emergency very well reflects both media's and Government's increased concerns about organized crime as a reaction to the assassination of Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic. The most of articles (42,6%) are published during the state of emergency, i.e. immediately after the assassination of the Prime Minister and during the period when the police action against organized crime was the most intensive. This means that the number of articles published during such a short period of time as it is one month and a half was about 50% bigger than the number of those published within previous 2,5 months. Similarly, the number of articles published within five months after the end of state of emergency was much smaller in comparison to the number of articles published during the state of emergency (88 in comparison to 124).

Media's and Government's concerns about organized crime are also well documented by the data about the themes analyzed in the articles, among which the results of police action "Sabljka" seem to be the most frequent topic (20, 6%). Consequently, the types of crimes addressed in media after the assassination of Prime Minister are predominantly those which were politically motivated and for which the prime suspects were members of criminal group known as "zemunski klan." Since illegal drug trade and kidnappings were, apart from political murders, allegedly the most frequent crimes committed by this (Belgrade based) group and its branches throughout Serbia, this is not unusual that their criminal activities overshadowed some other, also very serious and widespread crimes (e.g. organized trafficking in people).¹³

Media's presentation of organized crime during the state of emergency was, first of all, focused on demands for decisive fight against organized crime and clearing up and arrest of all responsible for the assassination of Prime Minister and other political murders. "The response of the state will be clear and unambiguous... State of emergency is necessary measure for bringing criminals to justice and to protect state from this and all similar groups which dares to attack democratic institutions of the state of Serbia", says the public statement of the Serbian Government.¹⁴

As soon as police action "Sablja" began, the media attention started to be focused mainly on its successes, which was presented as "historical chance" for defeating organized crime, as "final fight against crime" in more general sense and similar. Newspapers were filled with reports about daily arrests of hundreds of people, about searches, large amount of weapons and large quantities of drugs, destructions of illegally constructed buildings owned by members of organized crime etc. Titles such as "criminal groups broken", "all kidnappings solved", "hundreds of people arrested", "the most powerful gang broken", "car mafia broken", "narco network destroyed", "drug trade completely stopped" etc. were quite frequent.

Since the freedom of press was suspended and, thus, flow of information was controlled by the Government, figures about arrests, searches etc. were mostly those released by police and Government. According to the Government's report released at the end of the state of emergency, during that period 11, 665 persons were brought to the police, while 2,697 are left in police custody. 5,560 criminal complaints are issued against 3,946 persons for 5,671 crimes. Huge amount of weapons was seized from arrested or collected from citizens who voluntarily gave them responding to the Government's call. In addition, 28,200 grams of heroin, 463 grams of cocaine, 44, 837 kilos of marihuana as well as 4,960 tablets of synthetic drugs was seized. Also, 688 stolen cars were discovered.¹⁵

One of characteristic features of state's messages sent through media was also the message that state of emergency is "against criminals and terrorists", as well as that ordinary citizens should not be afraid and that it will not take the form of hunt of 'witches and revenge against political opponents'. However, already during the state of emergency the critic of police action "Sablja" started to emerge, throwing light on its shortcomings.

The critics were mostly about partiality and political selectivity of action, which led to it not fulfilling its aim, i.e. not assuring that justice will be achieved. Some commentators, for example, suggest that, in spite of its extremely large scope, the fact that police did not try to check rumors that some of Prime Minister's close associates may had their role in assassination, led to the politization of the state of emergency and police action,¹⁶ which became more and more emphasized after its end, leading to severe political crises. This may suggest that police action lost its "historical chance" not only in its fight against organized crime, but also in strengthening democracy and rule of law, and thus, of showing clear political will for discovering the (impartial) truth about the past and of stopping rather than deepening political divisions and conflicts in Serbian society.

PERIOD BETWEEN THE END OF STATE OF EMERGENCY AND THE STARTING OF TRIALS FOR ORGANIZED CRIME

The main characteristic of the media images of organized crime in the period after the end of the state of emergency is large release from the custody of those who were arrested during police action "Sablja", including either their complete freeing of

liability or filing complaints against them for some trivial crimes, such as forgery or illegal possession of guns. This, as media representations suggest, overshadowed initial successes in breaking up of most of organized crime groups in Serbia and continuous clearing up of the most cruel political murders, kidnappings, drug trade and cigarettes smuggling rings etc.

Thus, it is not surprising that one of the main features of the media reactions from that time was minimization of the results of the police action "Sablja" as well as the accusation of the police for torture and other violations of human rights of arrested. The Government's own reaction to that included prediction of new political murders and attribution of the minimization of its results to mafia who "is preparing itself to hit back".¹⁷

Simultaneously, the media coverage suggests constant efforts made by the Government to show that "Sablja" "is going on", that it is successful etc. It included both reports about successful police actions, including increasing international cooperation, and intensive preparations for the beginning of trials. The latter one is especially evident in frequent articles about District Court Special Department for Organized crime. However, unrealistic statements of Government officials, at first place these of Minister for internal affairs and Minister of justice, which exaggerated the results of "Sablja", such as "there is not organized crime in Serbia anymore", "123 criminal groups were broken with 844 members and most of them are arrested and await trials",¹⁸ only contributed to the further intensification of feelings that the effects of police action are much smaller than Government argued. In addition, as some analytical articles from *Vreme* magazine¹⁹ suggest, in spite of all efforts, the police action was not effective enough largely because of so called "leaking of information", resulting from the loyalty of the part of police to the criminal groups rather than to the police itself.²⁰

TRIALS

Beginning of trials for organized crime brought continuation and further deepening of political conflicts between the Government and its opposition, consisted mostly from supporters of previous regime. The trials became political battlefields in which defendants and their lawyers were at the one side, and victims and/or their families at the other one. Media reports from the trials suggest the creation of victim's blame and insults, threats and even direct physical violence against victims, but also between different actors, such as defendants and lawyers, representing offenders as well as victims. There is obvious and, in comparison to the trials for conventional crimes, unusually high level of obstructions of trials by attorney lawyers and their extreme (political) identification with their clients.

The misuse of trials for organized crime culminated when, in December 2003, the trial for the assassination of Prime Minister started several days before parliamentary elections and it was largely misused by defense lawyers, media and Government for pre-election political campaigns. The very timing of the beginning of the trial and reading of the indictment in the eve of election, together with media giving their space unproportionally more to the attorney lawyers than to the Court and Prosecution office, contributed further to blaming the victim and justification of defendants, and, in this way, reflected the culminating political crises in Serbia (Nikolic-Ristanovic, 2004).²¹

CONCLUSION

Organized crime in Serbia is mostly presented, both by media and state control, as a monster by itself rather than as a natural consequence of structural processes related to both economic sanctions and ethnic conflicts in 1990s, and slow, indecisive and tense political transition since 2000. Although the critics of police campaign against organized crime made some efforts to make visible political interests/conflicts behind it, they never asked anything more than pure repression. All that only intensified the illusion brought by "Sablja" that organized crime in Serbia may be eradicated without removing its deep structural causes. But, as stressed by Jewkes, "the concentration on symptoms, rather than causes or long-term effects, leads to a somewhat superficial analysis of crime and deviance and frequently negates the fact that those who commit crimes are not 'others', they are 'us' and are of our making." (Jewkes, 2004:85)

As I showed in this paper, in spite of warnings, attempted assassination and even very clear announcement of the assassination in some newspapers, state control reaction against organized crime in Serbia was almost inexistent in the period prior the assassination of the Prime Minister. Once prime Minister was killed, the reaction became exaggerated and full of unrealistic promises and predictions of new crimes. At the end of the day, social reaction seems far less effective in terms of suppressing and preventing organized crime than in intensifying political conflicts within already severely divided society.

To some degree, social reaction to organized crime in Serbia may be explained using disaster research and sociology of moral panics, which stresses the importance of the way in which a single dramatic incident serves to confirm the actor's deviant identity. Something which was latent becomes clearly visible and this makes action much easier. Because, dramatic incident "dramatizes the issues at stake when boundaries are blurred and provide a forum to articulate the issues more explicitly...Moral panics depend on the generation of diffuse normative concerns, while the successful creation of folk devils rests on their stereo-typical portrayal as atypical actors against a background that is over typical" (Cohen, 1994:192, 61). There is common feature in this type of reactions that "moral entrepreneur has to defend the success of his methods and at the same time contend that the problem is getting worse" (Cohen, 1994:53)

Also, similarly to Cohen's findings in his research on media construction of crime, mass media reflect real conflicts of interests which exist on different levels, so that the analyses of their constructions may help us understand how "we are manipulated into taking some things too seriously and other things not seriously enough" (Cohen, 2002, quoted by Jewkes, 2004). In Serbia, all conflicts have one thing in common - they all may be translated into one major theme: political conflict around being for or against the Government which came into power on October 5, 2000 as well as the related concerns about status loss. The fear of losing the status seems to be behind both organized crime's reaction in the form of the assassination of the Prime Minister and behind the state reaction in the form of state of emergency/war against organized crime. This is very well seen in Legija's letter to the public, and in both the lack of state reaction before and its overreaction after the assassination.

Thus, it is impossible to understand organized crime in Serbia without being aware of it as an integral part of economical and political structures of Serbian state created during 1990s. In addition, it is important to recognize the role that these same criminal groups had both in ethnic conflicts and in political murders in Serbia, but also in the survival of Serbian population during the economic sanctions and isolation of the country. It is important to have in mind also that economic sanctions led to the over-criminalisation of Serbian population in 1990s so that the majority of people were

forced to turn to illegal ways of earning for survival (Nikolic-Ristanovic, 1998). Significant part of it meant that they had some, at least peripheral, connections with criminal businesses. The boundaries between legal and illegal are still vague for many in Serbia. This pose the question of how media and state messages are received and what is the real impact of the monster stereotype and war against organized crime rhetoric. Finally, the monster stereotype may be even counter productive in the society where still there is not consensus around the theme of aggression/defence and war criminal/national hero dichotomies.

The most recent crimes, such as the assassination of Prime Minister and murders of prosecution witnesses for related trial may be understood as organized crime's reaction/resistance to the social change. However, the symbiotic relationship between the state and organized crime would be the major challenge for every Government, since the real struggle against organized crime may be only one which would take risk of "unmasking and debunking"(Cohen, 1994:204) this symbiosis as well as political conflict behind it.

The proper reaction to organized crime need to be based on the explanation of structural causes which led to its creation. Only than it will be clear that the struggle against it cannot rely only on repression and social exclusion, but need to take into consideration legalization of illegal businesses as well as other ways of social inclusion of those who were not involved or did not have significant role in the most serious crimes. Hence, it seems that the effective struggle against organised crime in Serbia cannot be imagined unless the part of the comprehensive truth and reconciliation process and clear and decisive concept of transitional justice, including both transformation of institutions and development of rule of law.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 The articles published in the period between January 1 and September 30, 2003 are collected systematically as the part of the Institute for criminological and sociological research project Serious forms of crime in the conditions of transition, funded by Serbian Ministry of science. Thus, this paper itself is the result of the part of the analyses done within this (broader) research project, and reflects the current stage of ideas developed on the basis of it.
- 2 The quantitative analyses for this paper is done by my colleague Biljana Simeunovic-Patic, for which I am very much grateful to her.
- 3 With the exception of trafficking in people, the media picture about the structure of smuggling and illegal trade may probably be close to reality, having in mind that fuel, cigarettes and weapons smuggling developed mostly as a consequence of the economic sanctions and war in the former Yugoslavia, and were recently reduced as a consequence of several Government's actions toward suppressing it.
- 4 "Legija, Cume, kriminal, politika, policija i mediji"(Legija, Cume, crime, police and media), *Vreme*, 7 January, 2003. "Ko su glavni akteri u optuzbama oko otmica i ubistava koja su se u Srbiji dogodila u poslednjih desetak godina" (Who are the main actors in indictments for kidnappings and murders committed in Serbia during last ten years), *Blic*, February 1, 2003, "Rat sa ratnim zlocincima" (War against war criminals), *Politika*, 25 march, 2003.
- 5 This was especially emphasized as a response to the confusion resulted from the lack of appropriate response of the state bodies to the attempted assassination of the prime Minister in February 2003.

- 6 The two groups were earlier cooperating very closely, but split and at that time already were in severe conflict
- 7 Severe obstructions within police, state prosecution office and judiciary were serious obstacle to efficient state control reaction to organized crime, in spite of new legislation and other measures undertaken.
- 8 This dichotomy is obvious from the political statements published in printed media at that time. While ruling coalition understood Legija's letter as an invitation for the riots and spreading the fear from unrest, the statements of both moderate, such as Kostunica's Democratic Party of Serbia, and extreme nationalist parties, such as Sheselj's Serbian Radical Party, suggested understanding that Legija offered serious analyses and justifiable critic of the work of the Government, as it was since the changes of 5 October 2000. While former saw Legija as a treat to political stability of the country, the latter obviously treated him as serious political actor. This dichotomy continued to exist and became very significant again in May 2004, after sudden surrender of Legija and his appearance on several trials where he was prime accused, including the trial for the assassination of Prime Minister Djindjic.
- 9 Ljubisa Buha Cume was himself in danger from Legija and "zemunski klan". His supply of machines for road repair was destroyed and his body guard was killed in an assassination attempt against Buha. After that, Buha left the country and his letters to Serbian press were sent from abroad. Afterwards he was given the status of informant witness in main trials against organized crime and the information which he provided helped very much clearing up of main criminal activities of "zemunski klan".
- 10 This was mostly based on his alleged negotiation with Legija on 5 October 5, when, according to these allegations Legija was given some political promises in exchange for not using violence against Milosevic's opponents. However, while Djindjic's political opponents accused him for protecting Legija, Legija and people under his control seemed to send messages to Serbian public that Djindjic is close to their own opponent, Ljubisa Buha.
- 11 Sometimes it seemed as the Government was loosing control over police and judiciary.
- 12 Milic, N. "Milic: Cume je u centralnom zatvoru" (Milic: Cume is in Central prison), Politika, 4 June, 2003.
- 13 For details about the scope and characteristics of trafficking in people as a form of organized crime in Serbia see recent survey results published in V. Nikolic-Ristanovic, S. Copic, B. Simeunovic-Patic, S. Milivojevic and B. Mihic (2004) Trafficking in people in Serbia, OSCE:Belgrade.
- 14 "Delo zemunskog klana" (Deeds of 'zemunski klan'), Politika, March 13, 2003.
- 15 "Akcija 'Sablja' u brojkama" (Action 'Sablja' in numbers), Politika, 18 May 2003.
- 16 S.Cerovic "Ciscenje i prljanje" (Cleaning and soiling), Vreme, 17 april, 2003.
- 17 "Upozorenje srpskog ministra policije"(Warning of Serbian Minister of Internal Affairs), 11 July 2003
- 18 "Cena" (Price), Vreme, 18 September 2003.
- 19 "Provera zvanicne verzije" (Checking official version), Vreme, 18 September 2003.
- 20 This is further documented in some other discussions about organized crime. For example, the presentations by police members at the round table on the implementation of the new article of Criminal code of Serbia concerning criminal offense trafficking in people, organized by Ministry of Justice, OSCE and Victimology Society of Serbia, Belgrade, 3 June, 2004.
- 21 The political crises is resumed after the change of the Government, which led to unselective criticism and rejection of the most of achievements of the former Government. Moreover, this included deepening of the criticism of police action "Sablja", political promotion of some formerly arrested people, as well as sudden appearance of Milorad Ulemek Legija, prime accused in several political assassinations and other crimes and re-creation of his image as national hero, person who "knows and will reveal the truth" against the intensification of minimisation and "demonisation" of victims/political opponents of the main ruling party.

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