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Review paper

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ALIJA IZETBEGOVIĆ AND THE MARKALE MASSACRE: MEDIA, RESPONSIBILITY, AND PUBLIC REACTION

This article investigates the Markale market massacres in Sarajevo (1994 and 1995) as defining moments of the Bosnian War, focusing on the central role of Alija Izetbegović, President of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It argues that the massacres were not only episodes of mass civilian suffering but also pivotal sites where Izetbegović's leadership intersected with contested media discourses and international diplomacy. His statements, symbolic gestures, and political positioning became crucial in framing the massacres as evidence of aggression and in mobilizing both domestic resilience and international sympathy. Drawing on media reports, political documents, and secondary scholarship, the article analyzes how narratives of victimhood, responsibility, and legitimacy were constructed around Izetbegović's role, and how these narratives influenced public perception, shaped Bosnia's international standing, and contributed to NATO's eventual intervention. By highlighting the interplay between wartime leadership, discourse, and power, the study underscores the importance of Izetbegović's agency in both the immediate crisis and its longer-term historical memory.

Keywords: Alija Izetbegović; Bosnian War; Markale massacres; political leadership; media discourse

INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

It is often claimed that war does not merely destroy lives and cities, but also produces competing discourses of power, where political authority is exercised as much through narratives of legitimacy and responsibility as through military force. Alija Izetbegović, President of the Presidency of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1992 to 1995, stood at the center of one of the most turbulent and violent conflicts in post-Cold War Europe. The Bosnian War not only brought about unprecedented destruction and loss of life but also produced a series of emblematic episodes that continue to frame historical memory and scholarly debates on accountability and political leadership. Among the most tragic and symbolically charged of these events were the Markale market massacres in Sarajevo.

The two attacks on the crowded Markale marketplace, carried out on 5 February 1994 and 28 August 1995, occurred during the prolonged Siege of Sarajevo, one of the longest sieges in modern European history (Džidić 2012). The first strike killed 68 civilians and left around 140 wounded, while the second resulted in 43 deaths and 84 injuries (Džidić 2012; Karović-Babić 2014). Both incidents shocked the besieged population and reverberated far beyond Sarajevo. They not only inflicted immense human suffering but also quickly became focal points for domestic and international media, shaping narratives of victimhood, responsibility, and legitimacy.

Controversy over attribution of responsibility followed immediately after both massacres. Competing claims from the Bosnian government, Bosnian Serb forces, and international observers highlighted the deeply politicized environment in which facts were contested and instrumentalized. The events at Markale were thus not only acts of violence but also moments of strategic communication in the broader struggle for international opinion. As such, they raised fundamental questions about the role of political leadership, including that of Izetbegović, in responding to crises where truth, representation, and accountability intersected.

For scholars, the Markale massacres remain instructive case studies of how mass atrocities become embedded in media discourse and international diplomacy. They demonstrate the ways in which civilian suffering was reported, interpreted, and framed by various actors, local and foreign, and how such framing influenced both public reactions and policy decisions, including eventual NATO intervention in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This article examines these dynamics through the lens of Izetbegović's leadership and media responses, seeking to understand how the inter-

play of violence, responsibility, and perception shaped not only wartime strategies but also post-war narratives of memory and justice.

As President of the Presidency of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Alija Izetbegović occupied a central position in both the political and symbolic life of the besieged state. His leadership during the war was marked by the dual challenge of managing internal governance under conditions of extreme scarcity and external representation in a fragmented international arena. In the context of the Markale massacres, Izetbegović was not only a national leader confronted with mass civilian casualties, but also a figure whose actions and statements were closely scrutinized by both domestic and foreign audiences.

While supporters viewed him as a statesman embodying resilience and moral authority, critics, particularly among opposing factions, often accused him of instrumentalizing tragedy for political or diplomatic leverage. This tension underscores the extent to which Izetbegović's role transcended that of a wartime head of state: he became a pivotal actor in shaping the narratives of victimhood, responsibility, and legitimacy that surrounded the Markale events. His responses, mediated through press conferences, international appeals, and symbolic gestures, reveal the interdependence between political leadership, media representation, and public reaction in moments of acute crisis.

MEDIA COVERAGE AND NARRATIVES

At the time of the first Markale massacre in February 1994, reports and images of the destruction were broadcast around the world within hours. Journalists based in Sarajevo documented the aftermath directly from the scene. Among them were two local women reporters whose accounts reflect not only the devastation but also the lasting personal impact of witnessing such violence. This rapid coverage drew immediate international attention to the Bosnian war. Scholars have pointed out that the near-instant reporting from Markale intensified the global spotlight, although some argue it was not as decisive a turning point as often claimed (Gowing 1994). The television scenes of wounded civilians carried away from the market left a deep impression on audiences and inflamed political leaders abroad. For instance, U.S. President Bill Clinton was described as being angered by the reports, which influenced him and his advisors to weigh stronger measures in Bosnia. Yet Gowing (*ibid.*) suggests that the severity of the attack itself, more than the emotional impact of television footage, was what compelled policymakers to act.

Over the past decade, both journalists and researchers have revisited how Markale was covered. Some Sarajevo reporters have described the lasting emotional burden of documenting the massacre, noting how the event remained with them for life. Analysts also stress that every February, on the anniversary of the attack, competing narratives reappear in the media. Investigative and fact-checking outlets in Bosnia highlight that even thirty years later, some publications continue to deny established facts. In 2025, for example, the Bosnian Serb news agency SRNA marked the anniversary with articles claiming the attack was “attributed to Serbs without evidence” and framing it as a “false flag operation” by Izetbegović’s government (Šehović 2025). Such narratives, which explicitly accused the Sarajevo authorities under Alija Izetbegović of staging the massacre, have been systematically challenged by regional fact-checkers including Raskrinkavanje.ba and Raskrikavanje.rs. These organizations stress that the Markale massacres are confirmed war crimes supported by legal verdicts (*ibid.*). The persistence of denial in certain media outlets shows that Markale continues to serve as a contested symbol in the struggle over memory and interpretation of the Bosnian war.

A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF WAR REPORTING OF THE MARKALE MASSACRE

A discourse analysis of war reporting requires placing media texts within their wider social and political surroundings. Scholars often describe the press as a “fourth power” (Fejzić 2007), shaping public opinion alongside political, legal, and economic systems (Luhmann 1997). Thinkers such as Eco (2010) and Morin (1983) stressed that media both reveal truth and generate distortion, providing fertile ground for pseudo-information during times of conflict. Eco argued that media exert a “formally negative impact” on society by molding needs and altering collective perception, while Hemsley et al. (2018) demonstrated how negative labeling on social platforms fosters cycles of hostility. These critiques are especially relevant when assessing war reporting, where information itself becomes a form of political capital.

Discourse analysis of media texts builds on Van Dijk’s work, which distinguishes between microstructure (lexical, syntactic, and rhetorical choices) and macrostructure (overall meaning and ideological stance). His socio-cognitive model emphasizes how mental representations of groups are shaped through language, particularly through the “WE vs. THEY” divide (Van Dijk 1988, 2009; Zilić & Olovčić 2024). Strategies include hyperbole, metaphor, euphemism, denial, omission of actors, and selective

attribution of blame. Such methods are evident in the coverage of the Markale massacres.

Oslobođenje, Sarajevo's long-running daily newspaper, operated under Bosnian government control during the war. Its coverage of the 1994 Markale massacre adopted an openly accusatory and emotionally engaged tone that reflected both the tragedy of the event and the human dimension of reporting under siege. The headline, "A horrible Chetnik massacre" (*Oslobođenje*, 6 Feb 1994, no. 16340), explicitly identified perpetrators and conveyed the collective anguish of the city. The article referred to "aggressor positions" in Mrkovići and used evocative imagery such as "Grenade in the heart of the people" and "Sarajevo's lifeline" to describe the market, thereby expressing solidarity with victims and the broader suffering of the population. By personalizing victims as "our fellow citizens" and appealing to international actors, the reporting intertwined empathy, moral clarity, and an appeal for global attention. This emotional expressiveness, rather than contradicting professionalism, illustrates the ethical and communicative complexity of wartime journalism, where conveying truth often involves both factual accuracy and sincere emotional resonance.



Figure 1: Article of "Oslobođenje", 06. 02 1994., no. 16340.

(Retrieved from <https://radiosarajevo.ba/metromahala/teme/kako-je-izgledao-izvjestaj-o-masakru-na-marakalama-granata-u-srce-naroda/405721>)

Glas Srpski, published in Banja Luka, presented a markedly different account (Figure 2). Its headline declared: “A mine placed in Markale market exploded” (*Glas Srpski*, 7 Feb 1994, no. 7247). In this phrasing, the perpetrators vanish from the narrative, a textbook example of passivation. Subsequent articles avoided direct attribution and instead introduced “questions and doubts” about the incident, opening space for alternative readings. As time passed, the reporting advanced claims that the massacre was “Muslim subterfuge” or self-inflicted violence, a message amplified through grotesque propaganda spectacles such as Risto Đogo’s puppet show in Pale. This style of coverage reflects Van Dijk’s observation that discourse can erase agency while serving to legitimize one side’s ideological stance.



Figure 2: The front page of “Glas Srpski”, February 7, 1994, No. 7247 (Retrieved from <https://www.glassrpske.com/arhiva/1994/02>)

Both *Oslobođenje* and *Glas Srpski* described the event as a massacre, yet their reporting diverged sharply in style and purpose. *Oslobođenje* emphasized horror, emotional appeal, and identification with the victims, aiming to stir outrage and draw international sympathy. *Glas Srpski*, by contrast, downplayed responsibility through omission, reframing, and later counter-accusations. In each case, media discourse operated as a political tool: one narrative sought to legitimize its side, while the other aimed to discredit opponents (Zilić & Olovčić 2024). This contrast reflects McLuhan's (2015) dictum that "the medium is the message", showing how the form and framing of reporting influenced public perception as much as the facts being conveyed.

The rise of digital media and social networks has further shaped how narratives about the Markale massacres circulate. According to the Institute for Integrated Transitions (2021), online platforms can amplify both factual accounts and emotionally charged interpretations, reaching global audiences almost instantly. Detektor.ba (2023) highlights how such amplification may broaden awareness and engagement among young audiences, while Raskrinkavanje / SeeCheck (2023) emphasizes the risks of misinformation and contested narratives. These dynamics underscore the ongoing need for careful verification and contextualization in both historical and contemporary reporting.

RESPONSIBILITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The weight of international investigations and war crimes trials has firmly established that responsibility for the Markale massacres lies with the Bosnian Serb forces besieging Sarajevo, not with Izetbegović's government. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) examined the incidents in detail across multiple proceedings. In *Prosecutor vs. Stanislav Galić* (ICTY 2003), the Tribunal concluded beyond reasonable doubt that the mortar shell which struck Markale on 5 February 1994 was deliberately fired from territory under the control of the Sarajevo-Romanija Corps (SRK) (Šehović 2025). The court dismissed as "unreasonable" the defense's suggestion that Bosnian Army forces would attack their own civilians, noting that such a claim contradicted all the "established legally relevant facts" (ibid.). The judges affirmed that the Markale attack was a deliberate strike against civilians by Serb artillery (ICTY 2003; Šehović 2025). Likewise, the second massacre on 28 August 1995 was traced to shells fired from Bosnian Serb positions north of Sarajevo (Džidić 2012).

These judgments rested on extensive evidence. For the 1994 attack alone, the Galić trial included testimony from 171 witnesses and more than 1,200 exhibits, ranging from ballistic analyses and UN reports to military records, all of which pinpointed the origin of the fatal mortar fire (Šehović 2025). The record of international law is therefore clear: the Markale massacres were atrocities carried out by Serb forces, confirmed by multiple convictions.

Accountability extended to senior leadership. Stanislav Galić was sentenced to life imprisonment for his role in directing the shelling and sniper campaign against Sarajevo, including Markale (ICTY 2003; Džidić 2012). His successor, General Dragomir Milošević, was convicted for the continuation of the campaign, which included the second Markale attack, and sentenced to 29 years (ICTY 2009; Džidić 2012). Radovan Karadžić, the political leader of the Bosnian Serbs, received a 40-year sentence in 2016 for war crimes and crimes against humanity, with the Markale attacks explicitly listed as part of the terror campaign against Sarajevo's civilians (ICTY 2016). General Ratko Mladić, the commander of Bosnian Serb forces, was also convicted and sentenced to life, with the Sarajevo atrocities, including Markale, among the charges (ICTY 2017).

A 2023 analysis summarized the evidence from The Hague, stating that the mortar that struck Markale in February 1994 originated from an SRK battery at Mrkovići, north of Sarajevo, operated by a Bosnian Serb unit. Orders, technical reports, and forensic analyses all pointed to the same conclusion (Šehović 2025). The final Galić judgment also highlighted the thorough work of local investigators, UN military observers, and international experts, whose findings converged (*ibid.*). In the words of the ICTY, quoted by a Bosnian source: “the 120 mm mortar shell fired at Markale market on 5 February 1994 was beyond a reasonable doubt deliberately launched from territory controlled by the Sarajevo-Romanija Corps” (Raskrinkavanje.ba 2018). This remains the authoritative account of responsibility.

At the time, however, international hesitation complicated the public narrative. Concerned about possible NATO retaliation and the safety of UN peacekeepers held by Serb forces, some UN leaders issued guarded statements suggesting the perpetrator might never be known (Karović-Babić 2014). Yasushi Akashi, the UN special envoy, refused to assign blame without what he deemed absolute proof and, even years later in 2011, claimed uncertainty over who fired the shell (Šehović 2025). Bosnian Serb leaders capitalized on this hesitation. Radovan Karadžić openly praised the reluctance of UN officials, boasting on Serb television: “We are satisfied that we have the United Nations, with which we arrange all these affairs” (Karović-Babić 2014). Such remarks

reveal how Serb leadership used international caution to cloud accountability and prolong doubt over established facts.

PUBLIC REACTION AND AFTERMATH

The Markale massacre provoked immediate shock and anger among the Bosnian public and leadership. By early 1994, Sarajevo had already endured nearly two years under siege, but the scale of bloodshed at Markale intensified fear and outrage. Within hours of the February 5 explosion, the Bosnian Presidency convened an extraordinary session (Karović-Babić 2014). President Izetbegović and his colleagues declared a period of mourning and, more importantly, launched urgent diplomatic efforts. Izetbegović personally sent letters to the leaders of 17 countries, as well as to the UN Secretary-General, the NATO Secretary-General, the European Union, and the CSCE, calling for action to prevent further massacres. Prime Minister Haris Silajdžić also appealed to the UN Security Council, urging it to apply “all necessary measures, including... air power” to halt the shelling of civilians (*Oslobođenje* 1994). These letters framed Markale as a moral crisis of global importance, demanding immediate intervention.

For ordinary Sarajevans, the massacre became both a moment of grief and defiance. Survivors and bystanders gathered body parts, carried the wounded, and tried to impose order amid chaos. Reports circulated of citizens bringing the remains of victims to UN offices as a grim protest meant to shame the international community for its inaction. Such gestures reflect the widespread sense that Sarajevo’s suffering was being ignored. Bosniak civilians often voiced frustration not only with the Serb forces besieging the city but also with international actors they felt had failed to stop the carnage (Karović-Babić 2014).

Globally, the February 1994 Markale attack marked a shift in the response to the Bosnian War. Images of civilians slaughtered in a Sarajevo marketplace triggered outrage across Europe and the United States. Foreign leaders condemned the attack in strong terms. Belgium’s Foreign Minister Willy Claes immediately called for NATO air strikes on Serb artillery, insisting that there was “no other way” to protect civilians (Karović-Babić 2014). UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali wrote to NATO officials, referencing Security Council resolutions and effectively authorizing consideration of air strikes. Within days, NATO issued an ultimatum to the Bosnian Serb forces: withdraw heavy weapons from around Sarajevo or face military action. Backed by the United States, France, and other NATO members, this ultima-

tum temporarily eased the siege in 1994, as some weapons were pulled back and a ceasefire took hold. Although hindered by UN–NATO “dual key” arrangements, Markale pressed Western governments toward military involvement in ways earlier atrocities had not (*ibid.*).

Even then, hesitation persisted. Some UN commanders feared reprisals against peacekeepers. General Michael Rose, the UNPROFOR commander, initially confirmed Serb responsibility for a shelling the day before Markale, but after the massacre he used more cautious language, saying the origin of the fatal shell was “impossible to determine” at that moment (*ibid.*). He later drafted a confidential memo to British officials opposing robust intervention, citing the risk to UN personnel. Yet public opinion in Europe and the United States leaned strongly in favor of action; polls indicated majorities supported air strikes if needed to protect civilians (Gowing 1994).

In the years since, Markale has remained a powerful and divisive memory. For Bosniaks, especially in Sarajevo, it stands as a symbol of suffering under siege and as an emblem of Serbian aggression against civilians. Each anniversary is marked by wreath-laying ceremonies at the market site, where a plaque lists the names of the victims (Džidić 2012). Survivors describe denial of the massacre as deeply wounding. One woman who lost her brother said: “I’m deeply offended when the murders at Markale are denied. It is tough living with that even after so many years” (Džidić 2012). Another man, bereaved in 1995, compared ongoing denial to living with an open wound constantly reopened by revisionism.

Among many Serbs in Republika Srpska and Serbia, the dominant narrative remains one of rejection or deflection. Public opinion polls and commentary show that a considerable share of Serb citizens either deny responsibility, suspect the massacre was staged by Bosniaks, or minimize its significance compared to Serb casualties. Serb officials rarely acknowledge the atrocity, and representatives from Republika Srpska have never attended commemorations in Sarajevo. Instead, nationalist media often repeat conspiracy theories on those same dates. Fact-checking groups such as Raskrinkavanje.ba respond annually with detailed refutations (Šehović 2025), while the Office of the High Representative condemns denial rhetoric as harmful to reconciliation.

Over the years, critics of Izetbegović have tried to tarnish his legacy by suggesting he orchestrated false flag operations to win sympathy abroad. These claims lack credible evidence and are contradicted by patterns of Serb attacks throughout the siege. No reputable historian or investigator has found proof of self-inflicted massacres,

while extensive documentation and judicial verdicts firmly establish the responsibility of Karadžić's forces.

CONCLUSION

The Markale market massacres of 1994 and 1995, and Alija Izetbegović's association with these events, have been examined through media accounts, scholarly research, and judicial proceedings. Coverage at the time drew global attention to the Bosnian War, as images from Markale influenced both international public opinion and debates among policymakers. Yet these same images and reports became contested territory, with propaganda and disinformation campaigns working to shift responsibility. Over the past decade, researchers and fact-checking organizations have shown how denial narratives continue to circulate, even as the weight of evidence confirms Serb responsibility (Šehović 2025).

On the matter of accountability, all credible inquiries, from UN investigations to ICTY trials, have concluded that Bosnian Serb forces carried out the attacks. Convictions of senior leaders such as Karadžić, Mladić, Galić, and Milošević have established this in the historical record. By contrast, the alternative claim that Izetbegović's side orchestrated the massacre is unsupported by evidence and regarded by scholars as a politically motivated conspiracy, firmly rejected by judicial findings (ibid.). The persistence of such theories serves as an illustration of how even well-documented crimes can be subjected to denial in the aftermath of war.

Public reaction to Markale combined grief, outrage, and demands for action. In Sarajevo, the massacres reinforced despair at the siege but also strengthened calls for international intervention. The Bosnian government, led by Izetbegović, used this moment to intensify diplomatic pressure, and the outrage abroad contributed to NATO's eventual engagement. Within Bosnia, memory of Markale remains divided. For Bosniak communities, the site is remembered in mourning and as a symbol of injustice that demands recognition. Among segments of the Serb population, however, narratives shaped by years of propaganda still dominate, producing defensiveness or outright denial.

Izetbegović's name is therefore inseparable from discussions of Markale, not because of responsibility for the crime, judicial verdicts have made that clear but because his government sought to turn the massacre into an argument for stronger global involvement. The media's role in shaping how the atrocity was perceived, the pursuit of accountability through trials, and the varied public reactions all show how narra-

tives of war are formed, challenged, and remembered. Scholars stress that defending established facts against denial is essential if historical truth is to prevail

A critical discourse analysis adds another layer to this discussion by examining how media outlets constructed meaning through their choices of language and attribution. By naming or omitting perpetrators, amplifying emotion or fostering doubt, newspapers framed Markale either as proof of Serb aggression or as grounds for suspicion toward the Bosnian government. When combined with judicial findings and survivor testimonies, such analysis demonstrates how truth and denial continue to coexist in Bosnia's contested public memory (Zilić & Olovčić 2024).

The narratives of the Markale massacres, shaped in part by Alija Izetbegović's leadership, continue to influence collective memory and interethnic relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Media representations, both traditional and digital, amplify these narratives, affecting how communities understand responsibility, victimhood, and justice. Critically examining this interplay highlights the power of leadership and storytelling in fostering or hindering dialogue. Understanding these dynamics is essential for promoting reconciliation, countering misinformation, and building a more inclusive and empathetic society.

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ALIJA IZETBEGOVIĆ I MASAKR NA MARKALAMA: MEDIJI, ODGOVORNOST I REAKCIJA JAVNOSTI

Sažetak:

Ovaj članak istražuje masakre na sarajevskoj pijaci Markale (1994. i 1995) kao presudne događaje u ratu u Bosni i Hercegovini, sa posebnim naglaskom na ulogu Alije Izetbegovića, predsjednika Predsjedništva Republike Bosne i Hercegovine. Tvrdnja rada je da ovi masakri nisu bili samo epizode masovnog stradanja civila, već i ključni trenuci u kojima se Izetbegovićevo političko vodstvo preplitalo s osporavajućim medijskim diskursima i međunarodnom diplomatijom. Njegove izjave, simbolički potezi i političko pozicioniranje postali su presudni u predstavljanju masakra kao dokaza agresije te u mobiliziranju i domaće otpornosti i međunarodne podrške. Oslanjajući se na medijske izvještaje, političke dokumente i sekundarnu literaturu, članak analizira kako su narativi o žrtvama, odgovornosti i legitimnosti građeni oko Izetbegovićeve uloge, te kako su ti narativi oblikovali percepciju javnosti, uticali na međunarodni položaj Bosne i Hercegovine te doprinijeli konačnoj NATO intervenciji. Naglašavanjem međugre ratnog vodstva, diskursa i moći studija ističe važnost Izetbegovićevo djelovanja, kako u trenutku krize, tako i u dugoročnom historijskom pamćenju.

Ključne riječi: Alija Izetbegović; rat u Bosni i Hercegovini; masakri na Markalama; političko vodstvo; medijski diskurs

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