Abstract:
This paper examines how narratives are contested during two trials at the international tribunal for former Yugoslavia. The accused on trial – Radovan Karadžić and Vojislav Šešelj – construct discourses that contest the legitimacy of the international institution while deflecting the responsibility of local actors. The indictees’ powerful narrative is picked up by major newspapers and resonates among the local population. On the one hand, the paper argues that the findings highlight the political opportunity presented by an international court, which becomes a podium that grants ‘mad men’ a chance to ‘perform,’ attain political relevance, collectivize crimes, and ridicule and exoticize the tribunal. The findings also underscore a population that has encountered political schemes, scandals, and spectacles for almost three decades and has become desensitized and tolerant of or, worse, receptive to conspiracy theories and masquerades on the part of its politicians. On the other hand, the paper argues that the two trials raise important questions about the accountability of international institutions to local populations. The evidence is based on the author’s extensive fieldwork in Serbia and Bosnia from 2010-2013, as well as a discourse analysis of the framing of the two trials by major Serbian newspapers and their audiences.