

The official commemoration of the war year 1991 in Croatia:

ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



Humanitarian Law Center Foundation

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1. Introduction

Twenty-nine years after the end of the armed conflict, the war continues to be the foundation of the Republic of Croatia. The Croatian authorities have therefore paid excessive attention to the commemoration of 1991, which is remembered in Croatia as a year of resistance to the "Greater Serbian aggression". Apart from the fact that this continues to maintain the dominant narrative, according to which Croatia and Croats are the victims and winners of the war, such a culture of memory promotes and establishes nationalist policies and power relations with ethnic "others", i.e. minority Serb communities in Croatia. Aside from memory policies, the education system in general does not offer a different narrative in the history textbooks and school visits to war-related locations that are incorporated into the curriculum. At the same time, peace initiatives do not occupy an important place in the politics of memory. Integrating the memory of peace initiatives at the higher state level would help create a society that has overcome divisions concerning the past without suppression of information, and would help overcome occasional interethnic tensions in Croatia and the region.

This study provides an analysis of how Croatia officially marked the 30th anniversary of the commencement of the war in 1991. The study provides an overview of the various anniversaries and commemorations, through which one can see the state of affairs regarding the official 2021 remembrance policy. In addition to analysing certain positive developments, this study also points to a certain backsliding and stagnation as regards certain problematic aspects which, in more or less altered forms, trace their roots to the ethno-nationalist ideas of the 1990s. Finally, this study offers recommendations for the future commemoration of the events of 1991.

The study shows that the current commemoration of the war in 1991 does not allow for a more serious departure from the dominant narrative regarding the war events and the crimes committed against the Serb population. Although the language used has been mitigated and does not contain blatant examples of ethnic nationalism, and the presence of militaristic elements in the protocols has been reduced (although veterans and soldiers still occupy a significant place in the protocol), the war was still marked inappropriately. Thus, in order to preserve the dominant narrative that the war of the 1990s is viewed

exclusively through the prism of the "Greater Serbian aggression", those aspects that indicate that the war was, at least partly, an internal or civil war are denied. Also, in the reproduction of the dominant narrative, according to which Croats assume the role of victims and Serbs the role of aggressors, already existing anti-Serb sentiments in Croatian society are still being supported, at least indirectly. This is reflected in the fact that state protocols have almost completely failed to mark the crimes committed by Croatian forces against Serb civilians since 1991. This attempt to ignore the trauma of the Serb community will continue to ghettoize that same community and thus further maintain the existing dominant ethno-nationalist narrative about the war. Also, by focusing on war events, the protocols have almost completely ignored the peace initiatives of that time. This does not give adequate space to peace as an alternative.

The study also offers recommendations: the further reduction of militaristic elements, soldiers and veterans in protocols; a greater emphasis on civilian casualties; the provision of a more important place for younger generations in the protocol; the highlighting of the importance of reconciliation; a focus on social transformations, not statehood; the abandonment of rigid definitions of the character of the war; and the official commemoration of the war crimes committed against Serb civilians.

2. The war in Croatia (1991–1995)

As part of the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), the war in Croatia began in 1991. Initially, there were minor armed clashes between rebel Croatian Serbs and Croatian special police (in Pakrac and Plitvice, in March). The situation culminated in May, when volunteers of the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) and members of the "Dušan Silni" Serb paramilitary unit in Borovo Selo near Vukovar ambushed and killed 12 Croatian policemen --m one Serb volunteer was also killed. During the summer months, the armed conflict became an open war engulfing a large part of Croatian territory within the borders of the self-proclaimed Serbian Autonomous Region (SAO) of Krajina, which was later renamed the Republika Srpska Krajina (RSK). During the summer of 1991, the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) turned from an actor establishing buffer zones between Serb rebels and the Croatian police and the newly established National Guard Corps (ZNG), to an actor who directly assisted Serb rebels. Thus the JNA at first helped the Serbian rebels by arming them, and then, soon after, in coordinating actions. At the end of August, the JNA became actively involved in the conflict, assisting the Territorial Defence (TO), RSK units and volunteers from Serbia in seizing villages and towns (mainly in the Dalmatian hinterland). From the end of August, the JNA was participating in the organisation of the siege of Vukovar; and with September began the direct artillery and air attacks, and later the attacks by tank and other units, on the city itself, as well as on Dubrovnik, Šibenik, Zadar and other Croatian towns and villages. By the end of the year, the JNA had thus assisted RSK forces in occupying large parts of Croatian territory, and accompanied the persecution and mass war crimes against non-Serbs. In Vukovar, whose defence fell in November 1991 after almost three months of siege and great destruction of the city, Serbian forces and the JNA committed mass crimes, most notably the liquidation of prisoners at Ovčara two days after their surrender. Along with Vukovar and Ovčara, mass crimes were committed against non-Serb populations throughout Croatia – in Baćin, Dalj, Dubrovnik, Joševica, Saborsko, Široka Kula, Škabrnja, Tordinci, Tovarnik, Voćin, to name some of the larger ones.

As the partition lines settled, a ceasefire was signed between the belligerent parties in January 1992, and Croatia was soon internationally recognized. In the following months, UN forces came to Croatia to maintain peace in the warring area and to enable the return of the non-Serb population -- which did not happen. This war brought into a state of permanent uncertain peace -- with occasional artillery fire from both sides and limited military operations from the Croatian side aimed at capturing strategically important locations -- with the Battle of the Miljevci Plateau in June 1992, Operation "Pirate" in January 1993, and the Operation "Medak Pocket" in September 1993. The war entered its final phase after the RSK leadership rejected Plan Z4¹, a peace agreement by which the international community envisaged the integration of the occupied territories into the Republic of Croatia, while granting very broad political autonomy to the Serb community in part of the then Krajina. Very soon, in May 1995, Croatia launched Operation "Flash", which brought Western Slavonia under control. After that, in August, it launched its largest operation, "Storm", which brought under control the rest of the territory of the RSK, except for the territory in Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Srijem. With the end of "Storm", the open war in Croatia practically stopped. Croatian forces were now fully transferred to Western Bosnia (in accordance with the Split Agreement between Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina), while the demarcation line between Croatian forces and the remaining Krajina forces in Eastern Slavonia was calm. These final operations culminated in the Dayton Peace Accords, which ended the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In parallel, under UN auspices, the warring parties in Croatia signed a memorandum of understanding in November 1995, the Erdut Peace Agreement, which officially ended the war in Croatia. This agreement stipulated the return of the territory of Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Srijem (Syrmia) to the Republic of Croatia through a two-year interim UN administration.

In addition to the numerous crimes committed by the JNA, TO, RSK forces and paramilitary units from Serbia, the Croatian forces -- ZNG, Croatian Army (HV) and special police units -- also committed numerous crimes against Serb civilians and prisoners of war.

1 The Croatian side also viewed the proposal as unacceptable and contrary to the constitutional framework, but did not publicly completely reject this plan, noting that it could be the starting point for further negotiations on the peace terms. See: Nikica Barić, *Serbian Rebellion in Croatia, 1990-1995*. (Zagreb: Golden marketing -- technical book, 2005), 475.

The crimes in Karlovac, Sisak, Osijek, Gospić, Paulin Dvor, Pakrac, Pakrac, Pakrac Poljana and Vukovar committed during 1991², and at the Lora, Kuline and Kerestinec prisons in 1992, must be singled out. Also, there were crimes in the form of mass destruction, arson, looting and liquidation of civilians recorded during and immediately after the larger Croat operations of "Medak Pocket", "Flash" and "Storm", in 1993 and 1995.

2 For more on these crimes against Serb civilians and prisoners of war, see: Tihomir Ponoš, "Sisak 1990–1991: War Crimes Against Serbs", *Traces: Journal of Serbian and Croatian Topics* 3, no. 2 (2020): 7–72; Serb National Council, "Koranski most", *Serb National Council*, <https://snv.hr/zlocini/koranski-most/>; Miren Špek, "Characteristic objects that marked the decade", in *The Prosecution of War Crimes – Guarantee of the Process of Dealing with the Past in Croatia*, ed. Vesna Teršelić and Maja Dubljević (Zagreb: Documenta, 2014), 159–89; Mladen Stojanović, "Characteristic Examples of War Crimes Trials", in *War Crimes Prosecution – Guarantee of the Process of Dealing with the Past in Croatia*, ed. Vesna Teršelić and Maja Dubljević (Zagreb: Documenta, 2014), 65–76; Serbian National Council, "Commemoration held in Jeminovac, Pupovac: 'Autumn of 1991 was terrible. Both for Croats and Serbs'", *Serb National Council*, <https://snv.hr/odrzana-komemoracija-u-jeminovcu/>; Serb National Council, "Vukovar", *Serb National Council*, <https://snv.hr/zlocini/vukovar/>.

3. The official memory policies in Croatia

The war of the 1990s in Croatia was officially called *The Homeland War*/"The Homeland War", and is considered the most important foundation of Croatian statehood, owing to the fact that the acts of secession from the SFRY and international recognition occurred during its duration. Because of this, in public discourse and memory policies, the Homeland War has the structure of a state-building myth. As a political myth, the myth of the Homeland War relies in large part on facts related to war events that pointed to the emergence of a "Greater Serbia" political programme supported, organized and partly coordinated by the then Serbian President Slobodan Milošević and the rest of the Serbian leadership. This myth also includes facts that point to an act of international aggression, or at least to the role of Serbia and Yugoslavia in such an act, through the agency of the JNA and State Security Service (SDB), both by their direct engagement, and by their equipping and training Serbian rebels and paramilitary units from Serbia. The dominant narrative of the Homeland War portrays the war as a "Greater Serbian aggression", which the Croatian people resisted, liberating occupied territory and winning victory in 1995. In this sense, the Homeland War is seen as an exclusively defensive war of liberation, in which Croatia and the Croats are both the victims and the winners. The fall of Vukovar stands out as a symbol of sacrifice, and as a symbol of victory, of the "Storm" liberation operation. This dominant narrative, widely accepted since the end of the war, was built principally by the dominant Croatian party – the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), and by the Catholic Church, mainstream media and veteran³ associations. After years of reproducing this myth, almost the entire political establishment have eventually accepted it and turned it

3 Croatian veterans are officially and colloquially called *defenders*, which is also based on the interpretation of the war of the 1990s as a defensive armed conflict. See: Sven Milekić, "A Protest, Coup d'État, or Internal Party Power Struggle: What Motivated Croatian War Veterans to Hit the Streets?", *Politička misao* 59, no. 4 (2022): 220.

into an official narrative, with the Croatian Parliament adopting the Declaration on the Homeland War in 2000.⁴ With the declaration and subsequent incorporation of some elements of this narrative into the amendments to the Constitution in 2010, the dominant narrative of the Homeland War was consolidated.

However, what makes this dominant narrative a myth is its one-dimensionality or flatness, and the "erasure" of elements less conducive to it – of anything that could jeopardize or cast doubt on the dominant narrative of the war, according to which Croatia and the Croats were the exclusive victims and winners of this armed conflict. One of the things that the dominant narrative denies, or at least ignores, is the element of civil war or internal conflict. Thus, the exclusive focus on "Greater Serbian aggression" ignores the fact that Croatia had been part of the SFRY at least until October 8, 1991⁵, when the Croatian Parliament made a decision to sever all state and legal ties with the SFRY.⁶ In this sense, the war can be seen as a civil or at least internal conflict within the SFRY. Likewise, throughout the war, the Croatian authorities fought against units of Croatian Serbs, i.e. the resident population. Although the role of Serbian and federal political, military and intelligence authorities

- 4 The Declaration on the Homeland War was adopted in a specific socio-political context in 2000. Due to the beginning of the prosecution of Croatian war crimes suspects, numerous veterans' associations and groups, with the support of right-wing opposition parties, protested against the "criminalization" or attack on the "dignity" of the Homeland War. The coalition government, led by the Social Democratic Party of Croatia (SDP), tried to achieve some kind of political consensus around the war in the 1990s by reaffirming the existing war narrative. For the Declaration on the Homeland War, see: House of Representatives of the Croatian State Parliament, "Declaration on the Homeland War", *Official Gazette*, 17 October 2000, https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2000_10_102_1987.html; for the socio-political context in which the Declaration was adopted, see: Snježana Koren, "'Useful past'? Wars of the 1990s in the Declarations of the Croatian Parliament", in *Culture of Remembrance: 1991 Historical fractures and overcoming the past*, ed. Tihomir Cipek (Zagreb: Disput, 2011), 123–55.
- 5 According to some interpretations, this date can also be considered January 15, 1992, when Croatia was internationally recognized. See: Žarko Ivković, "Was the Homeland War also civil? Are Ustasha and Partisan crimes equal?", *Večernji list*, November 2, 2019, <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/je-li-domovinski-rat-bio-i-granski-jesu-li-ustaski-i-partizanski-zlocini-jednaki-1356611>.
- 6 Croatian courts occupy an identical position to the application of the Geneva Conventions. Thus, in January 2015, the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Croatia quashed the final verdict of the Supreme Court against Branimir Glavaš for war crimes committed against Serb civilians in Osijek in 1991–1992. The Constitutional Court found that the Supreme Court should have applied the Additional Protocol of the Geneva Convention on the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts only for circumstances until October 8, 1991. In the opinion of the Constitutional Court, the Supreme Court should have applied the Additional Protocol of the Geneva Convention on the Protection of victims of international conflicts to all circumstances after 8 October 1991. See: Petar Vidov, "Glavaš: All segments of my war crimes conviction have been abolished", *Faktograf*, 2 August 2016, <https://faktograf.hr/2016/08/02/branimir-glavas-sud-ratni-zlocin/>.

is indisputable, the fact is that a part of the Croatian citizenry took up arms against the central authorities.⁷ Likewise, after aid from Yugoslavia and Serbia weakened in 1994 and 1995, the RSK authorities were left to fend for themselves in the war against Croatia. At that moment, the armed conflict was again predominantly internal, between Croatian Serbs and the central authorities, which resulted in the successful "Flash" and "Storm" operations. Denying this aspect of the war is the consequence of several factors. Firstly, this in a certain way denies the civil status of Croatian Serbs, who are thus exclusively portrayed as "aggressors", as persons attacking a state foreign to them. Secondly, from the position of ontological certainty⁸, the interpretation of the war as partly civil (or internal) could jeopardize this self-conception of a defensive war, which provokes emotional reactions. In the dominant perception, the interpretation of the war as an international aggression is necessary because it much more clearly establishes the dichotomy of victim-perpetrator (aggressor, criminal) than civil war.⁹ Thirdly, also from the aspect of ontological security, the dominant narrative is focused on international aggression, because it is believed that only thus can Croatia establish its position as a victim and establish its sovereignty as a state which had existed before the aggression. Finally, the main problem with the acceptance of civil war elements arises on account of a binary understanding of the character of war: either the war is seen as the result of an international aggression or as a civil war. Of course,

7 As a result, Croatian Serbs were charged with the crime of armed rebellion, for which they were abolished in the 1996 Law on General Amnesty. See: House of Representatives of the Parliament of the Republic of Croatia, "Law on General Amnesty", *Official Gazette*, 27 September 1996, https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/1996_09_80_1390.html.

8 Ontological security represents the need to realize the predictability and completeness of one's existence without change with the passage of time, which is realized through routinised relationships with others. In the context of states in international relations, states attach great importance to ontological security, that is, the maintenance of their own identity, which sometimes goes to their own detriment – such as when states insist on not resolving a certain conflict with another state because it builds a national identity. See: Jennifer Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma", *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no. 3 (2006): 341–70.

9 The fact that an armed conflict has the character of a civil war is not associated with the eventual responsibility for starting the war. For example, historians have long ago attributed the greatest responsibility for the launch of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), as well as mass terror during and after the conflict, to Francisco Franco. Paul Preston, *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 2012).

it is possible that the armed conflict has the character of an internationalized civil war and that it contains equal elements of both ideal-types.¹⁰

Another element ignored or denied in the dominant interpretation of the 1990s war is Croatia's role in the armed conflict in neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina. Thus, public memory at the state level has emphasized the role of Croatia in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1992 and 1994–1995, when Croatia assisted the Bosnian-Herzegovinian authorities in the fight against the Army of Republika Srpska (VRS) and the JNA. It has also highlighted Croatia's positive role in hosting a large number of Bosniak refugees, and in helping to arm the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina (ABiH) at a certain period. In doing so, Croatia institutionally cares for veterans of the Croatian Defence Council (HVO),¹¹ i.e. the armed forces of the self-proclaimed Croatian Republic of Herzeg-Bosnia¹², although both were established outside the state institutions of internationally recognized Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹³ In addition to the fact that Herzeg-Bosnia was as illegal a parastatal creation as the RSK, the HVO, with the logistical and direct military assistance of the HV, fought against the ABiH and committed numerous including mass war crimes against Bosniak civilians and prisoners of war. As established by multiple verdicts before the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), Croatia played an active role in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina during 1993, when crimes were committed for the purpose of the ethnic cleansing of Herzeg-Bosnia, which would later be either annexed to Croatia or join a narrow confederation with it. Discussion of this Bosniak-Croat armed conflict, which lasted from late 1992 to early 1994, was almost

10 The Spanish Civil War is again a good example, where Franco enjoyed direct military aid from Germany and Italy, as the Republicans did from the Soviet Union. Also, Mirjana Kasapović wrote about similar political disagreements that exist regarding the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992–1995). See: Mirjana Kasapović, "Bosnia and Herzegovina 1992–1995: Civil War, External Aggression, or Both?", *Political Thought* 52, No. 2 (2015): 37–61.

11 For example, in January 2021, the President of the Republic of Croatia Zoran Milanović awarded decorations to several HVO units. See: Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia, "The President of the Republic presented decorations to retired Generals of the Croatian Army and units of the HVO and the Special Police of the Ministry of the Interior of the Croatian Army", *Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia*, 15 January 2021, <https://www.predsjednik.hr/vijesti/predsjednik-republike-urucio-odlikovanja-umirovljenim-generalima-hv-a-i-postrojbama-hvo-a-i-specijalne-policije-mup-a-hr-hb/>.

12 In November 1991, political representatives of Bosnian Croats, controlled by the Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (HDZ BiH), proclaimed the Croatian Community of Herzeg-Bosnia. It was renamed the Croatian Republic of Herzeg-Bosnia in August 1993.

13 The Republic of Croatia also recognized Bosnia and Herzegovina in April 1992.

completely ignored or banned by¹⁴ political representatives of the Republic of Croatia, except for a few exceptions.¹⁵ The recognition of Croatia's role in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina would go against the interpretation of Croatia as an exclusive victim of the war in the 1990s, and link it to international aggression.

And finally, the dominant narrative ignores or trivialises the facts related to war crimes committed by Croatian forces. Whilst on the one hand the official memory is built on mass war crimes that were planned and organized by the state organs of SFRY and Serbia, on the other hand it is claimed that crimes committed by Croatian forces were isolated and individual incidents that had not been previously planned by the political and military leadership of the Republic of Croatia. Even when these crimes were committed following orders from and-or with the knowledge of the command, as in the case of crimes in Sisak and Osijek, these events are described as excesses. Although, for example, crimes against Serb civilians in Gospić in 1991 were committed on the orders of the local military and political leadership, the Government and President Tudjman were informed about them shortly after their commission. Apart from not stopping the crimes in time, they did nothing to prosecute the perpetrators.¹⁶ Likewise, war crimes – murder, looting, arson and destruction of property – during and particularly after the Operations “Flash” and “Storm” are claimed to be incidental situations, which were not planned or organised at a higher

14 That is how it is in November 2017. The Croatian Parliament, at the initiative of the ruling HDZ, held a minute's silence for "all civilians killed, killed and missing Croatian defenders, as well as all victims of war crimes in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina" on the occasion of the suicide of Slobodan Praljak during the sentencing of him and the political and military leadership of Herzeg-Bosnia in the *Prlić et al. case*. In addition to highlighting The Croatian victims in the first place, Parliament Speaker Gordan Jandroković and Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, before a minute's silence, clearly labelled the verdict as a moral injustice and Praljak as a victim, while denying established facts pointing to mass crimes committed against Bosniaks by the HVO. See: Hina, "SABOR A minute of silence for Praljak", *Nacional*, 30. 11. 2017, <https://www.nacional.hr/sabor-minuta-sutnje-za-praljka/>.

15 In April 2010, The President of the Republic of Croatia Ivo Josipovic participated in the commemoration of the victims from Ahmići, a village near Vitez, where in April 1993 the HVO military police killed 116 Bosniak civilians. See: Marija Arnaudović and Tina Jelin, "Josipovic bowed to Bosniak victims in Ahmići", *Radio Free Europe*, April 15, 2010, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/josipovic-bih-ahmici-posjeta/2012751.html>.

16 The trial of the so-called "Gospić Group", led by General Mirko Norac, began only in 2001 due to the pressure from the ICTY as part of Croatia's efforts to open the EU accession negotiations. For the prosecution of Norac and the "Gospić Group" and the beginning of cooperation on the prosecution (and attempts to prosecute) the crimes of the 2000s, see: Vjeran Pavlaković, "Better grave than slave: Croatia and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia", to *Croatia from independence: War, Politics, Society, Foreign Relations*, ed. Sabrina P. Ramet, Konrad Clewing and Reneo Lukić (Zagreb: Golden marketing – Tehnička knjiga, 2013), 295–317.

level, but were the work of individual unknown perpetrators, or because of a desire for revenge or self-interest, which the central authorities could not prevent.¹⁷ An eventual recognition that some of the crimes were planned and had the purpose of causing fear in the Serb population would be a blow to the interpretation of Croatia as solely a victim, as well as acknowledgment of its real role in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

17 Although Croatian officials admitted in the following years that numerous crimes had taken place and even commemorated them, the interpretation that they were an excess, without planning at a higher state level, remained.

4. Marking the 30th anniversary of the beginning of the war in Croatia

State institutions (the Government, the Ministry of Croatian Defenders, the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Croatia, the Ministry of the Interior, the Croatian Parliament, the Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia) dedicated all of 2021 to marking the 30 years since the beginning of the war in Croatia.¹⁸ This included marking the significant battles, clashes, liberations, surrenders, sufferings, war crimes and establishment of military units throughout almost the entire year.¹⁹ In total, 64 different events of 1991 were commemorated at a high state level, with those events carrying greater public significance marked in several different ceremonies. Some of these important events from 1991 are the so-called "Bloody Easter", a skirmish between the Croatian special police and Serbian rebels in Plitvice on March 31, where policeman Josip Jović (considered the first "Croatian defender" killed in the war)²⁰ and rebel Rajko Vukadinović were both killed; a skirmish in Borovo Selo on May 2, in which 12 Croatian policemen and three Serb rebels were killed,

18 According to some interpretations, the war began in 1990, with the so-called "Log Revolution", when armed rebel Serbs blocked roads in the Dalmatian hinterland, thus starting a Serbian rebellion in Croatia. This same date is taken as the starting date from which veteran status can be acquired if the individual was a member of police units. Nevertheless, it is a historiographical and political consensus that the war began in 1991, with the cases of the first clashes in Pakrac and Plitvice in March.

19 Events are marked in various ways, such as commemorations, unveiling of monuments, interviews with veterans and representatives of victims, awarding medals to deserving individuals for works from the war, organizing academic symposia, exhibitions, film screenings, marathons, sports competitions, police skills competitions.

20 Although Jović is commemorated as the first defender killed, in November 1990, Croatian policeman Goran Alavanja was killed by Serb rebels. Given his ethnic Serb background and documents pointing to his closeness to Serbian rebel authorities, Alavanja is not considered a Croatian defender – although posthumously, under the law, he has that status. See: Ilija Vučur, "The Death of Goran Alavanja 23 November 1990: Event, Interpretations, Manipulations", *Journal of Contemporary History* 49, No. 3 (2017): 587–607.

which many consider to be the beginning of an open war; the day when the ZNG was founded and lined up in Zagreb on May 28. The central place in the commemoration of the 30th anniversary of the beginning of the war was occupied by the commemoration of the defence and fall of Vukovar, with various ceremonial activities that started from August – when the attack on the city was launched in 1991 – until November 18, when the defence of the city collapsed.²¹

There was a certain discrepancy between the speeches given by government officials (PM, Vice-PM and ministers), the President of the Republic and local political officials (mayors, chiefs, prefects). While everyone mostly emphasized the perspective of the war as something that had brought freedom, in order to found a state that is today a prosperous member of the EU and NATO, President Zoran Milanović nevertheless emphasized the importance of the army and defenders, underscoring their sacrifice. At the same time, government officials emphasized reconciliation, peace and coexistence in the Croatian democracy, which respects human rights²², while local officials often directed their rhetoric towards local circumstances, in partial alignment with the government's discourse. In this sense, the war was being celebrated because it resulted in an independent state, but at the same time peace and coexistence in a modern and developed European state were also being invoked. Young people were called to memorialise the war, both as a responsibility

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- 21 In 2019, the current Government proposed and the Parliament voted to amend the Law on Holidays, Memorial Days and Non-Working Days in the Republic of Croatia, on the basis of which November 18 was declared a public non-working holiday called the Day of Remembrance of the Victims of the Homeland War and the Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Vukovar and Škabrnja. See: Croatian Parliament, "Law on Holidays, Memorials and Non-Working Days in the Republic of Croatia", *Official Gazette*, November 15, 2019, https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2019_11_110_2212.html.
- 22 Government of the Republic of Croatia, "We remember with gratitude the Croatian defenders who stood in the defence of Croatia 30 years ago in Pakrac", *Government of the Republic of Croatia*, March 2, 2021, <https://vlada.gov.hr/vijesti/sa-zahvalnoscu-se-prisjecamo-hrvatskih-branitelja-koji-su-prije-30-godina-u-pakracu-stali-u-obranu-hrvatske/31590>; Ministry of Croatian Defenders, "30th anniversary of the suffering of Dabar locals", *Ministry of Croatian Veterans*, 21 November 2021, <https://branitelji.gov.hr/vijesti/obiljezena-30-obljetnica-stradavanja-mjestana-dabra/3974>.

which was the price for freedom, and as a warning that it must never happen again.²³ Although many of these commemorations were in a victorious spirit, yet the war was not celebrated militaristically to the extent that it had been in previous years.

What is more, these markers were used to position officials against their political opponents and win the support of voters. In their open political conflict, government officials and, in particular, President Milanović, used speeches to confront and deal with each other.²⁴ In so doing, Milanović often tried to win the attention of the military (about whom he has been in conflict with the Government) and veterans, passing himself off as one who cares and understands their needs, desires and frustrations. He also shifted the focus to the Serb community in Croatia, i.e. the Independent Democratic Serb Party (SDSS), a coalition partner in the HDZ government, on which he wanted to inflict political damage.

4.1. The central position of veterans

In commemorating the events of 1991, a significant place is given to soldiers and policemen who participated in the defence of the state, both groups being considered defenders.

23 The Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia, "President Milanović at the marking of the 120th Brigade of the Croatian Army in Sisak: We want peace, freedom, security and good relations with neighbours", *Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia*, 1 September 2021, <https://www.predsjesnik.hr/vijesti/predsjesnik-milanovic-na-obiljezavanju-ustrojavanja-120-brigade-hv-a-u-sisku-zelimo-mir-slobodu-sigurnost-i-dobre-odnose-sa-susjedima/>; Ministry of Croatian Defenders, "Marked 30th Anniversary of the Death of the Youngest Victim in the Homeland War", *Ministry of Croatian Veterans*, September 26, 2021, <https://branitelj.gov.hr/vijesti/obiljezana-30-obljetnica-pogibije-najmladje-zrtve-u-domovinskom-ratu/3939>; Ministry of Croatian Defenders, "30th Anniversary of the Battle of Vukovar Solemnly Commemorated", *Ministry of Croatian Defenders*, 18 September 2021, <https://branitelj.gov.hr/vijesti/svecano-obiljezana-30-obljetnica-bitke-za-vukovar/3933>; Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Croatia, "30th Anniversary of the Suffering of Škabrnja Marked", *Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Croatia*, 18 November 2021, <https://morh.gov.hr/vijesti/obiljezana-30-godisnjica-stradanja-skabrnje/10186>.

24 Although outside the official protocol, in talks with media representatives, Prime Minister Plenković accused President Milanović of politicizing the army. See: Government of the Republic of Croatia, "Plenković on the anniversary of the founding of the 3rd Guards Brigade 'Kuna': If it were not for their sacrifice, there would be no Croatian freedom", *Government of the Republic of Croatia*, 29 April 2021, <https://vlada.gov.hr/vijesti/plenkovic-na-obljetnici-osnutka-3-gardijske-brigade-kune-da-nije-bilo-njihove-zrtve-ne-bi-bilo-hrvatske-slobode/31995>; Defence Minister Mario Banožić said during the commemoration of the fall of Vukovar that the war of the 1990s could not be a basis for political action. See: Government of the Republic of Croatia, "Banožić: The Homeland War Cannot Be a Basis for Political Activity", *Government of the Republic of Croatia*, 18 November 2021, <https://vlada.gov.hr/vijesti/banozic-domovinski-rat-ne-moze-biti-podloga-za-politicko-djelovanje/33400>.

Thus, out of a total of 64 events listed earlier, senior state officials marked a total of 28 anniversaries of the establishment of different branches of the army and police and military units. As Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, President Milanović paid special attention to the anniversaries of the ZNG, HV and special police units. Thus, he personally attended the commemoration or received representatives of as many as 19 units and several veteran associations.²⁵ President Milanović also marked the establishment of the Croatian Army, Land Army, Air Force and Navy, and met with representatives of the Association of Veterans and Veterans of the Military Police from the Homeland War to mark 30 years since the establishment of the military police. During these and other occasions, President Milanović decorated entire units and numerous other retired commanders.

All anniversaries of the events of 1991, and other events from the war of the 1990s, have been militarised²⁶, in the sense that they are organised according to military protocols.²⁷

25 Milanovic also attended the celebration of the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the Kijevo Police Station in April 1991, which soon found itself in the JNA's encirclement. See: Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia, "President Milanović at the celebration of the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the Kijevo Police Station", *Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia*, 28 April 2021, <https://www.predsjednik.hr/vijesti/predsjednik-milanovic-na-obiljezavanju-30-obljetnice-uspostave-policijske-postaje-kijevo/>.

26 Commemorations of public holidays and events from the war trace their roots back to the 1990s. Thus, five years of Croatian statehood (marking the constitution of the first multiparty Parliament and the formation of the Government from 1990) were marked with a large military parade at Zagreb's Jarun Lake. The parade took place in the context of renewed conflicts in Croatia in 1995, just four weeks after the successful Operation Flash. According to the ceremony's director, Krešimir Dolenčić, the parade served as a demonstration of military force ahead of the final liberating action "Storm", only two months later. See: Iva Rebac, "This was the prelude to Operation Storm: Croatia showed all its military power at Jarun in 1995", *24 sata*, 30 May 2021, <https://www.24sata.hr/news/to-je-bio-uvod-u-akciju-olujna-hrvatska-je-na-jarunu-te-1995-pokazala-svu-svoju-vojsku-moc-764874>; The culmination of the militaristic commemoration of the events of the war in the recent period is a large military parade organized on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of "Storm". The parade at the time was organised in the centre of Zagreb, where military forces marched along the Street of the City of Vukovar. The parade was organised in the context of a pre-election competition between the ruling coalition and HDZ, a months-long veteran protest in front of the ministry and an open conflict between Prime Minister Zoran Milanović and President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović. In this sense, the parade in Zagreb, advocated by the Government, was used in a political competition with the opposition and the president, who advocated the traditional ceremony in Knin. The parade represented an attempt by centrist and Social Democratic parties to gain a monopoly over the nationalist politics of memory. See: Zeljavaljbi, "Ceremonial parade on the occasion of 20th anniversary of Operation Storm (04.08.2015.)_complete TV broadcast", *YouTube*, 25. 9. 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GIV0GJR6YCc>. In the same year, after the military parade in Zagreb, nationalist and right-wing outbursts, hate speech and display of Ustasha symbols marked the celebration of 20 years of "Storm" in Knin. See: Sven Milekić, "From Bleiburg to Knin", *News*, 10. 8. 2015, <https://www.portalnovosti.com/od-bleiburga-do-knina>.

27 In addition to military protocol, all events marked at the high state level included a religious ceremony, usually in the form of Holy Mass and sermons within the Roman Catholic Church.

In these protocols, along with state officials, the central place is occupied by parades of war flags and soldiers, honorary armed guards, and demonstration exercises by military and special police units, in the presence of members of military and police units that participated in this particular event.²⁸ During the commemoration of the establishment of military and police units, in conversations with veterans and commemorating the establishment of different branches of the military, top state officials spoke of their merits with the utmost respect. Thus, according to President Milanovic, the Croatian Army is most responsible for the fact that the Croatian dream was realised with full independence.²⁹ Heroic intonations have accompanied the commemoration of events, so veterans (defenders) have been seen as heroes --as those who "defended and liberated" Croatia with their own blood.³⁰ In addition to the defenders being the personification of victory, they also symbolise the sacrifice they made for the freedom and independence

- 28 The militarization of the protocol was also seen in the choice of musical bands. Thus, to mark the 30th anniversary of the Battle of Vukovar – organized by the Ministries of Croatian Veterans, Defence and Interior, in cooperation with the local county and city authorities – General Danger was chosen, a band formed by local veterans during the war and that plays patriotic songs with war themes. See: Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Croatia, "Program marking the 30th anniversary of the Battle of Vukovar", *Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Croatia*, 14 September 2021, <https://www.morh.hr/program-obilježavanja-30-obljetnice-bitke-za-vukovar/>.
- 29 Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia, "President Milanović: The Croatian Army has enabled the Croatian Dream to finally be realized in full independence", *Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia*, 28 May 2021, <https://www.predsjednik.hr/vijesti/predsjednik-milanovic-hrvatska-vojska-je-omogucila-da-se-hrvatski-san-konacno-ostvari-u-punoj-neovisnosti/>.
- 30 Paying freedom dearly and in "blood", fighting "in fire and sword, hell of battle" were a common motive in commemorating the events of 1991. See: Ministry of Croatian Defenders, "The 30th anniversary of the 83rd Independent Zagreb Volunteer Battalion of the Croatian Army was marked", *Ministry of Croatian Veterans*, October 11, 2021, <https://branitelj.gov.hr/vijesti/obiljezena-je-30-godisnjica-83-samostalnog-zagrebackog-dobrovoljackog-bataljuna-hv-a/3946>; Ministry of Croatian Defenders, "30th anniversary of the suffering of the locals of Široki Kula and surrounding towns", *Ministry of Croatian Veterans' Affairs*, October 13, 2021, <https://branitelj.gov.hr/vijesti/30-obljetnica-stradavanja-mjestana-siroke-kule-i-okolnih-mjesta/3949>; Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia, "President Milanović: Croatia can be calm because it is guarded by the Croatian Army", *Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia*, 28 May 2021, <https://www.predsjednik.hr/vijesti/predsjednik-milanovic-hrvatska-moze-biti-mirna-jer-je-cuva-hrvatska-vojska/>; Government of the Republic of Croatia, "The Croatian Army has been and remains a guarantor of the security and stability of the Croatian state and a steadfast guardian of our people", *Government of the Republic of Croatia*, 28 May 2021, <https://vlada.gov.hr/vijesti/hrvatska-vojska-bila-je-i-ostaje-jamac-sigurnosti-i-stabilnosti-hrvatske-drzave-i-postojan-cuvar-nasega-naroda/32220>; Ministry of Croatian Defenders, "Minister Medved with a mother of a killed defender unveils memorial to Croatian defenders in Josipdol", *Ministry of Croatian Veterans*, July 23, 2021, <https://branitelj.gov.hr/vijesti/ministar-medved-s-majkom-poginulog-branitelja-otkrio-spomen-obiljezje-hrvatskim-braniteljima-u-josipdolu/3910>.

of Croatia.³¹ Along these lines, the Government marked the Battle of Vukovar for the first time at a high level in 2021 (in September, the month in which the JNA's fierce attacks on the city began), and not just the decline in the city's defences, traditionally commemorated in November.³²

Protocolar events started in March 2021, with marking the first armed clash between the Croatian police and Serb rebels was marked in Pakrac. There, Prime Minister Andrej Plenković gave a central speech, in which he put a special emphasis on the gratitude that Croatia felt for its defenders and their sacrifice.³³ The sacrifice of the defenders was particularly emphasised in the commemoration of the death of police officer Jović at Plitvice in March 1991 - he is considered to be the first defender killed in the war.³⁴ At the commemoration, President of the Republic of Croatia Milanović spoke of "courage bordering on madness", and the defenders during this action at Plitvice were portrayed as a few ill-equipped non-professionals, inept with weapons, who stood up against an

31 The Government of the Republic of Croatia, "The sacrifice of Croatian defenders has given freedom, pride and the state, and it is up to us to cherish and strengthen it", *Government of the Republic of Croatia*, 28 May 2021, <https://vlada.gov.hr/vijesti/zrtva-hrvatskih-branitelja-dala-je-slobodu-ponos-i-drzavu-a-na-nama-je-da-je-njegujemo-i-jacamo/3221>; Ministry of Croatian Defenders, "30th anniversary of the murder of 12 Croatian police officers in Borovo Selo marked", *Ministry of Croatian Veterans*, 2 May 2021, <https://branitelji.gov.hr/vijesti/obiljezana-30-obljetnica-ubojstva-12-hrvatskih-redarstvenika-u-borovu-selu/3873>; This simultaneous status of winner and victim is the way in which Croatia's position from the 1990s has been interpreted in Croatian memory policy. In Croatia, in the 1990s, a narrative was constructed according to which Croatia was a victim of "Greater Serbian aggression", from which it defended itself and liberated itself with its own forces – although Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Srijem were returned with the help of the UN provisional authorities. In this sense, Croatia is the only post-Yugoslav state in which such a narrative was constructed. See: Dejan Jović, *War and Myth: Identity Politics in Contemporary Croatia* (Zagreb: Fraktura, 2017), 36–7.

32 The Government of the Republic of Croatia, "The Heroic Battle for Vukovar is a pledge and inspiration for the future facing Croatia", *Government of the Republic of Croatia*, 18 September 2021, <https://vlada.gov.hr/vijesti/herojska-bitka-za-vukovar-zalog-je-i-nadahnuce-buducnosti-okrenutoj-hrvatskoj/32965>.

33 The Government of the Republic of Croatia, "We remember with gratitude the Croatian defenders".

34 In addition to Jović's dangers, the individual dangers of two defenders (soldiers from the war) were commemorated at a high level. The first is one of the commanders of the Defence of Vukovar Blago Zadro, who was killed in the fighting near Trpinjska Cesta Road in October 1991. The other is JNA's pilot Rudolf Perešin, who defected to Austria with a Yugoslav "Mig" aircraft in order not to avoid warring against in Croatia. He was killed during the 'Flash' Operation in May 1995. See: Government of the Republic of Croatia, "Medved and Banožić at the celebration of the 30th anniversary of the death of Major General Blago Zadro", *Government of the Republic of Croatia*, 16 October 2021, <https://vlada.gov.hr/vijesti/medved-i-banozic-na-obiljezavanju-30-obljetnice-pogibije-general-bojnika-blage-zadre/33180>; Government of the Republic of Croatia, "We are eternally grateful to Rudolf Perešin for the heroism and sacrifice he made for our homeland", *Government of the Republic of Croatia*, 25 October 2021, <https://vlada.gov.hr/vijesti/vjecno-smo-zahvalni-rudolfu-peresinu-na-herojstvu-i-zrtvi-koju-je-podnio-za-nasu-domovinu/33227>.

overwhelming enemy.³⁵ Milanović used similar rhetoric about the defenders' courage bordering on madness in April, to mark the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the Kijevo³⁶ police station and the establishment of the "Kuna" 3rd Guards Brigade in Vinkovci³⁷. Defenders were in the focus of commemorations and marking events from the war at high state level (with the almost regular presence of Milanović), and the statesmen/politicians/functionaries often emphasised that they would treat veterans with dignity and continue to cater for them.³⁸ The importance of veterans and state concern for them was linked to Croatian defence policy today, investing in the modernisation and equipping of the army, as well as the participation of the Croatian armed forces in international missions.³⁹

Such speeches have shown how the past can be used for the purpose of promoting goals in the present and the future. In particular, such speeches have been important for legitimising investments in the military, defence and security systems, which includes the acquisition of weapons.⁴⁰ In their speeches, officials and veterans emphasised the direct link between the actions of military units in the war of the 1990s and today, when Croatia is part of NATO.⁴¹ In his speeches at the commemoration of the events of 1991, President

- 35 Ministry of the Interior, Police Directorate, "Marking the 30th anniversary of the 'Plitvice' action and the death of Josip Jović, the first Croatian gendarme", *Ministry of the Interior*, 31 March 2021, <https://policija.gov.hr/vijesti/obiljezana-30-obljetnica-akcije-plitvice-i-pogibije-josipa-jovica-prvog-hrvatskog-redarstvenika/5313>.
- 36 Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia, "President Milanović at the celebration of the 30th anniversary of the Kijevo police station establishment".
- 37 Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia, "The President in Vinkovci tells the neighbours: We need to talk about the missing, we cannot get over it", *Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia*, April 29, 2021, <https://www.predsjednik.hr/vijesti/predsjednik-u-vinkovcima-porucio-susjedima-moramo-razgovarati-o-nestalima-preko-toga-ne-mozemo-prijeci/>.
- 38 Ministry of Croatian Defenders, "30th Anniversary of 'Plitvice' Action Marked", *Ministry of Croatian Veterans*, 31 March 2021, <https://branitelji.gov.hr/print.aspx?id=3854&url=print>; The Government of the Republic of Croatia, "We remember with gratitude the Croatian defenders".
- 39 Government of the Republic of Croatia, "Victim of Croatian Defenders"; Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia, "President Milanović's message to the 'Thunders': When the Croatian Army goes on international missions, we will always take into account Croatian interests", *Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia*, 14 May 2021, <https://www.predsjednik.hr/vijesti/predsjednik-milanovic-porucio-gromovima-pri-odlasku-hrvatske-vojske-u-medunarodne-misije-uvijek-cemo-voditi-racuna-o-hrvatskim-interesima/>.
- 40 The Government of the Republic of Croatia, "The Croatian Army was and remains the guarantor of security"; Government of the Republic of Croatia. "Soldiers, Croatia is proud of you!"
- 41 Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Croatia, "Red Berets awarded in Knin to new members of the 'Spiders' 3rd mb", *Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Croatia*, 28 April 2021, <https://morh.gov.hr/vijesti/u-kninu-dodijeljene-crvene-beretke-novim-pripadnicima-3-mb-pauci/9590>; The Government of the Republic of Croatia, "The Croatian Army was and remains the guarantor of security".

Milanović particularly emphasised the importance of a strong army for today's Croatia.⁴² At the celebration of the 30th anniversary of establishment of the "Thunders" Guard Brigade, Milanović said that investments in the army and armaments were necessary, because Croatia needs and wants a well-paid army.⁴³ As he explained on the 30th anniversary of the line-up of the ZNG, the Croatian army stems from the Croatian people and as such is the foundation of the Croatian state. According to Milanović, Croatia can rest assured because it is guarded by the Croatian army, which the president considers "sacred".⁴⁴ In addition to investing in the army and defence systems, with such speeches Croatian officials have legitimised long-standing state policies towards veterans, who enjoy a developed care system which includes numerous rights and benefits: pensions, tax incentives, various social benefits, and special health care (especially for war invalids).⁴⁵

- 42 Milanović's emphasis on veterans and the army should be understood in the context of his conflict with then Defence Minister Mario Banožić and the Government over control over the armed forces and intelligence agencies. Milanović, as an officially non-partisan official (according to the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia, presidents of the Republic must freeze their membership in a political party), advocated the depoliticization of the army, which, according to his interpretation, was usurped by the HDZ. Thus, during the awarding of decorations to the participants of the "Plitvice „action from March 1991, Milanović said that as commander-in-chief of the Croatian Army he would lead a policy that is not partisan. See: Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia, "President Milanović presented decorations to the participants of the action 'Plitvice'", *Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia*, 30 March 2021, <https://www.predsjednik.hr/vijesti/predsjednik-milanovic-urucio-odlikovanja-sudionicima-akcije-plitvice/>. For more on Milanović's conflict with the government over army management, see: Oxford Analytica, "Croatia's Political Feud Has Foreign Policy Fallouts", *Oxford Analytica Daily Brief*, 18 May 2022, <https://dailybrief.oxan.com/Analysis/DB270254/Croatias-political-feud-has-foreign-policy-fallouts>.
- 43 Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia, "President Milanović decorated the members of 'Thunders' and said: Our goal is for the Croatian Army to be well paid and modernized", *Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia*, 11 May 2021, <https://www.predsjednik.hr/vijesti/predsjednik-milanovic-odlikovao-pripadnike-gromova-i-porucio-nas-je-cilj-da-hrvatska-vojska-bude-dobro-placena-i-modernizirana/>. The use of the term *sacred* in connection with the 1990s war is an indication of the ingrainedness of nationalist discourse in the political establishment. As originally a discourse between the right and the HDZ, the war of the 1990s is often called 'sacred' in order to taboo debate and dismiss any criticism as blasphemous. See: Jović, *War and Myth*, 22, 33, 196, 199, 200.
- 44 Office of the President, "President Milanović: Croatia can rest assured"; Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia, "President Milanović: The Croatian Army Stems from the Croatian People and is One of the Foundations of the Croatian State", *Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia*, 28 May 2021, <https://www.predsjednik.hr/vijesti/predsjednik-milanovic-hrvatska-vojska-proizlazi-iz-hrvatskog-naroda-i-jedan-je-od-temelja-hrvatske-drzave/>.
- 45 Even broader than that, official speeches linked the determination in the war with the similar determination of the current Government to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic and the aftermath of devastating earthquakes. See: Ministry of Croatian Defenders, "30th anniversary of the defence of Zadar officially marked".

Veteran associations themselves, representing the military and police units that participated in war events, were always present during the protocol part of the commemoration, and their representatives on some occasions gave speeches.⁴⁶ While officials have highlighted veterans as bearers of the truth about the 1990s war and as the only "authentic witnesses ... creating a homeland,"⁴⁷ most of these speeches boiled down to a brief retelling of the events being commemorated, from the participants' perspective.⁴⁸ However, on some occasions, veteran representatives reproduced in their speeches the dominant and official narrative of the war of the 1990s, with the use of metaphors and particularly emotionally charged language, which made their rhetoric resemble that of state officials. Veterans, in addition to the microperspective, often reproduced the mythologues of the war of the 1990s – a simplified political interpretation of complex historical events. In these one-dimensional stories, nations act as one body with one will that pursues one goal. Thus, on marking the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the police station in Kijevo near Knin, the former commander of the defence and president of the local veteran association, Marinko Čavka, said that the greatest significance of the event was that the defenders of the place came there in 1991 and said: "This is Croatia!" and thus announced the will of the Croatian people to establish their own state.⁴⁹ For Ante Deur, veterans leader and member of parliament, as he said in his speech during the commemoration of the battle for Vukovar, without the sacrifice of the Vukovar defenders there would be no independent Croatian state.⁵⁰ A similar fatalistic interpretation of the

46 In the commemoration of some war events, such as the commemoration of the suffering of the locals of Saborsko and Široki Kula, the central place in the protocol, although without speech, was given to civilian victims of war. See: Ministry of Croatian Defenders, "The 30th Anniversary of the Saborsko Suffering in the Homeland War", *Ministry of Croatian Defenders*, 12 November 2021, <https://branitelj.gov.hr/vijesti/obiljezena-30-godisnjica-stradanja-saborskog-u-domovinskom-ratu/3965>; Ministry of Croatian Defenders, "The 30th anniversary of the suffering of the inhabitants of Široka Kula".

47 Government of the Republic of Croatia, "Banožić: The Homeland War cannot be a basis for political action"; Ministry of Croatian Defenders, "30th Anniversary of Zadar defence solemnly celebrated"; Ministry Croatian Defenders, "At the Fortress of St. Michael in Šibenik, Marking the 30th anniversary of the September War Memorial", *Ministry of Croatian Defenders*, September 23, 2021, <https://branitelj.gov.hr/vijesti/na-sibenskoj-tvrđavi-sv-mihovila-završeno-obilježavanje-30-obljetnice-spomendana-rujanskog-rata/3936>.

48 The Government of the Republic of Croatia, "Božinović: The Croatian Police Played a Key Role in the Homeland War", *the Government of the Republic of Croatia*, <https://vlada.gov.hr/vijesti/bozinovic-hrvatska-policija-odigrala-je-ključnu-ulogu-u-domovinskom-ratu/32021>.

49 Lidija Grubašić, "30th anniversary of the establishment of the Kijevo Police Station marked", *HRT*, April 28, 2021, <https://radio.hrt.hr/radio-knin/vijesti/obiljezena-30-obljetnica-uspostave-policijske-postaje-kijevo-3653551>.

50 Hina, "The 30th Anniversary of the Battle of Vukovar Marked in Vukovar", *NI*, September 18, 2021, <https://hinfo.hr/vijesti/u-vukovaru-obiljezena-30-obljetnica-bitke-za-vukovar/>.

importance of a particular battle was repeated at the commemoration of the Battle of Trokut in Western Slavonia in October by retired General Rudi Stipčić, when he said that, but for the deaths of those killed in that battle, the war would have been lost.⁵¹

On other occasions, representatives of veterans' associations and military and police units that participated in a particular event, used their speeches to criticise and crack down on political elites. Thus, during the commemoration of the Battle of Vukovar in September, Branko Borković, the commander of the city's defense, stated that Croatia was not a 'random state'—a pointed and cynical reference to a phrase previously used by Milanović during his tenure as Prime Minister.⁵² On another occasion, Slavko Butorac, former commander of the Lučko Anti-Terrorist Unit, which participated in the action at Plitvice in March 1991, thanked Milanović for the decoration and for "not forgetting the forgotten ones".⁵³

4.2. Framing the war

Through the rhetoric used to commemorate the events of 1991, mediated by the various channels of communication, specific interpretation frameworks were created by which the memory of war has been evoked in accordance with the dominant narrative mentioned above. Thus, the war is described by its character as a war for the defence of the Croatian homeland and people from aggression, and for the realisation of Croatian

51 Edi Kirschenheuter, "30 years since the Battle of Trokut", *Radio Samobor*, October 29, 2021, <https://www.radiosamobor.hr/2021/10/29/30-godina-od-bitke-na-troktu/>.

52 Ministry of Croatian Defenders, "30th anniversary of the Battle of Vukovar solemnly marked"; Milanović pronounced the phrase "accidental state" in 2012 in the context of criticism of the critique of the critique of agricultural policy, left to chance. This phrase was later decontextualized in order to impute to Milanović that he had said that Croatia was an accidental state. See: Petar Vidov, "What did Milanovic really say about the accidental state and the civil war?", *Faktograf*, January 15, 2020, <https://faktograf.hr/2020/01/15/sto-je-milanovic-doista-govorio-o-slucajnoj-drzavi-i-gradanskom-ratu/>. Statements of veteran leaders should always be taken in the context of the existence of interest relations between veterans' associations and HDZ. At the time Borković said this, President Milanovic was in open political conflict with the HDZ government and Prime Minister Plenković. On the existence of interest relations between HDZ and veterans' associations, see: Milekić, "A Protest, Coup d'État"; Danijela Dolenec and Daniela Širinić, "Mobilizing Against Change: Veteran Organizations as a Pivotal Political Actor", in *Ruling by Other Means: State Mobilized Movements*, ed. Grzegorz Ekiert, Elizabeth Perry and Xiaojun Yan (Boston: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 239–60.

53 Office of the President, "President Milanović presented decorations to the participants of the 'Plitvice' action".

freedom. At the commemoration of the defence of Zadar, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Croatian Veterans Tomo Medved defined the war of the 1990s as a "just, legitimate, defensive and liberating" action, when Croatian forces defended and liberated the "internationally recognised Croatian state" and "preserved democracy".⁵⁴ In this sense, Plenković characterised the first armed clash in Pakrac, which took place in March 1991, as a violation of the Croatian Constitution of 1990 and undermining the constitutional order, state institutions and democratically elected government. In addition to "military aggression", Plenković used the term "armed rebellion", which had not dominated the commemoration of the war in previous decades,⁵⁵ and in addition to this, Croatian officials often referred to Serbian rebels as "terrorists", in accordance with the dominant discourse in the media and political speeches when these events took place in the first part of the 1991 war, before the flare-up of the armed conflict at the end of the year.⁵⁶ This legalistic framework, with the emphasis on the overthrow of the democratic order, had been less present in previous years, while nationalist interpretations dominated. The same frame was used for the interpretation of the action at Plitvice, which was one of the first armed clashes in the war.⁵⁷

However, there were other, mutually compatible interpretive frameworks through which discourse on the war of the 1990s was communicated during the commemoration of the events of 1991. The war had the dominant framework of statehood, i.e. the creation of an independent and sovereign state, the Republic of Croatia, as a historical right of the Croatian

- 54 Ministry of Croatian Defenders, "Ceremonial Celebration of the 30th Anniversary of the Defence of Zadar", *Ministry of Croatian Defenders*, 6 October 2021, <https://branitelji.gov.hr/vijesti/svecano-obiljezena-30-obljetnica-obrane-zadra/3943>.
- 55 Government of the Republic of Croatia, "We remember with gratitude"; Government of the Republic of Croatia, "Plenković: Vukovar is Croatia and Croatia is Vukovar", *Government of the Republic of Croatia*, 18 November 2021, <https://vlada.gov.hr/vijesti/plenkovic-vukovar-je-hrvatska-i-hrvatska-je-vukovar/33397>.
- 56 Ministry of the Interior, "30th year since the murder of police officers in Žuta Lokva", *Ministry of the Interior*, 24/08/2021, <https://mup.gov.hr/vijesti/30-godina-od-ubojstva-policijskih-sluzbenika-u-zutoj-lokvi/287220>; Ministry of Croatian Defenders, "30th anniversary of the murder of 12" marked.
- 57 Ministry of Interior, "Marked 30th anniversary of the 'Plitvice' action"; At Plitvice, Milanović also claimed that the fallen policeman Josip Jović fought for "freedom, constitution, democracy, Croatian belonging to Europe". See: Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia, "President Milanović laid a wreath in front of the Memorial to Josip Jović, the first Croatian gendarmerie member killed in the Homeland War", *Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia*, 31 March 2021, <https://www.predsjednik.hr/vijesti/predsjednik-milanovic-polozio-vijenac-ispred-spomen-obiljezja-josipu-jovicu-prvom-hrvatskom-redarstveniku-poginulom-u-domovinskom-ratu/>.

people.⁵⁸ Croatian sovereignty and the right of the Croatian people to self-determination are thus at the heart of the interpretation of the war, which is seen as important because it created an independent state.⁵⁹ Although it was noted during the commemoration that the war was provoked and imposed by Serbia and Yugoslavia, and tragic in terms of human losses⁶⁰, on the other hand, the war was interpreted as a necessity in order to realise the "millennial dream of one's own state", as Plenković put it on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the ZNG.⁶¹ War in this sense is celebrated as a means of achieving goals such as freedom, while the victims are commemorated as embedded in the foundations of statehood.⁶² The war is therefore seen at the same time as terrible and imposed, and, on the other hand, as one of the brightest moments of Croatian history, because then the dream of an independent Croatia was realised. For modern Croatia, the war of the 1990s, in Milanović's words at the commemoration of the 'Plitvice' action, is "the beginning of history".⁶³

Related to the interpretation framework of armed rebellion against the democratic order, the war of the 1990s was presented as a struggle between "two worlds", as Plenković

- 58 Office of the President, "President Milanović presented decorations to the participants of the 'Plitvice' action"; Office of the President, "President Milanović at the commemoration of the 120th Brigade"; Ministry of Croatian Defenders, "30th anniversary of the suffering of Saborsko marked"; Ministry of Croatian Defenders, "Commemoration at Ttrokut Novska memorial marked the beginning of the liberation of Western Slavonia", *Ministry of Croatian Veterans*, 29 October 2021, <https://branitelji.gov.hr/vijesti/komemoracijom-kod-spomen-obilježja-trokut-novska-obiljezen-pocetak-oslobadjanja-zapadne-slavonije/3957>; Office of the President, "President Milanović: Croatia can rest assured"; Office of the President, "President Milanović: The Croatian Army Made Possible"; Office of the President, "President Milanović: The Croatian Army Stems from the Croatian People". The importance of statehood for the interpretation of the war in the 1990s is also illustrated by the order of Ante Starčević, which Milanović granted to Ivan Krupec, president of the Association of War Veterans of the 2nd Guards Brigade "Thunders", for "contribution to the maintenance and development of the Croatian state-building idea, by establishing and building a sovereign Croatian state". See: Office of the President, "President Milanović decorated members of 'Thunders'".
- 59 The Government of the Republic of Croatia, "The Croatian Army was and remains the guarantor of security".
- 60 Thus, when marking the establishment of a police station in Kijevo, Milanović pointed out that operation "Storm" was carried out in such a way as to preserve human lives. See: Office of the President, "President Milanović at the commemoration of the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the Kijevo Police Station".
- 61 The Government of the Republic of Croatia, "The Croatian Army was and remains the guarantor of security". A similar formulation was used by Milanović to mark the 30th anniversary of the ZNG line-up. See: Office of the President, "President Milanović: The Croatian Army Made Possible".
- 62 Ministry of Croatian Defenders, "30th Anniversary of the Fall of Slunj and the Exile of Slunj", *Ministry of Croatian Defenders*, 15 November 2021, <https://branitelji.gov.hr/vijesti/obiljezena-30-obljetnica-pada-slunja-i-progonstva-slunjana/3968>.
- 63 Office of the President, "President Milanović laid a wreath in front of the Memorial to Josip Jović".

formulated it when marking the Battle of Vukovar. According to him, it was a clash between "Croatian democracy in the making and the totalitarian Greater Serbian regime in dissolution"⁶⁴ -- on the one hand was "the idea of an independent democratic, European and inclusive Croatia, a state of the Croatian people and all national minorities"⁶⁵, and on the other "the totalitarian, hegemonic and exclusive Milošević regime that advocated for the backward concept of ethnically pure territories through ethnic cleansing".⁶⁶ The war was interpreted as a desire for democratic change in the context of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of socialist regimes in Europe. European and democratic values were emphasised, which stand against totalitarian values.⁶⁷ Plenković linked the interpretation of the war as a defence of Croatian democracy to Tudjman's speech at the first line-up of the ZNG in May 1991, when he said that the soldiers and "the entire Croatian people" would know how to stand up and defend freedom, democracy and sovereignty as one.⁶⁸

64 A very similar formulation, previously unknown in political rhetoric in Croatia, was used by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Croatian Defenders Tomo Medved, to mark the Battle of Trokut. This indicates certain compliance and attention when using specific vocabulary. See: Kirschenheuter, "30 years since the Battle of the Triangle".

65 Although today Croatia has a high level of protection for national minorities, the situation was radically different in the 1990s. More: Antonija Petricusic, "Nation-Building in Croatia and the Treatment of Minorities: Rights and Wrongs", *L'Europe en Formation* 349–350, no. 3–4 (2008): 135–45.

66 Government of the Republic of Croatia, "Heroic Battle for Vukovar".

67 The antitotalitarian position of the Plenković Government, which in reality minimizes the difficult Ustasha legacy (especially in connection with genocidal policies towards Serbs) and marginalizes the partisan (more on that below), is typical of the modern European right. Plenković continued the policies of his predecessor at the head of HDZ, Tomislav Karamarko, with marginalization of individuals and groups who wanted to openly affirm the Ustasha legacy. Plenković's government advocates a departure from both totalitarian orders that ruled in the mid-20th century – SFRY (which many historians and experts dispute) and the Independent State of Croatia (NDH). On the practical level, Plenković is one of the most deserving that certain Ustasha symbols – such as the rallying cry "for homeland ready" – have received some professional, political and paralegal protection by establishing a Council to deal with the consequences of the rule of undemocratic regimes, created by the 2017 government decision. For more on Plenković's antitotalitarianism, the issue of the rallying cry "ready for home" and the work of the Council, see: Eric Gordy, "Making an Expert Muddle out of Croatia's Undemocratic Past", *Balkan Insight*, 2 March 2018, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/03/02/making-an-expert-muddle-out-of-croatia-s-undemocratic-past-03-01-2018/>; Srećko Pulig, "'Totalitarian Communist Yugoslavia' and 'Democratic Croatia'", *Radio Gornji Grad*, 7 March 2016, <https://radiogornjigrad.blog/2016/03/07/totalitarna-komunisticka-jugoslavija-i-demokratska-hrvatska/>; Katarina Damčević, "'Ready for the Homeland' in Croatian media: Commemorations, victory, and foundation", *Σημειωτική-Sign Systems Studies* 51, no. 1 (2023): 36–72.

68 The Government of the Republic of Croatia, "Soldiers, Croatia is proud of you! The Government will responsibly support you with the same zeal as it did 30 years ago", *Government of the Republic of Croatia*, 28 May 2021, <https://vlada.gov.hr/vijesti/vojnici-hrvatska-je-na-vas-ponosna-vlada-ce-vas-odgovorno-podupirati-s-jednakim-zarom-kao-i-prije-30-godina/32225>.

In addition to a strong emphasis on belonging to Europe⁶⁹ and the European Union, some speeches also mentioned belonging to "Western civilisation", along the lines of the perception of Croatia as a "bulwark of Christianity" and a defender of "European civilisation".⁷⁰ Following this interpretation framework, Croatian soldiers present themselves as those who have "defended the fortress" for centuries – defending "their own on their own", according to Milanović on the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the "Thunders" 2nd Guards Brigade – from the times of the Ottoman Empire to the war in the 1990s. In the very text of the oath that the current members of that unit took before Milanović, in their "veins flow centuries of the experience and the blood of the Croatian fortifications".⁷¹ This transcendentalism is associated with the element of statehood, because the Croatian state has its borders in which "the spirits of our ancestors are buried", as Milanović formulated it during the celebration of the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the 120th Brigade in Petrinja.⁷² Milanović echoed a similar thought when marking the suffering in Baćin, when he said that the current Croatian border on the River Una was also "a historical border in the Turkish wars", and that this "ground is soaked in blood from all possible wars - a ground of insecurity, migration".⁷³ Such rhetoric is part of Milanović's fatalistic idea of the Croats as a warrior people doomed to an eternal struggle for their survival and independence. He formulated this on the 30th anniversary

69 Office of the President, "President Milanović laid a wreath in front of the Memorial to Josip Jović".

70 Government of the Republic of Croatia, "Heroic Battle for Vukovar"; Office of the President, "President Milanović: Croatia can rest assured"; Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia, "President Milanović at the celebration of the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the 57th Independent Battalion 'Marijan Celjak'", *Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia*, 12 June 2021, <https://www.predsjednik.hr/vijesti/predsjednik-milanovic-na-obiljezavanju-30-godisnjice-ustrojavanja-57-samostalnog-bataljuna-marijan-celjak/>. The narrative of Croatia belonging to Western civilization versus neighbourhood states is not new. Tudjman insisted on this interpretation, influenced by the researchers and politicians Ivo Pilar from the beginning of the 20th century, even as a dissident in SFRY in the 1980s. Originally based on the concept of Croatia as a "bulwark of Christianity" as opposed to the Ottoman Empire (a term coined in the 19th century), this narrative introduces exclusivity towards other nations positioned east of Croatia, which are claimed to belong to another, lower, cultural circle. See: Stevo Đurašković, "Nation-building in Franjo Tuđman's Political Writings", *Croatian Political Science Review* 51, no. 5 (2014): 59, 66, 67; Alex J. Bellamy, *The Formation of Croatian National Identity: A Centuries-old Dream* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), 68, 80, 95, 110.

71 Office of the President, "President Milanović's message to the Thunders"; Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia, "President Milanović in Baćin: The culture of remembrance of the victims we want requires reciprocity", *Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia*, 21 October 2021, <https://www.predsjednik.hr/vijesti/predsjednik-milanovic-u-bacinu-kultura-sjecanja-na-zrtve-koju-zelimo-zahitjeva-uzajamnost/>.

72 Office of the President, "President Milanović at the commemoration of the 120th Brigade".

73 Office of the President, "President Milanović in Baćin".

of the establishment of the "Marijan Celjak" 57th Independent Battalion, when he said that Croats have had to fight for centuries "to explain their cause".⁷⁴

The continuity of war in the history of Croats and Croatia were present in a large number of protocols, where, in addition to professional soldiers, guardians of the honour of historical Croatian units⁷⁵ were often present, trying to portray participation in the war of the 1990s as part of the continuity of the struggle of Croatian soldiers in defending the homeland from aggressors.⁷⁶ The war of the 1990s is thus clearly positioned in a very specific policy of memory which provides an interpretation of the Second World War in Croatia. This refers to the emphasis on the continuity of Croatian victimhood, in the case of World War II at the hands of Partisan forces, on which the focus was placed. Thus, during the celebration of the 30th anniversary of the suffering in Saborsko, the Mayor of Saborsko, Marko Bičanić, said that 498 Croats had been killed there during World War II, a fact which had been silenced under the SFRY.⁷⁷ In this sense, it has become commonplace that in right-wing discourse, which often dominates at the social macrolevel, veterans of the 1990s and war victims are associated with the victims of Partisan rather than Ustasha crimes. It is a policy of memory that puts emphasis on Partisan and Communist post-war crimes, representing Croats as a victim nation, and establishing a kind of continuity

74 Office of the President, "President Milanović at the celebration of the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the 57th Independent Battalion 'Marijan Celjak'."

75 The presence of honour guards and historical Croatian units in public political and military protocols was introduced in the 1990s. The most famous example is the honour guard that secures the Banski Dvori (the seat of the Government and former President of the Republic). For the presence of historical honour guards at the commemoration of 30 years of the beginning of the war in Pakrac and the fall of Vukovar, see: Government of the Republic of Croatia, "We remember with gratitude"; Government of the Republic of Croatia, "Marking the Day of Remembrance of the Victims of the Homeland War and Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Vukovar and Škabrnja", *Ministry of Croatian Defenders*, 19 November 2021, <https://branitelji.gov.hr/vijesti/obiljezen-dan-sjecanja-na-zrtve-domovinskog-rata-i-dan-sjecanja-na-zrtvu-vukovara-i-skabrnje-3973/3973>. For more on the introduction of historical honour guards into state protocols in the 1990s, see: Frane Vrkić, "Honour Guard as a National Symbol of Croatia", *Polemos* 20, No. 1-2 (2017): 13–28.

76 This has been called in the media and in political speeches since 1990 the *millennial dream or aspiration of the Croatian people to re-establish an independent state*. This view of Croatian history was especially propagated by President Tudman, claiming that this dream was realized by the establishment of independent Croatia in 1990, which was then defended and internationally recognized in 1991–1992, and in 1995 (after the operations 'Flash' and 'Storm') and in 1998 (after the peaceful reintegration of Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Syrmia) achieved its territorial integrity. Bellamy, *The Formation of Croatian National Identity*.

77 Ministry of Croatian Defenders, "The 30th anniversary of the suffering of Saborsko marked".

between World War II and the wars of the 1990s.⁷⁸ However, this policy is not entirely one-dimensional, and allows for the commemoration of the anti-fascist movement and Ustasha crimes – such as the Holocaust – on certain occasions.⁷⁹

One of the basic differences in the commemoration of the 30th anniversary of 1991 compared to previous years was in the changed presentation of Serbs in speeches given by high officials. In most speeches, senior officials avoid labelling Serbs as ethnic "others", which often used to be the case. This change, very likely arising from the pragmatism of the HDZ government in coalition with the SDSS, was visible at most commemorations of the 1991 events.⁸⁰ In doing so, the character of the "other" was transferred to Serbia (rather than Serbs), Yugoslavia and Milošević, as inspirers and implementers of the "Greater Serbia" policy.⁸¹ On some occasions, Serbs – from Serbia as well as Croatia – are even portrayed as victims of Milošević's Greater Serbian policy. Although Plenković said that the declaration of SAO Krajina in 1990 was as an institutional rebellion against the Croatian state, it was done at the "instigation of the regime in Belgrade". Likewise, a part of the Serb population was drawn into the armed conflict by "malicious propaganda", and all those who were in favour of "the coexistence of Croats and Serbs in their common

78 As a person who manages the policy of exhumation and identification of missing persons at the highest level from 1941 to 1995, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Croatian Defenders Tomo Medved held a burial in 2018 with military honours for Ustashes, Home Guardsmen and civilians killed by partisans in World War II and the post-war period. Some questioned the legality of this decision, given that, according to the current Rulebook on the right to military burial, this right has "killed Croatian defenders, deceased Croatian war invalids from the Homeland War (hereinafter: HRVI) and deceased Croatian defenders from the Homeland War". See: Gordana Duhaček, "Under what authority does Medved bury Ustashes with military honours?", *Index*, September 17, 2018, <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/s-kojim-pravom-medved-pokapa-ustase-s-vojnima-pocastima/2024276.aspx>.

79 Affirmatively, the national liberation struggle (NOB) is spoken of on certain occasions such as the commemoration of the national holiday Antifascist Struggle Day, which was established as a holiday in the 1990s at the initiative of President Tudjman. See: Mario Pušić, "A long report from Brezovica: shoutout to Milanović 'Zoki, Zokil', Plenković barely looked at him", *Jutarnji list*, June 22, 2021, <https://www.jutarnji.hr/video/news/velika-reportaza-iz-brezovice-milanovicu-vikali-zoki-zoki-a-plenkovic-ga-jedva-pogledao-15082773>. Another example is the Croatian presidency of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) from March 2023 to March 2024. However, although the Presidency is not silent about the Holocaust in Croatia, led by the Ustashes, this is not deprived of many controversies concerning the silence over the genocide against Serbs and the use of the IHRA presidency to achieve closer foreign-policy ties with Israel. See: Sven Milekić, "Croatia's Support for Israel Can't Fix Holocaust Obfuscation at Home", *Balkan Insight*, November 1, 2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/11/01/croatias-support-for-israel-cant-fix-holocaust-obfuscation-at-home/>; Novosti, "Where have the Serbs gone?", *Novosti*, 12.12.2023, <https://www.portalnovosti.com/gdje-su-nestali-srbi>.

80 Sven Milekić, "Croatian War Commemorations 2021: Framing Serbs for Political Purposes", *Cultures of Remembrance in Dialogue*, <https://www.kulturesecanja.org/blog/hrvatske-ratne-komemoracije/>.

81 Government of the Republic of Croatia, "Heroic Battle for Vukovar".

Croatian homeland" were silenced.⁸² On another occasion, when marking the Battle of Vukovar, Plenković stressed that Croatian volunteers faced "forcibly mobilised" soldiers and reservists from the Serbian side of the town.⁸³

4.3. Ethnic favouritism in commemoration of war crimes and civilian suffering

Although the war of the 1990s is commemorated in a festive way, as the most important event in Croatian history, when the dream of its own state came true, this does not mean that the marking of the events of the 1990s has not included any commemorations. Among other things, the reason for this is that the perception of Croatia (and Croats) as victors – which is why veterans are celebrated – and as victims dominates. In this topos of sacrifice, the most important and central role is played by the sacrifice of Vukovar, the "Heroic Town", which is considered to have brought victory in the war by forcing the JNA and Serbian paramilitaries to focus on it, thus giving time to the Croatian defence to line up and boost the morale of defenders throughout Croatia.⁸⁴

In addition to Vukovar and the casualties in the surrounding villages, and the fallen defenders in general⁸⁵, war crimes, civilian casualties, the liberation of the Bučje

82 Government of the Republic of Croatia, "We remember with gratitude".

83 Government of the Republic of Croatia, "Heroic Battle for Vukovar"; For more on forced mobilizations in Serbia during the war in Croatia in the 1990s, see: Srđan Mladenov Jovanović, "Confronting Recent History: Forced Mobilization in Serbia During the War in Croatia 1991–1995", *Balkanica Posnaniensia Acta et studia* 27, no. 1 (2020): 167–80.

84 Government of the Republic of Croatia, "Heroic Battle for Vukovar".

85 Apart from Josip Jović, who is remembered as the first Croatian policeman killed, the killing of police officers and soldiers was commemorated at a high state level in Borovo Selo, Struga Banska, Josipdol, Žuta Lokva, Varaždin and Dalj. See: Ministry of Croatian Defenders, "30th Anniversary of the Murder of 12"; Osijek-Baranja Police Department, "30th anniversary of the tragic death of police officers of the Dalj Police Station marked", *Osijek-Baranja* Police Department, 1 August 2021, <https://osjecko-baranjska-policija.gov.hr/vijesti/obiljezena-30-obljetnica-tragicne-pogibije-polica-jaca-policijske-postaje-dalj/35754>; Varaždin Police Department, "Memorial to the killed and missing police officers of the Varaždin Police Administration in the Homeland War", *Varaždin Police Department*, 17 September 2021, <https://varazdinska-policija.gov.hr/vijesti/svecano-otvoreno-spomen-obiljezje-poginulim-i-nestalim-polica-jcima-pu-varazdin-u-domovinskom-ratu/35053>; Ministry of The Interior, "30th year since the murder"; Ministry of Croatian Defenders, "Minister Medved with a Mother"; Ministry of the Interior, "The 30th anniversary of the murder of police officers"; Ministry of Croatian Defenders, "30th anniversary of the death of 13 Croatian police officers in Struga Banska marked", *Ministry of Croatian Defenders*, 26 July 2021, <https://branitelji.gov.hr/vijesti/obiljezena-30-obljetnica-pogibije-13-hrvatskih-redarstvenika-u-strugi-banskoj/3913>.

concentration camp and the successful or unsuccessful defence of places - in Baćin, Saborski, Laslovo, Široka Kula, Dabar, Slunj, Škabrnja, Promina -- were commemorated at a high state level - in the presence, for instance, of the Minister of the Interior and Minister of Croatian Defenders, who are also deputy prime ministers. In these protocols, along with the representatives of veterans' associations, representatives of civilian casualties played a central role.⁸⁶ In addition to mass casualties, individual sufferings and war crimes against civilians have been commemorated at the high state level. One is the case of the suffering of Gordan Lederer, who was the first Croatian journalist killed in the war, in August 1991.⁸⁷ The second is the commemoration of the youngest victim of the war, the then three-month-old Ivan Špoljarić, who was killed by artillery fire on a Croatian refugee camp in Grabovac in September 1991.⁸⁸ However, except in Vukovar, the very highest state officials – Prime Minister Plenković and President Milanović – did not participate in the marking of these protocols -- this role was left to vice-presidents and delegates.⁸⁹ An additional specificity in commemorating war crimes and the suffering of civilians is in the way Serbs have been depicted. Although they are not portrayed from an anti-Serb perspective, the role of the rebel local Serbs in crimes against the non-Serb population is clearly noted. Thus, in commemorating the suffering of Saborsko, it was noted that "local Serbs together with the so-called JNA in their savage campaigns killed the inhabitants of that village and destroyed all the houses together with the parish church".⁹⁰ In the case

86 Office of the President, "President Milanović in Baćin"; Ministry of Croatian Defenders, "The 30th anniversary of the suffering of Saborsko marked"; Ministry of Croatian Defenders, "The 30th anniversary of the suffering of the locals of Široki Kula"; Ministry of Croatian Defenders, "In Bučje marked the 30th anniversary of the liberation of the notorious enemy stronghold", *Ministry of Croatian Defenders*, December 26, 2021, <https://branielji.gov.hr/vijesti/u-bucju-obiljezana-30-obljetnica-oslobadjanja-zloglasnog-neprijateljskog-uporista/3991>; Ministry of Croatian Defenders, "The 30th anniversary of the suffering of Dabar locals marked"; Ministry of Croatian Defenders, "Minister Medved paid tribute to the victims of the Promina region and visited the Veterans' Centre in Šibenik", *Ministry of Croatian Defenders*, July 23, 2021, <https://branielji.gov.hr/vijesti/ministar-medved-odao-pocast-zrtvama-prominskoga-kraja-i-obisao-veteranski-centar-u-sibeniku/3911>; Ministry of Croatian Defenders, "Marking the 30th Anniversary of the Suffering and Occupation of Laslovo", *Ministry of Croatian Defenders*, November 23, 2021, <https://branielji.gov.hr/vijesti/obiljezavanje-30-obljetnice-stradanja-i-okupacije-laslova/3976>; Ministry of Defence, "The 30th anniversary of the suffering of Škabrnja marked"; Ministry of Croatian Defenders, "30th anniversary of the fall of Slunj marked".

87 Ministry of Croatian Defenders, "The 30th Anniversary of the Death of Gordan Lederer", *Ministry of Croatian Defenders*, 10 August 2021, <https://branielji.gov.hr/vijesti/obiljezana-30-obljetnica-pogibije-gordana-lederera/3921>.

88 Ministry of Croatian Defenders, "30th anniversary of the death of the youngest victim marked".

89 The only exception is the participation of Milanović in the commemoration of the victims of Baćin. See: Office of the President, "President Milanović in Baćin".

90 Ministry of Croatian Defenders, "The 30th anniversary of the suffering of Saborsko marked".

of Široka Kula, the "local Lika Serbs and the so-called 'Martić's militia'" were mentioned as perpetrators of crimes against civilians.⁹¹ In Bačin, Milanović wondered how people who were "neighbours, policemen, butchers, merchants" suddenly became "brutal killers" who had no problem "killing dozens and dozens of old infirm people".⁹² In spite of this, alongside the duty to remember crimes and acknowledge the significance of the victims for the realisation of an independent state, the importance of forgiveness and peaceful reconciliation were emphasised.⁹³

What was left out in the state 1991 commemoration protocol, however, were the commemorations of war crimes against Serbs and the other sufferings of Serb civilians in Croatia. The only time crimes against Serb civilians were directly mentioned was in the case of commemorating the liberation of Bučje, where the rebel Serbs had established a concentration camp. On that occasion, it was noted that Serbs too were interned in a local concentration camp, because they did not want to join Serb paramilitary units or because they had co-operated with Croats.⁹⁴ None of the other mass crimes committed by Croatian forces against Serb civilians and prisoners of war in 1991 – in Karlovac, Sisak, Osijek, Gospić, Paulin Dvor, Požega villages, Pakrac, Pakračka Poljana, Vukovar and elsewhere – were commemorated in the state protocol with the presence of high-ranking state officials.⁹⁵ The commemoration of these crimes is entirely left to civil society organisations – especially the Serbian National Council (SNC) – and to private initiatives with virtually no state funding and support and enjoying almost no public or media visibility.⁹⁶ Most of these crimes are not even marked by visible protocols on the scenes of their commission, because of threats and pressure from veteran and right-wing groups.⁹⁷

91 Ministry of Croatian Defenders, "The 30th anniversary of the suffering of the inhabitants of Široki Kula".

92 Office of the President, "President Milanović in Bačin".

93 Ministry of Defence, "30th anniversary of the suffering of Škabrnja marked"; Ministry of Croatian Defenders, "30th anniversary of the suffering of Dabar locals marked"; Office of the President, "President Milanović in Bačin".

94 Ministry of Croatian Defenders, "30th anniversary marked in Bučje".

95 The exception being SDSS officials who perform certain functions in the Government.

96 Serb National Council, "Commemoration held in Jeminovac"; Jadranka Jačimović, "Paid tribute to the murdered and missing Serbs from Vukovar", *Srbi.hr*, November 17, 2021, <https://srbi.hr/odana-pocast-ubijenim-i-nestalim-srbima-iz-vukovara/>.

97 Novosti, "Memorial Service for the Victims Executed on the Korana Bridge", *News*, 21. 9. 2021, <https://www.portalnovosti.com/parastos-za-likvidirane-na-koranskom-mostu>. After preventing the commemoration in 2020, in 2021, the local branch of Dinamo football club fans, Bad Blue Boys, made a mural on the bridge dedicated to Mihajlo Hrastov, a member of the special police unit of the 'Thunders', who killed 13 captured and disarmed JNA reservists on the Korana Bridge in Karlovac in September 1991. The oak court case lasted 23 years and ended with a conviction for the unlawful killing and wounding of the 13 reservists. See: Vedran Salvia, "Mihajlo Hrastov, a man who for 23 years could not be proven to have killed 13 soldiers", *Index*, September 22, 2021, <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/kako-je-izgledalo-sudjenje-hrastovu-za-ubojstvo-13-zarobljenika-i-sto-pise-u-presudi/2305735.aspx>.

The reason for this treatment of Serb victims from 1991 is that they question or challenge the dominant narrative of the war in Croatia in the 1990s, according to which Croats are the exclusive victims of an imposed war. According to this narrative, the war crimes committed by Croatian forces against Serb civilians and prisoners were isolated and unplanned incidents that did not have support from the higher political levels.⁹⁸ An interpretation according to which the Croatian authorities in fact carried out planned mass crimes in 1991 would jeopardise this heroic and victimological narrative⁹⁹, because one would then have to debate the responsibility, if not for starting a war, at least for its radicalisation. In this sense, the state policies of remembrance introduced into the official narrative the memory of crimes committed by Croatian forces in 1995, during and after the 'Storm' Operation, because chronologically this comes after 1991. In this way, in addition to the fact that such crimes have again been portrayed as unplanned and individual incidents which Croatia, unfortunately, could not prevent, they are also portrayed as retaliatory, a consequence of the events of 1991 interpreted in such a way that the Croats were then the exclusive victims.¹⁰⁰

The state protocol has even omitted cases of individual crimes against Serb civilians, the marking of which would not have jeopardised the dominant narrative. Thus, the commemoration of the murder of the Serb family Zec in Zagreb in December 1991, including of 12-year-old Aleksandra, was organised by human rights and Serbian organisations, as in the previous 30 years. The only move forward evident in the 30th anniversary of the murder of the Zec family was the presence at the commemoration of

98 Especially for the crimes in Sisak, Osijek and Gospić, the state authorities knew and did nothing or enough to prevent and sanction them.

99 Despite this, when he was Croatian President (2010–2015), Ivo Josipović commemorated the victims of crimes in the villages of Požega and Paulin Dvor. See: Radio Free Europe, "Croatia: Josipović at the Commemoration of Serb Civilian Victims", *Radio Free Europe*, December 27, 2010, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/24809919.html>; Radio Free Europe, "Josipović and Tadić lay flowers at the monument to the victims in Paulin Dvor", *Radio Free Europe*, November 4, 2010, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/2210996.html>; The commemoration of the victims at Paulin Dvor was part of mutual reconciliation policies between Croatia and Serbia, led by Josipović and Serbian President Boris Tadić. See: Milan Krstić, "Mutual Apologies between Serbia and Croatia: Causes and Effects of Apologies and The Reasons for Their Limited Influence", *Traces: A Magazine for Serbian and Croatian Topics* 4, No. 2 (2021): 146–73.

100 Sven Milekić, "From Defiance and Extremism to Limited Concessions: Celebrations of Operation Storm in the Context of the EU", *Cultures of Remembrance in Dialogue*, <https://www.kulturesecanja.org/blog/od-prkosa-i-ekstremizma/>.

the new Mayor of Zagreb, Tomislav Tomašević.¹⁰¹ While the government itself ignored the commemoration of the murder of the Zec family, Milanović went further, claiming that the Zec family were once invited to meet with the Government, and that they had received reparation, so that there was no special need for commemoration at the highest level.¹⁰² Thus the opportunity was missed to commemorate Aleksandra Zec as a child victim of war, which would have been in accordance with the new state focus on this category of victims –as was realised with the commemoration of the previously mentioned Ivan Špoljarić as the youngest victim of war.

The problematic attitude towards war crimes committed by Croatian forces and Serb victims continued, giving support to the relativisation of crimes and a kind of rehabilitation of perpetrators. Thus, during the promotion of the monograph on the "Thunder" Special Police Unit from Karlovac, President Milanović advocated for a kind of rehabilitation of the earlier mentioned member of that unit, Mihajlo Hrastov, who killed 13 captured reservists on the Korana Bridge. Milanović defended Hrastov, from whom the state had tried to collect the costs of compensation for the damages sought by the families of the murdered reservists. He qualified the crime as a "mistake", but said there were differences between punishment and "thorough abuse". According to him, Hrastov had paid his dues to society, and the state should give up charging the expenses and stand up in his defence as other Western democracies, such as the U.S., do for their soldiers. In doing so, but also advocating the rule of law and the concept of Croatia as a nation under the rule of law, he called for amending the law to make this possible.¹⁰³ In this way, Milanović supported

101 Youth Initiative for Human Rights, "Commemoration of 'The Zec Family – 30 Years Later'", *Youth Initiative for Human Rights*, December 9, 2021, <https://yihhr.hr/hr/komemoracija-obitelj-zec-30-godina-poslije/>.

102 Nacional/S.B., "Milanović: 'The Zec family is a terrible story, but I know the more terrible ones. Pupovac behaves inappropriately and plays dirty'", *Nacional*, December 7, 2021, <https://www.nacional.hr/milanovic-obitelj-zec-je-grozna-prica-ali-znam-ja-i-groznijih-pupovac-se-ponasa-nedolichno-i-igra-prljavo/>.

103 Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia, "President Milanović in Karlovac: If you are guilty, you get punished, but the state cannot financially charge people who have been held accountable for their sins", *Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia*, 1 July 2021, <https://www.predsjednik.hr/vijesti/predsjednik-milanovic-u-karlovcu-ako-si-kriv-kaznjen-si-ali-drzava-ne-moze-i-financijski-teretiti-ljude-koji-su-odgovarali-za-svoje-grijehe/>. Croatia has collected claims for compensation for non-material damage to family members of those killed on the Korana Bridge by Hrastov, but the money is in the process of return following a 2023 government decision. See: Maxportal, "Croatia seeks HRK 2.46 million from Mišo Hrastov as compensation to a fallen Serb", *Maxportal*, April 6, 2021, <https://www.maxportal.hr/premium-sadrzaj/hrvatska-od-mise-hrastova-trazi-246-mil-kuna-kao-odstetu-poginulom-srbinu/>; Vedran Brkulj, "The state forgives debts to war criminals, experts appalled: They are equated with victims", *T-portal*, January 9, 2024, <https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/drzava-oprasta-dugove-ratnim-zlocincima-strucnjaci-zgrozeni-izjednacava-ih-se-sa-zrtvama-foto-20240109>.

the relativisation of the crime and its symbolic and legal rehabilitation. Given that in this particular case the families of the murdered were prevented from commemorating their murdered members, Milanović thus directly helped these oppressive tendencies in Croatian society.

Resistance to alternative interpretations of the war, including the mention of crimes committed by Croatian forces, has been a common motif of Milanović's rhetoric. In his speeches, Milanović has often referred to "our truth", to some Croatian version of the past that is "difficult", but of which one should not be ashamed and which is correct, unlike the "history" written by "others".¹⁰⁴ Milanović thus rejects the interpretations of the crimes as premeditated, claiming that these were "mistakes" (as in Karlovac), arising from "negligence" or "human nature", but prosecuted by Croatia anyway. He made this claim during the commemoration of the establishment of the 106th ZNG Brigade in Osijek, indirectly referring to the crimes committed in the town against Serb civilians in 1991.¹⁰⁵ Milanović expressed a kind of relativisation of war crimes committed by Croatian forces in his criticism of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia at the Hague. During the already mentioned promotion of the book on the "Thunder" Special Police Unit, Milanović, in advocating for assistance to Hrastov, said that Croatia must not be naïve, because it had experienced "an epic and a disaster with The Hague", which eventually ended happily, but at a "high cost".¹⁰⁶ This problematic attitude towards war crimes could also be heard from the government, when its Vice-President Medved criticised the verdicts of Croatian courts for crimes committed against Croatian civilians in Široka Kula. According to Medved, the sentences for Serb paramilitary members - handed

104 Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia, "President Milanović: The courage of volunteer defenders saved Croatia from horror and fragmentation of territory", *Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia*, October 10, 2021, <https://www.predsjednik.hr/vijesti/predsjednik-milanovic-hrabrost-branitelja-dragovoljaca-spasila-je-hrvatsku-od-uzasa-i-komadanja-teritorija/>; Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia, "President Milanović at the celebration of the foundation of the 106th Brigade of the ZNG in Osijek: The defender is the one who risked his life, there were not many such people", *Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia*, 28 June 2021, <https://www.predsjednik.hr/vijesti/predsjednik-milanovic-na-obiljezavanju-osnutka-106-brigade-zng-a-u-osijeku-branitelj-je-onaj-koji-je-riskirao-zivot-takvih-ljudi-nije-bilo-puno/>.

105 Office of the President, "President Milanovic at the commemoration of the foundation of the 106th Brigade". In 2023, Branimir Glavaš and his subordinates were convicted of these crimes. Glavaš's case, like Hrastov's case, is one of the longest-lived in the Croatian judiciary. See: M. T., "Branimir Glavaš went to BiH: I have no intention of serving a single day in prison", *Dnevnik.hr*, November 14, 2023, <https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/branimir-glavas-otisao-u-bih-nemam-namjeru-odsluziti-ni-jednog-dana-u-zatvoru---812496.html>.

106 Office of the President, "President Milanovic in Karlovac".

down in the absence outside Croatia of the indictees - were "light" -- although 20 years is the maximum possible sentence for a war crime under the Criminal Code.¹⁰⁷

Despite the absence of a state commemoration of the 1991 crimes against Serbs, Milanović has on several occasions called out the political representatives of the Serbs, the SDSS, for their lack of reciprocity in expressing respect/reverence/guilt/remorse/contrition/regret. In commemoration of crimes against Croatian civilians in Baćin, Milanović criticised the political representatives of the Serbs in Croatia for not attending the commemoration. Stating that he himself was going to Jasenovac (the Ustasha death camp) and to the commemorations for Serb victims of Operation 'Storm', Milanović said he would have expected the political representatives of the Serbs to be present in Baćin, because this reciprocity in contrite reverence for the victims of another fraternal nation was a prerequisite for peaceful coexistence.¹⁰⁸ Likewise, during the commemoration of the murdered Croatian policemen in Borovo Selo, Milanović called out the local mayor from the SDSS for permitting the erection of a large monument at the local cemetery dedicated to Vukašin Šoškočanin, the local Serb rebel leader who orchestrated the May 1991 attack.¹⁰⁹

107 Ministry of Croatian Veterans' Affairs, "30th anniversary of the suffering of the inhabitants of Široka Kula". Although the events of the war in neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina were not marked in 2021, Medved criticized Bosnia and Herzegovina for indictments against Croatian officers at a commemoration for the murdered journalist Lederer, citing the help of Croatia and the Croatian Army to the state. See: Ministry of Croatian Defenders, "30th anniversary of Gordan's death marked".

108 Office of the President, "President Milanović in Baćin". Milanović directed the same criticism at SDSS President Milorad Pupovac on the anniversary of the December murder of the Zec family. See: Nacional/S.B., "Milanović: 'The Zec family is a terrible story'". Although Milanović made these accusations for the purpose of causing political damage to the HDZ and the government, they did not fully correspond to the truth. The Serb National Council, headed by SDSS President Milorad Pupovac, has repeatedly commemorated crimes committed against Croats. See: Telegram/Hina, "Milanović called out Pupovac for ignoring the commemorations of murdered Croats. He received the SNV's response", *Telegram*, December 9, 2021, <https://www.telegram.hr/politika-kriminal/milanovic-je-prozvao-pupovca-da-ignorira-komemoracije-ubijenim-hrvatima-stigao-mu-odgovor-iz-snv-a/>.

109 Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia, "President of the Republic Zoran Milanović laid a wreath at the memorial of twelve killed police officers in Borovo", *Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia*, 29 April 2021, <https://www.predsjednik.hr/vijesti/predsjednik-republike-zoran-milanovic-polozio-je-vijenac-kod-spomen-obilježja-dvanaest-poginulih-redarstvenika-u-borovu/>. For more on Šoškočanin and the controversy surrounding his monument, see: Index vijesti, "This is a monument to Šoškočanin in Borovo Selo. Who was this war criminal?", *Index*, May 12, 2021, <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/ovo-je-spomenik-soskocaninu-u-borovu-selu-tko-je-bio-taj-ratni-zlocinac/2275510.aspx>.

4.4. Official oblivion regarding peace initiatives

In addition to the lack of state commemorations of the wartime suffering of Serbs, state protocols bypassed events related to peace initiatives and peacemakers from the 1990s war. Already with the beginning of the war, in July 1991, the foundations of the Anti-War Campaign of Croatia (ARKH) were laid, bringing together peace and human-rights activists who advocated peace alternatives and de-escalation of the state of war. It continued to function throughout the entire course of the war.¹¹⁰ The absence of state and official memory of ARKH is not surprising and has lasted for decades, as the initiative had major problems in articulating the sensitive and delicate position of advocating peace in a war-torn and partly occupied state.¹¹¹ Given that peace initiatives open up the possibility of questioning the dominant narrative, they have been erased from state memory policies and occupy an exclusively marginal place in the public memory.

In addition to the official oblivion regarding anti-system activists and social peace initiatives, high state protocols have also circumvented cases of state officials who were actively working to establish peace. One of them is the former head of the Osijek-Baranja Police Department, Josip Reihl-Kir, who was killed in an ambush in Tenja (near Osijek) in July 1991. As head, Reihl-Kir actively worked to calm tensions between Croatian and Serb communities in the Osijek region. In doing so, he successfully won over the local rebel Serbs in removing the barricades that were springing up in Slavonian villages and roads in those months. As the de-escalation of the war did not suit the radical forces on either the Croatian or Serbian sides, Reihl-Kir was ambushed by Croatian policeman Antun Gudelj, to whom he had supplied weapons. Although Gudelj was convicted *in absentia* in 1994, he was granted amnesty in 1997 by an improper application of the General Amnesty Act, which allows amnesty only for the crime of armed rebellion. Following the initiative of Jadranka Reihl-Kir, the widow of the murdered man, Gudelj was extradited to Croatia from Australia in the mid-2000s, and finally convicted in 2009. Nevertheless, Gudelj never disclosed the original organisers of the crime, which has been speculated about for

110 For more on Croatia's Anti-War Campaign, see: *Croatia's Anti-War Campaign 1991–2011: Untold History*, ed. Vesna Janković and Nikola Mokrović (Zagreb: Documenta, 2011).

111 For more on this, see: Bojan Bilić, "Walking on a Thin Wire: Articulating Anti-War Engagement in Croatia in the Early 1990s", in *The Anti-War Campaign of Croatia 1991–2011: Untold History*, ed. Vesna Janković and Nikola Mokrović (Zagreb: Documenta, 2011), 212–28.

years. As the murder of Reihl-Kir opened a new chapter on the murder of Croatian official peacekeepers by Croatian forces, the memory of him is also left entirely to civil society – peacekeeping and human-rights organisations. Only recently, including in 2021, members of the Osijek-Baranja Police Department attended the commemoration of the anniversary of his murder, but without senior officials, such as the President, Prime Minister, and ministers, or at least their delegates.¹¹²

112 NACIONAL/S.B., "Forgotten Crime: Joseph Reihl-Kir was murdered on this day 30 years ago. Who ordered the murder has not been resolved by any government", *Nacional*, July 1, 2021, <https://www.nacional.hr/zaboravljeni-zlocin-josip-reihl-kir-ubijen-je-na-danasnji-dan-prije-30-godina-ko-je-narucio-ubojstvo-nijedna-vlast-nije-otkrila/>.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

In the 2021 commemoration of the 1991 war in Croatia, some positive developments were to be observed, compared to how the beginning of the war was marked in previous years. In the presence of political representatives of the Serb community in Croatia, the rhetoric itself has been greatly mitigated. It is no longer dominated by highly-charged emotional speeches that promote, directly or indirectly, anti-Serb sentiments. Serbs are no longer explicitly labelled collectively as enemies, criminals or ethnic "others". Likewise, the speeches of the statesmen and political functionaries have often called for peace, reconciliation and coexistence, turning attention towards the proclaimed prosperous future of Croatia as a member of the EU and NATO. Likewise, military protocols, i.e. the presence of militaristic elements, have been greatly reduced, when compared, for instance, to the military parade for the 20th anniversary of 'Storm'.¹¹³ Also, in these protocols, a prominent place was occupied by the appeal to democracy, constitutional order and respect for human and minority rights, which constituted no small departure from the ethno-nationalist ceremonies of the past.

However, much of the 1991 commemoration has remained the same as in previous decades. It should be emphasised that some of the changes in the state policy of memory are the result of political cooperation between HDZ and SDSS. Official memory policies continue to fully insist on promoting the dominant narrative of the war, denying certain counter-narratives. Some of these most important counter-narratives are those about the war as partly civil or internal, which would lead, especially for the younger generation, to a better understanding of the conflict, and help emphasise the importance of cohesion between different communities in Croatia. Shifting responsibility exclusively to Serbia, but with the undefined mention of "Serbian rebels" or "terrorists", brings confusion to

113 It will be necessary to wait until 2025, or the 30th anniversary of the 'Storm', in order for such a conclusion to be justified in the long run. Namely, as "Storm" is directly associated with a military victory, it is possible to expect a new military parade for that anniversary.

already complex historical events.¹¹⁴ An additional problem at the semantic level was the simplification and orientation of the conflict as a struggle for the "preservation of European civilisation". Extremely problematic is the historicist connection of the war of the 1990s with the Ottoman wars or Partisan crimes, as well as the portrayal of the war as a struggle between democracy (Croatia) and the totalitarian order (Yugoslavia).

Another important counter-narrative ignored by the official commemoration in 1991 was that of war crimes committed by Croatian forces against Serb civilians and prisoners. This counter-narrative threatens the dominant narrative because it questions the notion of the Croats as being the exclusive victims of the war, especially those from 1991. Likewise, this counter-narrative challenges the setting about war crimes of the Croatian side as unplanned and standalone incidents, as opposed to the crimes of the Serbian (Yugoslav) side, which were planned, organized and mass. Because of this threat to the dominant narrative, the official protocols have completely avoided the marking these tragic events. On top of that, Croatian officials have in several cases relativized these crimes while highlighting crimes committed by Serb (Yugoslav) forces.

All this contributed to the further marginalization of the Serbian community – and its trauma – and its further cultural ghettoization. Such policies of memory lead to the perpetuation of Croatian ethno-nationalism built on the victimological trauma of 1991 and the victory of 1995. The simplification of memory of 1991 as the year of Croatian suffering and sacrifice completely erases the trauma of the Serbian community and, even without derogatory and anti-Serb rhetoric, generates anti-Serb sentiments. A proof of this is the escalation of pro-Ustasha and anti-Serb sentiments and messages sent during the commemoration of the fall of Vukovar from 2023.¹¹⁵

Despite certain positive developments, the commemorations still had a high presence of militaristic elements, giving the impression of a celebration of war and too much focus on war veterans. This was also evident in the lack of interest in marking peace initiatives.

114 It is possible that such a narrative suits the SDSS as HDZ's coalition partner, because it reduces the pressure on the Serb community in Croatia and transfers it to Serbia.

115 Mr. Borković, "VIDEO Ustasha greetings in Vukovar column", News, November 19, 2023, <https://www.portalnovosti.com/video-ustaski-pozdravi-u-vukovarskoj-koloni>.

Finally, officials used speeches and events themselves to win voters' support and harm their political rivals. Croatian President Milanović and Prime Minister Plenković led the way. Likewise, in their speeches, officials often turned to the topics of daily politics and thereby diminished the focus on the events that were being commemorated.

Recommendations for the future commemoration of the war in 1991:

- 1. Reduce the presence of weapons, armed soldiers, increase the presence of veterans who would indicate the horrors of war and the need of younger generations to avoid them.**
- 2. Increase the presence of civilian casualties of war and give them the opportunity to tell their individual stories, which may not fundamentally correspond to the settings of the dominant war narrative.**
- 3. Leave the organisation of certain events to youth organisations and in general to generations born after the war, with an even greater focus on advocating for a peaceful and happy future and coexistence.**
- 4. Offer a very concrete narrative on reconciliation, with an explanation of what it means, who is reconciled and how. Further promote reconciliation, by giving space to the memory of peace initiatives and peacekeepers, despite their very limited success.**
- 5. Abandon the focus on statehood and make way for debate on social transformations.**
- 6. Abandon rigid definitions of the character of the war, as well as problematic orientational and simplified interpretations of the war.**
- 7. Officially commemorate Serb victims at the highest state level, with a very clear articulation of the responsibility of the Croatian state and of specific persons for what happened to them.**

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