



Foundation Humanitarian Law Center

# **Annual Report**

**January - December 2023**



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# 1. Documentation, Archive, and Information System

The Humanitarian Law Center (HLC) Archive is one of the largest and most unique collections of materials documenting human rights violations and breaches of international humanitarian law during the wars in the former Yugoslavia. Currently, it holds 120 archival meters of printed documentation and over 40,000 different video recordings. A significant portion of the archive includes recordings of trials conducted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (IRMCT), along with the evidence presented during these proceedings. To date, the HLC has digitally archived over 95% of all publicly available ICTY/IRMCT materials, which encompasses 9,742 trial days on DVD and 115,746 documents from the court's database.

Additionally, the archive contains documentation from war crimes trials held before courts in Serbia, materials on human rights violations in Serbia during the 1990s, media content, and records related to claims for the restitution of tenancy rights by refugees and internally displaced persons. An important element of the archive includes victim and witness statements, as well as the register of human losses developed by in collaboration with partners from other post-Yugoslav states. The archive provides comprehensive documentation related to investigations of individuals who were killed due to the NATO bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, those who were killed or forcibly disappeared during the Kosovo war from 1998 to 2000, and citizens of Serbia and Montenegro who were killed or went missing in the wars in Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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During the reporting period, 2,299 documents were processed and securely stored in the HLC Archive and Information System (IS). This includes documents from the following archival collections: Reparations, Human Losses, Press Clipping, and Property rights. Additionally, 600 videos from the HLC's archival documentation were digitized and stored in the IS, including oral history interviews, media materials, and recordings from conferences, forums, and other meetings.



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## 2. Criminal Justice

The HLC has been actively monitoring war crimes trials since the very first proceedings in Serbia. This monitoring has enabled the participation of victims, their families, and witnesses, while also keeping the public informed through regular daily and annual reports. To date, the HLC has published 11 annual/bi-annual trial reports, alongside an analysis of the first decade of work by institutions specialized in prosecuting war crimes.

Additionally, the HLC continuously supports victims by providing legal representation. This support has allowed more than 2,500 victims to come to Serbia to give statements as injured parties and witnesses, and to follow the proceedings.

One of the HLC's key mechanisms in the fight against impunity is the creation of dossiers on individuals suspected of war crimes. These dossiers aim to bridge the gap between the extensive evidence and material related to war crimes and their perpetrators—collected by the ICTY and other sources—and the relatively small number of indictments brought before Serbian courts. By focusing on mid- and high-level perpetrators, these dossiers shift the emphasis from the individual responsibility of direct perpetrators to the systemic nature of the crimes and the policies behind them. To date, 16 dossiers have been published, leading to over 30 criminal complaints submitted to the relevant prosecuting authorities.

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The HLC had monitored and reported on all war crimes trials in 27 ongoing cases before the War Crimes Departments of the Higher Court and the Court of Appeal in Belgrade. The HLC regularly informed the public about these trials through daily reports on its website and social media posts. Additionally, it published nine press releases analyzing developments in the key proceedings and critically reviewed the work of relevant institutions. A more comprehensive overview of these issues, covering all war crimes proceedings before Serbian courts, was provided in the [Report on War Crimes Trials in Serbia During 2022](#), published on May 10, 2023.

In eight cases, the HLC represented a total of 1,544 victims during 52 hearings related to the Kalinovik, Zvornik-Standard, Čuška, Štrpci, Srebrenica, Bosanska Krupa–Donji Dubovik, Jajce, and Lovas II cases.

One dossier on suspected perpetrators of war crimes was published. The dossier titled "[Serbian Volunteer Guard](#)" outlines the history of this unit from its establishment in 1990 until its formal disbandment in 1996. It details the formation, structure, and key characteristics of the Serbian Volunteer Guard (SDG) and provides evidence of the unit's involvement in committing crimes in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The dossier also includes a list of 189 SDG members identified by the HLC during the investigation.

Throughout the year, HLC researchers collected and analyzed evidence regarding the responsibility of Svetozar Andrić for war crimes committed during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. At the onset of the armed conflict, Andrić held the position of commander of the First Birčanska Infantry Brigade of the Army of Republika Srpska (VRS). From July 1995, he served as deputy commander and chief of staff of the VRS Drina Corps at the time when the genocide in Srebrenica was committed. He also issued the order to establish the notorious "Sušica" detention camp in Vlasenica. Currently, Andrić is a member of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party and has held several public offices in Serbia, including deputy mayor of the New Belgrade municipality, member of parliament, and member of the Belgrade City Council. By the end of the year, the research was completed, the dossier "Svetozar Andrić" was finalized, and its publication and public presentation were scheduled for early 2024.



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### 3. Reparations

Since 1996, the HLC has been supporting victims in exercising their right to compensation for damages resulting from unlawful actions by state authorities, including the killing of family members. As a result of this support, over 780 victims of war crimes and human rights violations, as well as their family members, have obtained financial compensation for the harm they suffered.

In addition, the HLC has provided support to victims in administrative procedures for securing reparations through the recognition of civilian victim of war status.

Based on its experience in representing victims in compensation proceedings and in securing rights under the law regulating the rights of civilian war invalids, the HLC, in cooperation with the Center for Advanced Legal Studies, prepared in 2015 a [Model Law on the Rights of Civilian Victims of Human Rights Violations in Armed Conflicts and Related to Armed Conflicts in the Period from 1991 to 2001](#). The aim of this document is to ensure assistance, support, and protection for individuals who suffered as civilians during and in connection with the wars in the former Yugoslavia, as well as to acknowledge their suffering.

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In 2023, the HLC represented 114 plaintiffs in a total of 28 lawsuits filed by attorneys engaged by the HLC on behalf of victims and their family members.

In the case *Gvozdanović v. Ministry of Defense*, the Court of Appeals in Belgrade upheld the decision of the First Basic Court in Belgrade, partially accepting the plaintiff's claim and ordering the Ministry of Defense to pay RSD 1,250,000 in compensation for non-material damages. In October 2019, Dubravko Gvozdanović filed a lawsuit for non-material damages due to physical pain, fear, disfigurement, and reduced quality of life that he suffered during his imprisonment at the Sremska Mitrovica Penal-Correctional Facility between December 1991 and May 1992. In February 1992, this facility housed members of the Croatian National Guard who had been captured in Vukovar in November 1991. Gvozdanović was subjected to daily abuse, mistreatment, beatings, and torture, which left lasting physical and psychological consequences. The Ministry of Defense filed a petition for review with the Supreme Court of Cassation.

In the case *Baričević (Franjo, his wife, son, and daughter) v. Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Serbia and Vojislav Šešelj*, the Higher Court in Belgrade rejected the claim for both non-material and material damages related to the devaluation of their property in Hrtkovci, which they were forced to exchange due to pressures following Šešelj's speech on May 6, 1992, in Hrtkovci. This fact was established by the ICTY in the *Šešelj* case, in which Franjo Baričević testified. The HLC supported the Baričević family in their decision to appeal. The appeal has been submitted and the case is now before the Court of Appeals.

In the *Deportation of Srebrenica Refugees* case, the First Basic Court in Belgrade rejected a lawsuit for damages due to the death of a close family member. Azem Avdić, the plaintiff's father and husband, fled the area of Srebrenica fearing actions by the Army of Republika Srpska, and entered the territory of Serbia, where he was apprehended by the Bajina Bašta police. He was handed over to the Border Police Station, and the commander there transferred him to the Bratunac police, who then delivered him to the Military Police of the VRS Bratunac Brigade. Azem Avdić subsequently disappeared and is still registered as a missing person. The HLC-appointed attorney filed an appeal, and since June 2023 the case has been pending before the Court of Appeals in Belgrade.

Fourteen civil proceedings for damages due to the death of a close relative were conducted before Serbian courts in connection with the crime committed at Ovčara, where on November 21, 1991,



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members of the Vukovar Territorial Defense and the “Leva Supoderica” volunteer unit—both under the former JNA—tortured and executed at least 200 prisoners of war. As of 2023, 11 of these proceedings were completed, with plaintiffs awarded around RSD 16,000,000 in damages. Three cases remain ongoing.

Since 2017, civil proceedings have also been underway in a lawsuit for damages for the deaths of 16 civilians killed between October and December 1991 in Sotin, Croatia. On behalf of 21 individuals, the HLC filed a lawsuit against the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Serbia and two direct perpetrators, Dragan Mitrović and Žarko Milošević. As of now, 20 plaintiffs remain in the case, and the court has awarded 800,000 dinars to 19 of them, and 1,100,000 dinars to one plaintiff. Both the plaintiffs’ attorney and the Ministry of Defense have appealed, and the case is currently before the Court of Appeals in Belgrade.

In 2023, civil lawsuits were also pursued in the *Ana Herman v. Ministry of Defense* and *Lizane Mala v. Ministry of Defense* cases, for non-material damages resulting from the actions of Serbian authorities and institutions toward those convicted of war crimes in which their family members were killed. The HLC based these claims on final judgments from the ICTY in the *Veselin Šljivančanin et al.* and *Šainović et al.* cases. In *Herman v. MoD*, the First Basic Court dismissed the claim, and the plaintiff’s attorney has appealed. The case is now before the Court of Appeals.

In April 2023, the HLC published the report [\*Material Reparations in Civil Compensation Lawsuits – Court Practice in Serbia \(2021–2022\)\*](#), which analyzes the realization of victims’ rights to compensation in civil lawsuits before Serbian courts. The report is based on legal practice in cases where the HLC provided legal representation to victims seeking compensation from the Republic of Serbia. The findings show that political will to acknowledge responsibility for past crimes and to compensate all victims remains absent. Victims and their families are forced to pursue lengthy, expensive, and often uncertain legal proceedings. They are repeatedly required to testify, exposing them to secondary victimization. Court costs are high, creating further barriers to justice for those already recognized as victims. Many proceedings last nearly a decade. Courts and state institutions rarely demonstrate a supportive attitude toward victims. The burden of proof placed on them is excessive, and material law provisions—particularly on the statute of limitations—are interpreted against them in the absence of a final criminal conviction for the war crime. These cumulative burdens discourage victims from pursuing compensation claims against the Republic of Serbia.



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## 4. Memorialisation

Since its founding, the HLC has launched numerous initiatives aimed at commemorating civilian victims of war and preserving memory of them. Among these efforts, the HLC organized the first public testimonies of war crimes victims, where individuals from all parts of the former Yugoslavia shared their experiences. Additionally, the HLC hosted a series of exhibitions that focused on judicially established facts about the past and the everyday lives of people in war-affected areas.

The HLC also co-produced the documentary film *Depth Two*, directed by Ognjen Glavonić. This film reconstructs war crimes committed in Kosovo and illustrates the concealment of the bodies of Albanian civilians in mass graves in Serbia, based on testimonies from the ICTY.

A series of public lectures was conducted, focusing on fact-based findings about crimes committed in Kosovo, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Building on this long-standing experience and expertise, the HLC established its Memorialisation Program in 2019 as the core pillar of the organization's work.

A key component of the program is memory activism, which provides informal education and disseminates judicially established facts about the wars using various media formats. The program also conducts research and analysis on memory politics and publishes commentary on official memorial policies in the region. The HLC places significant emphasis on the digital sphere, aiming to bring comprehensive content about the past to the public through innovative digital tools. These include podcasts, blogs, digital narratives, and curated online collections designed reach broader audiences.

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As part of the podcast *Memory Cultures in Dialogue*, three episodes have been released, addressing the topics of [paramilitary formations](#) in Yugoslav wars, the [teaching of history](#) in Serbia and Croatia concerning the breakup of Yugoslavia, and memories of the [NATO bombing](#) in Serbia.

On the [blog](#) of the same name, six texts have been published. The authors wrote about the following topics: teaching about the wars of the 1990s; the importance of ICTY for post-Yugoslav communities; war commemorations in Croatia in the context of relations with minority populations; young people's knowledge about the wars of the 1990s in Croatia.

During this period, three fellowships were implemented. As part of the project *History Teachers and the Memory of the 1990s*, Rodoljub Jovanović, a PhD candidate at the University of Deusto in Spain, conducted research on the teaching of 1990s history, organized a [public discussion](#) to present his findings, and wrote three texts that were published on the *Memory Cultures in Dialogue* blogspot.

Katarina Damčević, a lecturer at the University of Tartu, Estonia, analyzed the ways in which the Ustaša salutation „Ready for the Homeland” (*Za dom spremni*) is used by politicians and war veterans in Croatia to uphold the narrative of the Homeland War. She published her research findings in the publication [Ready for Wars of Memory: The Case of the HOS Memorial Plaque in Croatia](#) and organized an online discussion titled “[Symbols, Conflicts, and Identities](#)” in March 2023.

Sven Milekić, a PhD candidate in history at Maynooth University in Ireland, collected data on the commemorations of events from 1991, the Erdut Agreement, and the peaceful reintegration in Croatia as part of his fellowship project “Commemorating the Beginning of the War in Croatia 30 Years Later and Analyzing History Teaching on the Topic.” Based on his research, he prepared an analysis titled [Official Commemoration of the War Year 1991 in Croatia: Analysis and Recommendations](#). Milekić also wrote three articles for the *Memory Cultures in Dialogue* blog and organized an online event titled “[War and Peace of the 1990s – Education, Memory, and Youth in Croatia](#)” on September 22, 2023.

In February, the HLC publicly presented the study titled [Media and Revisionism](#). The study analyzes historical revisionism related to the wars of the 1990s as depicted in Serbian media, covering the



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period from the fall of the Milošević regime in 2000 to the present. The report distinguishes between the period up to 2012—when the media often challenged war narratives—and the period after 2012, marked by the rise of revisionist narratives under a new authoritarian government, consolidated within state-controlled media and an increasing share of tabloid press. The study was shared with the public on April 10, 2023, during a discussion in Belgrade. The event featured several notable participants, including the report’s author and researcher at the Institute for Global and European Studies at Leipzig University, Katarina Ristić; journalist and editor of the Peščanik portal, Svetlana Lukić; and BIRN journalist Milica Stojanović.

The HLC also organized a public discussion on February 6, 2023, titled [\*The Past Cannot Heal Us\*](#), which also took place in Belgrade. The event included the contributions from sociologist and Associate Professor at University College Dublin Lea David; historian and Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Recent History of Serbia, Olga Manojlović Pintar; writer and dramatist Filip David; and journalist Bojan Tončić. The discussion was based on findings from a book of the same title and explored how the concept of “moral remembrance” manifests in the post-Yugoslav space, as well as the outcomes of transitional justice efforts more than three decades after the onset of the wars.





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## 5. International Cooperation

From 2014 to 2024, the HLC was a member of the consortium Global Initiative for Justice, Truth and Reconciliation, which brought together nine organizations from the United States, Indonesia, Guatemala, South Africa, the Netherlands, Cambodia, and Serbia. In this capacity, the HLC participated in strengthening the capacities of organizations around the world in areas related to documenting human rights violations and securely storing collected data.

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The HLC participated in eight international projects.

### **Enhancing Sustainability of CSO Digital Archives**

As the lead partner, the HLC coordinated the process of creating a Wiki Manual, organized the [International Conference on Digital Archives of Civil Society Organizations](#) in Belgrade from November 1–3, 2023, edited a publication based on the presentations and proposals from the conference, and produced 14 video interviews with conference participants and about the conference itself.

### **Truth Telling through Digital Narratives**

The HLC coordinated a project that included organizing two training sessions on truth-telling, data verification, digital security, and using WordPress for eight participant organizations from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Turkey, Lebanon, Guinea, Iraq, and Indonesia. After the sessions, HLC mentored three organizations in creating digital narratives and helped develop a technical manual for this purpose.

### **Transitional Justice Tools to Address Radicalism and Violent Extremism**

The HLC mentored two organizations from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina on small sub-granting projects. It organized a virtual roundtable from November 13–15, 2023, showcasing two [case studies](#) and several small projects. Additionally, the HLC prepared a policy proposal summarizing six case studies and organized the final project [webinar](#) on January 18, 2024.

### **South Sudan Human Rights Documentation Initiative**

The HLC contributed to this project by conducting trainings on war crimes databases and the secure storage and preservation of documentation, as well as participating in workshops on public advocacy organized within the project.

### **Colombia Repositories Program**

The HLC developed a platform for documenting attacks on non-governmental activists in Colombia, which will be used by local civil society organizations.

### **HRDI Sudan**

The HLC developed platforms for documenting human rights violations in that country.

### **Violence Prevention in Guinea – CONAREG Website and Digital Archive**

The HLC participated in developing an online media center and archive related to human rights violations in Guinea, designed for the national coalition of civil society organizations and victim associations CONAREG.

### **Rohingya Oral History Archive: Enhancing Sustainability of CSO Digital Archives**

The HLC helped develop a repository and database containing statements and testimonies from Rohingya refugees.



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## 6. Outreach

Since its establishment in 1992, the HLC has actively informed the public about its activities and developments in the field of transitional justice through press releases, publications, conferences, and public debates. To date, it has published over 100 materials in its *Under Scrutiny*, *Documents*, and *Dossiers* series, as well as various analyses and reports. Key tools for communicating with the broader public are the HLC's website, specialized portals, and social media channels.

Since 2012, the HLC has organized Transitional Justice Schools, which bring together participants from Serbia and other post-Yugoslav countries. More than 400 young people have participated in the HLC's educational programs to date.

Additionally, the HLC maintains a specialized library dedicated to collecting and preserving materials related to transitional justice, dealing with the past, humanitarian law, as well as history, sociology, and related fields. The library contains over 6,200 titles and is integrated into the COBISS electronic bibliographic and library database.

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### ***Presentations, Debates and Conferences***

In March, the HLC published and presented to the public its 15th [dossier](#) on suspected perpetrators of war crimes during the wars in the former Yugoslavia, titled *Serbian Volunteer Guard*. The dossier outlines the facts about the former paramilitary unit, its involvement in crimes committed during the armed conflicts in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the offenses committed by its members, and the names of those involved. The public launch of the dossier included a discussion with participation of the then-HLC Executive Director Ivana Žanić, Filip Švarn—the chief editor of the weekly *Vreme*—and the HLC researcher and dossier author Jovana Kolarić.

In April, in Belgrade, the [report](#) *Material Reparations in Civil Litigation for Compensation – Practices of Serbian Courts in the Period 2021–2022* was published and publicly presented. This report analyzed the course of ongoing judicial proceedings for reparations in Serbia during 2021 and 2022. The speakers included Ivana Žanić from HLC, lawyer Mihailo Pavlović, author of the publication and Igor Matijašević, a representative of the families of the victims from Sotin (Croatia).

In April, a [discussion](#) on the responsibility of the media in Serbia for supporting historical revisionism was held in Belgrade. The conversation, based on research findings published in the publication *Media and Revisionism*, featured Katarina Ristić, researcher at the Institute for Global and European Studies at the University of Leipzig and author of the paper; Svetlana Lukić, journalist and editor of the portal *Peščanik*; and Milica Stojanović, journalist of the Balkan Investigative Research Network.

At a [conference](#) held in Belgrade in May, the annual *Report on War Crimes Trials in Serbia during 2022* was presented. The event featured Ivo Josipović, former President of Croatia and law professor at the University of Zagreb; Marina Kljaić, the legal representative of the victims; and Ivana Žanić from HLC.

The conference “[Enhancing Sustainability of Civil Society Organizations for Digital Archiving](#)” brought together practitioners from around the world in Belgrade to exchange ideas and experiences in developing digital archives dedicated to documenting systematic and mass human rights violations.

### ***Press Releases***

Through 18 press releases, the public in Serbia has been informed about developments in judicial proceedings against those accused of war crimes and efforts to secure compensation for victims. These



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press releases have also reminded the public of important events from the war period and the suffering of victims, and have criticised actions by state representatives that undermine the reconciliation process and shirk institutional accountability for the crimes committed.

### ***Publications***

Four publications were released: *Report on War Crimes Trials in Serbia in 2022*; *Dossier: Serbian Volunteer Guard*; *Material Reparations in Civil Compensation Lawsuits – Court Practice in Serbia (2021–2022)*; and the study *Media and Revisionism*.

### ***Internet Presentations***

The [HLC website](#) recorded 258,084 visits, including 85,050 unique visitors. Throughout the year, the website published 18 press releases, 13 news articles, four publications, and 26 updates in relation to transitional justice in Serbia and post-Yugoslav region. Additionally, the initiative to create a new website was launched.

The [Zona \(Ne\)odgovornosti portal](#) received 26,533 visits, with 19,558 unique visitors.

The [Memory Cultures in Dialogue](#) portal was visited 153,546 times by 35,103 unique visitors.

The [RECOM portal](#) was visited 225,039 times, including 73,493 unique visitors.

By the end of 2023, HLC's social media channels reached a total of društvene mreže FHP-a pratilo je ukupno 10.653 followers – which includes 5,403 on Facebook, 4,562 on X, and 729 on Instagram.

### ***Library***

The HLC Library was enriched with 67 new titles.