

Memory Politics of the 1990s Wars in Serbia:

HISTORICAL REVISIONISM AND
CHALLENGES OF MEMORY ACTIVISM



Humanitarian Law Center

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Abstract

Since 2012, when the Serbian Progressive Party came to power, the wars of the 1990s became the focal point of the official memory politics and crucial for the political legitimacy of the SNS government. The populist discourse of the return of the national pride is central to state-sponsored memory work, arguing that the previous governments and international community coerced the Serbian nation to feel ashamed about its heroes and victims of the 1990s wars. The current regime uses the fact that the previous governments did not focus on the 1990s in their memory politics as a demarcation line and source of legitimacy. Because of the SNS and their political allies, the Serbian people are finally allowed and able, as the dominant narrative claims, to remember their heroes and victims with pride. The government builds its political legitimacy on its commitment to the industry of memory, which involves large-scale commemorations, usage of media technologies, cultural production and new ways of disseminating the dominant narratives.

This paper analyses the memory politics of the 1990s wars and outlines the problem of historical revisionism in contemporary Serbia from the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević until today. The first section of the paper offers an overview of the memory of the 1990s wars during the first decade after the fall of Milošević. The expectations from the democratic changes quickly turned into disappointment as the new state authorities showed the lack of willingness to confront the questions of guilt and responsibility of Serbia and its forces during the 1990s wars. Various patterns of denial and relativisations are analysed. The central part of the paper focuses on the period since 2012 and populist state-sponsored memory politics. To facilitate a better understanding of the war narratives, commemorative practices and the emergence of the 1990s wars in official memory politics, the paper explains the main characteristics of populist memory politics. The paper proceeds to analyse the interpretation of the 1990s as liberation wars, the national program of commemorations and the industry of memory, focusing mainly on Operation Storm, the Kosovo war and NATO bombing of Yugoslavia as the focal points of official memory politics. The final section concludes with a brief outlook on memory activism and its challenges in facing the industry of memory from above.

1. Introduction

On 9 May 2019, Serbia celebrated Victory Day in the Second World War with a military parade in Niš, initially planned to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the beginning of the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia on 24 March. After President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić asked the Ministry of Defence and the police to postpone the event, the organisers rescheduled the parade to Victory Day as a more appropriate occasion for showcasing Serbia's military power.¹ In addition to the military parade, the celebration of Victory Day involved the march of the Immortal Regiment through the city. The participants carried portraits of their family members who had died during the Second World War and in the 1990s wars in former Yugoslavia. The images of the soldiers killed in the 1990s were not the only reference to the wars that followed the dissolution of Yugoslavia, and the war in Kosovo in particular. The plan was that the memorial procession would pass one of the boulevards at 12:44 PM, "the time symbolic of the number of the resolution that guarantees the territorial sovereignty of Serbia over Kosovo"²

General Vladimir Lazarević led the 2019 Immortal Regiment procession and was the keynote speaker at the celebration. In 2004, Lazarević was sentenced by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) to 14 years in prison for crimes against humanity – specifically, against Albanians during the war in Kosovo. He was released in 2015.³ Lazarević was not at this Victory Day parade accidentally or as just one of the participants in the procession, he was the most important guest, as the deputy mayor of Niš Miloš Bandur emphasised.⁴

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- 1 Jelena Canić Milovanović, 'Pripreme u Nišu počele, pa vojna parada odložena', Južne vesti, 18 March 2019, <https://www.juznevesti.com/Drushtvo/Pripreme-u-Nisu-pocеле-pa-vojna-parada-odložena.sr.html>; B. Janačković, 'IZVAĐENE BANDERE, ASFALTIRAJU "OSTRVA" Kako se Niš sprema za vojnu paradu za 20. godišnjicu bombardovanja', Blic, 19 March 2019, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/drustvo/izvadjene-bandere-asfaltiraju-ost-rva-kako-se-nis-sprema-za-vojnu-paradu-za-20/v0vmg58>.
 - 2 'Sutra u Nišu maršira "Besmrtni puk"', *Gradski Portal 018* (blog), 8 May 2019, <https://gradskiportal018.rs/2019/05/08/sutra-u-nisu-marsira-besmrtni-puk/>.
 - 3 'Osudeni general Lazarević predvodio „Besmrtni puk“ u Nišu: Na Dan pobede nad fašizmom, Srbija promovise ratne zločince', *Insajder*, 9 May 2019, [//insajder.net/sr/sajt/vazno/14379/](https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/vazno/14379/).
 - 4 'Sutra u Nišu maršira "Besmrtni puk"'.

General Lazarević depicted the Immortal Regiment as standing for freedom-loving patriotism, regardless of the strength of the attacking enemy, as demonstrated in Serbian history from the anti-Ottoman uprisings to the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia.⁵ The 2019 Immortal Regiment march in Niš was not the first time that military figures in the armed conflicts of the 1990s have taken leading positions in the commemorations of the victory against fascism in the Second World War. In 2014, General Ljubiša Diković led the military parade. General Diković was the Chief of the General Staff of the Serbian Armed Forces at the time, officially and widely considered a hero of the Kosovo war. The government decorated Diković for the military parade with a gold award plaque of the Ministry of Defence.⁶ As a sentenced war criminal speaking at a Victory Day celebration of antifascism, General Lazarević embodies the contradictory populist memory politics of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and its political allies, who have been in power since 2012.

The intertwined commemoration of Victory Day and the anniversary of the NATO bombing illuminates the convolutions of official memory politics in contemporary Serbia. In 2012, the SNS came to power with its coalition partners, including the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS). Since then, Serbia has experienced a decline of democracy and a parallel rise of the right-wing populist and revisionist discourses that form the basis of state-sponsored memory politics. As a result, the current regime invests enormous efforts in the sphere of memory politics, with a particular focus on the 1990s wars.

During the first decade after the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević in 2000, there was no clear memory politics regarding the 1990s wars. While state officials laid wreaths or gave statements to the media on the occasions of particular anniversaries, they centred on the revision of the Second World War and socialist Yugoslavia. Thus, there was no single master commemorative narrative about the 1990s wars. At the same time, the political elites did not separate themselves from the politics that accompanied the waging of the wars during the 1990s, and public recognition of Serbian responsibility or acknowledgement of the suffering of non-Serb victims did not happen. Furthermore, the SPS quickly returned as one of the most potent political parties in the country.

5 Beta, "Besmrtni puk" prošetao kroz Niš, na čelu kozaci i general Lazarević, NI, 9 May 2019, <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/a482438-Besmrtni-puk-prosetao-kroz-Nis-na-celu-kozaci-i-general-Lazarevic/>.

6 'Dodeljene nagrade za „Korak pobednika”', RTK, 19 December 2014, <https://www.rtk.rs/57461/urucene-nagrade-za-korak-pobednika/>.

After the SNS came to power in 2012, the wars of the 1990s became the central theme of the state-sponsored memory politics, alongside to the Second World War. The state actors utilised the fact that the previous governments had failed to confront the past as the foundation for their political legitimacy and to draw the line between themselves and their predecessors. In this way, the SNS regime was seen to have restored pride to the Serbian nation, with the argument that politicians and the international community had previously forced Serbs to be ashamed of their heroes and victims in the 1990s wars, while now they were finally to be allowed and enabled to remember them with pride.

The memory politics of the SNS regime functions within the framework of populism, and it centres on the dichotomy of heroism and victimhood. Serbian heroes and victims are the central themes of the official memory politics based on the populist discourse of the glorious past and national pride. The heroes are the Serbian armed forces, including convicted war criminals, and the only victims in the Serbian culture of remembrance are the Serbian ones.

The political actors are conscientiously promoting the changes in the memory politics and culture around the 1990s wars, and fully aware of the meaning and importance of these concepts for the present and future. Therefore, they have created an industry of memory where commemorations travel; they are broadcast and streamed live, high-budget documentaries and feature films are made about the events of the 1990s and the state finances publications about the memory of the combatants, and mandates commemorative public classes in schools.

The period of SNS rule represents a turn in memory politics towards embracing the 1990s wars and establishing a central master narrative. However, the critical analysis of this period must not omit the problematic relationship to the 1990s wars in the decade after the fall of Milošević when the Democratic Party and its coalition partners ruled Serbia. The first decade of the 2000s was also the period of the full political rehabilitation of the SPS. In other words, the critique of recent trends in memory culture and politics in Serbia must not turn into the idealisation of the period between the fall of Milošević and the SNS coming to power.

This paper analyses the memory politics of the 1990s wars and outlines the problem of historical revisionism in contemporary Serbia from the overthrow of Milošević until

today. The first section of the paper offers an overview of the memory of the 1990s wars during the first decade after the fall of Milošević. The expectations from the democratic changes quickly turned into disappointment as the new state authorities showed a lack of willingness to confront the questions of the guilt and responsibility of Serbia and its forces during the 1990s wars. Various patterns of denial and relativisations are analysed. The central part of the paper focuses on the period since 2012 and populist state-sponsored memory politics. To facilitate a better understanding of the war narratives, commemorative practices and emergence of the 1990s wars in official memory politics, we first outline the main characteristics of populist memory politics. The paper proceeds to analyse the interpretation of the 1990s as “liberation wars”, the national programme of commemorations and the industry of memory, focusing mainly on Operation Storm, the Kosovo war and NATO bombing of Yugoslavia as the focal points of official memory politics. The final section concludes with a brief outlook on memory activism and its challenges in facing the government-sponsored industry of memory.

2. Failed Expectations after The Overthrow of Slobodan Milošević

The wars that followed the dissolution of socialist Yugoslavia did not constitute a prominent theme in the official memory politics in the first years after the ousting of Slobodan Milošević in 2000. The political actors who came to power after 2000 had a unique opportunity to make a clean break and draw the line between themselves and the previous regime. They could have established new historical narratives, institutions, and policies that would constitute a separation from the previous government and overcome the violent past and legacies of the wartime 1990s.⁷ This did not happen. Beyond a few symbolic steps in a positive direction, the state officials did not show the motivation to confront the violent past of the 1990s, deal with the issues of responsibility and guilt and acknowledge the suffering of non-Serb victims.

The problematic relationship to the 1990s wars and the ignored and unresolved question of Serbia's complicity and responsibility have their foundations in the 1990s. Then, the regime of Slobodan Milošević used propaganda and violence against its political opposition and everyone who wanted to expose the truth about the ongoing wars.⁸ Milošević's regime directly silenced the public, the opposition, the media and the activists, but the

7 Jelena Subotić, *Hijacked Justice: Dealing with the Past in the Balkans* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 2009), 41.

8 Jelena Obradović-Wochnik, 'The "Silent Dilemma" of Transitional Justice: Silencing and Coming to Terms with the Past in Serbia', *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 7, no. 2 (2013): 331.

governments subsequent to his overthrow continued to do this indirectly by “not creating conditions under which speaking about the past is welcomed”.⁹ As a result, after 5 October 2000, “the public sphere did not transform into an arena that encouraged debate”, and critical discussion about the past mostly remained ignored and limited to civil society.¹⁰

After 2000, the optimistic expectations from the democratic changes quickly turned into disappointment when “it became clear that the newly emerged political elites were deeply and inextricably linked to the politics of the 1990s”.¹¹ The public officials of the Milošević era and the cadre of the SPS did not disappear on 5 October. Particularly between October 2000 and the formation of the government of Zoran Đinđić the following year, the continuities with the old regime were evident in the ministries, and the state security and military and police structures. The gradual rise of the SPS in the political life of Serbia culminated in 2008 when the DS and SPS signed the Declaration of Political Reconciliation that promoted the ideas of moving on and overcoming the conflicts from the past.¹² The declaration further cemented the ignoring and of the human rights violations committed by the Serbian military, police and paramilitary forces.

In the immediate post-Milošević years, the political actors invested strenuous efforts in institutional memory work.¹³ However, the official memory politics focused on revising the Second World War and socialist Yugoslavia, perceiving and condemning Slobodan Milošević as an ideological successor of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia and the last communist ruler of Serbia. Through such a retrospective lens, in looking at the 1990s, the political elites could represent themselves as the liberators of Serbia from communism and the carriers of democratic transition.¹⁴ At the same time, however, there was no political will for a critical reflection on the ethnonationalist politics and wars waged by the previous regime.

9 Obradović-Wochnik, 338.

10 Obradović-Wochnik, 331.

11 Lea David, 'Fragmentation as a Silencing Strategy: Serbian War Veterans against the State of Serbia', *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 2, no. 1 (2015): 59.

12 'Deklaracija o pomirenju DS i SPS', Peščanik, 2008, <https://pescanik.net/deklaracija-o-pomirenju-ds-i-sps/>; Eric Gordy, *Guilt, Responsibility, and Denial: The Past at Stake in Post-Milosevic Serbia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 94.

13 Brian Conway, *Commemoration and Bloody Sunday: Pathways of Memory*, Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2010).

14 Jelena Đureinović, *The Politics of Memory of the Second World War in Contemporary Serbia: Collaboration, Resistance and Retribution* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 6.

During the first decade after the ousting of Milošević, the state actors did not want to deal with the 1990s because it was “politically undesirable, as it would alienate huge segments of society”.¹⁵ Thus, “all Serbian governments, from the very beginning have looked for ways to silence public debate regarding the wars of the 1990s, rather than accept any responsibility”.¹⁶ The post-Milošević governments “put the entire enterprise of justice back into the service of nationalist ideology”, rejected the trials before the ICTY as illegitimate, and even provided “those indicted with generous legal budgets, helped coordinate their criminal defence, and offered long-term guaranteed financial assistance to their families”.¹⁷ Although the civil society brought the facts and many initiatives for taking responsibility for the misconduct during the 1990s wars to the fore, “the Serbian governments never took full, or even partial, responsibility for their part in these wars, consistently refusing to engage in any publicly transparent reckoning with the past”.¹⁸

15 David, 'Fragmentation as a Silencing Strategy', 59.

16 David, 60.

17 Subotić, *Hijacked Justice*, 5.

18 David, 'Fragmentation as a Silencing Strategy', 59.

3. Patterns of Denial in Serbia

The memory politics of the 1990s wars in Serbia consist of several frames of remembrance that dominate society. The hegemonic image of the wars involves numerous strategies and patterns of denial and relativisation present at the state level of memory work and in society. One of these frames and strategies is the claim that Serbia did not participate in any of the wars and that there was no war in the territory of Serbia. Furthermore, the guilt and responsibility for genocide and other human rights violations during the wars are externalised to the Army of Republika Srpska in the case of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, or to Serb paramilitaries or the opposing sides in the war. Besides the direct denial of genocide and war crimes, there are multiple levels and approaches to the question of responsibility that range from celebration of war crimes and their perpetrators to transference and relativisation. When it comes to the victims of the 1990s wars, the Serbian culture of remembrance focuses exclusively on the Serb victims, completely ignoring the non-Serb victims of the crimes perpetrated by the Serb forces.

Several main types or patterns of narratives about the 1990s wars dominated the period between 2000 and 2012, but they can also be found in the 1990s and are also part of today's official memory politics. One of the central narratives is that Serbia did not participate in the wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, externalising the guilt and responsibility to paramilitaries, Serbs from outside of Serbia or, in conspiracy theory mode, to the other side and the international community. For instance, "there has been a tendency to blame the atrocities, allegedly committed by Serbia, on the paramilitary formations, as if it had nothing to do with official Serbian policy".¹⁹ In the case of the Srebrenica genocide, an element of genocide denial in Serbia is to be found in the externalisation of responsibility to the Army of Republika Srpska and the claim that Serbia did not have anything to do with it. Another dominant frame of memory of the 1990s is that there was no war in Serbia and that the wars took place outside of its territory. However, a series of war crimes

¹⁹ David, 60.

and human rights violations took place on the territory of Serbia between 1991 and 2001, leaving many sites of war crimes, persecution, confinements, enforced disappearances, mass graves and paramilitary unit camps still unmarked and unremembered to this day.²⁰ In addition to the frames of denial, the process of general relativisation keeps the entire issue of responsibility in Serbia obscured by the fact that even if forces controlled and financed by the Serbian government committed the largest share of crimes, they were not the only forces to commit crimes.²¹

The problems of “denial and responsibility have been at the heart of what the anti-war and memory activists in Serbia have been confronting with their actions and claims”.²² In his book on guilt and responsibility in Serbia, Eric Gordy differentiates between numerous forms and approaches to responsibility, that stretch from the celebration of crime to various strategies of avoidance and relativisation. The most notable examples of the celebration of war crimes are the glorification of Ratko Mladić as a hero and the chanting of the slogan “nož, žica, Srebrenica” (knife, wire, Srebrenica) and other chants that encourage or celebrate ethnic violence against non-Serbs.²³ While such gestures are usually only a fringe phenomenon, they resonate in Serbia because their “frequent recurrence suggests either that no successful strategy to control it has been adopted or that it is widely tolerated”.²⁴ Additionally, “there is a fundamental homology between the slogans and sentiments expressed by far-right fringe groups and the stances advanced by state media and through educational institutions under the regime that was in power up to 2000”.²⁵ The DS-led government or the current SNS regime have not openly celebrated the genocide in Srebrenica or glorified Ratko Mladić as a Serbian hero. However, they have maintained a culture of remembrance that tolerates and normalises genocide denial and celebration of war criminals. In the case of the SNS regime, many of its representatives used to be openly fervent supporters of Ratko Mladić, and their current memory politics encourages the celebration of genocide and its perpetrators.

20 Youth Initiative for Human Rights, War in Serbia, accessed 6 September 2021, <https://ratusrbiji.rs/en/>.

21 Gordy, *Guilt, Responsibility, and Denial*, 20.

22 Orli Fridman, “Too Young to Remember Determined Not to Forget”: Memory Activists Engaging With Returning ICTY Convicts, *International Criminal Justice Review* 28, no. 4 (2018): 426.

23 Gordy, *Guilt, Responsibility, and Denial*, 90.

24 Gordy, 91.

25 Gordy, 91.

As opposed to the celebration of war crimes, other forms of denial and distortion are more common and appear in public discourses in Serbia almost daily. In his analysis, Gordy recognises pure denial and impure avoidance, the former being the assertion that nothing took place for which any person might be held guilty or responsible, and the latter manifesting as the relativisation, dismissal or minimisation of events.²⁶ In addition to these forms of denial, there is “metadenial”, which denies that things are being denied “and correspondingly claims that accusations are rampant”.²⁷

Transference represents another issue in the memory of the 1990s wars at the official level. It can function as avoidance, where the establishment and acceptance of the individual guilt of specific perpetrators allow bystanders and former supporters of the institutions involved in crimes to be absolved by the direct attribution of the crimes to their perpetrators.²⁸ Transference as avoidance is related to the problem of limited accountability, and the question whether the trials against a few individuals really release everybody else from the need to confront what these individuals did in their names. The perpetrators of war crimes and human rights violations in the name of the Serbian nation would not have been able to commit these crimes if they had not had a certain level of popular support or if they were not successful in using popular ideas about the identity and interests of the nation as a pretext.²⁹ Another related issue is transference as a ritual apology and whether anything concrete is accomplished by such apologies, especially if we consider that there have been many apologies extended from all sides since 2000.³⁰

There are a variety of approaches to guilt and responsibility or their avoidance, and they are widely spread across Serbian society and do not only concern state officials and official memory politics. This issue is exemplified in the “*Tu Quoque fallacy*”, which involves responding to mentions of crimes committed by Serbian forces with the argument about the systematic ignoring of crimes against Serbs, and that these crimes are worse and more extensive than the crimes against other groups. Colloquially, we can summarise this argument as: “And what about what they did to us?”. One example of this is the counter-

26 Gordy, 91–92.

27 Gordy, 93.

28 Gordy, 97.

29 Gordy, 98.

30 Gordy, 99.

commemoration of Serb victims in villages in the vicinity of Srebrenica around the time of the anniversary of the genocide. Among the numerous other strategies of denial or avoidance of responsibility are placing particular crimes in the broader context of all crimes during that particular war, all 1990s wars, or all wars of recent history. Of a similar generalising nature, there is the frequently encountered position that we do not know everything about the 1990s wars with certainty, and that we cannot accept the existing evidence with absolute confidence; therefore, there is space for doubt and alternative narratives about the wars.³¹ Such an approach deliberately ignores or delegitimises the vast amounts of evidence about the wartime events gathered by the ICTY and the various documentation initiatives that have existed since the early 1990s.

The patterns of denial outlined above imply that there is little or no acknowledgement or respect for the victims of Serbian armed forces in the context of the official memory politics and broader memory culture of the 1990s wars in Serbia. Victimhood in the 1990s wars is reserved exclusively for the Serbian victims, with the 1995 military-police operation Storm in Croatia and the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in focus. However, the emphasis on Serbian victimhood does not mean that the victims are officially commemorated or offered specific rights or benefits. Due to the discriminatory legislation, the official status of civilian victim of war is impossible for most victim groups. Nor were the victims of the 1990s wars commemorated at the state level in the first decade after the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević, as the official memory politics did not focus on the 1990s. After 2012, the change in the official memory politics brought Operation Storm and the beginning of the NATO bombing to the forefront, with large-scale commemorations broadcast live on the internet and national television. Nevertheless, the turn towards commemorations has not improved the status of the civilian victims of Operation Storm and the NATO bombing.

31 Gordy, 110.

4. Populism and Memory Politics

Serbia has undergone “the authoritarian turn” since the SNS came to power in 2012.³² With the consolidation of power under the leadership of current president Aleksandar Vučić, Serbia has “reverted to more authoritarian rule”, after over a decade of democratisation following the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević in 2000.³³ However, the legacies of Milošević’s authoritarian regime persisted, and the democratisation was marked by the government’s failure “to decisively break with authoritarian practices and establish independent and democratic institutions, thus facilitating the return of competitive authoritarian regimes”.³⁴ The SNS regime is a hybrid regime – it is functioning within a formally democratic system whilst imposing patterns of rule that at the same time erode and bypass democratic institutions.³⁵ This type of hybrid regime, “neither democratic nor fully authoritarian”, can be termed illiberal democracy or competitive authoritarianism.³⁶ The authoritarian turn is not a specificity of Serbia, and it reflects many countries of the region and the global crisis of democracy.

Both Milošević’s “rump” Yugoslavia and present-day Serbia can be approached from the same perspective, if we understand competitive authoritarianism as a regime where “formal democratic institutions exist and are widely viewed as the primary means of gaining power, but in which incumbents’ abuse of the state places them at a significant advantage vis-à-vis their opponents”.³⁷ Of course, the two regimes share many similarities, including the continuity of political actors in power and narratives and interpretations of the 1990s

32 Florian Bieber, *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*, New Perspectives on South-East Europe (London: Palgrave Pivot, 2020), 62.

33 Bieber, 34.

34 Florian Bieber, ‘Patterns of Competitive Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans’, *East European Politics* 34, no. 3 (2018): 337.

35 Bieber, *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*, 7.

36 Damir Kapidžić, ‘The Rise of Illiberal Politics in Southeast Europe’, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 20, no. 1 (2020): 4.

37 Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 5.

wars and other historical events. The importance of the 1990s for today's political context is that the decade "provided an important template and structural features that facilitated the increasing authoritarianism in recent years".³⁸ At the same time, the equation of these two periods of authoritarianism, or the construction of the post-2012 time as the continuation of the identical politics after a decade of democratic interlude is not fruitful for understanding the specificities and dynamics of memory politics.

The populist political discourses underlie the authoritarian democracy of the SNS and their coalition partners, and they constitute the basis of the official memory politics about the 1990s wars. The ambivalences and convolutions of memory politics arise from the populist element in the dominant political discourses. Populism aims at constructing and defining "the people", and the question of who belongs to "the people" involves "constructing powerful myths that draw on the collective memory of an imagined past".³⁹

For the purposes of analysing memory politics in this paper, populism is understood as "a discourse, an ideology or a worldview".⁴⁰ Populism represents a "thin-centred ideology",⁴¹ and its thin-centred nature is why populism often intertwines with other ideological elements that are incompatible with right-wing populism in their essence. However, these contradictory elements are essential for appealing to broader audiences. The thin-centred characteristics and ideological incoherence of populism result in "a mixed bag of beliefs, stereotypes, attitudes and related programs which aim to address and mobilise a range of equally contradictory segments of the electorate".⁴² This feature of populism is crucial for understanding memory politics and its inconsistencies and contradictions, such as the shoulder-to-shoulder celebration in Niš of the of Second World War antifascists and sentenced war criminals of the 1990s mentioned at the beginning of this paper.

38 Bieber, *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*, 2.

39 Anna Cento Bull, 'The Role of Memory in Populist Discourse: The Case of the Italian Second Republic', *Patterns of Prejudice* 50, no. 3 (2016): 217.

40 Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 5.

41 Mudde and Kaltwasser, 6.

42 Ruth Wodak and Majid KhosraviNik, 'Dynamics of Discourse and Politics in Right-Wing Populism in Europe and Beyond: An Introduction', in *Right-Wing Populism in Europe: Politics and Discourse*, by Ruth Wodak, Majid KhosraviNik, and Brigitte Mral (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), xvii.

In their selective view of historical events and actors, the populists interpret “the people” as either heroes or victims of evil.⁴³ The interpretation of the past through the narrow and dichotomist lens of heroes and victims is one of the main characteristics of Serbia’s memory politics, while “many horrific skeletons” in the cupboard of the national history are ignored and denied.⁴⁴

43 Ruth Wodak, ‘Final Commentary: Learning from the Past(s)? Contesting Hegemonic Memories’, in *European Memory in Populism: Representations of Self and Other*, by Chiara De Cesari and Ayhan Kaya (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 280.

44 Wodak, 281.

5. The Return of The National Pride: Memory Politics since 2012

As previously outlined, there was no clear official memory politics about the wars of the 1990s during the first decade after the fall of Milošević. The state officials occasionally laid wreaths for the Serb victims on particular anniversaries, and they gave statements and comments for media, but they did not engage in an elaborate memory work on the 1990s wars. The lack of an all-encompassing memory policy does not mean that the state actors had no attitude towards the armed conflicts of the 1990s. On the contrary, the state officials chose not to clearly separate themselves from the politics of the 1990s, and failed to admit the responsibility of Serbia and recognise the suffering of the non-Serb victims. However, they did not invest strenuous efforts in constructing a central narrative about the wars and disseminating it across Serbian society.

After 2012 and particularly since Aleksandar Vučić became president in 2014, the wars of the 1990s have become the focal point of the official memory politics and crucial for the political legitimacy of the SNS government. The recent transformation of Serbian memory politics can be understood as part of the populist turn, as is evident in the changes and novelties in commemorative narratives and practices. Like the populist ideology in general, the memory politics based on populism is contradictory and merges seemingly incompatible historical events and actors, from the communist and multi-ethnic Partisans to the war criminals of the 1990s, as exemplified in Vladimir Lazarević's appearance at the Victory Day procession in Niš. As a result, Serbian military history amalgamates with the concept of liberation wars, the foundation of hegemonic narratives and a blueprint for populist memory politics that interpret the national history through the lens of heroes and

victims, and bravery and innocence. The 1990s wars are a critical aspect of the liberation wars narrative. The Serbian army is crucial in this context because the dominant narratives revolve around it as a righteous and heroic entity, thus reinforcing the all-encompassing militarisation of commemorative practices.

5.1. The 1990s wars as the liberation wars

The transformation of the official memory politics at the narrative level concerns the turn towards fully embracing the 1990s wars. The return of national pride is the central discourse that the government builds its memory work upon, arguing that previous governments and the international community coerced the Serbian nation into feeling ashamed about its heroes and victims of the 1990s wars. The current regime uses the fact that the previous governments did not focus on the 1990s in their memory politics as a demarcation line and source of legitimacy. Because of the SNS and their political allies, the Serbian people are finally allowed and able, as the dominant narrative claims, to remember their heroes and victims with pride. In other words, the government builds its political legitimacy precisely on its creation of an industry of memory.

The dichotomy of heroism and victimhood represents the basis of the dominant narratives about the past. The concept of the liberation wars of Serbia points to the heroic aspect of this mnemonic dichotomy and forms the basis of the memory politics of the SNS, SPS and their political allies. The idea emerged in the 1990s, but has become more relevant since 2012. The focus on heroes and victims implies deliberately leaving out the dark episodes of the national history, such as collaboration during the Second World War and responsibility for war crimes and genocide during the 1990s. The liberation wars of Serbia exist officially as a concept in a governmental committee for the preservation of their memory and the national calendar that this board has adopted, a blueprint of the official memory politics.

The Board for the Preservation of Traditions of the Liberation Wars of Serbia came into being already in 1997 as an inter-ministerial committee in charge of initiating, coordinating, advising and following various forms of memory work and observing existing and newly

created memorials.⁴⁵ The Board's existence, activities, and public presence became evident to the public from 2013 when it started publishing statements and announcements of upcoming commemorations. The Serbian media have increasingly mentioned the Board as the organiser of commemorations and reported about its meetings.⁴⁶ The Board is responsible for a commemorative programme of events and persons related to the liberation wars. The State Programme for Commemorating the Anniversaries of Historic Events of the Serbian Liberation Wars, the programme's official name, describes "the significant anniversaries, commemorative days, national and religious holidays, as well as important Serbian personalities, together with a brief description of why specific days are commemorated and exhaustive explanations of the protocol for each of them".⁴⁷ The most recent versions of the programme were passed in 2009, 2013 and 2016.⁴⁸ The programme is essentially the national calendar that the memory agents had mainly ignored during the 1990s and early 2000s. In the authoritarian democracy which is Serbia today, the programme represents the base of the official memory politics and illuminates how populism narrates history.

The 2009 programme lists historical events, including the 1389 Battle of Kosovo, the anti-Ottoman uprisings, and other 19th century dates important for Serbian statehood, and First and Second World War events, along with the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia. After 2012, the government added more dates related to the 1990s wars, focusing on the war in Croatia, the NATO bombing and the Kosovo war. When it comes to the war in Croatia, the only event on the calendar is Operation Storm. The programme calls it an aggression without reference to the broader context of the war and the events that preceded the Croatian military-police operation that ended the war. In addition to 24

45 'Odluka o osnivanju Odbora za negovanje tradicija oslobodilačkih ratova Srbije', 38/97, 46/01 Službeni glasnik Republike Srbije § (n.d.).

46 Tanjug, 'Sednica Odbora za negovanje tradicija oslobodilačkih ratova', Blic, 5 June 2015, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/drustvo/sednica-odbora-za-negovanje-tradicija-oslobodilackih-ratova/dtwd992>.

47 Lea David, 'Impression Management of a Contested Past: Serbia's Evolving National Calendar', *Memory Studies* 7, no. 4 (2014): 477.

48 Odbor za negovanje tradicija oslobodilačkih ratova Srbije, 'Državni program obeležavanja godišnjica istorijskih događaja oslobodilačkih ratova Srbije' (Vlada Republike Srbije, 11 March 2009); Odbor za negovanje tradicija oslobodilačkih ratova Srbije, 'Državni program obeležavanja godišnjica istorijskih događaja oslobodilačkih ratova Srbije' (Vlada Republike Srbije, 2013); Odbor za negovanje tradicija oslobodilačkih ratova Srbije, 'Državni program obeležavanja godišnjica istorijskih događaja oslobodilačkih ratova Srbije' (Vlada Republike Srbije, 16 December 2016).

March, 7 May also became the Day of Remembrance of the Civilian Victims of the NATO bombing. The state commemorates the Battle of Košare on 14 June, when it ended, with the programme referring to Kosovo as “our territory” and the Army of Yugoslavia as “our army”. In a similar manner to the entry about Operation Storm, the Battle of Košare description emphasises that its end led to the withdrawal of the Army of Yugoslavia from Kosovo, resulting in the emigration of 250 000 people of predominantly Serbian nationality from Kosovo.⁴⁹ There is no mention of the broader context of the war and the human rights violations committed by the Army of Yugoslavia, and Serbian police and paramilitaries against Kosovo Albanians. The programme emphasises its educational purpose and offers a list of thematic school classes for various anniversaries, including the beginning of the NATO bombing.⁵⁰

The introduction represents the programme of commemorations as one of the crucial state documents through which “the Republic of Serbia entirely rejects every relativisation of crimes committed against innocent civilians in the past, attempts at historical revisionism and rehabilitation of political organisations, armed units and individuals responsible for the crimes committed”.⁵¹ However, the way in which the programme describes the historical events and everything the government does within memory politics contradicts these claims. The official memory politics of the 1990s wars relativise or deny crimes committed against innocent civilians by the Serbian armed forces and glorify war criminals. Historical revisionism is a state policy. The programme highlights the liberation wars narrative that underpins the populist memory politics, and implies that all wars fought by the Serbian armed forces were for liberation and that they never engaged in offensive warfare. Thus, members of the Serbian army, police and paramilitary units cannot have been war criminals if they were righteous fighters for the liberation of their people and country.

The position of the Ministry of Defence as a critical organiser of commemorations, alongside the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs, is not a surprise. When it is not about commemorating the Serbian victims, the official memory politics celebrates the Serbian military forces as liberators, and always fighting on the right side. Furthermore, commemorations are opportunities to showcase the military power

49 Odbor za negovanje tradicija oslobodilačkih ratova Srbije, 'Državni program 2016', 13.

50 Odbor za negovanje tradicija oslobodilačkih ratova Srbije, 30.

51 Odbor za negovanje tradicija oslobodilačkih ratova Srbije, 'Državni program 2009', 1.

and celebrate the Army of Serbia in the present, so celebrations of many anniversaries are military parades. Thus, the army plays an essential part in commemorations, and particularly of the events of the Kosovo war and the NATO bombing as occasions to celebrate the Army of Serbia, its power and righteousness. The dominant interpretation of both events, which are interlinked, concentrates attention on the Serbian victims of NATO or of the Kosovo Liberation Army. Moreover, the defensive role of the Army of Yugoslavia and, in the case of the Kosovo war, of the police, against foreign aggression and separatist and terrorist forces, stands in the centre of focus. Military parades, the anniversaries of the battles of Košare and Paštrik and the NATO bombing illuminate the aim of official commemorations not only to mourn the victims but also to publicly demonstrate the strength of the army that defended Serbia at the time, and that can defend it in the future again, if necessary.

6. Industry of Memory

The transformation of commemorative practices in Serbia is evident in the establishment of the industry of memory. It closely relates to the notion of the memory industry, which involves the production and sale of souvenirs, entertainment, tourism and kitsch pertaining to the past. In its broader sense, the memory industry encompasses museums, archives, cemeteries, anniversaries, memorials, festivals and the field of memory studies. The “industry of memory”, as Viet Thanh Nguyen discusses it in his book about the memory of the war in Vietnam, represents the exploitation of memory as a strategic resource and in the service of the political power.⁵² The industry of memory refers to the mechanism of the production and distribution of memory and its elements, including the ideological background and the material and financial conditions that enable it.

The industry of memory is always based on inequality and exclusion. Using example of the Vietnam War, Viet Thanh Nguyen demonstrates the disparity between the United States and Vietnam regarding their influence and the power to distribute their war narratives internationally. The monopoly created by the industry of memory, such as the United States exercise at the global level, facilitates unjust memory and forgetting, rather than just and impartial memory.

The concept of the industry of memory does not only work at the international level, but can also be applied for a better understanding of Serbian memory politics today. When it comes to the memory of the 1990s in Serbia, the industry of memory manifesting as the cultural production and large-scale dissemination of dominant narratives has become characteristic since the SNS came to power. One master narrative about the 1990s wars dominates Serbian society and forms the pillar of the official memory politics. The state actors as memory agents use diverse cultural and media formats to distribute the historical narrative to the broadest population. Political actors disseminate the narrative through

52 Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

cultural production, including film and publishing, large-scale events with audiences, and live broadcasting and streaming. Inequality is of the essence of the industry of memory, because access to resources and means of production is not equal but very restricted to the memory actors close to the government who promote the hegemonic narratives about the past. The memory activists who work against the industry of memory do not have access to such resources and such a broad reach in society. Finally, they do not have the power to truly contain and delegitimise the official narratives and their authority in front of the population at large, a power usually associated with the state itself.⁵³

The war in Kosovo and the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia are the key subjects of the Serbian industry of memory and the mass production of content that promote the dominant narratives. The police-military operation “Storm” represents another important subject. The commemorations of these events include large-scale events and solemn ceremonies, attended and jointly organised by the Republic of Serbia and Republika Srpska, with the support of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The state commemorations involve speeches by Aleksandar Vučić, Milorad Dodik and the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church, accompanied by a programme of reenactments, poetry, theatre, folklore and testimonies of victims and soldiers. Reenactments of the events of the 1990s in a tacky manner represent a novel and widespread practice in the context of Serbian memory politics, with the 2020 and 2021 commemorations of Operation Storm as the most prominent examples. In 2020, the actors reenacted the refugee convoy on the Sremska Rača bridge, and the 2021 commemoration took a step further with actors lying all over the stage as the dead bodies of Serbs from Croatia.

The populists in power make use of new media technologies for the purposes of memory politics and dissemination of war narratives, making all commemorative practices more widely and easily accessible than ever before. The state institutions organise live broadcasting of major commemorations on the Radio Television Serbia in prime time. Additionally, the commemorations are live-streamed on the internet, with the video recordings remaining available after the event. Besides the accessibility of the recording, some commemorative practices are no longer confined to the capital city and travel across Serbia. This is the case with the commemorations of the beginning of the NATO bombing on 24 March, which have taken place in Grdelica, Niš, Novi Sad and Belgrade since 2014.

53 James V. Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 10.

6.1. Victimhood: Operation Storm

Operation Storm commemorations, which have existed since 2015, also travel across Serbia to the places where many refugees from the region of Krajina in Croatia settled and are living today. Until 2015, the only commemoration of Operation Storm was a religious memorial service in St. Mark's Church in Belgrade organised by the Association of Families of Missing and Killed Persons, which was attended by some state officials. The former president of Serbia, Boris Tadić, commented on Operation Storm shortly in media and demanded a public apology from Croatia and an investigation into the destiny of missing persons. The former president and prime minister in the post-Milošević period, Vojislav Koštunica, argued in public that Operation Storm was the largest ethnic cleansing in Europe since the Second World War. The Serbian Radical Party (SRS) also made an appearance at these commemorations. A protest march followed the memorial service for the victims, ending with the laying of flowers at the memorial plaque to Serb victims of the 1990s wars in Tašmajdan Park. The "Suza" association still organises the religious memorial service today.

Operation Storm constitutes one of the main sites of memory in Serbia, and is commemorated largely under the slogan "Storm was a Pogrom". Its focus on victimhood is the most relevant example of the memory politics dichotomy of Serbian heroes and victims. The political actors abuse and instrumentalise victims for their own political purposes, while the victims themselves and their families do not have the status of civilian victims of war, and many of them are still socially endangered. In 2015, the Day of Remembrance of Killed and Expelled Serbs was established on 4 August as a day of mourning in Serbia and Republika Srpska, and marked at noon with a minute of silence, sirens and church bells. The official commemorations started with the symbolic meeting of Vučić and Dodik at the bridge in Sremska Rača. Official commemorations occur at different locations in Serbia in the evening hours, with several thousand people in the audience.

Victims are the central theme of Operation Storm commemorations. Victims are spoken to and victims speak - the victims who, according to the claims of the official discourse, were ignored by the previous government. However, the Operation Storm commemorations do not merely represent the acknowledgement of the suffering of the Serbs from Croatia:

“There is indeed only a fine line, often crossed in political arguments, between sombre remembrance of the victims and capitalising on the emotional charge of memory for immediate communal returns”.⁵⁴

The victimisation narrative is politically instrumentalised and taken out of the broader context. First, the families of those killed or disappeared during Operation Storm are invisible to the state institutions of Serbia and Croatia, and do not receive any support and recognition from them but are used for the populist rhetoric of the ruling political elites. The official commemorations blur the events of the 1990s, including the context in which Operation Storm took place. Thus, no one mentions the regime established by the Serbian forces across Croatia that preceded the 1995 operation or the enforced mobilisation of hundreds of refugees after they arrived in Serbia. Finally, when the government officials speak about the Serbs from Croatia being welcome in Serbia, they do not mention that it was not only the previous governments that did not consider them welcome, but that many of the current officials were in high positions in 1995 and did not want the refugees in Serbia.

6.2. Televising the Kosovo war and NATO bombing

There is more information about the 1990s wars in the Serbian public sphere than ever before. Around the anniversaries of Operation Storm, the events of the Kosovo war and the NATO bombing, continuous dissemination by media of much information about the events accompanies the official commemorations. Day by day, people can follow particular wartime events, photos, video materials and commentaries. The image of the wars disseminated in public reflects the official narratives, whilst critical voices are marginalised.

With the assistance of national television and other media, state institutions invest significantly in the memory industry and its accessibility to the general population of

54 Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, *Frames of Remembrance: The Dynamics of Collective Memory* (London, New York: Routledge, 2017), 60.

Serbia. The anniversaries also represent occasions for which documentary films are produced and aired, while the commemoration ceremonies are broadcast live on RTS and YouTube. For the 20th anniversary of the NATO Bombing in 2019, RTS aired documentary films about the NATO bombing and the battles of Košare and Paštrik every evening in prime time, with record-breaking viewership. The documentaries are high-budget, usually in RTS production with the support of the Ministry of Defence. The documentaries and feature movies are also accessible on YouTube, untypically for film production, and they have attracted from between 1.5 to 5 million views. The documentary film “War Stories from Košare”, a co-production of the Ministry of Defence and RTS, was particularly successful and broke audience records the first time it was aired. It has 5.9 million views on YouTube. In 2021, the documentary transformed into a series as well.⁵⁵ Numerous television programmes and shows accompany the films daily. Throughout 2019, several exhibitions about the NATO bombing also took place.⁵⁶

Besides its support for film production and organisation of commemorations, the Ministry of Defence runs a publishing house, “Odbrana”, which serves the official memory politics and production of heroic myths about the 1990s wars. In addition to various monographs about military history, Odbrana publishes “The Warrior” book series, which focuses on memoirs and testimonies about the Kosovo war, including the books of memories of the battles of Košare and Paštrik and the personal memoirs of convicted war criminals such as Dragoljub Ojdanić and Nebojša Pavković.

The so-called Battle of Košare of 1999 is a modern myth that illuminates the successful nature of populist narratives and the novelty of the focus on the 1990s wars in the official memory politics. Public discourses compare the Battle of Košare, with the Serbs outnumbered by the Albanian forces, to the Battle of Thermopylae and the heroic sacrifice of young “barefaced” soldiers to the Spartans. Although the event was entirely unknown

55 Radio televizija Srbije, ‘Dokumentarna serija “Ratne priče sa Košara”, 24 - 26. marta RTS 2, 20 časova’, 18 March 2021, <http://www.rts.rs/page/rtssr/rtspredstavljaj/story/267/hajnovije/4300115/dokumentarna-serija-ratne-price-sa-kosara-24---26.-marta-rtss-2-20-casova.html>.

56 Filming of a film and series about Operation Storm started in summer 2021 with the production company who had worked on a film and series about Košare. Radio-televizija Vojvodine. ‘Počelo snimanje filma i serije “Oluja”’. Accessed 17 September 2021. https://www.rtv.rs/sr_lat/kultura/pocelo-snimanje-filma-i-serije-oluja_1254659.html.

for most of the population of Serbia until less than a decade ago, the battle of Košare became a widely known story further perpetuated by various groups in society, such as organised football fans. Similarly to Operation Storm commemorations, the solemn ceremonies and commemorations of the battles of Košare and Paštrik emerged in 2016. The interest of the political actors for these events has resulted in streets being named after “the heroes of Košare” and the films, series and publications already mentioned.

7. Populist Appropriation of Human Rights Memorialisation

Since the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević, the state actors have shown no profound willingness to confront the 1990s wars and deal with the guilt and responsibility on the Serbian side. After 2012, evasion of the issues related to the 1990s wars turned into their embrace by the political actors. As the previous sections have summarised, the current memory politics of the 1990s wars is exclusionary and aggressive, as disseminated and popularised through the industry of memory. The exclusion occurs with respect to the opposing narratives and, more importantly, to the non-Serb victims, who are not given the recognition they deserve and even face denial of their suffering. Denial of the Srebrenica genocide is a state policy. The commemorative speeches are hostile and aggressive and perpetuate images of the enemy.

As opposed to the antagonistic memory and revisionist discourses, Serbian public officials appropriate human rights memorialisation frames as the most striking feature of their populist memory politics. They advocate the duty to remember and to resist forgiveness, to focus on victims and to deal with the past - all the paradigmatic human rights memorialisation pillars.⁵⁷ The witness-testimony and victim-centred approach underlie the institutional memory work, whether it is children from the 1995 refugee convoy speaking at Operation Storm commemorations or men who fought at Košare as young soldiers telling their stories in a documentary.

57 Lea David, *The Past Can't Heal Us: The Dangers of Mandating Memory in the Name of Human Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

While the state institutions provide public support for convicted and suspected war criminals, who are entirely normalised and accepted in society, and celebrate the army's role in the 1990s wars, the state representatives depict Serbia as the state most dedicated to regional reconciliation. In this way, Aleksandar Vučić emphasises that Serbia has confessed its crimes and condemned the perpetrators of the crimes committed in its name, of which Serbia is ashamed; while stating also that Serbia respects the other sides' victims, expecting only respect for Serbian victims from the other sides in return. The aim of fighting against forgetting features prominently in the speeches of Vučić and other state officials.

The duty to remember, dealing with the past and focussing on the victims are the principles of moral remembrance – memory politics in the name of human rights.⁵⁸ They are usually associated with memorialisation efforts based on human rights principles and opposed to nationalism. Illiberal political forces, like the SNS-led regime in Serbia, appropriate and utilise human rights memorialisation for their populist memory politics. In the Serbian case, the duty to remember and focus on the victims in actual practice extends only to Serb victims. As understood by the current regime, the idea of dealing with the past does not mean that Serbian society should confront its problematic past and mass human rights violations. On the contrary, dealing with the past is seen as going in the opposite direction, and to imply the celebration of the Serbian armed forces as heroes and the commemoration of Serbian victims, with the claim it was forbidden to remember them before.

58 David.

8. Conclusion: Memory Activism against Revisionism

Memory activism is about challenging the dominant memory and mainstream narratives, and aims to recognise invisible, silenced and marginalised aspects of the past. It exists in conflict and post-conflict societies and the still present legacies of state repression and human rights abuses. Memory activism represents “the strategic commemoration of a contested past outside state channels to influence public debate and policy”.⁵⁹ While memorialisation can occur at different societal levels and involve different actors, including the state, memory activism is always from below. It can demand state recognition of a particular issue, but it never directly involves state officials. Memory activism practices are often different from the official commemorations because of their interactive nature and accessibility, and their goal of inviting and securing the participation of the community. Activism in the field of memory does not involve the resources that the state or other powerful actors can invest in memorialisation, which is one of the reasons its forms are diverse and do not only involve “traditional” commemorations and concrete memorials. Memory activism does not exist isolated in the national context, but “expert-based discourse and models for post-conflict reconciliation travel the world, reaching unintended places, and shaping the vocabulary, strategies for political change, and claims of minority groups, civil society, and governments”.⁶⁰

Memory activism, just like memory politics, is based on the past but oriented to the present and future. This type of activism centres on the idea, “First the past, then the future”, assuming that dealing with the past could lead to sociopolitical changes and

59 Yifat Gutman, *Memory Activism: Reimagining the Past for the Future in Israel-Palestine* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2017), 1–2.

60 Gutman, 11.

solutions to present and future problems.⁶¹ In other words, memory activism connects the present and the past but is also future-oriented, because it implies a vision of the future that frames the utilisation of the past.⁶² Therefore, everything memory activists do is done for future generations.

Memory activism in Serbia emerged from the anti-war movement active during the 1990s, and it is intertwined with the activities and achievements of the broader non-governmental sector advocating for transitional justice and dealing with the past. Memory activists are in a different position today from where they were in the first years after the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević. While they had to fight state-sponsored oblivion and make the 1990s wars publicly visible before, today, they also face a more significant challenge and have to stand against an industry of memory built on falsification and denial and relying on vast material and media resources.

In a context like Serbia, where the facts about human rights violations during the 1990s wars are systematically silenced and marginalised, memory activism relies on the power of documentation and knowledge production. Against the current state-sponsored industry of memory, documentation can serve as a powerful tool of memory activism, but it must be able to compete with the state efforts in reaching the broader population. Some steps toward digital memory activism, visible, accessible and participatory for everyone, have been taken. There is “the noticeable turn towards online platforms for purposes of online commemoration and advocacy, and the growing use of hashtags by memory activists in their memory work”, which Orli Fridman refers to as “hashtag memory activism”.⁶³ To be able to confront the industry of memory, in addition to online commemorations, activists and practitioners will have to increasingly engage with the production of digital and media contents to address the contested pasts and disseminate the facts about the wars to broad audiences.

The lack of digital tools and material resources are not the only challenge memory activists have to overcome to counteract the official memory politics of this authoritarian

61 Yifat Gutman, 'Looking Backward to the Future: Counter-Memory as Oppositional Knowledgeproduction in the Israeli– Palestinian Conflict', *Current Sociology* 1, no. 65 (2017): 54.

62 Irwin-Zarecka, *Frames of Remembrance*, 101.

63 Orli Fridman, “Hashtag Memory Activism”. Online Commemorations and Online Memory Activism', *Observing Memories*, 2019, <https://europeanmemories.net/magazine/hashtag-memory-activism/>.

democracy and become more accessible to the Serbian public. Namely, doing memory work is challenging and can achieve only limited reach, as there is no comprehensive public support and acceptance of critical views about the recent violent past. One of the serious issues is the absence of people's voices and the disconnect between memory activists, practitioners, and the Serbian public. Public engagement and dissemination are one of the primary goals of transitional justice and memory initiatives in Serbia. However, audiences at events and commemorations are primarily other activists and practitioners, media and intellectuals – where everyone speaks about issues they broadly agree on.⁶⁴ These events and initiatives are, in practice, not accessible to everyone. The audience's material, financial and social location has to be considered, and their potential lack of free time or cultural and social capital to attend events and participate in NGO initiatives.⁶⁵ Finally, there is a disconnect “between what NGO campaigns claim the public knows and does not know about the past and what individuals know but do not communicate”.⁶⁶ In our aims toward (re)educating the public, we tend to forget that most people in Serbia have some kind of connection to the wars of the 1990s and direct or indirect experience of the wars, including the loss of friends or relatives. These individuals cope with their experiences, feelings and knowledge about the wars, crimes and responsibility, in different ways.⁶⁷ The accessibility and involvement of people in memory activist initiatives have to be rethought beyond the one-directional re-education of the people of Serbia concerning their nation and state's responsibility in the 1990s. At a critical point like today, the role of facts-based memory activism related to the 1990s wars is more important than ever. It is time to rethink memory activism and advocacy practices, in order to achieve society's profound public engagement and participation.

64 Obradović-Wochnik, 'The "Silent Dilemma" of Transitional Justice', 329.

65 Obradović-Wochnik, 346.

66 Obradović-Wochnik, 340.

67 Obradović-Wochnik, 346.

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