Defenders of the Homeland: How Croatian 1990s Veterans Kept the Dominant War Narrative Alive

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Abstract

Coming out of the break-up of Yugoslavia, Croatian mythmakers transformed the 1990s armed conflict – Homeland War – into a central state and nation-building political myth. As a straightforward and sanitised narrative of the armed conflict between Croatian forces and joint forces of Serb rebels and Yugoslav forces, this myth downplays unpleasant facets of the war so that it could serve the nation-building process. While using archival and media sources, the thesis sheds light on a somewhat ignored role of Croatian veterans of the 1990s war – called defenders – in creating and grounding that myth. Alongside the political elites, veterans helped construct and kept the dominant narrative alive for decades, transforming it into an official one in 2000. Often using mnemonic battles to fight political opponents and authorities, veteran associations re-produced the dominant narrative, emphasising their role in the 'creation of the state'. By doing do, veteran associations and groups used these mnemonic battles to secure better welfare, funding for their organisations or their position in society as the main memory entrepreneurs and veto players. While their contentious behaviour was most intense when centre-left governments were in power, the thesis evaluated the relationship between veteran associations and conservative forces, offering a more nuanced analysis of the phenomena. Finally, the thesis evaluates the role of veteran associations and groups in Croatia's contemporary nationalism, including propensity to ethnonationalist and far-right ideology, as they took part in culture wars. The thesis demonstrates how veteran associations profoundly affected reconciliation in Croatian society.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Ana, who supported me throughout my academic journey, and to my deceased family members who fought and suffered in different wars.

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Abbreviations

A.R.B.H.	Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina (*Armija Republike Bosne i Hercegovine*)
D.C.	Democratic Centre (*Demokratski centar*)
D.O.R.H.	Croatian State Attorney Office (*Državno odvjetništvo Republike Hrvatske*)
E.U.	European Union
G.I.G.N.	National Gendarmerie Intervention Group (*Groupe d'intervention de la Gendarmerie nationale*)
H.B.	Croatian Block (*Hrvatski blok*)
H.D.A.	Croatian State Archives (*Hrvatski državi arhiv*)
H.D.Z.	Croatian Democratic Union (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica*)
H.D.Z.B.H.	Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica Bosne i Hercegovine*)
H.G.Z.	Croatian Generals' Assembly (*Hrvatski generalski zbor*)
H.I.D.R.	Croatian Disabled of the Homeland War (*Hrvatski invalidi Domovinskog rata*)
H.N.D.	Croatian Independent Democrats (*Hrvatski nezavisni demokrati*)
H.N.S.	Croatian People's Party (*Hrvatska narodna stranka*)
H.O.S.	Croatian Defence Forces (*Hrvatske obrambene snage*)
H.R.T.	Croatian Radio-Television (*Hrvatska radio-televizija*)

H.S.	Croatian Parliament (*Hrvatski sabor*)
H.S.L.S.	Croatian Social-Liberal Party (*Hrvatska socijalno-liberalna stranka*)
H.S.P.	Croatian Party of Rights (*Hrvatska stranka prava*)
H.S.P.A.S.	Croatian Party of Rights 'Ante Starčević' (*Hrvatska stranka prava 'Ante Starčević'*)
H.S.S.	Croatian Peasants Party (*Hrvatska seljačka stranka*)
H.V.	Croatian Army (*Hrvatska vojska*)
H.V.I.D.R.	Alliance of Croatian Military Disabled of the Homeland War (*Savez Hrvatskih vojnih invalida Domovinskog rata*)
H.V.O.	Croatian Defence Council (*Hrvatsko vijeće obrane*)
I.C.T.Y.	International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia
I.D.S.	Istrian Democratic Assembly (*Istarski demokratski sabor*)
I.M.F.	International Monetary Fund
I.P.D.	Agency for Information and Propaganda Activities (Služba za *informativno-propagandnu djelatnost*)
J.N.A.	Yugoslav People' Army (*Jugoslavenska narodna armija*)
L.G.B.T.	Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender
M.P.	Member of parliament
N.A.T.O.	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
N.D.H.	Independent Croatian Volunteers (*Nezavisni dragovoljci hrvatski*)

N.D.H.	Independent State of Croatia (*Nezavisna Država Hrvatska*)
O.V.K.	Kosovo Liberation Army (*Oslobodilačka vojska Kosova*)
P.O.W.	Prisoner of war
P.T.S.D.	Post-traumatic stress disorder
P.U.B.P.U.D. 91	Police Association of Defenders of the Police Administration Dubrovnik 91 (*Policijska udruga branitelja Policijske uprave Dubrovnik 91'*)
R.S.K.	Republic of Serbian Krajina (*Republika Srpska Krajina*)
S.A.O.K.	Serb Autonomous Region Krajina (*Srpska autonomna oblast Krajina*)
S.D.P.	Social Democratic Party of Croatia (*Socijaldemokratska partija Hrvatske*)
S.D.S.	Serb Democratic Party (*Srpska demokratska stranka*)
S.D.S.S.	Independent Democratic Serb Party (*Samostalna demokratska srpska stranka*)
S.F.R.J.	Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (*Socijalistička Federativna Republika Jugoslavija*)
S.I.S.	Ministry of Defence's Security and Intelligence Service (*Sigurnosno-informativna služba Ministarstva obrane*)
S.O.A.	Security and Intelligence Agency (*Sigurnosno-obavještajna agencija*)
S.U.B.N.O.R.	Alliance of Associations of Fighters of People's Liberation War (*Savez udruga boraca Narodnooslobodilačkog rata*)

S.U.D.H.O.S.	Alliance of Associations of Volunteers of the Croatian Defence Forces (*Savez udruga dragovoljaca Hrvatskih obrambenih snaga*)
S.V.A.M.O.R.H.	Central Military Archives of the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Croatia (*Središnji vojni arhiv Ministarstva obrane Republike Hrvatske*)
U.H.B. 1990-96	Association of the Croatian Defenders 1990-1996 of the Republic of Croatia (*Udruga hrvatskih branitelja 1990-1996 Republike Hrvatske*)
U.D.H.R.M.	Association of Volunteers of the Croatian War Navy (*Udruga dragovoljaca Hrvatske ratne mornarice*)
U.H.B.D.D.R.	Association of Croatian Defenders-Volunteer of the Homeland War (*Udruga hrvatskih branitelja-dragovoljaca Domovinskog rata*)
U.H.D.D.R.	Association of Croatian Volunteers of the Homeland War (*Udruga hrvatskih dragovoljaca Domovinskog rata*)
U.H.V.D.R.	Association of Croatian Veterans of the Homeland War (*Udruga hrvatskih veterana Domovinskog rata*)
U.N.	United Nations
U.N.P.R.O.F.O.R.	United Nations Protection Force
U.O.B.D.R.	Association of Sick Defenders of the Homeland War (*Udruga oboljelih branitelja Domovinskog rata*)
U.P.R.H.	Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia (*Ured predsjednika Republike Hrvatske*)
U.S.	United States of America

U.S.P.D.R.R.H.	Association of Special Police from the Homeland War of the Republic of Croatia (*Udruga specijalne policije iz Domovinskog rata Republike Hrvatske*)
U.V.D.R.	Association of the Homeland War Veterans (*Udruga veterana Domovinskog rata*)
U.Z.B.V.	Association of Zagreb's Defenders of Vukovar (*Udruga zagrebačkih branitelja Vukovara*)
V.I.D.D.R.	Association of Military Disabled and Volunteers of the Homeland War (*Udruga vojnih invalida i dragovoljaca Domovinskog rata*)
V.R.H., U.P.V.	Government of the Republic of Croatia, Office of the Prime Minister (*Vlada Republike Hrvatske, Ured predsjednika Vlade*)
V.R.S.	Army of the Republic of Srpska (*Vojska Republike Srpske*)
W.V.F.	World Veteran Federation
W.W.I.	World War I
W.W.II.	World War II
Z.A.N.U.–P.F.	Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front
Z.N.G.	Croatian National Guard (*Zbor narodne garde*)
Z.U.H.D.D.R.	Union of Associations of Croatian Volunteers of the Homeland War (*Zajednica udruga hravatskih dragovoljaca Domovinskog rata*)
Z.U.V.H.G.P.	Assembly of Associations of Croatian Guard Brigades' Veterans (*Zbor udruga veterana hrvatskih gardijskih postrojbi*)

Introduction

1990s wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina

Wars in Croatia and neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina were a part of the longer process of the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (*Socijalistička Federativna Republika Jugoslavija*, S.F.R.J.) during the late 1980s and early 1990s.[1] With the rise of ethno-nationalism in the Yugoslav republics, the situation in Croatia started to deteriorate in 1990, especially with the first multi-party elections in April-May. While the Croatian Democratic Union (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica*, H.D.Z.), led by Franjo Tuđman – later the Croatian President – won the election on a Croat nationalist platform, the Serb Democratic Party (*Srpska demokratska stranka*, S.D.S.), although electorally representing only a fraction of some 580,000 Croatian Serbs, pushed its nationalistic programme that pertained towards autonomy from Croatia.[2] With both Croatian and Serbian nationalists using the traumatic World War II (W.W.II.) past to villainise the other and victimise themselves, S.D.S., with the help of the Serbian media, started spreading fear of

[1] For the disintegration of S.F.R.J., see: Andrew Wachtel and Christopher Bennett, 'The dissolution of Yugoslavia' in Charles W. Ingrao and Thomas Allan Emmert (eds), *Confronting the Yugoslav Controversies: A Scholars' Initiative* (West Lafayette, 2012), pp 12-47; Susan L. Woodward, *Balkan tragedy: chaos and dissolution after the Cold War* (Washington, 1995); Viktor Meier, *Yugoslavia: a history of its demise* (London and New York, 2005); Josip Glaurdić, *The hour of Europe: western powers and the breakup of Yugoslavia* (New Haven and London, 2011); John R. Lampe, *Yugoslavia as history: twice there was a country* (Cambridge, 2000), pp 327-64; Misha Glenny, *The fall of Yugoslavia: the third Balkan war* (New York, 1992); Sabrina P. Ramet, *Balkan babel: the disintegration of Yugoslavia from the death of Tito to the fall of Milošević* (Bolder and Oxford, 2002), pp 1-78; Laura Silber and Allan Little, *The death of Yugoslavia* (London, 1995); Warren Zimmermann, *Origins of a catastrophe: Yugoslavia and its destroyers* (New York, 1999); Lenard J. Cohen and Jasna Dragović-Soso (eds), *State Collapse in South-Eastern Europe: New Perspectives on Yugoslavia's Disintegration* (West Lafayette, 2007).

[2] Silber and Little, *The death of Yugoslavia*, pp 87-106; Ramet, *Balkan babel*, pp 57-8; Glenny, *The fall of Yugoslavia*, pp 1-30; In the 1990 parliamentary elections, the majority of Croatian Serbs voted for the reformed Communists, the League of Communists of Croatia – Party of Democratic Changes (*Savez komunista Hrvatske – Stranka demokratskih promjena*), which later changed its name to the Social Democratic Party of Croatia (*Socijaldemokratska partija Hrvatske*, S.D.P.). See: Ramet, *Balkan babel*, p. 57; For a comprehensive overview of the Serb insurgency in Croatia between 1990 and 1995, see: Nikica Barić, *Srpska pobuna u Hrvatskoj 1990.-1995.* (Zagreb, 2005); Some place the beginning of the Serb insurgency in Croatia in 1989. See: Ramet, *Balkan babel*, p. 57; Silber and Little, *The death of Yugoslavia*, p. 101; Barić, *Srpska pobuna*, pp 41-52.

another genocide against the Serbs.[3] This fed into the presence of revivalism for the Croatian W.W.II. fascist Ustaša movement – which committed genocide against Serbs – in Croatia at the time, including the use of problematic symbols, purification of the language and ending the use of Cyrillic script.[4] On a practical level, this was tied to discussions over the first Croatian Constitution, to be passed in December 1990, which, in the end, derogated the position of Croatian Serbs from a constitutive nation to a national minority.[5] As part of the Serbian ethno-nationalist surge in the late 1980s across S.F.R.J., S.D.S. was tied to the Serbian and Yugoslav political and military leadership, which wanted to re-draw borders between republics, encompassing parts of Croatia, of what would be a rump Yugoslavia dominated by Serbs.[6]

Therefore, in August 1990, while S.D.S. organised a referendum on Serb autonomy in Croatia, armed Serbs in the regions of Lika and Dalmatian blocked major roads and railroads

[3] For more on the victim-centred manipulations among Serb and Croat elites, see: David Bruce MacDonald, *Balkan holocausts? Serbian and Croatian victim-centred propaganda and the war in Yugoslavia* (Manchester and New York, 2002); Silber and Little, *The death of Yugoslavia*, pp 98-9; Glenny, *The fall of Yugoslavia*, pp 11-2.

[4] Mile Bjelajac and Ozren Žunec, 'The war in Croatia, 1991-1995' in Charles W. Ingrao and Thomas Allan Emmert (eds), *Confronting the Yugoslav Controversies: A Scholars' Initiative* (West Lafayette, 2012), pp 232-72, at pp 236-7; Glenny, *The fall of Yugoslavia*, pp 11-2; Silber and Little, *The death of Yugoslavia*, pp 91-2, 105; For more on Ustaša and the Independent State of Croatia (*Nezavisna Država Hrvatska*, N.D.H.), see: Sabrina P. Ramet, 'The N.D.H. – an introduction' in *Totalitarian Movements & Political Religions*, vii (2006), pp 399-408.

[5] Robert M. Hayden, 'Constitutional nationalism in the formerly Yugoslav republics' in *Slavic Review*, li (1992), no. 4, pp 654-73, at pp 656-8; Meier, *Yugoslavia*, pp 148-51; Glenny, *The fall of Yugoslavia*, p. 12; 236; Silber and Little, *The death of Yugoslavia*, pp 102-3; Barić, *Srpska pobuna*, pp 66-8.

[6] Bjelajac and Žunec, 'The war in Croatia', pp 236-8; As a sign of links between the two Serb leaderships, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (I.C.T.Y.) later convicted R.S.K. leaders for war crimes, which they committed as a part of a joint criminal enterprise lead by Serbian President Slobodan Milošević and other high-ranking Serbian political and military officials, as well as the leaders of Bosnian Serbs. The goal of the joint criminal enterprise was the removal of the non-Serb population from territories spreading over a one-third of Croatia and a large part of Bosnia and Herzegovina. See: Prosecutor v. Babić IT-03-72 (Appeals Chamber Judgement), I.C.T.Y., 18 Jul. 2005, https://ucr.irmct.org/scasedocs/case/IT-03-72#appealsChamberJudgement (18 Apr. 2022); Prosecutor v. Martić IT-95-11 (Appeals Chamber Judgement)', I.C.T.Y., 8 Oct. 2008, https://ucr.irmct.org/scasedocs/case/IT-95-11#appealsChamberJudgement (18 Apr. 2022); For a detailed view of how Serbia used paramilitary units to pursue its goals in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, see: Iva Vukušić, *Serbian paramilitaries and the breakup of Yugoslavia: state connections and patterns of violence* (Abingdon and New York, 2022).

going from the Adriatic coast to continental Croatia, causing massive traffic breakdown amid a high tourist season. The event, later dubbed as the Log Revolution – a reference to logs placed as roadblocks – exposed the axis between Croatian Serb rebels and Serbian leadership, as the Yugoslav People's Army's (*Jugoslavenska narodna armija*, J.N.A.) fighter jets prevented Croatian police helicopters in reaching Knin and taking down the insurgency. Although the authorities removed roadblocks in two days, the event triggered the process of local Serbs pushing for political autonomy from Croatia, ignoring its institutions, while secretly receiving arms and training from the J.N.A. and State Security Service (*Služba državne bezbednosti*).[7] By December 1990, Serb-dominated counties of Knin, Benkovac, Vojnić, Obrovac, Gračac, Kostajnica and Dvor declared the Serb Autonomous Region Krajina (*Srpska autonomna oblast Krajina*, S.A.O.K.).[8]

The situation further escalated in March 1991, when the first fighting between Serb rebels and Croatian special police forces took part in Pakrac and Plitvice, taking two casualties.[9] In May, an ambush of Croatian police forces by Serb paramilitaries in Borovo Selo took an additional fifteen lives, pushing Croatia, still part of S.F.R.J., to the brink of war.[10] The events from Borovo Selo were followed by political developments, as later that month, Serbs in S.A.O.K. organised an illegal referendum and opted for the region to become part of

[7] Bjelajac and Žunec, 'The war in Croatia', pp 236-8; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 19-21 Aug. 1990; *Večernji list*, 19-21 Aug. 1990; Silber and Little, *The death of Yugoslavia*, pp 107-11; Meier, *Yugoslavia*, pp 148-50; Glenny, *The fall of Yugoslavia*, pp 17-21; Barić, *Srpska pobuna*, pp 77-90.
[8] Barić, *Srpska pobuna*, pp 93-9.
[9] Bjelajac and Žunec, 'The war in Croatia', p. 241; Barić, *Srpska pobuna*, pp 114-7; Silber and Little, *The death of Yugoslavia*, pp 146-52; The first casualty of the insurgency was a Croatian policeman Goran Alavanja, an ethnic Serb, killed by Serb rebels in November 1990. See: Ilija Vučur, 'Pogibija Gorana Alavanje 23. studenoga 1990.: događaj, interpretacije, manipulacije' in *Časopis za suvremenu povijest*, xlix (2017), no. 3, pp 587-607.
[10] Barić, *Srpska pobuna*, p. 118; Glenny, *The fall of Yugoslavia*, pp 75-80; Bjelajac and Žunec, 'The war in Croatia', pp 247-8; Some sources put partial blame for the Borovo incident on provocations of Šušak and some radical officials who launched armbrust attacks on the village a few nights before; Silber and Little, *The death of Yugoslavia*, pp 153-6; Scholars like Žunec and Bjelajac found such a story 'rather incredible', but added that clearly some groups wanted to escalate the conflict. See: Bjelajac and Žunec, 'The war in Croatia', p. 248.

Serbia and remain in rump Yugoslavia.[11] The S.A.O.K. referendum came in the announcement of a Croatian national one a week later, as Croatian citizens overwhelmingly opted for full sovereignty, with the possibility of entering a confederacy with other Yugoslav republics. In June, referring to the referendum results, the Croatian Parliament decided to initiate the separation process from S.F.R.J. – the decision put under a three-month moratorium.[12]

With a brief armed conflict breaking up between J.N.A. and Slovenian territorial defence and police forces in late June, as that Republic also opted for independence, the war in Croatia became an open one in the summer of 1991.[13] While in the early stages of the conflict, from March till the summer, J.N.A. still declaratively served as a buffer zone between Croatian forces and Serb rebels – although indirectly and secretively helping the last – in the late summer, the federal army openly engaged in the conflict, shelling Croatian towns.[14] In late August, the joined attack of J.N.A., Serb rebels and paramilitaries from Serbia against the city of Vukovar in Eastern Croatia, on the border with Serbia. The three-month-long siege, which levelled Vukovar to the ground, ended in November, as remaining Croatian forces surrendered to J.N.A. Upon the fall of Vukovar, J.N.A. and Serb paramilitaries committed mass execution of Croatian P.O.W.s and civilians, as well as transporting thousands to prison camps in Serbia – where some were killed, while many of them were tortured and physically and mentally abused – and mass expulsion of the non-Serb population. Parallelly with

[11] Barić, *Srpska pobuna*, pp 101-2.
[12] Ibid, p. 119; Silber and Little, *The death of Yugoslavia*, pp 164-5; Ramet, *Balkan babel*, p. 66.
[13] Ramet, *Balkan babel*, p. 67; Silber and Little, *The death of Yugoslavia*, pp 186-90; Barić, *Srpska pobuna*, pp 120-4; Bjelajac and Žunec, 'The war in Croatia', pp 242; Glenny, *The fall of Yugoslavia*, p. 101.
[14] Bjelajac and Žunec, 'The war in Croatia', pp 241-2; For a comprehensive view of the role of the J.N.A. in the war in Croatia, see: Jovana Kolarić, *Dossier: the JNA in the wars in Croatia and BiH* (Belgrade, 2018), pp 14-62; Bjelajac and Žunec, 'The war in Croatia', pp 244-7.

Vukovar, J.N.A. and Serb rebels initiated attacks against cities, towns and villages across Croatia in the fall of 1991.[15]

Although the Croatian National Guard (*Zbor narodne garde*, Z.N.G.) and, from November 1991, the Croatian Army (*Hrvatska vojska*, H.V.) managed to stop Serb and J.N.A. advances and even regain control of some territories, by December 1991, rebel Serbs had secured control over around thirty per cent of Croatian territory, expelling the majority of the non-Serb population.[16] In December 1991, the S.A.O.K.'s political leadership renamed the entity into the Republic of Serbian Krajina (*Republika Srpska Krajina*, R.S.K.), which remained an internationally non-recognised statelet until its dissolution in 1995.[17] With Croatia gaining international support and promised recognition, in January 1992, both sides negotiated a ceasefire and signed the Sarajevo Peace Agreement. The Agreement was a condition for implementing the Vance Plan, which included the deployment of the United Nations Protection Force (U.N.P.R.O.F.O.R.), tasked with supervising J.N.A.'s retreat from Croatia, demilitarisation of the R.S.K. and the return of non-Serb refugees.[18] From the ceasefire, the war entered a stalemate, with frontlines between Croatian and R.S.K. not moving significantly – except due to Croatia's occasional skirmishes and smaller operations.[19]

Aside from crimes committed by J.N.A., Serb rebels and paramilitaries from Serbia, Croatian forces also committed atrocities against Serb civilians. These atrocities often incited fear among Serbs loyal to the central government, causing many of them to leave. Aside from

[15] Barić, *Srpska pobuna*, pp 124-5; Bjelajac and Žunec, 'The war in Croatia', pp 248-51; Silber and Little, *The death of Yugoslavia*, pp 193-208; Meier, *Yugoslavia*, p. 221.
[16] Barić, *Srpska pobuna*, pp 124-5, 145¸ 371-98; Silber and Little, *The death of Yugoslavia*, pp 206-7.
[17] Barić, *Srpska pobuna*, pp 146-7.
[18] Ozren Žunec, 'Rat u Hrvatskoj 1991.-1995. 1. dio: uzroci rata i operacije do sarajevskog primirja' in *Polemos: časopis za interdisciplinarna istraživanja rata i mira*, i (1998), no. 1, pp 57-87, at pp 86-7; Ozren Žunec, 'Rat u Hrvatskoj 1991.-1995. 2. dio: od Sarajevskog primirja do završnih operacija' in *Polemos: časopis za interdisciplinarna istraživanja rata i mira*, i (1998), no. 2, pp 111-36, at pp 111-4; Barić, *Srpska pobuna*, pp 147-66; Ramet, *Balkan babel*, p. 205; Silber and Little, *The death of Yugoslavia*, pp 222-4.
[19] Žunec, 'Rat u Hrvatskoj 1991.-1995. 2. dio', pp 114-22.

layoffs from work, intimidation, threats, violent evictions, and destruction of property, these atrocities also included torture and massive executions, committed either in the relative vicinity of frontlines or in cities. Among larger crimes were executions at Pakračka Poljana, Gospić, Sisak, Osijek, Paulin Dvor, and villages around Požega, which all took place between August and December 1991.[20]

As the war in Croatia came to a stalemate, the armed conflict spilt over to neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina. In this Yugoslav republic, Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats made constitutive nations. Before the war started, Croat and Serb political elites in Bosnia and Herzegovina began to organise on territories they saw as vital for their ethno-nationalist projects. Thus, in November 1991, the leadership of the central Bosnian Croat party, the Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica Bosne i Hercegovine*, H.D.Z.B.H.), proclaimed the formation of the Croatian Community of Herzeg-Bosnia (*Hrvatska zajednica Herceg-Bosna*) as a political, cultural and economic entity of Croats in Bosnia, mostly gathering regions where Croats were a dominant ethnic group, with a few exceptions.[21] In January 1992, as Bosniak and Croat political representatives pushed for a national referendum on Bosnia and Herzegovina's independence from crumbling S.F.R.J., Bosnian Serb leadership declared the Serbian Republic Bosnia and Herzegovina (*Srpska Republika Bosna i Hercegovina*), constructing parallel and non-

[20] Silber and Little, *The death of Yugoslavia*, p. 192; Bjelajac and Žunec, 'The war in Croatia', p. 237; Dragutin Babić and Filip Škiljan, 'Srbi u Požeštini: sjećanje, pamćenje i nacionalni identitet' in *Anali Hrvatskog Politoloskog Drustva*, 15 (2018), no. 1, pp 157-77, at pp 157-8, 169-72; Tihomir Ponoš, 'Sisak 1990. - 1991: ratni zločini nad Srbima' in *Tragovi: časopis za srpske i hrvatske teme*, 3 (2020), no. 2, pp 7-72; Žunec, 'Rat u Hrvatskoj 1991.-1995. 2. dio', p. 132; Aside of crimes committed in 1991, a larger number of Serb civilians and P.O.W. were killed during and after the Croatian Operation Medak Pocket in September 1993. See: Lee A. Windsor, 'Professionalism under fire: Canadian implementation of the Medak Pocket Agreement, Croatia 1993' in *Canadian Military History*, ix (2000), no. 3, pp 23-35, at pp 32-4; In retaliation for the Medak Pocket, R.S.K. launched rockets attacks on Karlovac (killing tens of people) and Zagreb. See: Žunec, 'Rat u Hrvatskoj 1991.-1995. 2. dio', p. 117.

[21] In August 1993, it was renamed into Croatian Republic of Herzeg-Bosnia (*Hrvatska Republika Herceg-Bosna*). See: Ivo Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1918 – 2008* (Zagreb, 2008), p. 731.

constitutional state structures.[22] In the context of a recent violent war in neighbouring Croatia, Bosniak and Croat voters opted – while Serbs mostly boycotted – for an independent Bosnia and Herzegovina on the referendum on 29 February and 1 March 1992.[23] As the European Community, Croatia and the U.S. recognised the independent Bosnia and Herzegovina, in April 1992, Bosnian Serb paramilitaries launched a full-scale attack in different regions of the country, helped by the J.N.A., which was moving out from Croatia, following the Sarajevo Peace Agreement. Like in Croatia, this attack also included ethnic cleansing of the non-Serb population from what would later be known as the Republic of Srpska (*Republika Srpska*).[24]

At first, Bosniak and Croat forces together organised the defence against the attack of Bosnian Serb forces and J.N.A. Therefore, Herzeg-Bosnian armed forces, the Croat-dominated Croatian Defence Council (*Hrvatsko vijeće obrane,* H.V.O.) cooperated with the Bosniak-dominated Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina (*Armija Republike Bosne i Hercegovine,* A.R.B.H.) in fighting Bosnian Serb forces and J.N.A.[25]

However, cracks in the Bosniak-Croat political and military unity became evident in October 1992, as an open armed conflict between the H.V.O. and A.R.B.H. started in Prozor.[26] In 1993, the full-opened war erupted between H.V.O. and A.R.B.H., with massive war crimes committed on both sides and culminating with massive destruction and fighting in the city of

[22] Ramet, *Balkan babel*, p. 206; Silber and Little, *The death of Yugoslavia*, p. 226.
[23] Meier, *Yugoslavia*, pp 203-5; Gale Stokes, 'Independence and the fate of minorities, 1991-1992' in Charles W. Ingrao and Thomas Allan Emmert (eds), *Confronting the Yugoslav Controversies: A Scholars' Initiative* (West Lafayette, 2012), pp 82-113, at pp 104-5; Ramet, *Balkan babel*, p. 206.
[24] Stokes, 'Independence and the fate of minorities', p. 105; Silber and Little, *The death of Yugoslavia*, pp 239-40, 243, 245-84; Ramet, *Balkan babel*, pp 207-8, 218-9; Aside of helping Bosnian Serb forces, parts of J.N.A. fused into it. For more on the role of J.N.A. in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, see: Kolarić, *Dossier: the JNA*, pp 62-101.
[25] Žunec, 'Rat u Hrvatskoj 1991.-1995. 2. dio', pp 111-2; With the formal retreat of J.N.A. from Bosnia in May 1992, the Bosnian Serb forces were named the Army of the Republika of Srpska (*Vojska Republike Srpske,* V.R.S.).
[26] Davor Marijan, 'Sukob H.V.O.-a i A.B.I.H. u Prozoru, u listopadu 1992' in *Časopis za suvremenu povijest*, xxxviii (2006), no. 2, pp 379-402; Ramet, *Balkan babel*, p. 211.

Mostar in Western Herzegovina.[27] The 1993-94 war claimed thousands of lives – more on the Bosniak side – and brought a bad international image for Croatia, accused by the U.N. of direct involvement in the war. Croatia's involvement also brought about internal splits in H.D.Z. in Croatia, critique from opposition parties and cooled down relations between Croatia and the Catholic Church.[28] The Croat-Bosniak conflict left a stain on Croatia's international image as its political and military leadership supported the creation of Herzeg-Bosnia, with the final plan to tie its territories to Croatia.[29] Aside from the H.V.'s active participation in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatian leadership exerted overall control of H.V.O.[30] Additionally, Croatia's role in the Croat-Bosniak conflict exposed specific cooperation with Serb leaders, also dedicated to carving Bosnia and Herzegovina.[31]

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[27] For the Croat-Bosniak War, see: Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1918 – 2008*, pp 727-38; Silber and Little, *The death of Yugoslavia*, pp 323-35; Žunec, 'Rat u Hrvatskoj 1991.-1995. 2. dio', pp 112.

[28] Marcus Tanner, *Croatia: a nation forged in war* (New Haven, 2001), pp 292-3; Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1918 – 2008*, pp 734-6.

[29] In the 1990s, Tuđman insinuated that Croatia's territory had an unnatural shape or that present borders of Bosnia, set by the Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia (*Antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Jugoslavije*) in 1945, represent 'a historical absurd of bringing back one colonial formation made between 15th and 18th century'. See: Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1918 – 2008*, pp 727-31; For transcripts of audio recordings of Tuđman's meetings with generals, ministers, and Herzeg-Bosnian political and military leadership, see: Štefica Galić and Amer Bahtijar, *Stenogrami o podjeli Bosne* (Mostar, 2017).

[30] In November 2017, in the Prlic *et al.* case, the I.C.T.Y. Appeals Chamber established that Tuđman, Croatian Defence Minister Gojko Šušak, Chief of the General Staff of H.V. Janko Bobetko and six accused Herzeg-Bosnia political and military officials participated in a joint criminal enterprise aiming to create greater Croatia. See: Prosecutor v. Jadranko Prlić *et al.* IT-04-74-A (Appeals Chamber Judgement), I.C.T.Y., 29 Nov. 2017, https://ucr.irmct.org/scasedocs/case/IT-04-74#appealsChamberJudgement (31 Mar. 2022); For more on I.C.T.Y. verdicts against Bosnian Croat political and military officials demonstrating Croatia's role in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, see: Prosecutor v. Blaškić IT-95-14 (Appeals Chamber Judgement), I.C.T.Y., 29 Jul. 2004, https://ucr.irmct.org/scasedocs/case/IT-95-14#appealsChamberJudgement (31 Mar. 2022); Prosecutor v. Dario Kordić and Mario Čerkez IT-95-14/2 (Appeals Chamber Judgement), I.C.T.Y., 17 Dec. 2004, https://ucr.irmct.org/scasedocs/case/IT-95-14%2F2#appealsChamberJudgement (31 Mar. 2022); Prosecutor v. Mladen Naletilić and Vinko Martinović IT-98-34-A (Appeals Chamber Judgement), I.C.T.Y., 3 May 2006, https://ucr.irmct.org/scasedocs/case/IT-98-34#appealsChamberJudgement (31 Mar. 2022); On examples how Croatia financed H.V.O, see: Sven Milekic, 'Trial Shows Croatian Money Fuelled Bosnian Croats' War', Balkan Insight, 24 Nov. 2017, https://balkaninsight.com/2017/11/24/trial-shows-croatian-money-fuelled-bosnian-croats-war-11-24-2017/ (13 Apr. 2019).

[31] Ramet, *Balkan babel*, pp 211-2.

Despite this, both wars would come to an end in 1995. Under U.S. pressure and due to war fatigue, the Croatian and Bosnian leadership signed the ceasefire in February 1994. In March, Bosnia and Croatia signed a confederation agreement in Washington, which united them against the common enemy, the Republic of Srpska.[32]

The international community made similar efforts for peace between R.S.K. and Croatia. In January 1995, R.S.K. leadership resolutely rejected a peace plan brokered by the international community, offering extensive political autonomy to Croatian Serbs. As a tactical move, although highly critical of it, Croatia did not openly reject the whole Plan but agreed that, in principle, it could work as a starting point for further discussions. As the Serbs rejected the deal, insisting on full sovereignty, the international community saw Croatia as the side willing to compromise and make concessions.[33]

Receiving the support of the international community (mainly the U.S.) while trying to normalise life in the country and restore territorial integrity, Croatia launched its final operations, Flash (*Bljesak*), in May and Storm (*Oluja*), in August 1995. Flash and Storm effectively ended the war in Croatia and R.S.K., as the central government regained control of the occupied territories, except the Eastern part of the country.[34] While they managed to trigger the return of non-Serb refugees, the two operations – especially Storm – resulted in a

[32] Tanner, *Croatia*, p. 292; Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1918 – 2008*, p. 737; Silber and Little, *The death of Yugoslavia*, pp 354-9; Ramet, *Balkan babel*, pp 216-7; Peter W. Galbraith, 'Washington, Erdut and Dayton: negotiating and implementing peace in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina' in *Cornell International Law Journal*, xxx (1997), no. 3, pp 643-9, at pp 645-6.

[33] Tanner, *Croatia*, p. 295-6; Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1918-2008*, p. 744; Barić, *Srpska pobuna*, pp 474-80; Bjelajac and Žunec, 'The war in Croatia, 1991–1995', p. 253; Galbraith, 'Washington, Erdut and Dayton', p. 646; *Večernji list*, 31 Jan. 1995

[34] For operations Flash and Storm, see: Ivan Brigović, 'Osvrt na operaciju 'Bljesak' u dokumentima Republike Srpske Krajine' in *Časopis za suvremenu povijest*, xli (2009), no. 1, pp 39-70; Davor Marijan, *Oluja* (Zagreb, 2007); Barić, *Srpska pobuna*, pp 492-502, 518-24; Another reason why the U.S. supported Storm was because it could relieve Bosniak-Croat population in Bihać in Western Bosnia, besieged by both R.S.K. and the Republic of Srpska forces. After the Srebrenica genocide in July 1995, the U.S. feared an even worse scenario if Bihać would fall. See: Ramet, *Balkan babel*, p. 232; Galbraith, 'Washington, Erdut and Dayton', p. 647; Marijan, *Oluja*, p. 144; Barić, *Srpska pobuna*, p. 511; Žunec, 'Rat u Hrvatskoj 1991.-1995. 2. dio', p. 126.

massive refugee wave of the Serb population. Although Croatian authorities called Croatian Serbs to remain in their homes, guaranteeing their rights, many ran out of fear of revenge or due to compliance with R.S.K. leadership's call for evacuation. However, their fear was justified, as Croatian forces, as well as looters, committed numerous war crimes during and after the Storm. Aside from wanton destruction, arson, and massive looting, Croatian forces and looters executed a few hundred, mostly elderly, Serb civilians, often in their homes.[35] Despite a significant number of prosecuted individuals, Croatian authorities often ignored complaints of these crimes, which seldomly took place in broad daylight in the presence of the media.[36] Like its role in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the crimes from the Storm would haunt Croatia for years to come.

After the victorious Storm, H.V. moved into Western Bosnia and joined forces with H.V.O. and A.R.B.H. in attacking V.R.S. and regaining control of territories Republika Srpska held since 1992. Therefore, during the fall of 1995, joined Croat and Bosniak forces quickly advanced, coming close to Banja Luka, the capital of the Republic of Srpska, which already

[35] Croatian Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, *Military operation Storm and its aftermath: report* (Zagreb, 2001); Igor Graovac, 'Civilne žrtve u sektoru Jug u Oluji i neposredno nakon Oluje (osnovni pokazatelji)' in *Polemos: časopis za interdisciplinarna istraživanja rata i mira*, vii (2004), no. 13-14, pp 129-45; Janine Natalya Clark, 'Courting controversy: the I.C.T.Y.'s acquittal of Croatian generals Gotovina and Markac' in *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, xi (2013), pp 399-423, at pp 402-3; Barić, *Srpska pobuna*, pp 522-3; Despite acquitting Croatian generals Mladen Markač and Ante Gotovina of accusations specified in the indictment, the I.C.T.Y. established that around 320 Serbs were killed during and after Storm, while Croatian special police and military units committed forty-four of these murders. See: Prosecutor v. Ante Gotovina, Ivan Čermak, Mladen Markač IT-06-90-T (Trial Chamber Judgement), I.C.T.Y., 15 Apr. 2011, https://ucr.irmct.org/scasedocs/case/IT-06-90#trialJudgement (26 Oct. 2023); Croatia's military documents reveal that there were criminal acts committed by Croatian forces and unknown individuals, but to a smaller degree. See: Marijan, *Oluja*, pp 134-6; According to the Croatian State Attorney Office (*Državno odvjetništvo Republike Hrvatske*, D.O.R.H.), 214 person were killed by Croatian forces and unknown individuals during and after Storm. See: D.O.R.H., 'Podaci o prijavama, procesuiranim slučajevima i žrtvama kaznenih djela ratnih zločina i postupci u vezi kaznenih djela za vrijeme i nakon operativne akcije 'Oluja'', D.O.R.H., 26 Apr. 2011, https://dorh.hr/hr/izvjesca-o-radu/podaci-o-prijavama-procesuiranim-slucajevima-i-zrtvama-kaznenih-djela-ratnih (26 Oct. 2023).

[36] Sven Milekic, 'Croatia's 'Feral Tribune': the state strikes back', Balkan Insight, 3 Jul. 2018, https://balkaninsight.com/2018/07/03/croatia-s-feral-tribune-the-state-strikes-back-07-02-2018/ (26 Oct. 2023); For the number of prosecuted cases of crimes committed during and after Storm, see: D.O.R.H., 'Podaci o prijavama'; Marijan, *Oluja*, pp 135-6.

took in Serb refugees from Krajina and Western Bosnia.[37] In such a situation, the international community, led by the U.S., pushed all three warring sides to the negotiating table. Thus, in November 1995, leaders of Croatia, Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Yugoslavia all signed the Dayton Agreement, which ended the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and set up a constitutional framework and power-sharing mechanism in place today.[38] Parallely, the representatives of R.S.K. (still controlling Eastern Croatia) and Croatia signed the Erdut Agreement that envisaged the U.N.-ran two-year-long peaceful reintegration of the region to Croatian jurisdiction.[39]

Both wars had a profound impact on two countries and the whole region – especially Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo. The wars triggered massive population shifts, millions of refugees and internally displaced persons, permanently changing the ethnic composition of both countries.[40] Destructions of homes and religious, cultural and industrial objects radically burdened both countries despite the foreign aid in the reconstruction process.[41] Wars in

[37] Ramet, *Balkan babel*, p. 239; Žunec, 'Rat u Hrvatskoj 1991.-1995. 2. dio', p. 122, 131.
[38] Galbraith, 'Washington, Erdut and Dayton', p. 647-8; Barić, *Srpska pobuna*, pp 524-5.
[39] Galbraith, 'Washington, Erdut and Dayton', p. 647-8; Barić, *Srpska pobuna*, pp 529-30.
[40] In 1991, there were around 300,000 non-Serb refugees from the territory of R.S.K., while some 130,000 Serbs fled to Serbia. After the Storm, there were up to 200,000 Serb refugees from R.S.K., while only 5,000 remained. In 1996, Croatia still housed 180,000 refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina, alongside 200,000 internally displaced persons. At the same time, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia housed 255,000 Serb refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina and 300,000 from Croatia. See: Catherine Phuong, *The international protection of internally displaced persons* (Cambridge, 2005), pp 157-60; According to statistics of Croatian institutions, in December 1991 there were around 550,000 refugees and internally displaced persons housed in Croatia, while 150,000 found refuge abroad. See: Marijan Perković and Vlado Puljiz, 'Ratne štete, izdaci za branitelje, žrtve i stradalnike rata u Republici Hrvatskoj' in *Revija socijalne politike*, viii (2001), no. 2, pp 235-8, at p. 235; In Bosnia and Herzegovina there was almost 1,1 million internally displaced persons in 1995, while approximately the same number took refuge abroad. In 1997, there were still over 800,000 internally displaced persons, over one fifth of the total population. See: Marie-Janine Calic, 'Ethnic cleansing and war crimes, 1991-1995' in Charles W. Ingrao and Thomas Allan Emmert (eds), *Confronting the Yugoslav Controversies: A Scholars' Initiative* (West Lafayette, 2012), pp 114-51, at pp 137-8.
[41] For war damages in Croatia, see: Žunec, 'Rat u Hrvatskoj 1991.-1995. 2. dio', p. 133; Perković and Puljiz, 'Ratne štete', p. 235; For war damages in Bosnia and Herzegovina, see: William Norris, 'Post war struggles: poverty in Bosnia-Herzegovina', The Borgen Project, 26 Jul. 2013, https://borgenproject.org/post-war-struggles-poverty-in-bosnia-herzegovina/ (25 Oct. 2023);

Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina also had a devastating toll on human life. Although the exact number is still a matter of discussion among researchers, between 18,000 and 22,000 died during the war in Croatia, while around 100,000 died in the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina.[42]

Homeland War – Croatia's founding myth

In Croatia, the 1990s war is officially (in the Constitutions, laws, and names of institutions) and predominantly (in the academia and media) referred to as the Homeland War (*Domovinski rat*).[43] According to one theory, Croatian 1990s President Franjo Tuđman coined (or at least popularised) the name of the conflict, as both he and the media – which often picked up on President's rhetoric – got the inspiration from Soviet historiography which referred to the conflict with the Axis powers (1941-45), as the 'Great Patriotic War' (*Velikaja Otečestvennaja vojna* in Russian), or the 'Great Homeland War' (*Veliki domovinski rat*) in the Croatian translation in the 1940s.[44] According to another interpretation, Croatia's most

[42] For human losses during the Croatian war, see: Ivo Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1918.-2008.* (Zagreb, 2008), p. 751; Dražen Živić, Nenad Pokos, 'Demografski gubitci tijekom Domovinskog rata kao odrednica depopulacije Hrvatske (1991. – 2001.)' in *Duštvena istraživanja*, xiii (2004), no. 4-5, pp 727-50 at pp 737-40; Enis Zebić, 'Ljudski gubici u ratu u Hrvatskoj: 22.211 osoba', 15 Jan. 2018, Radio slobodna Europa, https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/hrvatska-ljutski-gubici/28976312.html (24 Mar. 2019); Tihomir Ponoš, 'Documenta ima novi izračun: U ratu u Hrvatskoj stradalo je oko 18 tisuća ljudi', 26 Dec. 2017, *Novi list*, http://www.novilist.hr/Vijesti/Hrvatska/DOCUMENTA-IMA-NOVI-IZRACUN-U-ratu-u-Hrvatskoj-stradalo-je-oko-18-tisuca-ljudi?meta_refresh=true (24 Mar. 2019); For human losses during the Bosnian war, see: Calic, 'Ethnic cleansing', pp 138-9; Ewa Tabeau and Jakub Bijak, 'War-related deaths in the 1992-1995 armed conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina: a critique of previous estimates and recent results' in *European Journal of Population*, xxi (2005), no. 2-3, pp 187-215.

[43] The 'Homeland War' first entered the Constitution in 1997. See: Zastupnički dom Sabora Republike Hrvatske, 'Ustavni zakon o izmjenama i dopunama Ustava Republike Hrvatske', Narodne novine, undated, https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/1997_12_135_1944.html (25 Mar. 2019).

[44] Dejan Jović, *Rat i mit: Politika identiteta u suvremenoj Hrvatskoj* (Zagreb, 2017), p. 190; Dejan Jović, 'Lenjinistički i staljinistički izvori Tuđmanove politike samoodređenja i odcjepljenja' in *Politička misao*, lii (2015), no. 1, pp 15-47, at pp 31-2; Žarko Puhovski, 'Vukovarske aporije: što su sve razotkrili hadezeovski rezervisti?', 22 Oct. 2018, Lupiga, https://lupiga.com/vijesti/vukovarske-aporije-sto-su-sve-razotkrili-hadezeovski-rezervisti (25 Mar. 2019).

popular weekly magazine, *Globus*, first introduced the 'Homeland War' in 1991 as a translation of the Soviet name. The magazine used it due to its 'communicational value', and soon it was picked up by the public and Tuđman himself.[45]

This Soviet root of the name is visible from the 1940s. Thus, the book *Stories from the Homeland War* (*Priče iz Domovinskog rata*), published in Zagreb in 1946, gathered thirteen stories from Soviet veterans.[46] As a result of the strong cultural influence the Soviet Union had in Yugoslavia in the 1940s, Croatian newspapers sometimes referred to W.W.II. in Yugoslavia as 'the Homeland War', aside from the 'People's Liberation War' (*Narodnooslobodilački rat*, N.O.R.), the official name for the conflict. After the split between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union in 1948, newspapers used 'Homeland War' solely for the Soviet war against Axis powers.[47]

Independently of how it was coined, the name 'Homeland War' reflects strong patriotic connotations of the term 'homeland' (*domovina*) in language that lasts for centuries, appealing to emotional reflection. The word was strongly popularised by Tuđman and H.D.Z., often using the phrase 'homeland and emigrated Croatia', which the mainstream media soon appropriated.[48] When Tuđman announced a general subscription in October 1991 due to a full-scale war, he stated that all those called for military duty had to organise

[45] Vladimir Karabalić, 'Hrvatski naziv Domovinski rat i njegovi njemački prijevodi' in *Godišnjak za kulturu, umjetnost i društvena pitanja*, xxviii (2011), pp 143-65, at pp 144-8; In September 1991, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, one of the biggest Croatian daily newspapers at the time, first time used the 'Homeland War', not as the formal name of the Croatia's 1990s war, but more as an aside description of it, in an opinion piece. See: *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 12 Sep. 1991.
[46] Jović, *Rat i mit*, p. 189.
[47] For examples of daily newspaper *Slobodna Dalmacija* using the 'Homeland War' instead of 'N.O.R.', see: *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 14, 30 May, 26 Jul., 5, 18, 29 Aug., 6, 26 Oct., 3, 27 Nov. 1946, 23 Apr., 26 Jun. 1947, 28 Jan., 30 Apr., 5 May 1948; For the split between Yugoslavia and Soviet Union, better known as the Tito-Stalin split, see: Ivo Banac, *With Stalin against Tito: Cominformist splits in Yugoslav Communism* (Ithaca and London, 1988).
[48] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 24 Feb. 1992; *Večernji list*, 3, 17 Oct. 1990, 30 Mar. 1991, 17 Mar., 28 Oct. 1993, 7 Feb., 18 Mar., 27 Sep. 1995, 16 Jan., 6 Aug. 1996, 7 Mar. 1997.

themselves to 'defend the homeland'.[49] After the war, Tuđman kept using the word homeland when referring to Croatia.[50] Such word use shows how even the very name of the conflict, 'the Homeland War', operates within the Tuđmanist narrative of the War.[51]

Due to this emotional connotation, some scholars see the term 'Homeland War' as a 'loaded' term that many use uncritically.[52] Due to the suggestive nature of its name, the term 'Homeland War' cannot be understood as a neutral term that can be used as a technical academic term.[53] Despite its use in Croatia's mainstream, it still carries a very particular political connotation.[54] As the American historian Andrew Bacevich emphasised, naming conflicts is important, as names of wars bestow meaning. The name attached to a date or event shapes our understanding of the conflict.[55] In that aspect, the term 'Homeland War' is not descriptive; it does not explain the character of the conflict (civil, international, defensive, aggression), its location (Croatian or elsewhere), the period during which it took place (the 1990s) or the result (independence or succession). Therefore, the name is controversial, and

[49] For Tuđman's announcement of the general subscription, see: Croatian1988, 'Dr. Franjo Tuđman-poziv na obranu domovine', YouTube, 11 Jul. 2008, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K17BtCjY14Q (27 Mar. 2019).
[50] Alex J. Bellamy, *The formation of Croatian national identity: centuries old dream?* (Manchester and New York, 2003).
[51] Dejan Jović, 'Croatia after Tudjman: the I.C.T.Y. and issues of transitional justice' in *Chaillot Papers*, (2009), no. 116, pp 13-28, at p. 14.
[52] Ivor Sokolić, *International courts and mass atrocity: narratives of war and justice in Croatia* (New York, 2018), pp 2, 57; Vjeran Pavlaković, 'Fulfilling the thousand-year-old dream: strategies of symbolic nation-building in Croatia' in Pål Kolstø (ed), *Strategies of Symbolic Nation-building in South Eastern Europe* (New York, 2016), pp 19-50, at p. 39.
[53] Jović, *Rat i mit*, p. 190.
[54] Therefore, the thesis will use the term only to either problematise the discourse, narrative and myth tied to this specific memory of the conflict. Also, the thesis will use the term when it is used by actors whose rhetoric and discourse is analysed or when it is a part of official names – of associations, initiatives, declarations, etc. Otherwise, the thesis will use the term '1990s' war'. Following the same logic, the thesis would not use Yugoslav names – like N.O.R. – used for World War II.
[55] Andrew Bacevich, 'How we name our wars matters', History News Network, 28 May 2013, https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/152045 (19 Apr. 2019).

some academics question how appropriate this name is – despite or due to its emotional and communicational value.[56]

The primary point of discontent is the impression of the vagueness of the term homeland or what the name does not communicate. Hence, some argue that this term was deliberately coined or popularised to blur out certain aspects of the war and to sanitise the narrative of the war. Thus, 'the homeland' can be extensively defined, including territories of Croatia and neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina.[57] Therefore, the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the episodes that include the Croat component, are a part of the Homeland War. Although there is a certain vagueness about Croatia's position on the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, except naming that country as another victim of the 'Greater-Serbian aggression', it is an integral part of the Homeland War.[58] This vagueness is where manipulations in its use appear, opening the door for the political use of the conflict, turning it into a myth.

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[56] Experts and academics in the field agreed on a conference in 2008 that the 'Croatian Defensive War' would be a more appropriate name for the conflict. For more, see: Sanja Butigan, 'Znanstvenici: Hrvatski obrambeni rat bolji je termin od Domovinskog rata', Slobodna Dalmacija, 8 Nov. 2008, https://www.slobodnadalmacija.hr/novosti/hrvatska/clanak/id/27899/znanstvenici-hrvatski-obrambeni-rat-bolji-je-termin-od-domovinskog-rata (7 Apr. 2019).

[57] Karabalić, 'Hrvatski naziv Domovinski rat', pp 144-6.

[58] Therefore, the Croatian Memorial Documentation Centre of the Homeland War (*Hrvatsko memorijalno-dokumentacijski centar Domovinskog rata*), the main institution dealing with Croatia's 1990s war, publishes books on the war in Bosnia. In one such book, memoirs of a commander of H.V.O. unit fighting near Sarajevo, the Centre explains that, aside of 'ethnic, geostrategic and geopolitical reasons', its scientific work cannot be limited within Croatia's international borders, as the 1990s wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina cannot be observed independently one from the other, as they were both a part of the same battlefront. See: Slavko Zelić, *HVO u obrani Sarajeva 1992.-1993. (prilozi za istraživanje uloge HVO-a u obrani Sarajeva i BiH), Republika Hrvatska i Domovinski rat 1990.-1995., Memoarsko gradivo knjiga 9* (Zagreb and Mostar, 2014), p. 8; Furthermore, since 2013 in Mostar there is the Croatian Documentation Centre of the Homeland War in Bosnia and Herzegovina (*Hrvatski dokumentacijski centar Domovinskog rata u Bosni i Hercegovini*), an institution with the same description as its counterpart in Zagreb, but solely focused on 'Homeland War in Bosnia and Herzegovina'. It was formed to counter claims set out by the I.C.T.Y. Trial Chamber in *Prlić et al* case in 2013. It was founded and now functions with the direct infrastructural and financial support of Croatian institutions. See: Središnji državni ured za Hrvate izvan Republike Hrvatske, 'Otvoren Arhiv Hrvatskog dokumentacijskog centra Domovinskog rata u BiH', Središnji državni ured za Hrvate izvan Republike Hrvatske, 7 Oct. 2019, https://hrvatiizvanrh.gov.hr/vijesti/otvoren-arhiv-hrvatskog-dokumentacijskog-centra-domovinskog-rata-u-bih/4596 (25 Oct. 2023); Željko Raguž, 'Hrvatski dokumentacijski centar Domovinskog rata u BiH', Hrvatska Zajednica Herceg-Bosna, undated, https://hercegbosna.ba/hdc/ (25 Oct. 2023).

As the 1990s war started almost parallel with achieving statehood and triggering or expediating the country's international recognition, it functions as Croatia's founding myth.[59] In this sense, a myth serves as a belief (not necessarily empirically based) held common by a large group, giving meaning to different events.[60] Although these events often occur in history, political myths on the right deprive its objects of all history, sanitising the narrative.[61] A political myth represents a made-up, unreliable, and contested explanation of reality that serves as a key to understanding the present.[62] All societies conform to political mythology, making sense of some shared traditions and experiences. This mythology operates with clear language using the black-and-white technique, contrasting 'us' to 'them'.[63]

As political myths are ideologically marked narratives in dramatic form, which explain past events for the sake of the present, the Homeland War also has its narrative.[64] The narrative helps people understand the social reality around them – the experience or memory of the Homeland War – and constitutes their social identity, often unconsciously.[65] There is an overwhelmingly dominant (or hegemonic) narrative of the Homeland War, advocated by most mainstream parties, war veterans associations, media, and many academics and school

[59] For the role of the war in achieving statehood and international recognition, see: Bjelajac and Žunec, 'The war in Croatia', p. 251; Woodward, *Balkan tragedy*, pp 178-91; Meier, *Yugoslavia*, pp 226-34; Marko Attila Hoare, 'The war of Yugoslav succession' in Sabrina P. Ramet (ed), *Central and Southeast European Politics since 1989* (Cambridge, 2012), pp 111-35 at p. 18; Glaurdić, *The hour of Europe*; Dejan Jović, *Rat i mit: politika identiteta u suvremenoj Hrvatskoj* (Zagreb, 2017), p. 218; For more on the usefulness of political myths for democracies, see: Tihomir Cipek, 'Funkcija političkog mita. O koristi mitskog za demokraciju' in *Anali Hrvatskog politološkog društva*, ix (2012), pp 7-19.
[60] Murray Edelman, *Politics as symbolic action: mass arousal and quiescence* (New York, San Francisco and London, 1971), p. 14.
[61] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York, 1972), p. 152.
[62] However, Girarde (Žirarde) also emphasises how myths are never created out of touch with historical reality. See: Raul Žirarde, *Politički mitovi i mitologije* (Belgrade, 2000), pp 13, 57-8.
[63]Anna Ceglarska, 'The role of myth in political thought' in *Krakowskie Studia z Historii Państwa i Prawa*, xi (2018), no. 3, pp 343-55, at p. 351.
[64] Christopher G. Flood, *Political myth: a theoretical introduction* (New York and London 1996), p. 42; Henry Tudor, *Political Myth* (London and Basingstoke, 1972), p. 16.
[65] Margaret R. Somers, 'The narrative constitution of identity: a relational and network approach' in *Theory and Society*, xxiii (1994), no. 5, pp 605–49, at p. 606.

curricula.[66] Like every hegemonic narrative, this dominant narrative is something people in Croatia often take for granted, almost as 'common sense'.[67] This simplified history master narrative outlines the conflict as an international 'Greater Serbian' or Yugoslav (sometimes marked as a joint effort of Serbia and Montenegro) aggression of joined forces of Croatian Serb rebels and J.N.A., during which almost 'bare-handed' and 'bare-footed' Croats managed to the defeat the much stronger enemy, managing to avoid the annihilation of the Croatian nation.[68] According to this sanitised interpretation, the Greater-Serbian aggression brought the Croatian people together to defend the homeland despite their political and ideological differences.[69] This narrative trait works into the political myth of unity or the 'united we stand' myth when people come together to overcome a shared enemy or impending doom.[70]

As Croatia's foundational myth, the Homeland War is the central historical event around which Croatian contemporary, post-socialist nationalism and national identity are built. The new post-socialist political regime, headed by Tuđman, put the idea of an independent state at the centre of its ideology while using the Homeland War as its main legitimisation idea.[71]

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[66] For the dominant narrative about the Homeland War, see: Jović, *Rat i mit*; Tamara Banjeglav, 'Conflicting memories, competing narratives and contested histories in Croatia's post-war commemorative practices' in *Politička misao*, xlix (2012), no. 5, pp 7-31, at pp 9-12; Pavlaković, 'Fulfilling the thousand-year-old dream'.

[67] Krebs and Lobasz explained how a dominant or hegemonic narrative function on the example of September 11 terrorist attacks and how this narrative structured the debate on terrorism and invasion of Iraq. For more, see: Ronald R. Krebs and Jennifer K. Lobasz, 'Fixing the meaning of 9/11: hegemony, coercion, and the road to war in Iraq' in *Security Studies*, xvi (2007), no. 3, pp 409-51.

[68] Jović, *Rat i mit*; Banjeglav, 'Conflicting memories', pp 9-12; Pavlaković, 'Fulfilling the thousand-year-old dream', p. 19; Stevo Đurašković, *The politics of history in Croatia and Slovakia in the 1990s* (Zagreb, 2016), p. 130; Sven Milekić, 'The myth of a good king: Franjo Tuđman and King Aleksandar in veterans' eyes' in *ASN World Convention* (online, 2021), p. 1; Sokolić, *International courts*, p. 58.

[69] Jović, *Rat i mit*, p. 361.

[70] Žirarde, *Politički mitovi*, pp 167-81.

[71] Vjeran Pavlaković, 'The legacy of war and nation-building in Croatia since 1990' in Balázs Apor and John Paul Newman (eds), *Balkan Legacies: The Long Shadow of Conflict and Ideological Experiment in Southeastern Europe* (West Lafayette, 2021), pp 21-56, at pp 21-2; Viktor Koska and Ana Matan, 'Croatian citizenship regime and traumatized categories of Croatian citizens: Serb minority and Croatian defenders of the Homeland War', in *Croatian Political Science Review*, liv (2017), no. 1-2, pp 119-49, at pp 121, 123; Tihomir Cipek, 'Sjećanje na 1945: čuvanje i brisanje. O snazi obiteljskih narativa' in Sulejman Bosto and Tihomir Cipek (eds), *Kultura sjećanja: 1945.*

This memory of the Homeland War was hijacked by conservative forces in Croatian society, predominantly by H.D.Z. that held power during the 1990s and the war itself.[72] Through the years, H.D.Z. took control of the narrative, becoming an undisputed pillar of Croatian independence, wielding the memory of the war for political purposes. H.D.Z. framed itself as the 'state-forming party' (*državotvorna stranka*), monopolising the culture of victory built around the Homeland War.[73] As articulated in rhetoric and public memory, the state-forming argument stems from the notion that the Croatian nation and state came to being during the Homeland War, making it a 'myth of origin'.[74] Thus, the Homeland War series was crucial for constructing the Croatian nation.[75] This type of political myth becomes a part of 'collective national consciousness', providing building blocks for constructing national

Povijesni lomovi i svladavanje prošlosti (Zagreb, 2009), pp 155-67, at p. 162; Nataša Zambelli, 'A journey westward: A poststructuralist analysis of Croatia's identity and the problem of cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia' in *Europe-Asia Studies*, lxii (2010), no. 10, pp 1661-82, at pp 1666, 1676; Banjeglav, 'Conflicting memories', pp 10-1; Siniša Malešević, *Ideology, legitimacy and the new state: Yugoslavia, Serbia and Croatia* (Abingdon and New York, 2002), pp 225-6.

[72] In August 1991, due to the escalation of the war, H.D.Z. formed a new coalition government with almost all other parliamentary parties, nicknamed 'the Government of Democratic Unity'. The Government that lasted a year, was under almost complete H.D.Z.'s control, as the prime minister and three out of four vice prime ministers were members of the party. Only ten out of thirty-eight ministers came from opposition parties (which had around forty-nine per cent of seats in the Parliament), out of which five were ministers without a portfolio. Furthermore, three of these ministers from other parties soon became H.D.Z. members, as well as six out of seven non-partisan members. Finally, due to the constitutional framework existing at the time, much of the executive power was in the hands of President Tuđman, also the President of H.D.Z., who often formed major state policies through a close circle of a few ministers and advisors, often working through his advisory bodies that were not enshrined in law. For more, see: Andrijana Perković Paloš, 'Vlada demokratskog jedinstva' (PhD thesis, University of Split, Split, 2018).

[73] Sokolić, *International courts*, pp 215-6; Danijela Dolenec and Daniela Širinić, 'Mobilising against change: veteran organisations as a pivotal political actor' in Grzegorz Ekiert, Elizabeth J. Perry and Yan Xiaojun (eds), *Ruling by Other Means: State Mobilised Movements* (Boston, 2020), pp 239-60, at pp 240-1; Koska and Matan, 'Croatian citizenship regime', p. 136; Mieczysław P. Boduszyński and Vjeran Pavlaković, 'Cultures of victory and the political consequences of foundational legitimacy in Croatia and Kosovo' in *Journal of Contemporary History*, liv (2019), no. 4, pp 799-824, at pp 802-4; Malešević, *Ideology, legitimacy*, pp 226.

[74] Tamara Banjeglav, 'Political rhetoric and discursive framing of national identity in Croatia's commemorative culture' in *Journal of Language and Politics*, xvii (2018), no. 6, pp 858-81, at p. 865; Anthony D. Smith, 'Ethnic myths and ethnic revivals' in *European Journal of Sociology*, xxv (1984), no. 2, pp 283-305, at pp 292.

[75] Jović, *Rat i mit*, p. 12; Pavlaković, 'The legacy of war', p. 27.

identity.[76] The sense of ownership for 'creating Croatia' goes to the Tuđman-led H.D.Z. and veterans –this thesis's focus – who won the Homeland War and defended the country.[77]

In that aspect, the thesis argues that the devastating consequences of the war were not the only reason why many in Croatia consider this conflict holy and thus not open to any questioning. In a way, the discourse on the war resembles a secular religion, a 'system of beliefs and practices that address fundamental questions' without 'invoking a supernatural being' – God, spirit, or higher entity.[78] However, as it functions as a religion, it has its sacred dogmas that are not to be questioned. Thus, it is customary in Croatia to refer to the Homeland War as holy, as a sanctity (*svetinja*) that no one should question.[79] The sacred status was created through mythologising the war, as myths of war are often more important for national identity creation than the experience itself.[80] Different groups contributed to this sanctification by constantly producing and reproducing its memory by the aforementioned conservative mythmakers, creating a narrative constituting a prevalent memory regime, an organised way of remembering certain events at a particular time.[81]

Central thesis – defenders of (from) the Homeland War

The thesis focuses on veteran associations and groups, reproducing the dominant discourse from the top, reflecting their discursive ties to Tuđman's politics of history and his political rhetoric in general. Therefore, as the thesis will demonstrate by analysing and contextualising

[76] Banjeglav, 'Political rhetoric and discursive framing', p. 865.
[77] Jović, *Rat i mit*, p. 29.
[78] George Jennings, David Brown and Andrew C. Sparkes, ''It can be a religion if you want': Wing Chun Kung Fu as a secular religion' in *Ethnography*, xi (2010), no. 4, pp 533-57, at p. 539.
[79] Jović, *Rat i mit*, pp 22, 196, 199-201; As the thesis will demonstrate, Croatian veterans often use the word 'sanctity' when talking about the Homeland War.
[80] John Hutchinson, *Nationalism and war* (New York, 2017), pp 72-3.
[81] Jan Kubik and Michael Bernhard, 'A theory of the politics of memory' in Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik (eds), *Twenty Years after Communism: The Politics of Memory and Commemoration* (New York, 2014), pp 7-36, at pp 16-7.

their activities and rhetoric, veteran associations and groups functioned as guardians of, essentially, Tuđmanist war narrative – with specific iterations. The research reveals the relationship between Tuđman and veteran associations, who see him through his 'pan-Croatian reconciliation' idea, according to which descendants of both communist (anti-fascist) Partisans and fascist Ustaša are to be reconciled as they all fought for an independent Croatia against Serbs in the Homeland War.[82] Similarly, the idea of the Croatian people and political elites setting aside their differences and fighting the common enemy in the Homeland War is a generally accepted representation of the conflict today and functions as a part of the same 'united we stand' mythical theme, according to which a group can achieve almost anything if they work, sacrifice, and obey their leaders.[83] In this way, the myth has the social function of keeping society together and loyal to the political elite.

However, despite the prominent role of Croatian political elites in creating the Homeland War myth, I argue it is wrong to claim that Croatia's war narrative is a simple elite war myth created exclusively by H.D.Z. and Tuđman. Despite the vital role of elites in creating war myths, they are also created spontaneously by multiple actors and groups to make sense of mass death, often driven by direct experience of the conflict. After all, elites often co-opted some of the narratives surfacing bottom-up.[84] As the thesis will demonstrate, H.D.Z. and

[82] For Tuđman's idea of 'pan-Croatian reconciliation', see: Darko Hudelist, Tuđman: biografija (Zagreb, 2004), pp 620-31, 677-92; Marinko Čulić, *Tuđman, i poslije Tuđmana* (Zagreb, 2014), pp 117-37; Ivo Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1990. – 2020. Godine velikih nada i gorkih razočaranja* (Zagreb, 2021), pp 249-50; Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1918 – 2008* (Zagreb, 2008), pp 771-2; Đurašković, *The politics of history*, pp 67-8, 123-5, 138-9, 151-4, 172-4; Stevo Đurašković, 'Nation-building in Franjo Tuđman's *Political Writings*' in *Croatian Political Science Review*, li (2014), no. 5, pp 58-79; For a less critical view, see: Davor Pauković, 'The role of history in legitimizing politics in the transition period in Croatia' in Davor Pauković, Vjeran Pavlaković and Višeslav Raos (eds), *Confronting the Past: European Experiences* (Zagreb, 2012), pp 183-222; Ivica Radoš, *Tuđman izbliza: Svjedočenja suradnika i protivnika* (Zagreb, 2005), pp 38-42; James J. Sadkovich, 'Franjo Tuđman: Intelektualac u politici' in Sabrina P. Ramet, Konrad Clewing and Reneo Lukić (eds), *Hrvatska od osamostaljenja: Rat, politika, društvo, vanjska politika* (Zagreb, 2013), pp 59-85, at p. 68.

[83] For ethno-totalitarianism in the Croatian society, see: Jović, *Rat i mit*, pp 283-324; For 'United we stand' mythic theme and myth of unity, see: Michael L. Geis, *The language of politics* (New York, 1987), pp 30-44; Žirarde, *Politički mitovi*, pp 161-87.

[84] Hutchinson, *Nationalism and war*, pp 4, 73-6.

Tuđman often picked up the rhetoric and tropes created and promoted by veteran associations. Additionally, the simple focus on elite mythmaking does not work in the case of forming the hegemonic narrative of Croatia's 1990s war. Elites and non-elites are intertwined, and veterans are as much a part of the establishment as they are not. Many veteran leaders are high-ranking party officials themselves, or high-ranking party officials are speaking for veterans and furthering their claims and discourse. In Croatia's case, veteran associations are often not ordinary civil society organisations but influential interest organisations with often direct and transparent political sponsorship.[85] Since the 1990s, veteran associations and groups have been significant for the organisational grounding of Croatia's contemporary nationalism.[86]

Veterans' important role comes from their status as defenders (*branitelji*) and how they are widely referred to in Croatia's legal documents, education, media and public discourse.[87] Although a loaded term, 'defender' is widely and sometimes almost exclusively used.[88] Conservative groups often use such morally and emotionally loaded terms related to the 1990s war that dominated political discourse decades after the conflict for fighting political opponents.[89] Some critics notice that the word 'defender' does not suggest that someone is a veteran, a retired or former soldier, as if he or they are still defending the country. Critics notice how other countries have ministries of veterans, while Croatia has a 'Ministry of

[85] In chapter one, the thesis will focus on one of such relationship between Croatian Defence Minister Gojko Šušak and disabled veterans.
[86] For organisational grounding, see: Siniša Malešević, *Grounded nationalisms: a sociological analysis* (Cambridge, 2019), pp 10-1.
[87] This is how the veterans are referred to in the Constitution and Law regulating their rights. See: Hrvatski sabor, 'Ustav Republike Hrvatske', Narodne novine, 9 Jul. 2010, https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2010_07_85_2422.html (25 Mar. 2019); Hrvatski sabor, 'Zakon o hrvatskim braniteljima iz Domovinskog rata i članovima njihovih obitelji', Narodne novine, 6 Dec. 2017, https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2017_12_121_2758.html (31 Mar. 2019).
[88] Pavlaković, 'Fulfilling the thousand-year-old dream', p. 39.
[89] Michal Mochtak, 'Mythologizing war: legacies of conflict in Croatian parliamentary debates' in *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, xx (2020), no. 3, pp 491-513, at p. 506.

Defenders'.[90] The active form used is yet another similarity between Croatian and Yugoslav W.W.II. veterans, referred to as 'fighters' (*borci*), as if they were still fighting the enemy. While the 'fighter' was more neutral, since someone could fight for both the aggressor and the one attacked, the term 'defender' offers a morally superior position. As the thesis will demonstrate, this is one of the reasons veterans insist on referring to the war as a defensive war fought against the 'Greater-Serbian aggression' (*velikosrpska agresija*). The aggression acts as veterans' *raison d'être*; if there is no aggressor to attack Croatia, there are no defenders to defend it. At the same time, as the thesis will clearly show, Croatian veterans rejected all notions that the war was – even partially – a civil conflict. While the aggressor requires a victim of that aggression, civil war does not, at the level of semiotics, predispose guilt for the attack or assert victimhood. In civil wars, the root of conflict may have different sources: political and ideological differences and religious or ethnic background. In terms of semiotics, there is no simple dichotomy of 'aggressor' and 'victim', no moral high ground to be won that triggers equal emotional engagement. Emotional engagement is needed in terms of preserving symbolic power. Croatian veterans of the 1990s need to control the war narrative, free from potential elements of civil war.

This official narrative offers a one-dimensional view of the war as a Greater-Serbian aggression, a life-or-death situation in which the defenders defended the Croatian state and people. In that aspect, they sacrificed themselves – their lives or health. Therefore, as the thesis will demonstrate, veteran associations present veterans – and Croats – as both victors and victims.[91] By analysing their rhetoric and activities – protest, institutional, legal – the thesis explores how veteran associations tried to keep the dominant narrative alive and intact

[90] Boris Pavelić, 'Puhovski: Ostale zemlje imaju ministarstvo veterana, smiješno je da kod nas još postoje branitelji', Novi list, 2 Dec. 2015, http://www.novilist.hr/Vijesti/Hrvatska/Puhovski-Ostale-zemlje-imaju-ministarstvo-veterana-smijesno-je-da-kod-nas-jos-postoje-branitelji (19 Apr. 2019).
[91] As noted by Jović, Croatia is the only post-Yugoslav country that managed to officially establish the myth of victor and myth of victimhood in the War. See: Jović, *Rat i mit*, pp 201-3.

by confronting different counter-narratives through two decades. Using their political influence through contentious politics, the associations especially tackled narratives opening the question of war crimes committed by Croatian forces – introduced by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (I.C.T.Y.) – which threatened to disturb the victim-aggressor dichotomy. This dichotomy remains the central dynamic of reproducing the dominant narrative in Croatia, and many mnemonic groups try to enforce or challenge it. As the thesis will demonstrate, veterans, organised in associations and different *ad hoc* groups, try to prevent calm discussions or prosecution of Croatian war crime suspects and perpetrators by claiming such incursions attempt at 'equalising the victim and the aggressor' in their presumed guilt. The opposition to the 'equalisation' of the victim and aggressor became an omnipresent trope and catchphrase, not only in the veteran movement but among political elites and the broader public.[92]

This simplified and sanitised dominant narrative of the Homeland War does not consider the suffering of the 'Other', the Serbs. Here, the suffering of Serbs is seen as an impediment to Croats' suffering.[93] This zero-sum game view of mass suffering and collective victimhood is not something specific for Croatian veterans, as it is present among all ethnic and victim groups in ex-Yugoslav countries, which serves to reinforce national and ethnic group identities.[94] In veterans' cases, this competition sometimes turns into open anti-Serb chauvinism, often disguised in different veteran and patriotic tropes that survived in the

[92] Sokolić, *International courts*, pp 62-3, 98-100, 152-3; Boduszyński and Pavlaković, 'Cultures of victory', p. 809; Sven Milekić, 'A protest, coup d'état, or internal party power struggle: what motivated Croatian war veterans to hit the streets?' in *Politička misao*, lix (2022), no. 4, pp 215-50, at p. 231.
[93] Iva Vukušić, 'Judging their hero: perceptions of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in Croatia' in James Gow, Rachel Kerr and Zoran Pajić (eds), *Prosecuting War Crimes: Lessons and Legacies of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia* (Abingdon and New York, 2014), pp 151-81, at p. 161.
[94] Cristian Axboe Nielsen, 'Collective and competitive victimhood as identity in the former Yugoslavia' in Nanci Adler (ed), *Understanding the Age of Transitional Justice: Crimes, Courts, Commissions, and Chronicling* (New Brunswick, 2018), pp 175-193.

public sphere for decades. Even the associations with moderate leadership will often succumb to anti-Serb rhetoric. Although veterans' anti-Serb rhetoric primarily targets Serb political leaders, associations often make blanket accusations against Serbs as a people, which negatively impacts fragile inter-ethnic relations in Croatia.

The thesis will expose these anti-Serb and anti-Yugoslav sentiments, among the predominant ideological facets of Croatia's veteran movement – and Croatian ethnonationalism – often followed by anti-Communist, anti-leftist and anti-liberal rhetoric. Anchored in political conservativism, besides the ties to H.D.Z. and other right-wing parties and groups, veteran associations are tied to the Catholic Church, as the religion has a prominent place in veteran commemorations, monuments, and rhetoric. As the thesis will show, although their ideological leanings are often fluid and created in a dialogue between different worldviews, associations and groups' conceptions of veteran identity became more radical as the years passed. Thus, by the 2000s and 2010s, it tied to specific conservative and ultra-conservative ideas, conducted directly and indirectly through discourse and different activities reaffirming an image of veterans as conservatives.

Therefore, while veterans are slightly more leaning towards the right wing – according to surveys – the promoted veteran identity is almost entirely hijacked by conservatives. Among mainstream associations, an image of liberal or left-wing veterans – despite their claims of being neither left nor right – becomes nearly a *contradictio of adiecto*. Associations often used this conservative, yet again fluid, veteran identity to ostracise individuals who were not worthy of the 'defender' identity, as they betrayed the supposed core values of the Homeland War. Such rhetorical excursions enable associations' leaders to ostracise, excommunicate, and delegitimise certain individual veterans, often using straightforward smear campaigns.

My research shows that the constant internal and external symbolic and rhetorical purges of non-patriotic elements left the veteran movement in a paradox. While praising unity as one of the highest principles for the nation to thrive, they constantly bring divisions within the society and among themselves. On the one hand, veteran associations and other conservative forces in Croatia seek unity in accepting their conservative values. Jović refers to this process as 'ethno-totalitarians of the everyday' when he describes bottom-up methods of trying to impose specific values that make 'real Croats' or 'Croatian patriots' on others.[95] On the other hand, veteran associations are in a constant process of internal divisions, bickering, and competition while often contributing to deepening societal divisions. Thus, veteran associations repeatedly rejected political labels by claiming that there is such a thing as an umbrella veteran identity, surpassing all ideological and political differences between them while thinking about the wellbeing of Croatia and the nation. Along these lines, veteran associations often stress that they fought for 'neither the left nor the right' but 'for Croatia'.[96] Despite this overarching identity, veterans constantly denounced fellow combatants for lacking support for the common cause. Additionally, concerning the rest of society, veterans' role as mnemonic warriors brings division; otherwise, there would be no need for such mnemonic activities.

This thesis will demonstrate the role veterans, through their associations and different *ad hoc* groups, had in building Croatia's culture of victory built around the Homeland War myth. Similar to veterans in the region from previous conflicts in the 20th century – W.W.I. and W.W.II. – Croatian veterans built their social standing around war as a state-building event.

[95] Jović, *Rat i mit*, pp 310-2.
[96] Izviješće o radu U.D.H.R.M. za razdoblje od posljednjeg zasjedanja Skupštine, 20 Apr. 2002, Association of Volunteers of the Croatian War Navy (Udruga dragovoljaca *Hrvatske ratne mornarice*, U.D.H.R.M.), registrator Zapisnik Izvršnog i Središnjeg Odbora Udruge za 2003, 2004, 2005, do 2008; Opširnije pojašnjenje zatraženog sastanka 'Istinom u budućnost', 8 Mar. 2005, Croatian State Archives (*Hrvatski državni arhiv*, H.D.A.), fond H.R.-H.D.A.-2049 Ured predsjednika R.H. Stjepana Mesića, fascikl 1551.

In promoting the hegemonic narrative, Croatian veterans act as guardians of contemporary Croatia, providing ideological support for the state built on war victory. Alongside political elites – predominantly H.D.Z. – veteran associations were among key mythmakers. The thesis will demonstrate how they provided ideological building blocks for establishing and petrifying the dominant narrative that limits free discussion about controversies and transgressions connected to the 1990s war: elements of the civil war, war crimes committed against Serbs, Croatia's role in the Bosnian War. Once the discussion over the contentious aspects was limited, through different campaigns and intimidation, it opened the path for transforming the war into 'sanctity' – the word used by veterans and right-wingers.[97]

Thus, the thesis establishes veteran associations and groups as one of the leading memory entrepreneurs for the memory of the 1990s war. Memory entrepreneurs are mnemonic actors or agents – individuals, activists, politicians, or professionals – who publicly pursue their interpretation of the past while trying to convince others to adopt this view and secure social recognition and political legitimacy for their narrative of the past.[98] Memory entrepreneurs do not simply revise history. They actively create and promote history by attaining socioeconomic and cultural power.[99] Veteran associations shaped the memory of the war and worked on its grounding on the national level. Through time, the memory of the war became petrified while working as a simple, one-dimensional, linear, and sanitised account of wartime events, rid of all nuances, and, as such, constantly performed in the public arena.

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[97] Jović, *Rat i mit*, pp 196, 199-201; Veteran treatment of Croatia's war as a 'sanctity' or 'holy' will be especially demonstrated in Chapters 2, 3 and 5.

[98] Iga Kozlowska, 'Memory entrepreneurs and the 'invisible Iron Curtain': transnationalizing historical memories' (PhD thesis, Northwestern University, Evanston, 2017), pp 10-11; Robin Wagner-Pacifici and Barry Schwartz, 'The Vietnam veterans memorial: commemorating a difficult past' in *American Journal of Sociology*, xcvii (1991), no. 2, pp 376-420, at p. 382; Elizabeth Jelin, *State repression and the labors of memory* (Minneapolis, 2003), p. 33.

[99] Robyn Autry, *Desegregating the past: the public life of memory in the United States and South Africa* (New York, 2017), pp 27, 30.

Therefore, in Bernhard and Kubik's typology of mnemonic actors, veteran associations and groups correspond to what they call 'mnemonic warriors'. Mnemonic warriors advocate a rigorous division between themselves, who promote the truth, and others who hold 'wrong' interpretations of history, producers of falsehood for different reasons. Seeing their mnemonic activities as battles of 'us' – promoters of truth – and 'them' – promoters of falsehood – mnemonic warriors do not allow any negotiation over the collective memory, focusing only on how to persuade others to accept their perception of history. As all divisions between past, present, and future are removed from warriors' mythological view of the past, the only way to address the issues of the past and present is to set the polity on the foundations of a 'true' version of history, crushing all alternative interpretations and forcing its proponents to either repent or leave public life. In their fundamentalist views, the truthfulness of historical events legitimises their claim to power – political, social, and symbolic.[100] While veteran associations use these mnemonic battles to allegedly confront all those who did not fight nor want an independent Croatia – bureaucrats, Yugoslav remnants, saboteurs, war profiteers, deserters, and tycoons – they promote conservative interpretations of the conflict, thus helping certain political elites – H.D.Z. – to stay in power. However, they rarely confronted war profiteers and tycoons and targeted more vulnerable groups – reporters, intellectuals, and Serb returnees –often labelled as enemies by H.D.Z.

The thesis will demonstrate how, in 1992, with the war entering a stalemate, H.D.Z. and the state took an active role in forming the first veteran associations, either by offering political and logistical support or through the direct work of its military officials. In later stages, 1994-5, H.D.Z.'s role was present in further fragmentation and co-opting of veteran associations.[101]

[100] Kubik and Bernhard, 'A theory of the politics of memory', pp 12-6.
[101] This will be discussed in chapter one.

The thesis will also show how H.D.Z.'s political opponents tried to co-opt veteran associations and groups – with partial success.[102]

Despite this, the thesis will test and probe the academically established relationship between H.D.Z. and veteran associations, introducing a more nuanced view of the phenomena.[103] Although often functioning as H.D.Z.'s proxy organisation, fulfilling its part of the client-patron symbiosis, the thesis shows that the relationship between the two is often prone to change, depending on the political, social, and economic context. Therefore, in its moments of internal weakness or low approval ratings, H.D.Z. looked to veterans for strength. While veteran associations always seemed to replicate H.D.Z.'s rhetoric, it was sometimes the reverse. Thus, H.D.Z. sometimes, depending on the need tried to co-opt the veterans to radicalise or pacify its rhetoric. While it does not mean that veterans did not have agency, it explains different contentious episodes.

Moreover, veteran associations take advantage of H.D.Z. to push for some of their demands, often exploiting their weaknesses at the time. This dissertation also offers a more nuanced view of Croatia's veteran movement, trying to portray its ever-changing landscape. Thus, the thesis goes beyond existing scholarship on the client-patron relationship, demonstrating how this perspective may not always be suitable for examining the relationship between veterans

[102] This will be discussed in chapter one, three, four and five.
[103] Danijela Dolenec, 'A soldier's state? Veterans and the welfare regime in Croatia' in *Anali* (*Annales*), xiv (2014), no. 1, pp 55-76; Dolenec and Širinić, 'Mobilising against change'; Sokolić, *International courts*; Ivor Sokolić, 'Heroes at the margins: veterans, elites and the narrative of war' in Vjeran Pavlaković and Davor Pauković (eds), *Framing the Nation and Collective Identities: Political Rituals and Cultural Memory of the Twentieth-Century Traumas in Croatia* (Abingdon, 2019), pp 143-59; Ivor Sokolić, 'My neighbour, the criminal: how memories of the 1991–1995 conflict in Croatia affect attitudes towards the Serb minority' in *Nations and Nationalism*, xxiii (2017), no. 4, pp 790–814; Paul Stubbs, 'New times?: towards a political economy of 'civil society' in contemporary Croatia' in Narodna umjetnost, xxxviii (2001), no. 1, pp 89-103; Paul Stubbs and Siniša Zrinščak, 'Europeizacija i socijalna politika: između retorike i stvarnost' in Vlado Puljiz, Slaven Ravlić and Velimir Visković (eds), *Hrvatska u E.U.: kako dalje* (Zagreb, 2012), pp 265-94; Paul Stubbs and Siniša Zrinščak, 'Citizenship and social welfare in Croatia: clientelism and the limits of 'Europeanisation'' in *European Politics and Society*, xvi (2015), no. 3, pp 395-410.

and H.D.Z. In attempting to gain a complete comprehensive understanding of this relationship, the thesis abandons crude elite and non-elite dichotomy, as veterans (leaders) can be members of both groups at different times. At the same time, these roles often change due to internal dynamics within the veteran movement and party politics.

While veterans claim the war is holy and its truths undisputed, the thesis reveals episodes when veteran associations were ready to negotiate some elements of the war mythology. Associations collaborated with the H.D.Z for material benefits and political pragmatism.[104] However, the thesis goes into an even more profound analysis, establishing how this betrayal of previous veteran truths was not uncontested within the movement and showing that many did not agree with the new paradigm. It also shows how support for H.D.Z. was not unconditional for some veteran associations and groups, as their loyalties often lay between different membership – parties, associations, wartime units, and local communities.

Although veterans are highly emotionally and ideologically invested in their mnemonic activities, their clash with counter-narratives from a small part of the political elites, media, civil society and I.C.T.Y. keeps the dominant narrative alive. To keep it alive, veterans are constantly reproducing the dominant narrative, filling out the gaps in its storyline. Thus, veterans remain as mnemonic warriors, battling the counter-narratives. If, hypothetically, the memory regime became unified, in Bernhard's and Kubik's understanding, there would be no need for mnemonic warriors, as there would be a high degree of consensus over the past.[105] However, conservative forces in Croatian society – including many veteran associations – periodically use mnemonic battles to tackle and de-legitimise political and other opponents. The thesis will demonstrate veteran associations' role in these mnemonic battles, which often

[104] To be discussed in chapter four.
[105] Kubik and Bernhard, 'A theory of the politics of memory', p. 17.

collide between Croatia's wartime legacy rooted in ethnonationalism and the country's further democratisation in pursuing an idealised version of Europeanisation.

The thesis offers the background of veteran mnemonic activities and struggles over war symbolism, revealing the real interests remaining in the back seat. While fighting to defend the dominant narrative from incursions of competing narratives or by trying to prevent Croatian officers from standing trial for war crimes committed, veteran associations and groups are often using this to fight other battles – battles over political influence, recognition or welfare. Thus, veteran associations are confronting counter-narratives and interfering in the policy process. By blocking or obstructing certain policies from being passed or implemented – cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. or prosecution of war crimes – veteran associations act as veto players in Croatian politics.[106] As veto players – 'actors or institutions whose consent is needed to alter policy' – veteran associations and groups have a say in passing, implementing or changing certain policies that usually consider war legacy.[107]

However, as veto players are open to policy change in exchange for trade-offs, so are veteran associations ready to negotiate specific policies despite proclaimed ideological rigidness.[108] Therefore, sometimes, the symbolic purity of the war and themselves serve as a bargaining chip for dealing with the authorities. The thesis reconstructs how veteran discourse transformed the war into a symbol, a value (*vrijednost*) – the term commonly used. With the war becoming a value, like democracy, personal liberties or the rule of law, it is part of Croatia's foundations. As such, many see veterans as bearers of this value, which cannot be suppressed by other values – such as the rule of law.[109] The creation of values goes further as

[106] Milekić, 'A protest, coup d'état', pp 221, 241; Dario Čepo, 'Structural weaknesses and the role of the dominant political party: democratic backsliding in Croatia since E.U. accession' in *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, xx (2020), no. 1, pp 141-159, at p. 144.
[107] Yonatan Lupu, 'Legislative veto players and the effects of international human rights agreements' in *American Journal of Political Science*, lix (2015), no. 3, pp 578-94, at p. 579.
[108] Ibid.
[109] To be discussed in chapter two.

veterans deify wartime political and military leaders, transforming them into symbols and values that no one can question.[110]

All this gives veterans symbolic capital, securing them a better position for demanding better welfare or more power. As the thesis will demonstrate, veteran leaders sometimes use these mnemonic battles over wartime symbolism to forward or protect their interests, which are entirely remote from veteran affairs.[111] Therefore, veteran associations often used the memory of the war as a screen memory. From a Freudian concept of memory unconsciously used to suppress certain traumatic events, screen memory is used to downplay or 'screen' certain unpleasant historical events.[112] Veteran associations use the memory of the war, built on Croatia's and Croats' victimhood and victory, to suppress the stories about wartime transgressions. Even more so, veteran associations and political elites use the war memory to conceal other transgressions not tied to the war directly: the 1990s fraudulent privatisation and transformation process or semi-authoritarian Tuđman's rule. Veteran associations' leaders often used the war memory to suppress and divert the attention from media, public or political discussion on veteran leaders' transgressions in other fields. A similar strategy is applied when veteran associations serve as proxies for their political benefactors – H.D.Z. or other individual officials. Thus, the memory of war is used to cover up or divert attention from discussing clientelist networks that existed parallel to the war or exist to the present day. Despite significantly developed and substantial welfare, these clientelist networks keep the veterans at the margins of society, unable to contribute and dependent on political and state help.

[110] To be discussed in chapter three.
[111] This will be demonstrated in chapter five.
[112] David, Lea, 'Holocaust discourse as a screen memory: the Serbian case' in Srđan M. Jovanović and Veran Stančetić (eds), *History and Politics in the Western Balkans: Changes at the Turn of the Millenium* (Belgrade, 2013), pp 104-28, at p. 107

Finally, the thesis will demonstrate how veteran associations helped create a deeply divided society with an unresolved wartime legacy that periodically falls into emotional and unproductive debates and conflicts over these issues. While veteran associations managed to persuade the state to introduce extensive welfare, while they attained political power, some in society perceived them as a nuisance. The war memory does not manage differences between opposing sides but constantly deepens them. Thus, although claiming to take the European path, Croatian veterans kept the militarised relations in a post-conflict society, which had consequences for reconciliation and further transition into a fully developed democratic society.

Historical, regional and global parallels

Aside from their relationship with H.D.Z., the thesis examines the relationship between veteran associations and Tuđman as the pivotal figure and ideologue of Croatia's contemporary nationalism. Veteran associations are especially susceptible to Tuđman's ideas of Croatian unity and saw him as the 'Great Unifier'. Deeply invested in the militaristic memory of the war, veteran associations cherish Tuđman's victorious wartime leadership, seeing him as a 'Messiah' and 'Saviour' through the political myth of a 'wise old man'. Deep appreciation for Tuđman transformed veteran associations into a sort of a Pretorian Guard, defending him from criticism regarding his semi-authoritarian style of rule and other transgressions. This relationship is not always unconditional, as some veteran associations often demand different things in return. On rare occasions and among rare groups, veterans are even critical of Tuđman. Despite this, associations, in general, are very devoted to Tuđman's leadership. Such close and almost personal relationship between veterans and their

wartime leaders turned autocrats in peacetime, which is something Croatian veterans from the 1990s war have in common with veterans of both world wars from the region.

Therefore, I argue that veteran associations fostered a specific political myth about Tuđman, portraying him as a 'good King' who, due to his old age and illness, was taken advantage of by 'treacherous' politicians and bureaucrats who did not take part in building the country and nation. This specific relationship between war veterans and their supreme wartime commanders turned peacetime leaders is customary for different cultures of victory in former Yugoslav states. Thus, like Croatian veterans, Serbian World War I (W.W.I.) veterans had a specific relationship with Yugoslav King Aleksandar I Karađorđević, who led them during three wars and took the throne upon his father's death in 1921. Tuđman and King Aleksandar I were unifiers and, as such, respected among veterans who thought politicians and bureaucrats were only bickering and bringing divisions within a nation forged in blood during wars.[113]

A more recent example of veterans' relationship with a wartime supreme commander turned post-war statesman was the relationship between Partisans and S.F.R.J. President Josip Broz Tito. Partisan veterans gathered in the Alliance of Associations of Fighters of People's Liberation War (*Savez udruga boraca Narodnooslobodilačkog rata*, S.U.B.N.O.R.) had Tito as its first and lifelong President while providing him with ideological support in building his cult of personality – even after he died in 1980. Their role was vital in enforcing Tito's

[113] Milekić, 'The myth of a good king'; For more on Serbian W.W.I. veterans and their relationship with King Aleksandar I, see: John Paul Newman, 'Serbian and Habsburg military institutional legacies in Yugoslavia after 1918' in *First World War Studies*, v (2014), no. 3, pp 319-35; John Paul Newman, *Yugoslavia in the shadow of war: veterans and the limits of state building, 1903–1945* (Cambridge, 2015); John Paul Newman, 'War veterans, fascism, and para-fascist departures in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, 1918–1941' in *Fascism*, vi (2017), no. 1, pp 42-74; John Paul Newman, 'Volunteer veterans and entangled cultures of victory in interwar Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia' in *Journal of Contemporary History*, liv (2019), no. 4, pp 716-36; Christian Axboe Nielsen, *Making Yugoslavs: identity in King Aleksandar's Yugoslavia* (Toronto, 2014), pp 27, 152, 238; Danilo Šarenac, 'Udruženje rezervnih oficira i ratnika 1919-1941' in *Istorija 20. veka*, i (2011), pp 27-38.

authoritarian rule in dealing with different initiatives deemed as nationalist and going against the 'brotherhood and unity' on the domestic level, as well as supporting Yugoslav foreign policy in the context of the Non-Aligned Movement. Besides his involvement in S.U.B.N.O.R.'s events and extensive welfare provided, Tito envisaged an essential role for former Partisans in keeping the N.O.R. legacy alive among younger generations and building socialism.[114]

The thesis looks closely into this sense of ownership among Croatian veterans, entitlement from the notion that they created the country. Croatian veterans share this feeling with Serbian W.W.I. veterans and former Partisan fighters, as they won the war at a great expense, creating a new political regime during and after the conflicts. Looking into other post-Yugoslav states, only Croatia and its veterans established themselves as both victors and victims of the conflict. Kosovo has come close to attaining both symbolic roles but cannot fully declare itself the winner, as the state is still not fully internationally recognised. Additionally, Kosovo's independence relies in significant part on the success of N.A.T.O. air

[114] For more on S.U.B.N.O.R. and its relationship with Tito, see; Tina Filipović, 'S.U.B.N.O.R.-ove politike i prakse sjećanja na N.O.R. u sisačkim proslavama' in *Historijski zbornik*, lxxiv (2021), no. 2, pp 389-408; Tina Filipović, 'Osnutak, struktura i djelovanje boračke organizacije na lokalnoj razini: Općinski odbor SUBNOR-a Labin' in *Časopis za suvremenu povijest*, liii (2021), no. 1, pp 43-68; Heike Karge, 'Mediated remembrance: local practices of remembering the Second World War in Tito's Yugoslavia' in *European Review of History – Revue européenne d'histoire*, xvi (2009), no.1, pp 49-62; Heike Karge, 'Transnational knowledge into Yugoslav practices? The legacy of the Second World War on social welfare policy in Yugoslavia' in *Comparativ | Zeitschrift für Globalgeschichte und vergleichende Gesellschaftsforschung*, xx (2010), no. 5, pp 75-86; Iva Jelušić, 'Gender and war in the Yugoslav media: the figure of the *Partizanka* in the making of the Yugoslav new woman' (PhD thesis, Central European University, Budapest, 2022); Max Bergholz, 'Među rodoljubima, kupusom, svinjama i varvarima: Spomenici i grobovi NOR-a 1947-1965. godine' in Husnija Kamberović (ed), *60 godina od završetka Drugog svjetskog rata: kako se sjećati 1945. godine* (Sarajevo, 2006), pp 75-100; Iko Mirković, *Borci N.O.R. Jugoslavije i njihova organizacija* (Belgrade, 1987); Jože Pirjevec, *Tito and his comrades* (Madison and London, 2018), pp 233, 328, 412; Mate Nikola Tokić, 'Framing and reframing the past: ethnic relations, political legitimacy and the legacy of the Second World War in socialist Yugoslavia 1945-1991' (PhD thesis, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 2007), p. 149; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 29 Sep., 1 Oct., 18 Nov. 1965, 6 Jul. 1966, 18 Apr., 16 May, 6 Jun., 3 Jul. 1967; *Večernji list*, 15 Jun., 29 Sep. 1965, 18 Apr. 1967, 25 May, 26 Sep. 1968, 29 Jan. 1972, 21 Jun. 1982, 5 Sep. 1983, 1 Oct. 1986; 20 Mar. 1995.

strikes against Serbia and its forces and not exclusively and predominantly on the efforts of the Kosovo Liberation Army (*Oslobodilačka vojska Kosova*, O.V.K.).[115]

Unlike Croatian and Kosovo veterans who came out victorious from what is widely seen as a defensive or national liberation war, their counterparts in Serbia were in radically different positions. Between 400,000 and 800,000 Serbian citizens fought in five conflicts in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Serbia and Montenegro (the last two during the N.A.T.O. intervention) in the 1991-9 period. Aside from serving in the J.N.A. – renamed into the Army of Yugoslavia (*Vojska Jugoslavije*) in 1992 – various battle-engaged special police units, their citizens also served in numerous paramilitaries, Territorial Defence units and armies of R.S.K. and Republika Srpska. However, despite such massive numbers, Serbian veterans never achieved the level of a status group or important political actors like Kosovo, and especially Croatian counterparts. One of the reasons for this was Serbia's deliberate strategy to fragment the veteran movement by giving out different rights to some categories. The state used this strategy to limit veterans' political power from the aforementioned large numbers and reduce the potential financial burdens of a potentially comprehensive welfare system. The weakening of veterans' position came through the fact that the Serbian Law on the Rights of Veterans, Military Disabled Persons and Members of their Families recognises only a limited number of veterans with regulated military service, which excludes a massive number of those who fought in all five armed conflicts – especially the ones who served in paramilitaries. Such a strategy is also the result of Serbia's strategy to distance itself from the

[115] Jović, *Rat i mit*, pp 201-3; For more on O.V.K. veterans, see: Boduszyński and Pavlaković, 'Cultures of victory'; Sultan Barakat and Alpaslan Özerdem, 'Impact of the reintegration of former KLA combatants on the post-war recovery of Kosovo' in *International Journal of Peace Studies*, x (2005), no. 1, pp 27-45; Isabel Ströhle, 'The politics of reintegration and war commemoration. The case of the Kosovo Liberation Army' in *Südosteuropa*, lviii (2010), no. 4, pp 478-519; Isabel Ströhle, 'Veterans' politics and policies towards the veterans of the Kosovo Liberation Army' in *Comparativ | Zeitschrift für Globalgeschichte und vergleichende Gesellschaftsforschung*, xx (2010), no. 5, pp 87–103.

mentioned wars – especially the ones in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina – interpreting them as conflicts that led to the break-up of Yugoslavia, avoiding taking any responsibility for them. As these wars are widely considered entirely or partially lost, there was limited prestige for the Serbian state to be gained from praising them, which in turn resulted in silencing veterans as mnemonic agents – a stark contrast to the Croatian case. All this led to a marginalised and stigmatised position of veterans in Serbian society.[116] For these reasons, Serbian veterans often look with envy at their Croatian counterparts.[117]

Somewhere between the Serbian and Croatian cases is the experience of veterans from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Over 400,000 people fought in different armies established by all three peoples, now living in a complex power-sharing constitutional arrangement between the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republic of Srpska. Veterans in Bosnia and Herzegovina have considerably more extensive welfare than their Serbian counterparts, including pensions, medical and healthcare aid, and other benefits to integrate them

[116] For more on Serbian veterans of the 1990s wars, see: Lea David, 'Dealing with the contested past in Serbia: decontextualisation of the war veterans memories' in *Nations and Nationalism*, xxi (2015), no. 1, pp 102–19; Lea David, 'Fragmentation as a silencing strategy: Serbian war veterans against the state of Serbia' in *Contemporary Southeastern Europe*, ii (2015), no. 1, pp 55-73; Lea David, 'Between human rights and nationalism: silencing as a mechanism of memory in the post-Yugoslav wars' Serbia' in *Journal of Regional Security*, x (2015), no. 1, pp 37-52; Goran Dokić, 'Between warfare and welfare: veterans' associations and social security in Serbia' (PhD thesis, University of Manchester, Manchester, 2015); Goran Dokić, 'States of victimhood and irreparable losses: Serbian veterans of the post-Yugoslav wars' in *Glasnik Etnografskog instituta S.A.N.U.*, lxv (2017), no. 1, pp 97-110; Maria Vivod, 'Getting-even with the state: Serbian war veterans suing a country officially never at war' in Michael Daxner, Marion Näser-Lather and Silvia-Lucretia Nicola (eds), *Conflict Veterans. Discourses and Living Contexts of an Emerging Social Group* (Cambridge, 2018), pp 70-88; Vladan Beara and Predrag Miljanović, 'Veterans in peacebuilding' in Helena Rill, Tamara Šmidling and Ana Bitoljanu (eds), *20 Pieces of Encouragement For Awakening And Change: Peacebuilding in the Region of the Former Yugoslavia* (Belgrade and Sarajevo, 2007), pp 165-80; Marek Mikuš and Goran Dokić, ''Nobody's stronger than the state': crisis and hope among Serbian N.G.O. workers and veterans' in *Ethnologia Balkanica*, (2015), no. 18, pp 385-403; Olivera Simić and Ivana Milojević, 'Dialogues between ex-combatants and youth in Serbia: a constructive use of war experience' in *Peacebuilding*, ii (2014), no. 3, 322-35; Samuel Tanner, 'The 'recycled' militiaman: an examination of the postwar reconversion of four former members of a Serbian armed group' in Nathalie Duclos (ed), *War Veterans in Postwar Situations: Chechnya, Serbia, Turkey, Peru, and Côte d'Ivoire* (New York, 2012), pp 157-76.

[117] Mirko Rudic, 'Veterani zle kobi', Balkan Insight, 21 Oct. 2013, https://balkaninsight.com/sr/2013/10/21/veterani-pobednici-i-gubitnici/ (31 Oct. 2022).

somewhat into Bosnian post-war society. Compared to Croatia, Bosnian veterans also have a more privileged treatment when compared to civilian victims. Compared to Croatia, their welfare was considerably less wealthy, partially due to the smaller state budgets, missing more tools for successfully integrating veterans into society. Thus, in 2017-8 Bosnian veterans of A.R.B.H. and H.V.O. protested for months after the announced pension cuts. Protesters also demanded special unemployment and financial supplements for each month spent in service. Unlike in Serbia, and much more like Croatia, certain veteran groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina have considerable political power, playing an important role in implementing peace agreements, sometimes as spoilers in the peace process. H.V.O. veterans, organised in different associations tied to Croatian counterparts and funded by the Croatian state, were especially active in disturbing the peace process in the early post-war years. In terms of their engagement as state-builders, as they belonged to different national projects – Serbian, Croatian and Bosniak ones – the role of Bosnian veterans is much more complex, as there are parallel views of the war and its achievements.[118]

[118] For Bosnian veterans, see: Irene Baraldi, 'Statebuilding and peace formation: a study on war veterans in Bosnia-Herzegovina' (M.A. thesis, University of Manchester, Manchester, 2017); Tobias Pietz, *Demobilization and reintegration of former soldiers in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina: an assessment of external assistance* (Hamburg, 2004); Massimo Moratti and Amra Sabic-El-Rayess, 'Transitional justice and D.D.R.: the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina' in *International Center for Transitional Justice*, vi (2009), pp 1-39, at pp 29-31; Kendra Gregson, *Veterans' programs in Bosnia-Herzegovina* (Sarajevo, 2000); Oliwia Berdak, 'Reintegrating veterans in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia: citizenship and gender effects' in *Women's Studies International Forum*, xlix (2015), pp 48–56; Zoltan Barany, 'Building national armies after civil war: lessons from Bosnia, El Salvador, and Lebanon' in *Political Science Quarterly*, cxxix (2014), no. 2, pp 211-38; Xavier Bougarel, 'The shadow of heroes: former combatants in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina' in *International Social Science Journal*, lviii (2006), no. 189, pp 479-90; Xavier Bougarel, 'Death and the nationalist. Martyrdom, war memory and veteran identity among Bosnian Muslims' in Xavier Bougarel, Elissa Helms and Ger Duijzings (eds), *The New Bosnian Mosaic. Identities, Memories and Moral Claims in a Post-War Society* (Aldershot, 2007), pp 167-91; Vesna Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 'Peace on whose terms? War veterans' associations in Bosnia and Hercegovina' in Edward Newman and Oliver Richmond (eds), *Challenges to Peacebuilding: Managing Spoilers During Conflict Resolution* (Tokyo, 2006), pp 200-18; Jessie Hronešová, 'Might makes right: war-related payments in Bosnia and Herzegovina' in *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, x (2016), no. 3, pp 339–60; Jaroslav Klepal, 'The only thing I earned in the damned war was P.T.S.D.' Reconsidering veteran sociality and politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina' in *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, xviii (2018), no. 4, pp 489–507; Nikolina Obradović, 'War veteran's policy in Bosnia and Herzegovina' in *Revija za socijalnu*

Out of South-East Europe, the Soviet Union offers another comparable case. After W.W.II. and decades of neglect from the political leadership, Soviet veterans developed a culture of victory like their Croatian counterparts. In the first decades, in the context of a totalitarian state, the Soviet Union framed the wartime victory as a success of the whole people, the working classes led by the idealised political leadership of Joseph Stalin. However, like Croatian veterans, Soviet veterans saw themselves as both the victor and victim, developing a special and strong sense of entitlement in defending and creating a new state. This feeling triggered bereavement regarding disillusion with post-war reality. While in the early post-war years, public discourse framed benefits as gifts from the community to veterans, for which they owed gratitude, veterans saw it the other way around. With parallels in the Croatian case – as the thesis will show – Soviet veterans saw the community as indebted to them, the victors and victims, who earned their benefits in a bloody war. Therefore, while Croatian veterans asked themselves, 'is this what we fought for?' when they felt disenfranchised or disappointed in the post-war reality, Soviet ones perpetuated a similar feeling encapsulated into 'did I not earn this' when they asked for certain benefits that were supposed to award their wartime merits, in defending the homeland. Therefore, Soviet veterans first became an

politiku, xxiv (2017), no. 1, pp 93-106; For the 2017-8 protest of Bosnian veterans, see: Igor Spaic, 'Bosnian war veterans protest against pension cuts', Balkan Insight, 15 Mar. 2017, https://balkaninsight.com/2017/03/15/bosnian-war-veterans-protest-against-pension-cuts-03-15-2017/ (2 Nov. 2023); Igor Spaic, 'The everyday desperation of Bosnia's protesting veterans', Balkan Insight, 1 Sep. 2017, https://balkaninsight.com/2017/09/01/the-everyday-desperation-of-bosnia-s-protesting-veterans-09-01-2017/ (2 Nov. 2023); Mladen Lakic, 'Protesting war veterans block roads in Bosnian towns', Balkan Insight, 28 Feb. 2018, https://balkaninsight.com/2018/02/28/ex-soldiers-blocking-streets-in-bosnia-02-28-2018 (2 Nov. 2023); Srecko Latal, 'Bosnia police dismantle veterans' blockade in Tuzla', Balkan Insight, 3 Mar. 2018, https://balkaninsight.com/2018/03/03/bosnia-police-dismantle-veterans-blockade-in-tuzla-03-03-2018/ (2 Nov. 2023); Mladen Lakic, 'Bosnian veterans take protest to M.P.s in Sarajevo', Balkan Insight, 17 Apr. 2018, https://balkaninsight.com/2018/04/17/protesting-war-veterans-in-sarajevo-04-17-2018/ (2 Nov. 2023); Danijel Kovacevic, 'Bosnia war veterans block border crossing with Croatia', Balkan Insight, 2 Jul. 2018, https://balkaninsight.com/2018/07/02/bosnia-war-veterans-block-border-crossing-with-croatia-07-02-2018/ (2 Nov. 2023); Mladen Lakic, 'Bosnian veterans scuffle with police in Sarajevo', Balkan Insight, 5 Sep. 2018, https://balkaninsight.com/2018/09/05/bosnian-veterans-blocked-main-street-in-sarajevo-09-05-2018/ (2 Nov. 2023).

entitlement group gathered by a sense that they deserved certain benefits or developed welfare. Only decades later, veterans became a status group enjoying certain privileges built upon their dual, morally superior perception as victors and victims.[119] As the thesis will show, this transformation was much quicker in the Croatian case, more-less established a year after the war.

On a global scale, national memory politics and treatment of veterans in the newborn state of Timor Leste, after twenty-four years of struggle against Indonesian occupation, share similarities with the Croatian case. Embedded into the country's culture of victory, East Timor's veterans are domestically seen and treated as the group that gave the most for the state's independence. As its armed struggle against the Indonesian occupation is important in the foundational myth, veterans – especially males – are favoured at the expense of civilian victims. Viewing deceased veterans as heroes and martyrs – introduced as a legal category – veterans' superior ranking in the hierarchy of war-affected groups comes from their agency, in contrast to the passive position of the civilian victims. The heroic narrative of the struggle, stressed by veteran associations, is used to justify veteran political power and place in high politics. Like Croatia, veteran associations and political parties form a client-patron relationship, as parties seek veteran approval to keep their voter base. Additionally, many veteran leaders often occupy important political posts, further complicating the division between elites and non-elites in Timorese society and between state and society – a substantial similarity with the Croatian case. These political ties lead to different issues, such as prioritising certain groups and individuals through corruption and influence peddling,

[119] Mark Edele, *Soviet veterans of the Second World War: a popular movement in an authoritarian society, 1941-1991* (Oxford, 2008); Mark Edele, 'Soviet veterans as an entitlement group, 1945-1955' in *Slavic Review*, lxv (2006), no.1, pp 111-37; Martin Crotty and Mark Edele, 'Total war and entitlement: towards a global history of veteran privilege' in *Australian Journal of Politics & History*, lix (2013), no. 1, pp 15-32; Mark Edele, 'The Soviet culture of victory' in *Journal of Contemporary History*, liv (2019), no. 4, pp 780-98.

resulting in an inflation of registered veterans and pensions that strain the state budget. As Timor Leste's national identity is built around their armed struggle against the foreign invader, (male) veterans are, similar to Croatia, among the most important groups for the country's nation-building process.[120]

In the context of another post-colonial conflict, the treatment and position of Zimbabwe's liberation war veterans share some commonalities with Croatian counterparts. Coming from a long-lasting liberation struggle against the white-minority government and civil conflict between opposing guerrillas, guerrilla veterans had a dynamic and changing relationship with the governing Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (Z.A.N.U.–P.F.), the party led by long-lasting national political leader Robert Mugabe. Both veteran associations and

[120] Henri Myrttinen, 'Resistance, symbolism and the language of stateness in Timor-Leste' in *Oceania*, lxxxiii (2013), no. 3, pp 208–20; Sara Niner, 'Bisoi: a veteran of Timor-Leste's independence movement' in Susan Blackburn and Helen Ting (eds), *Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements: A Biographical Approach* (Singapore, 2013), pp 226-49; Joanne Wallis, 'Victors, villains and victims: capitalizing on memory in Timor-Leste' in *Ethnopolitics*, xii (2013), no. 2, pp 133-60; Kate Christopher Roll, 'Inventing the veteran, imagining the state: post-conflict reintegration and state consolidation in Timor-Leste, 1999-2012' (PhD thesis, Oxford University, Oxford, 2014); Damian Grenwell, 'Of time and history: the dead of war, memory and the national imaginary in Timor-Leste' in *Communication, Politics & Culture*, xlviii (2015), no. 3, pp 16-28; Lia Kent and Naomi Kinsella, 'The veterans' valorisation scheme: marginalising women's contributions to the resistance' in Sue Ingram, Lia Kent and Andrew McWilliam (eds), *A New Era? Timor-Leste after the UN* (Acton, 2015), pp 213-23; Lia Kent and Naomi Kinsella '*A luta kontinua* (the struggle continues): the marginalization of East Timorese women within the veterans' valorization scheme' in *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, xvii (2015), no. 3, pp 473-94; Amy Rothschild, 'Victims versus veterans: agency, resistance and legacies of Timor-Leste's truth commission' in *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, (2017), no. 0, pp 1–20; Kate Roll, 'Street level bureaucrats and post-conflict policy-making: corruption, correctives, and the rise of veterans' pensions in Timor-Leste' in *Civil Wars*, xx (2018), no. 2, pp 262-85; Kate Roll, 'Reconsidering reintegration: veterans' benefits as state-building' in Judith M. Bovensiepen (ed), *The Promise of Prosperity Visions of the Future in Timor-Leste* (Acton, 2018), pp 139-56; Amy Caroline Rothschild, 'Victims and veterans: memory, nationalism, and human rights in post-independence Timor-Leste' (PhD thesis, University of California, San Diego, 2018); Lia Kent, 'Veterans and the politics of citizenship' in Andrew McWilliam and Michael Leach (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Timor-Leste* (Oxon and New York, 2019), pp 185-96; Amy Rothschild, 'Remembering the dead in post-independence Timor-Leste: victims or martyrs?' in Lia Kent and Rui Graça Feijó (eds), *The Dead as Ancestors, Martyrs, and Heroes in Timor-Leste* (Amsterdam, 2020), pp 219-41; Henri Myrttinen, 'Gender, agency and the (in)visibility of the dead and the wounded' in Lia Kent and Rui Graça Feijó (eds), *The Dead as Ancestors, Martyrs, and Heroes in Timor-Leste* (Amsterdam, 2020), pp 243-62; Sarah Niner, 'Veterans and heroes: the militarised male elite in Timor-Leste' in The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology, (2020), pp 1-23.

Z.A.N.U.–P.F. manipulated each other in pursuing particular interests. While Zimbabwe's veterans used extensive violence to further their cause or revert the post-war reality, they established firmed relationships with Z.A.N.U.–P.F., often helping the party win constituencies and intimidating the political opposition. Veteran associations had a role in building post-war national authoritarian regimes and helping the dominant party confront the opposition. In return, the state turned veteran associations into leading memory entrepreneurs, promoting 'patriotic history' that sanitises complicated narratives about Zimbabwe's liberation struggle and helps the regime keep the main idea of state legitimacy alive. Therefore, the state gave guerrilla veterans a formal role in higher education, limiting free discussions in schools and universities. As time went on, their use of war memory became more intense. They used this memory in the early 2000s to label international enemies and help Mugabe's alleged war with injustices of Zimbabwe's colonial legacy. The use of such discursive framing for discrediting (political) opponents and assisting the regime resembles Croatian veteran activities described in this thesis. Furthermore, similar to Timor Leste and Croatian cases, veteran leaders are filled with party cadres, and vice versa, again complicating often static and simplistic divisions between elites and non-elites. In Zimbabwe's case, like in Timor Leste and Croatia, different groups and individuals used political connections and corruption to attain certain benefits and pensions, surfacing the public discussion about real and fake veterans.[121]

[121] JoAnn McGregor, 'The politics of disruption: war veterans and the local state in Zimbabwe' in *African Affairs*, ci (2002), no. 402, pp 9-37; Norma Kriger, 'Zimbabwe: political constructions of war veterans' in *Review of African political economy*, xxx (2003), no. 96, pp 323-28; Norma J. Kriger, *Guerrilla veterans in post-war Zimbabwe: symbolic and violent politics, 1980–1987* (Cambridge, 2003); Norma Kriger, 'Zimbabwe's war veterans and the ruling party: continuities in political dynamics' in Staffan Darnolf and Liisa Laakso (eds), *Twenty Years of Independence in Zimbabwe: From Liberation to Authoritarianism* (Basingstoke and New York, 2003), pp 104-21; Jocelyn Alexander and JoAnn McGregor, 'War stories: guerrilla narratives of Zimbabwe's Liberation War' in *History Workshop Journal*, (2004), no. 57, pp 79-100; Terence Ranger, 'Nationalist historiography, patriotic history and the history of the nation: the struggle over the past in Zimbabwe' in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, xxx (2004), no. 2, pp 215-34; Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 'Patriots, puppets, dissidents and the politics of inclusion and exclusion in contemporary Zimbabwe'

Literature review on Croatian war veterans

The Croatian veteran movement was not extensively researched in academia. The topic of veterans' contentious politics was a part of the research by Boduszyński, Peskin, Lamont, Jović, Zambelli, and Pavlaković looking into Croatia's compliance with the I.C.T.Y. and implementation of transitional justice mechanisms in the context of regime changes between H.D.Z. and centre-left coalition governments of the 2000s. While dealing with broader political changes in Croatia, these scholars mentioned how veteran associations and groups – shown as simply H.D.Z. proxy organisations – protested Croatian authorities for cooperating with the I.C.T.Y.[122]

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in *Eastern Africa Social Science Research Review*, xxiv (2008), pp 108-81; Norma Kriger, 'From patriotic memories to 'patriotic history' in Zimbabwe, 1990-2005' in *Third World Quarterly*, xxvii (2006), no. 6, pp 1151–69; Jocelyn Alexander and Joann McGregor, 'Veterans, violence and nationalism in Zimbabwe' in Edna G. Bay and Donald L. Donham (eds), *States of Violence: Politics, Youth, and Memory in Contemporary Africa* (Charlottesville and London, 2007), pp 215-35; Paul Jackson, 'The civil war roots of military domination in Zimbabwe: the integration process following the Rhodesian war and the road to Z.A.N.L.A. dominance' in *Civil Wars*, xiii (2011), no. 4, pp 371-95; Muchaparara Musemwa, 'Zimbabwe's war veterans: from demobilisation to re-mobilisation' in *Transformation: Critical Perspectives on Southern Africa*, (2011), no. 75, pp 122-31; Mediel Hove and Darlington Mutanda, 'Revisiting the welfare of war veterans in Zimbabwe' in *Scholars Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, ii (2014), no. 1, pp 116-28; Patrick Dzimiri, Tawanda Runhare, Christina Tafawdza Dzimiri and Washington Mazorodze, 'Naming, identity, politics and violence in Zimbabwe' in *Studies of Tribes and Tribals*, xii (2014), no. 2, pp 227-38; Obert Bernard Mlambo and Tavengwa Gwekwerere, 'Names, labels, the Zimbabwean Liberation War veteran and the third Chimurenga: the language and politics of entitlement in post-2000 Zimbabwe' in *African Identities*, xvii (2019), no. 2, pp 130-46; Zenzo Moyo, 'Opposition politics and the culture of polarisation in Zimbabwe, 1980–2018', in Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Pedzisai Ruhanya (eds), *The History and Political Transition of Zimbabwe: From Mugabe to Mnangagwa* (Cham, 2020), pp 85-115.

[122] Mieczysław P. Boduszyński, *Regime change in the Yugoslav successor states: divergent paths toward a new Europe* (Baltimore, 2010), pp 217-22; Boduszyński and Pavlaković, 'Cultures of victory'; Vjeran Pavlaković, 'Croatia, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, and general Gotovina as a political symbol' in *Europe-Asia Studies*, lxii (2010), no. 10, pp 1707-40; Vjeran Pavlaković, 'Bolje grob nego rob: Hrvatska i Međunarodni kazneni sud za bivšu Jugoslaviju', in Renéo Lukić, Sabrina P. Ramet and Konrad Clewing (eds), *Hrvatska od osamostaljenja: Rat, politika, društvo, vanjski odnosi* (Zagreb, 2013), pp 433-62; Dejan Jović, 'Croatia and the European Union: a long delayed journey' in Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans, viii (2006), no. 1, pp 85-103; Dejan Jović, 'Croatia after Tudjman: the I.C.T.Y. and issues of transitional justice' in Chaillot Papers, (2009), no. 116, pp 13-28; Dejan Jović and Christopher K. Lamont, 'Introduction Croatia after Tuđman: encounters with the consequences of conflict and authoritarianism' in *Europe-Asia Studies*, lxii (2010), no. 10, pp 1609-20; Christopher K. Lamont, 'Bargaining for justice: the domestic and

More related to this thesis, some scholars touched upon the role of veterans in constructing and preserving the dominant narrative and shaping the memory of the Homeland War. Thus, Jović, whose ideas on veterans' role in public discourse and policy shaping, had contributed significantly to this thesis. His ideas of veterans as 'creators' of the country, upon which their whole system of symbolic, material, financial and political privileges and perks is based, is among the central themes of the thesis. Therefore, Jović problematises their prominent political position despite the lack of political legitimacy gained in elections.[123] However, this thesis goes beyond this description of veterans, looking into nuances and cases in which they defied H.D.Z. Additionally, the thesis tries to escape the rigid dichotomy between elites and non-elites.

Jović's work is compatible with research on Croatian veterans conducted by Dolenec and Širinić, who looked into veterans as 'pivotal political actors', initiating and blocking policies. They also identify the source of veterans' power and influence in their client-patron relationship with the Croatian state and H.D.Z. Their research demonstrates a strong correlation between H.D.Z. and veteran associations, with veterans' contentious behaviour elevating when the party was in opposition – 2000-3 and 2011-5. Therefore, Dolenec and

international politics of Croatian state compliance with International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia Article 29(d) and (e) Obligations' in Yannis A. Stivachtis (ed), *Global Affairs in a Turbulent World: Perspectives and Controversies* (Athens, 2008), pp 129-42; Christopher K. Lamont, 'Coercion, norms and atrocity: explaining state compliance with International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia arrest and surrender orders' (PhD thesis, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, 2008); Christopher K. Lamont, 'Defiance or strategic compliance? The post-Tuđman Croatian Democratic Union and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia,' in *Europe-Asia Studies*, lxi (2010), no. 10, pp 1683-705; Zambelli, 'A journey westward'; Victor Peskin and Mieczysław P. Boduszyński, 'International justice and domestic politics: post-Tudjman Croatia and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia' in *Europe-Asia Studies*, lv (2003), no. 7, pp 1117-42; Victor Peskin, 'Beyond victor's justice? The challenge of prosecuting the winners at the International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda' in *Journal of Human Rights*, iv (2005), no. 2, pp 213-31; Victor Peskin, *International justice in Rwanda and the Balkans: virtual trials and the struggle for state cooperation* (New York, 2008).

[123] Jović, *Rat i mit*; Dejan Jović, 'The war that is not allowed to be forgotten: nationalist discourse on the
'Homeland War' (1991-1995) in contemporary Croatia' in *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen*, (2012), no. 3, pp 52-69.

Širinić established that when H.D.Z. was in power, veteran associations helped it hold power while they weakened the opposition. When H.D.Z. was in opposition in the mentioned periods, associations protested centre-left governments to help the party regain power.[124] These ties to H.D.Z. makes veteran associations tied to the electoral successes of H.D.Z. and other right-wing parties.[125] In analysing elite and veteran narratives of the war, Sokolić concluded that the third actor of the symbiotic tripartite relationship is the Catholic Church, which also reproduces veteran narratives from the bottom. In return, veterans support its extensive social and political role in Croatian society.[126]

As noticed by Stubbs and Zrinščak, this client-patron relationship between leading veteran associations and the political elite has transformed these associations into 'powerful networks exercising political agency'.[127] Fisher noticed in her 2003 research that the ties between mainstream associations and H.D.Z. were evident, as party members often led the major associations while their organisations received state funds. For Fisher, these associations were so intertwined with H.D.Z. that it was hard to differentiate between them as their goals aligned, which became obvious during the contentious veteran period of the early 2000s. Fisher argued that these associations could no longer be seen as real civil society organisations but as para-political entities or 'uncivil' civil society.[128]

According to Dolenec, this client-patron relationship was established during the 1990s by the H.D.Z. regime, creating a conservative welfare system benefiting numerous registered veterans – over 500,000 – and creating what she called a 'soldier's state'. According to her, numerous associations were used to keep the status quo – preserving the system of privileges

[124] Dolenec and Širinić, 'Mobilising against change'.
[125] Sokolić, *International courts*, p. 142.
[126] Sokolić, 'Heroes at the margins'; Sokolić, 'My neighbour, the criminal'.
[127] Stubbs and Zrinščak, 'Citizenship and social welfare in Croatia', p. 405.
[128] Sharon Fisher, 'Contentious politics in Croatia: the war veterans' movement' in Petr Kopecky and Cas Mudde (eds), Uncivil Society? Contentious Politics in Post-Communist Europe (London, 2003), pp 70-88.

and benefits.[129] Due to the prominent role veterans take in public discourse on social policies and due to social clientelism – buying votes with material trade-offs – Stubbs and Zrinščak characterised it as a captured social policy – referring to the concept of a captured state.[130] Multiple authors researched these clientelist ties between veteran associations and the state, especially with H.D.Z., which uses veterans and their families as its target electorate through a developed welfare and funding of their associations.[131]

Even from the perspective of the client-patron relationship, Glaurdić's and Vuković's individual and aggregate-level data analysis shows how war-related trauma drives the electoral choice of Croatian voters years after the conflict. These communities, geographically located in parts of Croatia that were under occupation or close to the battlefront, with more veterans and disabled veterans and civilians, tend to support fiscally liberal political candidates. Fiscal liberals promote an interventionist role of the – central, regional and local – government in society, alleviating the devastating effects of the war.[132] These include different welfare provisions meant to mitigate the war trauma and, in the Croatian context, are tied to H.D.Z. that led the country into independence. These geographical regions, with more missing persons, war casualties and veterans, remain loyal to H.D.Z., unlike other parts of Croatia where those loyalties are less expressed. Therefore, the war remains the central cleavage of the Croatian political system, similar to other post-conflict and post-authoritarian societies – post-Pinochet Chile and post-Civil War Ireland.[133]

[129] Dolenec, 'A soldier's state?'; Stubbs, 'New times?'.
[130] Stubbs and Zrinščak, 'Europeizacija i socijalna politika'.
[131] Ana Balković, 'The austerity-fuelled wave of contention in Croatia – myth or reality?' in *Anali hrvatskog politološkog društva*, xvi (2019), no. 1, pp 71-94, at p. 79; Mirjana Kasapović, 'Demokratska konsolidacija i izborna politika u Hrvatskoj' in Mirjana Kasapović (ed), *Hrvatska politika 1990–2000* (Zagreb, 2001), pp 15-40; Stubbs and Zrinščak, 'Citizenship and social welfare', pp 400, 405; Boduszyński and Pavlaković, 'Cultures of victory'.
[132] Josip Glaurdić and Vuk Vuković, 'Post-war voters as fiscal liberals: local elections, spending, and war trauma in contemporary Croatia' in *East European Politics*, xxxiv (2018), no. 2, pp 173-93.
[133] Josip Glaurdić and Vuk Vuković, 'Voting after war: legacy of conflict and the economy as determinants of electoral support in Croatia' in *Electoral studies*, xlii (2016), pp 135-45.

While war still shapes electoral choices in Croatia, the factor that contributes to it are social divisions made salient by the war. Thus, the war created groups that experienced violence to a greater extent than others, and one such group was veterans.[134]

Regarding the veteran welfare system, Dobrotić's research in the late 2000s showed that researchers estimated the growth of already considerable state spending in the following years due to law amendments in 2004 and 2005. Dobrotić problematised how veteran welfare was compensatory-oriented, emphasising pay-outs – pensions and disability fees – while neglecting integration policies through different measures in areas of education, professional and vocational training or employment measures. In this way, veterans, as a relatively young population in the mid and late 2000s, were cut off from social life, becoming utterly dependent on state help.[135] In return, as many researchers have noticed, it has created a comprehensive and expensive welfare system comparable with much wealthier states, with an exceptionally high number of disability pensions.[136] Considering that this dependence on state help pacified the veterans, they only protested when they felt their benefits were threatened – despite discursively hiding it under a different agenda – usually when centre-left coalitions were in power.[137]

Similarly, Pupavac and Pupavac argue that the Croatian contemporary welfare model, based on new post-socialist state legitimacy built around the importance of the military and its victory in a liberating war, mimics the position of N.O.R. veterans in S.F.R.J. Pupavac and

[134] Christophe Lesschaeve, 'War as an enduring determinant of party choice in postwar Southeast Europe' in *Europe-Asia Studies*, (2022), pp 1-29.
[135] Ivana Dobrotić, 'Sustav skrbi za branitelje iz Domovinskog rata' in *Revija za socijalnu politiku*, xv (2008), no. 1, pp 57-83.
[136] Ibid.; Stubbs and Zrinščak, 'Citizenship and social welfare'; Ozren Žunec, 'Apsolutna žrtva i relativna kompenzacija: proturječja društvenog položaja veterana i državne skrbi za ratne veterane i invalide' in *Polemos: časopis za interdisciplinarna istraživanja rata i mira*, ix (2006), no. 2, pp 11-41; Mladen Pupavac and Vanessa Pupavac, 'Trauma advocacy, veteran politics, and the Croatian therapeutic state' in *Alternatives*, xxxvii (2012), no. 3, pp 199-213.
[137] Balković, 'The austerity-fuelled wave', pp 87-8; Boduszyński and Pavlaković, 'Cultures of victory'.

Pupavac looked at Croatia's veteran welfare policies through the framework of a therapeutical state. They found the Croatian model characterised by parasitical therapeutical behaviour and social stasis. According to them, Croatia developed a model that fosters a parasitical entitlement mentality among certain privileged groups, which, due to its long-term fiscal consequences, deepens the divide between them and the rest of society, making the issue of veteran rights politically divisive.[138] Furthermore, as argued by Koska and Matan, despite treating veterans as 'deserving citizens', the client-patron nexus is only a by-product of veterans' position on the margins of society, unable to contribute.[139]

Sokolić explained how, in this client-patron relationship, politicians keep veterans on constant alert by appealing to their emotions, keeping the war alive, and warning them of threats from which they have to defend. On the societal level, it is expressed through contentious behaviour, while on the individual level, it can seriously impact their 'mental and physical well-being'. Additionally, besides hampering political and social change by reviving the war, such political use of veterans furthers their marginalisation. As a part of the public sees veterans as those hampering progress, many see them as 'disruptors', perpetuating their marginalisation in society. In turn, this makes veterans susceptible to politicians' rhetoric of their marginalisation, creating a negative cyclic relationship at the margins of society.[140]

Thus, despite compensatory mechanisms, some researchers, above all Žunec, argued that the divisions between veterans and the rest of peacetime societies are tough to overcome due to veterans' brutalised wartime experience, incomprehensible to civilians. According to him, no compensation is ever enough for veterans as it is only relative compensation for their absolute sacrifice for the common good. Therefore, he saw the problem as unsolvable due to veterans'

[138] Pupavac and Pupavac, 'Trauma advocacy'.
[139] Koska and Matan, 'Croatian citizenship', p. 145.
[140] Sokolić, 'Heroes at the margins', pp 156-7.

dissatisfaction with their lives in peacetime.[141] Žunec, Sanader and Begić demonstrated how ancient states, such as the Roman Empire, also tried to elevate veterans after their active service, giving the most precious compensations for military service for the country's sake. Societies provide these goods and services as compensation, a sign of gratitude, and an attempt to re-socialise and integrate veterans into civic life. Therefore, the authors argued, veterans saw the state's prosecution of Croatian officers before the I.C.T.Y. and domestic courts for war crimes as a sign of ingratitude towards them.[142]

Jakir explained veterans' position in society as dual. On the one hand, their pensions are two times bigger than the national average, while veteran welfare accounts for five per cent of the state budget and 1.8 per cent of the gross domestic product. On the other hand, going back to Dobrotić's research, welfare is compensatory-oriented, with much fewer funds and effort put into re-integrating veterans into post-war society. Besides post-traumatic stress disorder (P.T.S.D.), veterans fall ill on a much bigger scale than the rest of the population and have a shorter lifespan, while the issue of their suicides is under-researched. Therefore, Jakir sees them as potential 'victims of transition', both their transition from military to civic lives and the 1990s process of a democratic transition, the economic, political and social transition from state socialism to market capitalism. Not integrating them into a new reality means veterans are lost, not knowing where they belong.[143] In the sense of economic transition, many veterans were indeed among the 'losers of the transition' – not the only ones – as they seem to have fallen victim to the voucher privation process of the 1990s.[144] As Milekić

[141] Žunec, 'Apsolutna žrtva'.
[142] Nada Begić, Mirjana Sanader and Ozren Žunec, 'Ratni veterani u starom Rimu i u današnjoj Hrvatskoj' in *Polemos: časopis za interdisciplinarna istraživanja rata i mira,* x (2007), no. 2, pp 11-30.
[143] Jakir, Aleksandar, 'Croatia: victims of transition? The role of Homeland War veterans in public discourse in Croatia' in Paul Taylor, Emma Murray and Katherine Albertson (eds), *Military Past, Civilian Present: International Perspectives on Veterans' Transition from the Armed Forces* (Cham, 2019), pp 31-42.
[144] Begić et al, 'Ratni veterani', p. 24; Milekić, 'A protest, coup d'état', pp 222-3.

shows, this bereavement among veterans is often rhetorically expressed in different iterations of the same statement: 'is this what we fought for?'.[145]

Although empirical research is not particularly rich, some sociological fieldwork showed this bereavement among veterans. Thus, in their study with disabled veterans, Jašarević and Leutar showed how their respondents were unsatisfied with their societal position, especially how the media frames them as a group interested only in their benefits. Disabled veterans felt stigmatised, isolated and marginalised, with the general population either uninterested or openly hostile towards them, questioning their motives for joining the war effort. Besides better-developed welfare, disabled veterans sought better reintegration and a role in society.[146] Fieldwork conducted by researchers from the Institute for Social Research 'Ivo Pilar' revealed some cracks in veterans' perception of their role in society and how they viewed their acceptance from the public.[147]

In his sociological study of the influence of the I.C.T.Y., domestic courts and transitional justice mechanisms on the dominant narrative of the Homeland War – the dialogue and exchange between narratives – Sokolić gave an insight into the perspective of veteran bottom-up narratives. In his semi-structured focus groups, dyads, and interviews in three cities and several non-urban locations in Croatia in 2014-5, Sokolić included veterans as one of his three target categories of non-elite groups, alongside middle and high school history teachers and pensioners. Despite a minimal sample, the study demonstrated how deeply rooted the dominant narrative is in society among different groups and how they discussed the war similarly. Veterans who took part in his research, coming from non-mainstream

[145] Milekić, 'A protest, coup d'état', pp 223.
[146] Tihana Jašarević and Zdravka Leutar, 'Samopercepcija društvenog položaja invalida Domovinskog rata' in *Društvena istraživanja*: *časopis za opća društvena pitanja*, xix (2010), no. 1-2, pp 93-116.
[147] Sandra Šućurović, Igor Mikloušić and Martina Knežević, *Psihosocijalna prilagodba hrvatskih branitelja: individualna i društvena perspektiva* (Zagreb, 2017).

associations, demonstrated an astounding level of uniformness of opinion when talking about the war, repeating all the main facets of the dominant narrative in the general present among veterans: that Serbian aggression could not be questioned; that the war is still ongoing; that Vukovar was the symbol of Croatian suffering.[148] Although similar research conducted on veterans in 1998 showed that the narration corresponded to the dominant narrative of the war, the narration was much more nuanced. Back then, the dominant narrative was not yet grounded and offered counter-narratives to emerge in the veteran community, questioning Tuđman's rule and other transgressions of the H.D.Z.'s regime.[149]

Sokolić's research revealed the dark sides of the hegemonic narrative, which are not visible on the surface but function as natural by-products of ethnonationalism embedded into the Homeland War myth. One of them is the othering of ethnic Serbs. Therefore, the research participants, especially veterans, demonstrated a negative image of Croatian Serbs and the Serbian Orthodox Church – in contrast to the Catholic Church. Some respondents, veterans included, saw Serbs as inherently aggressive people who did not relinquish their 'Greater-Serbian' ideology. At the same time, they were all suspected of being, at best, accomplices to crimes committed during the war.[150] The other problematic aspect observed in his research is the oblivion of Croatia's role in the war in neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina. While only remembering the positive aspects of Croatia's role in the Bosnian war – receiving Bosniak refugees and providing help in arms – brushing away all the negative elements revolving around the Croat-Bosniak war and massive war crimes. Despite numerous publicly discussed verdicts before the I.C.T.Y., veterans remained oblivious to these transgressions while

[148] Sokolić, *International courts*; Ivor Sokolić, 'Heroes at the margins'.
[149] Mladen Ostojic, 'Collective memory in personal accounts of veterans of the Croatian War 1991-1995', Socio-anthropologie (Socio-Anthropology), 29 Jun. 2010, http://journals.openedition.org/socio-anthropologie/1250 (21 May 2020).
[150] Sokolić, *International courts*; Sokolić, 'Heroes at the margins'; Ivor Sokolić, 'My neighbour, the criminal: how memories of the 1991–1995 conflict in Croatia affect attitudes towards the Serb minority' in *Nations and Nationalism*, xxiii (2017), no. 4, pp 790–814.

observing the Bosnian war through the prism of nesting orientalism as an essentially chaotic and savage conflict. Besides interpreting the Bosnian war through such a problematic framework, it demonstrated the weakness of the justice narrative compared to the Homeland War.[151]

Looking at veterans as a social movement, besides Dolenec and Širinić, junior researchers – M.A. students Soldić and Grgurinović – looked into veteran dissatisfaction expressed through their contentious behaviour.[152] Based on surveys conducted in 2015 and analysed register of civil society organisations, Bagić, Kardov, and Škacan described the structure of the veteran movement, with its numerous associations founded over more than two decades. They showed how disabled veterans organised themselves first in search of the welfare of a newly created state. The researchers demonstrated how veterans who were members of associations, compared to those who were not, preferred centre-right and right-wing parties and self-identified as right-wing leaning. However, the authors did not see association members' political leaning and self-identification as proof of the client-patron relationship with H.D.Z. Still, they concluded that associations and H.D.Z. probably have congruent political beliefs.[153] Such a conclusion leaned upon an earlier study by Bagić and Kardov of the same field research conducted, according to which veterans were more leaning towards the right and self-identified as such than the rest of the population. Besides, the likely result of social clientelism could be a consequence of veterans' sympathies for ideas of patriotism, authority

[151] Ivor Sokolić, 'Denying the unknown. Everyday narratives about Croatian involvement in the 1992-1995 Bosnian conflict' in *Südosteuropa*, lxv (2017), no. 4, pp 632-53.
[152] Marko Soldić, 'A land fit for heroes Croatian veterans of the Homeland War' (M.A. thesis, University of Oslo, Oslo, 2009); Ivan Grgurinović, 'Prosvjedi hrvatskih veterana: komparativna analiza taktika i zahtjeva' (M.A. thesis, University of Zagreb, Zagreb, 2018).
[153] Mislav Škacan, 'Zajedno u ratu, zajedno u miru: karakteristike veteranskih udruga u Republici Hrvatskoj' (M.A. thesis, University of Zagreb, Zagreb, 2018); Dragan Bagić, Kruno Kardov, and Mislav Škacan, 'Mobilizacijska struktura veteranskog pokreta u Hrvatskoj: organizacije društvenog pokreta i članstvo' in *Politička misao*, lvii (2020), no. 3, pp 195-223.

and a strong state, which are promoted more by right-wing parties.[154] As Glaurdić and Vuković also demonstrated, veterans' electoral choices may be driven by the fiscal liberalism of H.D.Z. in the field of veteran welfare.[155]

Complementary to Bagić's and Kardov's, Lesschaeve revealed a complex relationship between veteran status and electoral choices by examining the Croatian 2003 general elections. This case study showed a positive correlation between veteran status and nationalist parties, as they were likelier to vote for these parties than non-veterans. However, his research also revealed that veterans who experienced psychological war trauma were less likely to vote for nationalist parties – even less than the non-veteran population. The results showed that the consequences of war – trauma – were more critical for veterans than the war experience itself. Furthermore, Lesschaeve warned that veterans' electoral preference in favour of nationalist parties was potentially not caused by war experience but by their pre-existing political leaning, due to which they joined the military in the first place.[156]

Research has shown that veteran status is also important for candidates themselves. Following their conclusions on the importance of war legacies and congruence between voters and parties' war memory, Glaurdić, Lesschaeve, and Mochtak analysed the correlation between candidates' veteran status and electoral support through preferential votes on candidate lists.[157] Their research demonstrated a positive correlation between candidates'

[154] Dragan Bagić and Kruno Kardov, 'Politička participacija i stranačke preferencije ratnih veterana u Hrvatskoj' in *Politička misao,* lv (2018), no. 3, pp 82-103.
[155] Glaurdić and Vuković, 'Post-war voters'.
[156] Christophe Lesschaeve, 'Voting after violence: how combat experiences and postwar trauma affect veteran and voter party choices in Croatia's 2003 postwar elections' in *Armed Forces & Society,* xlvi (2020), no. 2, pp 259-80; Lesschaeve's research corresponds to Brown's work on Croatian volunteers from 1991. See: Cody McClain Brown, 'Who fights first: grievances, community and collective action' in *Politička misao*, l (2013), no. 5, pp 7-28.
[157] For importance of war and war memory for electoral choices, see: Lesschaeve, 'War as an enduring determinant'; Glaurdić, Josip, Christophe Lesschaeve, and Michal Mochtak. "Contesting war memories: Parties and voters in contemporary Southeast Europe." Party Politics 28.6 (2022): 1094-1108.

length of service in combat and their electoral success. As expected, this correlation was especially strong in war-affected areas and among right-wing voters. Their results mirrored their previous research of electoral cleavages, with war-affected areas traditionally more prone to H.D.Z., partially due to the party's welfare policies – fiscal liberalism. Authors argue that in situations where voters value candidates' wartime experience as salient qualities for post-war society, the degree to which that transformation to post-war society took place is questionable.[158]

Further research by Lesschaeve and Josip Glaurdić showed how political candidates' veteran status could, albeit not wholly, alleviate accusations of corruption. However, veterans and others who experienced war trauma are not as ready to ignore candidates' corruption charges due to their veteran status as voters with a high level of war grievances. Regardless of their war experience – if they experienced it at all if they were born post-1995 – voters who still 'live in the past' are most susceptible to alleviating corruption with someone's veteran status. Thus, politicians use their wartime veteran experience to avoid discussing present-day transgressions.[159] Such results are compatible with Mochtak's research that showed how M.P.s, decades after the war, use their own wartime experience – often veteran – to reaffirm their claims or discredit political opponents.[160]

According to the same authors, wartime veteran experiences of M.P.s inform how they talk about the war. M.P.s with veteran status reproduce the dominant war narrative on a much bigger scale than their non-veteran colleagues, using exceptionally loaded language to focus on the war's negative and traumatic aspects. Using such language demonstrates how veterans,

[158] Josip Glaurdić and Christophe Lesschaeve, 'Warrior candidates: do voters value combat experience in postwar elections?' in *Political Research Quarterly*, lxxv (2022), no. 4, pp 950-65.
[159] Christophe Lesschaeve and Josip Glaurdić, 'Condoning postwar corruption: how legacies of war prevent democratic accountability in contemporary Southeast Europe' in *East European Politics*, xxxviii (2022), no. 2, pp 188-207.
[160] Mochtak, 'Mythologizing war', 506-7.

as politicians, keep the war alive decades after its end. At the same time, right-wing politicians without veteran experience promote a positive and affirmative discourse about the war, emphasising the role of veterans and war victims in creating an independent state. They formed a feasible coalition as veterans lean towards centre-right and right-wing parties, which ideologically support more extensive veteran welfare. According to them, this amalgamated war narrative – combining positive and negative aspects – in combination with tangible benefits explains the salience of war in Croatian politics decades since violence ended.[161]

Croatian veterans: definition, figures, and welfare

The Law on Croatian Defenders from the Homeland War and Members of their Families (*Zakon o hrvatskim braniteljima iz Domovinskog rata i članovima njihovih obitelji*) from 2017 offers a legal definition of a Croatian veteran, pertaining to certain rights and benefits. Therefore, a Croatian veteran is a member of the armed forces – Z.N.G., H.V., police units, the paramilitary Croatian Defence Forces (*Hrvatske obrambene snage*, H.O.S.), armed units of the People's Defence (*Narodna zaštita*) – who took part in defending 'the independence, territorial integrity or sovereignty of the Republic of Croatia' between 5 August 1990 and 30 June 1996.[162] According to the Register of Croatian Defenders from the Homeland War (*Registar hrvatskih branitelja iz Domovinskog rata*), there were 513,140 registered veterans in December 2021. This figure included those killed and missing during the war, as well as

[161] Michal, Mochtak, Josip Glaurdić and Christophe Lesschaeve, 'Talking war: representation, veterans and ideology in post-war parliamentary debates' in *Government and Opposition*, lvii (2022), no.1, pp 148-70.
[162] Hrvatski sabor, 'Zakon o hrvatskim braniteljima'.

those who deceased from other causes during the years, as 426,345 registered veterans were still alive at the time.[163]

As 3.87 million people lived in Croatia in 2021, the veterans comprised some ten per cent of the total population.[164] While it shows the relevance of veterans in Croatia in their sheer numbers, it also opens the question of the reliability of these figures. Although the legal definition of veterans slightly changed through time, back in 1996, immediately after the war ended, both Tuđman and veteran associations claimed there were 350,000 veterans.[165] In 2005, less than a decade later, there were 489,407 registered veterans, while in 2008, there were 494,757, and in 2009, there were 499,315.[166] Some contingents saw especially dramatic changes in figures. Participants of the Vukovar battle saw a dramatic growth: instead of some 1,800 people who defended the city, there were between 6,500 and 7,500 registered veterans years later.[167] The number of volunteers – usually considered those who volunteered before 1992 – grew from some 25,000 initially to 56,000 in 1999 and 157,037 in 2005.[168] The number of veterans receiving the disability pension grew from 17,534 in 2001 to 34,610 in 2005, 38,786 in 2007, and 56,058 in 2010.[169]

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[163] Branimir Bradarić, 'U registru 513,140 branitelja, od kojih 426,345 živih', Večernji list, 10 Jan. 2022, https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/u-registru-513-140-branitelja-od-kojih-426-345-zivih-1553933 (3 Nov. 2023); Estimates on the number of killed and missing soldiers and police officers during the war range from 6,821 to 8,262. See: Šućurović et al, *Psihosocijalna prilagodba,* p. 14.

[164] For the results of the 2021 national census, see: Državni zavod za statistiku, 'Objavljeni konačni rezultati Popisa 2021.', Državni zavod za statistiku, 22 Sep. 2022, https://dzs.gov.hr/vijesti/objavljeni-konacni-rezultati-popisa-2021/1270 (3 Nov. 2023); Approximately some ten per cent of all living veterans do not live in Croatia. The 2011 national census showed similar figures. See: Zoran Šućur, Zdenko Babić and Jelena Ogresta, *Demografska i socioekonomska obilježja hrvatskih branitelja: prema Popisu stanovništva, kućanstava i stanova 2011. godine* (Zagreb, 2017), p. 7.

[165] *Večernji list*, 16 Jan. 1996; *Globus*, 18 Oct. 1996; Dvorana 'Vatroslav Lisinski' – proglašenje rezultata peticije: govor general pukovnika Đure Dečaka, 26 Oct. 1996, U.H.V.D.R., Registrator nerazvrstano, p. 1; In 1999, there were around 380,000 registered veterans, while in 2005, mainstream veteran associations held this figure to be truthful. See: *Jutarnji list*, 1 Dec. 2005.

[166] Begić et al, 'Ratni veterani', p. 18; Dobrotić, 'Sustav skrbi', p. 58; *Večernji list*, 23 Feb. 2008, 17 Oct. 2009.

[167] Some of Vukovar inhabitants joined H.V. after the fall of the city and fought on different fronts for the remainder of the war. See: *Večernji list*, 15 Nov. 2006, 14 Feb. 2012.

[168] *Večernji list*, 30 Apr. 1999; Begić et al, 'Ratni veterani', p. 18.

[169] *Jutarnji list*, 9 Jun. 2007, 9 Jul. 2010; Dobrotić, 'Sustav skrbi', p. 58.

Such dramatic changes in the number of registered veterans opened discussions among them. Numerous veteran leaders suggested that the number was inflated for clientelist purposes to secure different benefits, especially pensions and disability pensions. In their eyes, these practices devalued their merits, as many undeserving individuals received veteran status, which brings symbolic, material, and financial benefits.[170] This lack of transparency on how many and who are veterans, especially disabled ones, launched ongoing discussions over so-called fake veterans. With the help of politicians and bureaucracy, these often unnamed individuals attained veteran status to receive benefits and symbolic capital.

The issue of fake veterans became the subject of broad public debates in the early 2000s, as H.D.Z. lost power for the first time. In trying to curb public finances, the new centre-left coalition wanted to root out fake disabled veterans by organising different committees that investigated the disability status of many retired officers. While many applauded such governmental activities, many mainstream associations tied to H.D.Z. opposed this process. To counter this process, veteran leaders and associations reinforced the narrative and used the newly constructed idiom of 'dignity of the Homeland War' to present this as an attack on war memory and not specific individuals – an example of screen memory on play.[171]

As H.D.Z. came back to power in late 2003, the number of veterans, both disabled and non-disabled, again multiplied. In 2006, the Government started giving out shares of the

[170] *Vjesnik*, 3 Feb. 1997; *Večernji list*, 16, 30 Apr. 1999, 15 Nov. 2006; *Jutarnji list*, 3 Mar. 2000, 1 Dec. 2005.
[171] *Večernji list*, 8, 9, 16 May, 3, 9, 10, 15, 16, 21, 24 Jun. 2000, 9 Sep. 2003; *Jutarnji list*, 14, 16-8 Mar., 10, 11, 17 Apr., 9 May, 10, 15, 16 Jun. 2000; *Nacional*, 21, 28 Jun. 2000; 16 Apr., 7 May 2002; *Globus*, 7 Jul. 2000; *Novi list*, 10 Dec. 2001; On how certain associations tackled the investigations into disability by calling upon the 'defence of the dignity of the Homeland War', see: Promemorija o zaštiti digniteta Domovinskog rata, 13 Apr. 2000, U.H.V.D.R, registrator Nerazvrstano; Zapisnik III izvještajnog sabora održanog 15. rujna 2000. godine, 21 Sep. 2000, U.H.V.D.R., registrator Izvještajni sabor; Zapisnik sa 2. opće sjednice tijela udruge održane 23. lipnja 2000. godine u Zagrebu, 27 Jun. 2000, U.H.V.D.R., registrator Središnji odbor; *Jutarnji list*, 8 Apr., 27 May 2000; *Večernji list*, 8 Apr., 24 Jun. 2000; For associations supporting the investigation into veterans' disability, see: *Jutarnji list*, 24 Mar., 20 May, 10 Jul. 2000; *Večernji list*, 24 Jun. 2000.

Defenders' Fund (*Braniteljski fond*) – the owner of stocks of state-owned companies – to veterans, according to points related to the length of their service, rank, and disability status. As the Government gave points according to the register of veterans that was not publicly accessible, this lack of transparency caused an outrage as many felt they were given a smaller share in the Fund. Many claimed there were irregularities in the register and requested that the Government make it publicly accessible. These demands continued for years while H.D.Z. The Government continued to resist revealing it, claiming it would be an infringement of personal information and that it would bring further divisions among veterans and in society. At the same time, opposition parties joined most associations in asking for an open register.[172]

Although the centre-left Government made the register publicly accessible online in 2012, veteran circles and right-wing parties criticised the idea.[173] Upon returning to power, H.D.Z.'s Government decided to pull down the register from the Internet in 2017, claiming that it did not fulfil its purpose, as veterans still had to visit other administrative offices to receive an official confirmation on their status.[174] Meanwhile, in less than four years since

[172] *Večernji list*, 21, 25 Apr., 2, 7, 26 May 2006, 23 Mar. 2007; 10, 12, 15, 18, 20, 28, 29 Mar., 8, 9, 14 Apr., 3 Dec. 2008; *Hrvatski list*, 21 Dec. 2006, 24 Apr., 1 May 2008; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 31 Mar. 2007; 28 Mar. 2008; *Nacional*, 1 May 2007; *Jutarnji list*, 29 Jun., 19 Nov. 2007; In this period, only a few veteran associations supported the Government in not revealing the register. See: *Večernji list*, 11 Mar. 2008; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 11, 12 Mar. 2008; According to one opinion poll in 2008, ninety-one per cent of the public was for revealing the register. See: *Večernji list*, 20 Mar. 2008.
[173] *Jutarnji list*, 20 Dec. 2012; *Večernji list*, 18 Oct., 24, 30 Nov., 20, 21 Dec. 2012; *Hrvatski list*, 24 Jan., 7 Feb. 2013; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 21, 22 Dec. 2012; 1 Feb. 2013; Zapisnik 9. sjednice Odbora za ratne veterane Hrvatskog sabora, 12 Dec. 2012, Croatian Parliament (*Hrvatski sabor*, H.S.), fond Hrvatski sabor, podfond Hrvatski sabor, 7. saziv (2011-2015), serija Odbor za ratne veterane, podserija Sjednice, podpodserija 9. sjednica, podpodserija Zapisnik;
[174] Renata Rašović, 'Ukinuli Registar branitelja: 'Nije ispunio svoju svrhu'', Večernji list, 22 Dec. 2017, https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/ukinuli-registar-branitelja-tomo-medved-predrag-matic-1215883 (1 Nov. 2023).

removing the register from the public eye, according to the Ministry of War Veterans, an additional 7,205 veterans were put into the register.[175]

One of the reasons why individuals wished to attain veteran status was the extensive welfare offered by Croatia. One of the most prominent benefits is pensions, which are provided to specific groups of disabled and non-disabled veterans. Therefore, veterans are among the people who get their pensions under more favourable conditions.[176] Going back to discussions, between 2003 and 2009, while mostly H.D.Z. was in power, the number of veteran pensions grew from 30,865 to 64,494.[177] As of September 2023, the number of veteran pensions was 71,299, of which 52,034 were those of disabled veterans, and 14,985 were family pensions – spouses and children inheriting pensions from deceased veterans.[178] Additionally, 58,589 individuals got their pensions according to general regulations, with time spent on the front having a beneficial impact on the total sum of their pensions.[179] Compared to regular pensioners, those receiving veteran pensions had, on average, eighteen years of working experience, while ordinary pensioners have thirty-one years of experience.[180] Finally, veteran pensions are considerably larger compared to the average one.

[175] Some of the people added are those who started their lawsuits for attaining the veteran status against the state before 2009. See: Bradarić, 'U registru 513,140 branitelja'.
[176] Aside of Croatian veterans, including former members of H.V.O., some of these categories are: W.W.II. veterans (both fascist and anti-fascist), former H.V. and J.N.A. staff, former political prisoners from S.F.R.J., constitutional court judges, police officers, M.P.s and government officials, former members of S.F.R.J. political institutions, members of the Croatian Academy of Science and Arts, workers exposed to asbestos, etc. See: Marijana Bađun, 'Korisnici mirovina koji su pravo na mirovinu ostvarili pod povoljnijim uvjetima' in *Newsletter: povremeno glasilo Instituta za javne finacije*, xi (2009), no. 44, pp 1-10, at p. 2.
[177] Janine Natalya Clark, 'Giving peace a chance: Croatia's branitelji and the imperative of reintegration' in *Europe-Asia Studies*, lxv (2013) no. 10, pp 1931-53, at pp 1937-8; Bađun, 'Korisnici mirovina', p. 2.
[178] Hrvatski zavod za mirovinsko osiguranje, 'Statističke informacije Hrvatskog zavoda za mirovinsko osiguranje, broj 9/2023, listopad 2023.', Mirovinsko.hr, Oct. 2023, pp 47, 70, https://www.mirovinsko.hr/UserDocsImages/statistika/statisticke-informacije/2023/9/Statisticke-informacije-HZMO-a-9-2023-listopad-2023.pdf?vel=14834684 (2 Nov. 2023).
[179] Ibid, p. 47.
[180] Ibid, p. 144.

While workers reaching full retirement age on average have a pension of 481 euros, veterans receive 1,046 euros.[181]

Other than pensions, Croatia offers the most extensive welfare regarding the number of rights on disposition to veterans in medical care, taxes, various financial payments, help for disabled veterans, housing, loans, education and professional training, childcare, and entrepreneurship. Some of these numerous rights are the right to child supplement and warm meal at schools for children, student scholarship and fee waivers (also open to veteran children), free student housing, free school textbooks, supplement and disability fees, subsidised funeral costs, one-time financial aid, healthcare participation fee waivers, free housing, preferential housing loans, preferential office leases, home renovations, preferential treatment in applying for retirement homes, stocks of state-owned companies, right to legal aid.[182] Through the years, Croatia cut some veteran rights and benefits, as they were either seen as unconstitutional – like the right to free admission to universities for veterans' children – or the state found a more feasible measure – such as customs' waiver for importing cars.[183]

The gender dimension of the Croatian veteran movement

Representation of women in the Croatian veteran movement works within masculine militarisation stemming from Yugoslav times. Although female fighters were in Partisan units, the Yugoslav state reserved mandatory military service in J.N.A. solely for men.[184]

[181] Ibid.
[182] For the full and comprehensive list of rights and benefits at disposal to veterans, see: Dobrotić, 'Sustav skrbi'; Hrvatski sabor, 'Zakon o hrvatskim braniteljima'.
[183] For Constitutional Court's decision on revoking children's right to free admission to universities, see: *Jutarnji list*, 21 Dec. 2006; *Večernji list*, 21 Dec. 2006; *Nacional*, 26 Dec. 2006; Nowadays, the Ministry of War Veterans buys cars for fully disabled veterans every seven years. See: Hrvatski sabor, 'Zakon o hrvatskim braniteljima'.
[184] Oliwia Berdak, 'Reintegrating veterans in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia: citizenship and gender effects' in *Women's Studies International Forum*, il (2015), pp 48-56, at p. 50.

According to the Law on Defence, passed by the Croatian Parliament in 1991, women were relieved from general mobilisation except for reserve forces on the eve of general mobilisation.[185] Despite this, over 23,000 women volunteered, making up around five per cent of registered veterans, with those percentages going higher in areas hit directly by war – Eastern Slavonia, Lika and North Dalmatia.[186]

However, their representation in the veteran community, especially in the public discourse, is not equal to their wartime experience. The lack of female presence comes from the under-representation of women in Croatia's public sphere in general. Therefore, despite legislation for introducing and promoting equal opportunities for women, their numbers remain low in politics. In eight general elections held until and including 2015 – the period covered by the thesis – women never made up more than 21.9 per cent of M.P.s, dropping to twelve per cent in the 2016 snap elections.[187] Such an under-representation of women in politics is partially a result of their media treatment. Croatian mainstream media does not treat women equally when covering political topics, not consulting them as political officials or experts. Female politicians are under-represented in newspapers and T.V. shows. At the same time, the media

[185] Sabor Republike Hrvatske, 'Zakon o obrani', Narodne novine, undated, https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/1991_09_49_1230.html (1 Feb. 2023).
[186] Catherine Baker, 'Veteran masculinities and audiovisual popular music in post-conflict Croatia: a feminist aesthetic approach to the contested everyday peace' in *Peacebuilding*, vii (2019), no. 2, pp 226-42, at p. 227; Šućur et al, *Demografska i socioekonomska obilježja*, pp 8, 11; Branimir Bradarić, 'U Domovinskom ratu aktivno sudjelovalo 23.080 žena', Večernji list, 21 Oct. 2011, https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/u-domovinskom-ratu-aktivno-sudjelovalo-23080-zena-338806 (1 Feb. 2023).
[187] Mira Lulic and Ivana Tucak, 'Women and politics: the ineffectiveness of electoral gender quotas for parliamentary elections in the republic of Croatia' in *4th International Multidisciplinary Scientific Conference On Social Sciences And Arts SGEM* (Vienna, 2017); Elena Nacevska and Sonja Lokar, 'The effectiveness of gender quotas in Macedonia, Serbia and Croatia' in *Teorija in Praksa*, liv (2017), no. 2, pp 394-412; Katarina Krog, 'Zastupljenost žena u predstavničkim tijelima: slučaj Hrvatskog sabora' (M.A. thesis, University of Zagreb, Zagreb, 2016); Marjeta Šinko, 'Parlamentarna predstavljenost žena u Hrvatskoj: nakon nevidljivosti i staklenog stropa–regresija' in *Političke analize: tromjesečnik za hrvatsku i međunarodnu politiku*, vii (2016), no. 27, pp 3-10.

primarily consults women on 'lighter' topics, often feminising them through visual representation of their bodies and tying them to traditional gender roles.[188]

In such a patriarchal and re-masculinised society, Croatian female veterans are somewhat marginalised, with minimal mention of the war in public memory.[189] Women are almost absent in the leadership of the most prominent mainstream associations. A few female veteran associations are active in the veteran movement, although mostly local and with limited impact on the public and political elites.[190] Only one association, Women in the Homeland War (*Žene u Domovinskom ratu*), is slightly more known. The association is not strictly a veteran association, as the Zagreb branch was born out of Croatian peace activists, mothers of Croat soldiers who served mandatory military service in the J.N.A. in 1991.[191] However, this association, formed in 2006-07, did not mobilise on most of the veteran issues analysed in this thesis.[192]

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[188] Dunja Majstorović and Gordana Vilović, 'The presence and depiction of women on the front pages of Croatian daily newspapers: in the service of promoting gender stereotypes?' in *Medijske studije*, viii (2017), no. 16, pp 6-21; Irena Sever and Alen Andraković, 'Žena na javnoj televiziji: Slučaj informativnih emisija In medias res i Otvoreno' in *Nova prisutnost*, xi (2013), no. 1, pp 5-21; Katja Janković, 'Žene u medijima' (M.A. thesis, University of Osijek, Osijek, 2019); Branimir Felger, Gordana Lesinger and Ivan Tanta, 'Diskriminacija žena – zastupljenost žena i političarki u izbornim blokovima informativnih emisija nacionalnih televizija,' in *Mostariensia: časopis za društvene i humanističke znanosti*, xxi (2017), no. 1, pp 83-95.

[189] Taylor Andrew McConnell, 'Još Hrvatska ni propala [Still Croatia has not fallen]: examining the public face of memory in Croatia' (PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, 2020), pp 180-9.

[190] McConnell, 'Još Hrvatska ni propala', pp 181-2.

[191] *Večernji list*, 16 Mar. 2006.

[192] For their activities, see: Ma. B., 'Udruga Žene u Domovinskom ratu poduprla braniteljski prosvjed', Dnevnik.hr, 13 Jan. 2015, https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/udruga-zene-u-domovinskom-ratu-poduprla-braniteljski-prosvjed---368422.html (24 Jan. 2023); Silvija Romić, 'Udruga Žene u Domovinskom ratu zadovoljna novim zakonom', Narodni list, 1 Jun. 2015, http://www.narodni-list.hr/posts/115035002 (24 Jan. 2023); Vukovarsko-srijemska županija, 'Dekanić primio predstavnice udruge Žene u Domovinskom ratu, jer se Grad Zagreb povlači iz daljnje provedbe Programa za žrtve seksualnog zlostavljanja', Vukovarsko-srijemska županija, 27 Oct. 2021, https://www.vusz.hr/novosti-najave-i-sluzbene-obavijesti/dekanic-primio-predstavnice-udruge-zene-u-domovinskom-ratu-jer-se-grad-zagreb-povlaci-iz-d (24 Jan. 2023); Hina/tportal.hr, 'Kada će na snagu stupiti Lex hrvatski branitelji?!', Tportal, 17 Oct. 2013, https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/kada-ce-na-snagu-stupiti-lex-hrvatski-branitelji-20131017/print (24 Jan. 2023).

Concerning the Homeland War memory, women are predominantly tied to roles of widows, mothers and daughters – roles revolving around men.[193] Regarding Croatia's war-related civil society, women are primarily concentrated in associations connected to the veteran movement, in organisations gathering war widows and families of killed and missing soldiers. As such, they are respected by mainstream veteran associations and are members of the Republic Coordination of Associations from the Homeland War (*Republička koordinacija udruga proisteklih iz Domovinskog rata*), alongside veteran associations.[194] Some disabled female veterans were present in the sit-in protest in Savska. Even more so, one of the disabled female veterans, Nevenka Topalušić, passed away during the protest in front of the Veterans Ministry in Zagreb. The protesters used her death to criticise the government for allowing it to happen, erecting a monument in her memory while the protest lasted.[195] The level to which female veterans were invisible was evident in this case, as it was the first monument showing women as veterans in post-socialist Croatia. What is more, Topalušić was used as a symbol, as the inscription on the memorial plaque was dedicated to the protest, marking its start and not the moment of her death.[196]

Methodology

The thesis uses multiple types of sources, especially primary ones. My research heavily relies on media reports, including different newspapers from 1990 to 2015 – daily, weekly and monthly – national, regional or local (city) media coverage. I accessed most printed

[193] McConnell, 'Još Hrvatska ni propala', pp 185-6.
[194] The names of the Republic's Coordination was slightly altered through the years. See: Statut Republičke koordinacije udruga iz Domovinskog rata Dr. Franjo Tuđman, 24 Sep. 2015, Association of Croatian Veterans of the Homeland War (*Udruga hrvatskih veterana Domovinskog rata*, U.H.V.D.R.), registrator Republička koordinacija udruga iz Domovinskog rata, p. 2.
[195] Her case is discussed at length in chapter five.
[196] McConnell, 'Još Hrvatska ni propala', pp 183-4.

newspapers through the National and University Library in Zagreb, the Zagreb City Library, and the Croatian State Archives. Including many newspapers from different regions, different ideological editorial policies, and ownership – state or private – alleviates potential bias one may encounter in consulting a smaller range of media.[197] Through newspapers, I could trace different activities of veteran associations, as well as their rhetoric, used in protests, meetings, assemblies, press conferences, and interviews with veteran leaders. The analysis of newspapers allowed me to identify media frames used in covering veteran topics and specific discursive shifts of media on veteran issues.[198] Aside from secondary sources, newspapers were also crucial for following larger political and social processes at a certain point in time and seeing how veteran associations responded to them. Media coverage gives an insight into how associations communicated their activities and the discrepancy between the planned and achieved impact of these activities on media upon which the public, at least partially, forms its opinions. Finally, media representations of veteran narratives helped construct the hegemonic and public narratives of the war and counter-narratives against which associations mobilised.

Besides these newspapers, I tracked down a few weekly, monthly, and occasional magazines, bulletins, and pamphlets published by veteran associations. While mostly marginal nationally, these newspapers offered insight into veteran associations and bottom-up narratives about the war or current state affairs of veteran rights. Some of these publications are not preserved, as they were not deposited in libraries, while associations did not keep copies of all issues. These publications offer veteran views on issues that troubled the community while revealing complex relations between leading organisations – usually based in Zagreb – and local branches. These sources show top-down and bottom-up narratives at

[197] Some existing academic work on the topic did not consult multiple media sources which ended in revealing only the partial nature of certain events.
[198] See: Car, 'Myths in media texts'.

work, reproducing the hegemonic narrative and veteran counter-narratives. Additionally, in these publications, veteran leaders and associations voice more radical opinions that are sometimes censored and self-censored in fear of media, public or political backlash.

As Croatian media entered the digital era in the mid-2000s, news coverage moved their content to online sites. The Internet allowed much more extensive coverage of particular political and veteran events through various websites. Some of these websites had radically different editorial policies and offered more space to specific topics than mainstream printed media. Numerous news portals opened the possibility of a broader spectrum of voices and bottom-up veteran narratives that would not get such prominent space in printed media.

Finally, online media allowed for live coverage of events as they happened on the ground, often accompanied by different audio-visual material. Thus, the thesis uses videos from YouTube material, as many T.V. shows and local stations put their reportages and shows on that platform. Furthermore, in the era of cell phones with cameras, YouTube provided a platform for individual perspectives of mass events – like protests – exposing different non-elite narratives potentially overlooked by mainstream media. Finally, YouTube has become a tool for protesters, who use these videos to mobilise their supporters or demonstrate the state's alleged brutality against them. In these videos, veteran leaders are much more radical and direct in rhetoric, conveying messages to their members or supporters filming the events.

Besides media and digital sources, the thesis also relied on archival sources. The first group of these sources was documentation produced and kept by veteran associations. Approaching veteran associations and their leadership in search of archived documentation was very delicate. Numerous associations called upon different issues for not allowing me to consult their archival sources, claiming it would infringe on the general data protection regulation or that their documentation is only open to the membership. Some veteran leaders were openly

hostile, intimidating me through email and social networks. Other associations are the ones that never responded to my inquiries or returned phone calls. Some associations met me and sometimes even welcomed my work but refused to allow me access to their documentation or claimed not to have any documentation before 2016.

Finally, a few associations were fully cooperative and friendly, allowing me to review their archival documentation. Some of these associations had only partially sorted out documentation, often put in random unnamed or wrongly named boxes and lever arch files, reflected in minimal archival details in my footnotes and bibliographies.[199] Two associations that agreed to give me access to their documentation of substantial volume were the Association of Croatian Veterans of the Homeland War (*Udruga hrvatskih veterana Domovinskog rata*, U.H.V.D.R.) and the Association of Volunteers of the Croatian War Navy (*Udruga dragovoljaca Hrvatske ratne mornarice*, U.D.H.R.M.).[200] Luckily, U.H.V.D.R. probably has the most extensive archives of all associations because it is a nationwide association with organisations in each of the twenty counties and city of Zagreb that has existed since 1993, with a high level of organisation. Additionally, as this organisation had the ambition of acting like an umbrella association for all veterans, they archived additional documentation and correspondence from various veteran associations. Furthermore, as U.H.V.D.R. was a leading member of the Republic's Coordination from the Homeland War,

[199] In referencing these sources, I tried to be as specific as possible, giving the full title of the document or my description of it – especially in letters, which are usually not titled, but sent to a certain person or organisation or institution. I also gave a date when the document was made – sometimes reports are made a few days after the certain event – and, if offered, I gave the name of the lever arch file, which usually marks either the type of document – mails, reports, invitations – or different bodies and events – central committee, assembly.

[200] In 2002, U.H.V.D.R. changed its name into the Association of Volunteers and Veterans of the Homeland War of the Republic of Croatia (*Udruga dragovoljaca i veterana Domovinskog rata Republike Hrvatske*). However, the thesis will use solely the initial name and acronym – U.H.V.D.R. – for the sake of clarity; The third association that allowed me to access its archival documentation was the Association Frankopan Battalion (*Udruga Bojna Frankopan*). As Association's archival documentation dealt exclusively with organisation's internal issues – registering the association, paying membership fees, securing office space, organising trips and gatherings of members, issues around financial auditing – I did not use these sources in this thesis.

its archives held considerable documentation from that entity. Therefore, I gained insight into a much larger section of the veteran movement through U.H.V.D.R.'s archives.

The archival sources of the associations are crucial in unravelling the complexity of these entities – planned and executed activities, outreach to the public and media, correspondence with institutions and other associations, internal power struggles and disputes within and between associations. These sources are essential for understanding veteran activities and agency, sometimes obfuscated by mainstream media or political elites. Additionally, these sources reveal the functioning of the dominant discourse and narratives among membership – usually leadership, therefore veteran elites – and allow us to conduct proper narrative analysis. These sources help contextualise associations' activities and rhetoric of its administration, telling us about the veteran agency.

Finally, many of my archival sources come from different state institutions. Thus, I went through the presidential archives for Croatian presidents Tuđman (1990-99) and Stjepan Mesić (2000-10) in the Croatian State Archives. This documentation was crucial for understanding the dynamics of relations between the associations and political institutions. This relationship is special between associations and Croatian presidents, especially Tuđman, as veteran organisations often complain about specific ministries or local government ignoring their problems. In contrast, veterans saw the president as the bearer of sovereignty and statehood. In these exchanges with Tuđman, veteran leaders pursue a particular discourse of respect and admiration strongly connected to Croatia's culture of victory. From a practical point of view, this source allowed me to work on documents from associations that refused to give me access.

Besides the presidential archives in the Croatian State Archives, I managed to access the documentation of Croatian presidents Ivo Josipović (2010-5) and Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović

(2015-20), which are kept in the Office of the Croatian President. The Office of the President organises documents with specific code numbers within the fund of the president's advisor for veterans. These sources also demonstrated the continued relationship between presidents and veteran associations.

Besides the presidential archives, in my research, I used documentation from other institutions in the executive branch: the Cabinet of the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Defence. The Cabinet of the Prime Minister held the correspondence veteran associations and groups sent to Prime Minister Jadranka Kosor in 2011. As she took over the position after serving as the Minister of Veteran Affairs for five years, veteran associations still considered Kosor their primary contact in the Government, either informing her of their activities or expressing their support for her policies. Sources from the Defence Ministry are deposited in the Central Military Archives, containing documents that primarily concerned the 1992-7 period before the Ministry of Veteran Affairs was formed. In these documents, veteran associations – especially the ones representing disabled veterans – communicated with Defence Minister Gojko Šušak, as well as heads of different departments dealing with veteran welfare. The documents reflect a special bond existing between disabled veterans and Šušak, as they confine with him, complaining about specific issues or the course of state politics.

Finally, the only institution that ultimately rejected my access to its archives was the Ministry of Veteran Affairs, claiming that they do not have a legal obligation to keep the documentation of its correspondence with associations.

I also used parliamentary papers in my research, especially the documentation from committees for war veterans established in 1995. While the archives of the Chamber of Counties are kept in the Croatian State Archives, the documentation of the Committee for War Veterans of the Chamber of Representatives and later unicameral Parliament are still

deposited in the Parliament's archives.[201] Documentation of the Committee for War Veterans is important as it offers insight into how veteran associations advocated different legislative changes and other initiatives concerning the wartime legacy. Besides M.P.s who were also veteran leaders, veteran representatives were constantly present as external members of the Committee or occasionally present during important discussions. These discussions often announced the debate in Parliament's plenary session and mirrored rhetoric used in events organised by veteran associations and groups.

Finally, besides the primary sources, I used many secondary sources – books, articles, edited chapters, unpublished M.A. and PhD thesis – on veteran affairs, Croatia's contemporary history and politics, memory politics and other relevant topics. These included monographies and political biographies of former officials in power during my research period. In the Homeland War Book Collection, I also located books published by veteran leaders – often in memoirs – and their associations, sometimes self-published and non-commercial publications in minimal numbers and not present in other libraries and bookstores.[202] Although mainly focused on the memory of wartime activities, some of them included the account of founding their respective associations.

I trace and analyse veteran associations and leaders' rhetoric and discourse through all these sources. I show how sometimes this rhetoric is followed by specific contentious actions – protests and petitions – while in other cases, it is used to trigger or block particular policies. The thesis demonstrates how veterans frame their activities and discourse, building up the narrative later used to advocate change or the *status quo*. The thesis also identifies moments when veteran rhetoric correlates with the one political elites offer. Besides rhetoric, the thesis

[201] Between 1993 and 2001, Croatia had a bicameral Parliament, with Chamber of Counties representing twenty Croatian counties and the city of Zagreb.
[202] Many associations and individuals donated books to the Homeland War Book Collection.

also investigates other sources reflecting their ideological positions and worldviews – protest signs, public letters, and internal and external documents.

Structure of the thesis

The thesis is structured into six chapters and a conclusion. Chapter 1 deals with the 1992-9 period, as veterans formed their first associations as the war entered a stalemate in 1992. The chapter deals with the war and the immediate post-war period when H.D.Z. and Tuđman dominated Croatia's political life. Thus, the thesis explains how, in 1992-3, the new H.D.Z. regime was directly and indirectly involved in the process of the formation of the first major veteran associations. Similarly, in 1994-5, H.D.Z. played a role in the fragmentation of the veteran movement. In its second part, the chapter portrays the immediate post-war period, when veteran associations planned their first protest in September 1996 in an attempt to become a status group. The last part of the chapter deals with veteran links to the 1990s semi-authoritarian regime, emphasising the relationship of veteran associations with Šušak and Tuđman, who passed away in 1998 and 1999, respectively.

Chapter 2 looks into 2000 when Croatia turned a new page with Tuđman's death and H.D.Z. losing the elections to the centre-left coalition. As it sought to de-Tuđmanise Croatia and fast forward its E.U. path, the new Government tried to improve the country's cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. over crimes committed by Croatian forces. The chapter revolves around the contentious behaviour of veteran associations and newly formed veteran-political hybrid groups that mobilised against authorities. These groups and other conservative forces in Croatian society – above all H.D.Z. – started re-affirming the idea of the dignity of the Homeland War, which was allegedly at stake by the attempts to criminalise it from the I.C.T.Y., Government and part of the media. As things escalated in late summer-early fall of

2000 with the arrest of Croatian war crime suspects, the Parliament, dominated by the centre-left coalition, passed the Declaration of the Homeland War, in which political elites transformed the dominant narrative of the war – co-created by Tuđman, H.D.Z. and veterans – into the official one. While the centre-left coalition passed the Declaration, hoping it would end emotional debates, the chapter explains how this discursive concession would have short and long-term consequences as veteran associations gained leverage in their struggle against the state.

Chapter 3 shows how, in 2001-3, the Declaration of the Homeland War immediately influenced Croatia's cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. and prosecution of Croatian officers. The chapter offers accounts of how the state, still led by the centre-left coalition, continued to battle veteran associations and groups – helped by other conservative forces – to bring Croatian generals to justice – Mirko Norac, Ante Gotovina and Janko Bobetko. The chapter shows how veteran associations used the newly established official narrative to further their claims for resisting the arrest of war crime suspects. The chapter opens with the Gotovina saga, who went on a run in 2001, becoming Croatia's top political story for years. In the end, the chapter demonstrates how veteran associations successfully pulled the Government closer to their ideological position. Croatia reached the lowest level of I.C.T.Y. compliance in 2002, as it sabotaged Bobetko's arrest and extradition to the Hague. As Bobetko passed away in his home in 2003, the veteran movement hibernated with the upcoming elections later that year.

Chapter four deals with the 2004-11 period, with another tectonic change, as the centre-left coalition lost power to H.D.Z. in December 2003. The chapter analyses the metamorphosis of H.D.Z. – led by Prime Minister and party President Ivo Sanader – into a European-centred conservative party. For this top foreign policy goal, in 2004, Sanader sacrificed H.D.Z.'s previous defiance in cooperating with the I.C.T.Y. regarding Croatian officers suspected of crimes committed on Croatian territory. The chapter goes in-depth into the little-researched

paradigm change according to which Croatia could arrest and extradite its officers and remain loyal to protecting the dignity of the Homeland War. The chapter focuses on different tactics the Government used to successfully tackle existing peripheral veteran discontent, contributing to the further fragmentation of the veteran movement. In the last part, the chapter looks into the contentious period of 2011, when H.D.Z.'s Government led by Jadranka Kosor – who stepped in for Sanader in July 2009 – faced veteran protest in the context of anti-austerity protests in the context of recession and Croatia's planned E.U. accession. The chapter shows how veteran dissatisfaction over the arrest of their fellow combatant in Bosnia and Herzegovina joined forces with the widespread discontent over austerity measures, numerous Government corruption scandals and imminent E.U. membership. The chapter raises an essential issue in researching the Croatian veteran movement, as it describes veteran discontent with the H.D.Z.-led Government, which is an exception.

Chapter five is chronologically (2013-4) set in another environment – the centre-left coalition came back to power in December 2011 during the recession, while Croatia signed the E.U. accession and joined the Union in July 2013. In this period, veteran associations and groups transformed into political entrepreneurs and participated in culture wars, fighting the Government over identity issues. Therefore, the first part deals with veteran discontent in the 2013-4 period over introducing bilingual signs in Vukovar to fulfil the constitutional rights of national minorities. The chapter demonstrates how ad hoc created veteran groups – the same as in the early 2000s – managed to obstruct state policies by using both the dominant war narrative and direct democracy tools – petitioning for a national referendum.

Chapter six (2014-5) deals with a period still defined by an ongoing culture war when veteran associations launched another campaign against the authorities: an 18-month-long sit-in protest in front of the Ministry for War Veterans in Zagreb. Started also because of the officials' alleged contestation of the hegemonic war narrative, the protest climaxed in May-

June 2015, only to slowly die out, corresponding with twenty years since the war's end and H.D.Z.'s return to power. The research of Croatian veterans ended in 2015, as it represents the last symbolical battle over the Homeland War narrative, restoring the status quo in the veteran movement and Croatian politics.

In the conclusion, the thesis shows how Croatian veterans, through decades, worked to construct and reinforce the homeland War's dominant narrative. It shows how Croatian veterans positioned themselves as pivotal entrepreneurs of the Homeland War memory and veto players, often blocking or triggering specific policy changes – like state cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. The conclusion re-engages with the client-patron relationship between veterans and H.D.Z. show certain ruptures and nuances, contributing to negotiating the dominant narrative at certain times. Finally, the conclusion demonstrates how veteran associations positioned themselves as one of the conservative players in Croatian society, having a lasting effect on the post-conflict period.

Chapter 1

Veterans as defenders of the Homeland (War) (1992-9)

Introduction

After the ceasefire in January 1992, Croatia, now a fully independent and recognised state, had to face the massive demobilisation of soldiers returning from the front. Veterans formed the first associations upon the ceasefire, advocating re-socialisation through participation and developing welfare to mitigate their reintegration into society. Veterans acted as an entitlement group, as laws and procedures regulating their issues were not in place. While feeling entitled to the 'creation of an independent state', veterans wish to build the state by economic recovery or by introducing or preserving specific values. They wanted to be active citizens, caring for their fellow veterans but also working on improving society, fighting against its transgressions: war profiteers, crimes in the privatisation process, and corruption. Sometimes, this meant confronting the regime and the governing H.D.Z., but mostly, it was pointed against the unnamed enemy. This was because the regime stood behind the formation of these associations (1992-3), directly or indirectly, and their further fragmentation (1994-5).

The veteran movement was again influenced by the war's end, as the Dayton and Erdut peace agreements came into effect by the end of 1995. Thus, Croatia slowly entered its post-war period without needing a massive army. The end of the war opened a new question – what should the state, economically weakened by war, dubious privatisation and transformation process, do with a massive number of demobilised soldiers? From the end of Operation Storm in August 1995 to January 31, 1996, Croatia demobilised 146,000 soldiers.[203] As the privatisation and transformation of the economy generated a loss of 20-25,000 jobs annually,

[203] *Glas Slavonije*, 6 Feb. 1996.

this issue did not spare demobilised soldiers.[204] According to state officials, in early 1996, less than half of some 100,000 soldiers demobilised after Storm were employed, while some eighty per cent lived off social welfare. Besides the lack of jobs, other veteran issues were pressing: integration into civic life, housing, pensions, disability payment, and healthcare.[205]

The nature of Croatia's regime during the 1990s veterans also dictated the direction in which the veteran movement developed itself. During the 1990s, H.D.Z. was an undisputed political force in Croatian politics, leading the government and holding the parliamentary majority. While H.D.Z. held the government, their party president Tuđman was the President of the Republic, concentrating much power in his hands. Besides symbolic power, often referred to as supremo (*vrhovnik*), Tuđman owed his power to Croatia's semi-presidential system of government, which *de facto* functioned as 'super presidential'. As President, Tuđman was naming governments while having the prerogative to dissolve them. As his H.D.Z. dominated the Parliament in the 1990s, the government and Parliament were *de facto* Tuđman's organs, implementing his politics.[206]

For years, the regime and its intellectual elite built a cult of personality around Tuđman, referring to him as the 'father of the nation', sent by God to create an independent Croatia. Besides controlling political institutions, as the 'father of the nation', Tuđman intervened in civil society, media, culture, and even sports.[207] The construction of Tuđman as the 'father of

[204] *Večernji list*, 25 Jan. 1996
[205] *Vjesnik*, 11 May 1996; *Večernji list*, 11 May 1996.
[206] Davor Boban, 'The Croatian Parliament and the transformation of the political system', in Valeska Esch (ed), *Democratization in the Western Balkans: Promoting Multi-Ethnic Open Societies to Counter Radicalization and Polarization*, (Berlin, 2016), pp 32-8, at p. 34; Ivo Goldstein, *Kontroverze hrvatske povijesti 20. stoljeća* (Zagreb, 2019), p. 247; In 1998, Prime Minister Zlatko Mateša stated how the role of the government is to implement state policies articulated by Tuđman, showing its subordination to him. See: Žižić, 'Analiza izvora moći', p. 146.
[207] Enes Kulenović and Krešimir Petković, 'The Croatian Princes: power, politics and vision (1990-2011)' in *Croatian Political Science Review*, liii (2016), no. 4, pp 105-31, at p. 118; Jović and Lamont, 'Croatia after Tudjman', pp 1613-4; Dario Brentin, ''A lofty battle for the nation': the social roles of sport in Tudjman's Croatia' in *Sport in Society*, xvi (2013), no. 8, pp 993-1008.

the nation' climaxed at a state ceremony for his 75th birthday organised in the Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb. Here, the intellectual and political elite loyal to the regime promoted Tuđman as one of the greatest Croats ever.[208]

Therefore, Tuđman's and H.D.Z.'s rule in the 1990-99 period can be described as semi-authoritarian or authoritarian, constituting a 'competitive' or 'electoral' authoritarianism with regular and free elections but characterised by electoral fraud, operating in a system of 'defective', 'simulated' democracy.[209] Therefore, the elections were regular and free but characterised by electoral fraud. Tuđman's regime would call elections after different successful military operations to maximise its monopoly on Croatian ethnic nationalism. The timing of the elections meant that the opposition had little time to prepare for elections. Gerrymandering of electoral units was blatant, made to maximise HDZ votes.[210]

In general, Tuđman showed little tolerance for political opposition, like in 1995 when he refused to accept a mayor of Zagreb from opposition ranks.[211] The opposition was limited in accessing media, as the government and H.D.Z. kept most of the press under control, transforming them into a mouthpiece of Tuđman's regime. The authorities curtailed the freedom of expression by exerting massive pressure on independent media through formal and informal practices. The justice system's independence was minimal, as the executive branch and HDZ strongly influenced the judicial branch. The privatisation and transformation process of state and public-owned companies was not transparent, as many HDZ members

[208] For more on Tuđman's cult of personality, see: Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1918-2008*, pp 768-71.
[209]Mieczysław P. Boduszyński, *Regime change in the Yugoslav successor states: divergent paths toward a new Europe* (Baltimore, 2010), pp 74-114; Ottoway, *Democracy challenged*, pp 109-130; Peskin and Boduszyński, 'International justice and domestic politics', p. 1119; Nenad Zakošek, 'Democratization, state-building and war: the case of Serbia and Croatia' in *Democratization*, xv (2008), no. 3, pp 588-610, at p. 600; Jović and Lamont, 'Croatia after Tudjman', pp 1612-3; Brentin, ''A lofty battle for the nation'', p. 994.
[210] Boduszyński, *Regime Change*, 77-78.
[211] Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1918.-2008.*, pp 757-8.

got hold of numerous factories.[212] Some scholars brand this authoritarian system of rule as Tuđmanism, with limited and suppressed political pluralism and hegemony of H.D.Z. on the ideological platform of ethnic nationalism. Tuđmanism was a combination of conservative ideology, crony capitalism and free market, rejecting the ideas of European political liberalism.[213]

Due to his illiberal politics, treatment of independent media, opposition, and ethnic minorities, Tuđman fell out of the grace of the West – the E.U. and U.S. As years passed, Tuđman became a Europhobe, as the regime started playing a seemingly paradoxical approach of vilifying the West for meddling in Croatian domestic politics and, simultaneously, showing 'a democratic face' to the West.[214]

The chapter will demonstrate how the first associations were born in 1992-3 and their quick fragmentation and leadership changes in 1994-5. Here, the chapter will analyse establishing the client-patron relationship between veterans and H.D.Z. and state how that relationship was tested as the war ended in 1995 and re-evaluated in the first veteran contentious period in 1996. Finally, the chapter will describe veterans' symbolic and political ties to Tuđman and Defence Minister Šušak, helping build the semi-authoritarian regime of the 1990s, and how their deaths in 1998-9 were crucial for directing veteran activities in the early 2000s.

[212] Milekić, 'The myth of a good king', p. 3.
[213] Slaven Ravlić, 'Eponimizacija ideološke promjene u Hrvatskoj 1989-2005.' in *Anali Hrvatskog politološkog društva*, ii (2005), no. 1, pp 105-17, at pp 111-3; From the perspective of his followers, especially H.D.Z., Tuđmanism is his political doctrine. See: Snježana Koren, 'Twentieth-century wars in history teaching and public memory of present-day Croatia' in *Studi sulla formazione*, ii (2015), pp 11-32, at p. 15; Marina Živković, 'Personalizacija politike u Republici Hrvatskoj: slučaj dr. Franje Tuđmana' in *Sarajevski žurnal za društvena pitanja*, (2014), no. 1-2, pp 145-64, at p. 156; Đurašković, 'Nation-building', pp 58-9.
[214] Jović, *Rat i mit*, pp 207-9; Boduszyński, *Regime Change*, p. 76.

1992 – the first veteran associations are born

The first group of veterans that gained more extensive attention from Croatian authorities were the disabled soldiers. Many immediately recognised disabled veterans as one of the most vulnerable groups in society. Soldiers missing limbs or fully disabled in wheelchairs drew compassion among many, as their sacrifice for national independence was evident. To alleviate their physical and mental disability and trauma, the state had to introduce different tools to integrate them into society. Therefore, besides the apparent issue of their medical treatment, disabled veterans opened the question of their full integration into society, housing, employment, and education. In July 1992, the Ministry of Defence opened a special hotline which offered disabled veterans and their families information about their rights.[215] Soon, the Ministry opened a whole department providing care for disabled soldiers, giving out one-time financial payouts. Until then, the department gave out 500 of these to disabled soldiers.[216] As disabled veterans saw President Tuđman as pivotal in Croatia's politics, they informed him of plans to organise themselves to fulfil their rights. One of the first disabled defenders who reached Tuđman was Mesud Šabanović, former assistant to the commander of the H.V.'s Agency for Information and Propaganda Activities (Služba za *informativno-propagandnu djelatnost*, I.P.D.) in Slavonski Brod, who lost his legs in an air strike near Vukovar. He met with Tuđman in December 1991 and March 1992 and informed him of plans for founding an association of disabled defenders, which he supported.[217]

Under the umbrella of the Ministry of Defence, in April 1992, a group of disabled defenders placed an ad in daily newspapers, calling disabled defenders and active soldiers and police officers to come to the founding assembly of the Alliance of Croatian Disabled of the

[215] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 26 Jul. 1992.
[216] *Večernji list*, 2 Aug. 1992.
[217] *Behar*, no. 89, 2009; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 20 Mar. 1992.

Homeland War (*Hrvatski invalidi Domovinskog rata*, H.I.D.R.).[218] Šabanović, who was the head of the initiative committee for forming H.I.D.R., took part in moderating the assembly.[219] At the event, Defence Minister Gojko Šušak conveyed President Tuđman's promise that he would do everything possible to ensure former soldiers return to their daily lives. Šušak said the state would do everything in its power – considering a large part of the state was still under occupation – to integrate disabled soldiers, who have made a 'holy sacrifice' at 'the altar of the homeland'. In their speeches at the assembly, politicians and high-ranking military officials portrayed the soldiers as the watchdogs of Croatia's independence, 'the generation chosen by God to deliver … Croatia's independence'. The sacralisation of veterans and war in speeches showed how the Homeland War myth was constructed as a secular religion early on. At the working part of the assembly, members passed the statute of the Alliance of H.I.D.R. that enabled them to complete official registration.[220] In one of its first press releases, H.V.I.D.R. criticised the government's measure of compensating veterans with a one-time financial aid for wounded or killed soldiers. Besides massive inflation lowering the actual value of such aid, H.V.I.D.R. emphasised how such aid cannot be used as an alternative to life insurance for soldiers, which was cut earlier in the same year.[221] Till the end of the year, H.V.I.D.R. formed branch offices across Croatia, where members voiced other concerns: inadequate housing policy, jobs in the Defence Ministry and insufficient health care for disabled defenders out of big cities.[222]

[218] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 25 Apr. 1992. The Alliance was quickly renamed into Croatian Military Disabled of the Homeland War (*Savez Hrvatskih vojnih invalida Domovinskog rata*, H.V.I.D.R.), the name under which it is still known today.
[219] *Behar*, no. 89, 2009.
[220] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 26 Apr. 1992; *Večernji list*, 26 Apr. 1992.
[221] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 6 July. 1992.
[222] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 3, 17, 19 Jul. 1992; *Hrvatski vojnik*, 14 Aug. 1992; *Karlovački tjednik*, 8 Oct. 1992; Other associations started to decentralise and spread their networks outside the capital as well. See: *Glas Slavonije*, 30 Jul. 1992; *Novi vjesnik*, 12 Oct. 1992.

In the coming years, H.V.I.D.R. would remain one of the most prominent and influential veteran organisations, enjoying close ties to the government and regime, often entirely financed from either the Defence Ministry or the state budget.[223] While authorities did support H.V.I.D.R.'s foundation, its leaders complained that the financial aid was scarce, late or non-existing. Disabled soldiers fought bureaucratic battles to claim their disability status, which gave them rights. H.V.I.D.R.'s leaders exposed cases of alleged corruption while complaining that mainstream media ignored the association.[224]

Besides political ties between the regime and H.V.I.D.R., state officials also led other associations. Milan Galović, another I.P.D. officer, was one of these officials who formed some of these associations. While visiting soldiers of the 101st Brigade at the front in Eastern Croatia in May 1992, Galović presented some of the experience of veterans' associations in Western Europe. He proposed the formation of a similar association on the Zagreb level as a voluntary association for members of different brigades. The Brigade welcomed the idea, and 700 members became founding members of the Association of the Homeland War Veterans (*Udruga veterana Domovinskog rata*, U.V.D.R.) from Zagreb.[225] With the support of H.V.I.D.R., U.V.D.R. Zagreb held its founding assembly in Zagreb in November 1992. Galović was named the president of the organisation. The membership was open to active and retired defenders who served at least three months. The organisation's goal was to help members of units from the Zagreb area, providing social, medical, and legal assistance in attaining rights.[226] Like in the case of H.V.I.D.R., the case of U.V.D.R. Zagreb shows how

[223] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 19 Jul. 1992.
[224] *ST: Slobodni tjednik*, 15 Aug. 1992.
[225] Ivan Brigović and Ivan Radoš, *101. brigada H.V.-a* (Zagreb, 2013), p. 376; The fact that I.P.D. was working on setting up U.V.D.R. Zagreb for a while can be observed from H.V.I.D.R.'s foundational assembly on 25 April. There, the I.P.D. officer Ozren Žunec announced the formation of U.V.D.R. Zagreb. See: *Večernji list*, 26 Apr. 1992.
[226] *Vjesnik*, 8 Nov. 1992; Brigović and Radoš, *101. brigada H.V.-a*, p. 376.

associations were ad hoc grassroots organisations and grew from direct support of the political and military establishment.

1993 – volunteers at the forefront

After disabled veterans had created an extensive network by the end of 1992, the volunteers were the following veterans' group that organised themselves. Volunteers were poorly equipped soldiers and police officers who mainly joined during the peak of the war in 1991, fighting the J.N.A., Serb rebels and Serbian paramilitaries. They felt they should be honoured for being the first to take arms and carry out the most challenging part in defending the country, without any calculation or promises, not waiting for the mobilisation call.[227]

In January 1993, volunteers gathered in Zagreb's largest concert hall and founded the Association of Croatian Volunteers of the Homeland War (*Udruga hrvatskih dragovoljaca Domovinskog rata*, U.H.D.D.R.) while voting in Zvonimir Trusić as its President.[228] U.H.D.D.R. obliged itself to improve the position of the volunteers, which included regulating the volunteer status, providing legal assistance, and promoting physical recreation among its members. The association also wanted to secure jobs for their members in state institutions, probably interior and defence ministries, and encourage the full integration of volunteers into Croatia's political and social fibre. Finally, at its founding assembly, U.H.D.D.R. emphasised its commitment to defending the country and liberating the occupied parts.[229] U.H.D.D.R. quickly spread its branch offices across Croatia.[230]

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[227] *Globus*, 8 Oct. 1993.
[228] Udruga hrvatskih branitelja-dragovoljaca Domovinskog rata, 'Povjesnica', undated, http://www.U.H.B.D.D.R..hr/povjesnica.html (7 Mar. 2020).
[229] Udruga hrvatskih dragovoljaca Domovinskog rata, 'Povijest U.H.D.D.R.', Udruga hrvatskih dragovoljaca Domovinskog rata, undated, http://www.U.H.D.D.R..hr/povijest/ (7 Mar. 2020); *Večernji list*, 7 Mar. 1993.
[230] *Vjesnik*, 7 Jun. 1993; *Novi list*, 9 Aug. 1993; *Večernji list*, 31 Oct. 1993; *Gardist*, 9 Jul. 1993.

The Association gathered around Trusić and his former commander in the reserve police battalion, Tomislav Merčep, who was named U.H.D.D.R.'s lifelong honorary president.[231] Merčep, also an advisor to the minister of interior from 1991, was by then already notorious as *de facto* commander of the unit, known as 'Merčep's men', tied to massive war crimes against Serb civilians.[232] As an H.D.Z. member, Merčep entered the Parliament's Chamber of Counties at the 1993 elections in February.[233] Trusić also had his share of controversy. During the war, he spent five months in prison under suspicion of committing crimes against Serbs and destroying Orthodox churches but was released as the authorities dropped the charges.[234]

U.H.D.D.R.'s leadership was vocal in articulating its sometimes-extreme nationalism, anti-communism and anti-Yugoslavism.[235] As their logo suggested, they presented themselves as 'the association with a clear heart' – true patriots who voluntarily risked their lives for the homeland in a time of need. According to Trusić, the Association gathered 'true Croats' who do not need to 'prove their Croatness' to anyone, unlike mainstream, corrupt political parties.[236] The unsatisfaction with the political establishment and mainstream was not exclusively connected to U.H.D.D.R. Other veteran associations, such as H.V.I.D.R., blamed the bureaucrats – occupying these positions from Yugoslav times – for being corrupt, misusing the system for their benefit at the expense of disabled veterans.[237] The feeling of

[231] *Večernji list*, 7 Mar. 1993.
[232] For crimes of which Merčep's unit was suspected, see: D.C.I. Interagency Balkan Task Force, 'Croatia: Tomislav Mercep's role in atrocities', Central Intelligence Agency, 19 Oct. 1995, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/1995-10-19A.pdf (7 Mar. 2020); Kate Ferguson, *Architectures of violence: the command structures of modern mass atrocities* (London, 2020), p. 72; In 2017, Croatian Supreme Court issued the final verdict for some of these crimes, sentencing Merčep to seven years in prison in 2017. See: Sven Milekic, 'Croatian police official's war crimes sentence increased', Balkan Insight, 13 Feb. 2017, https://balkaninsight.com/2017/02/13/croatian-police-official-war-crimes-sentence-pro-longed-02-13-2017/ (7 Mar. 2020).
[233] *Feral Tribune*, 8 Sep. 1997.
[234] *Gardist*, 9 Jul. 1993.
[235] Ibid; *ST: Slobodni tjednik*, 21 Aug. 1993; *Globus*, 8 Oct. 1993.
[236] *Gardist*, 9 Jul. 1993; *ST: Slobodni tjednik*, 21 Aug. 1993.
[237] *Karlovački tjednik*, 25 Nov. 1993.

being cheated out of ideals for which they fought was an ever-present feeling among veterans. Volunteers, seeing themselves as the ones who first opted for Croatia's independence, saw themselves as the ones who should have the first say in how the country should look. While some were disillusioned with how the post-1991 Croatian state would look, some veterans probably imagined radical realities for the post-war period. Deeply emersed in a militaristic worldview, veterans often respected only their brothers and sisters in arms, an entitlement community to which only a few politicians belonged – Tuđman and Šušak.

Although U.H.D.D.R. was supposed to gather volunteers who saw themselves as unique compared to others, the association was open to all categories of veterans, along with a broader population, like reporters and medical staff, who participated in the war. While Merčep was promoting membership open to the overall population that participated in the war in different capacities, Trusić and some branch offices emphasised that only individuals who joined Croatia's defence voluntarily by December 24, 1991, could become full members.[238] While this may result from pragmatism, as an attempt to quickly build up the membership, it seemed to balance advocating the group's entitlement and avoiding the label of a privileged and closed group in society. Veteran leaders were aware of the popular perception of S.U.B.N.O.R. from Yugoslav days – a social caste enjoying great political status. As Trusić said at the opening ceremony of the Osijek branch: 'we're not asking more than it belongs to us'. He stuck to H.V.I.D.R.'s mantra from the early days of how the Association seeks to fully integrate disabled soldiers so they would have a role in society,

[238] Ibid; *Novi list*, 9 Aug. 1993.

earning for themselves and their families.[239] Other U.H.D.D.R. founders repeated how they do not want a privileged treatment like S.U.B.N.O.R. enjoyed.[240]

Instead of one overarching organisation, like S.U.B.N.O.R., Croatian veterans formed associations in a seemingly decentralised manner. As Galović explained, although the model of a national federation of veterans was the most common in the West, due to the Yugoslav legacy, such models became odious in Croatia.[241] The fragmentation of the veteran population was also a result of the different political interests of their founders, some of whom were under the regime's control. In that aspect, U.H.D.D.R. criticised and condoned the government and President Tuđman at different times. While U.H.D.D.R. condemned Croatia's policy in exchange for P.O.W.s or the state's treatment of killed soldiers, on another occasion, they praised Tuđman's peace efforts despite being ready to 'give their lives to liberate occupied territories'.[242] Veteran associations often praised Tuđman for his policies or actions in the war while blaming institutions and bureaucrats for most of their misfortunes.[243]

1993 – an umbrella veteran association: unrealised dream

In 1993, veterans gathered in associations and started to form new ones, soon to spread across the country. On the initiative of U.V.D.R. Zagreb and Galović, with the official support of Tuđman, in July 1993, veterans founded a new organisation on a national level – the Association of Croatian Veterans of the Homeland War (*Udruga hrvatskih veterana*

[239] *Gardist*, 9 Jul. 1993; *Novi list*, 9 Aug. 1993.
[240] *Globus*, 8 Oct. 1993; *Večernji list*, 16 Mar. 1994.
[241] *Nedjeljna Dalmacija*, 4 Aug. 1995.
[242] *Večernji list*, 1 Aug, 30 Nov, 10 Dec. 1993.
[243] *Karlovački tjednik*, 25 Nov. 1993.

Domovinskog rata, U.H.V.D.R).[244] At the founding assembly in Zagreb, Galović announced that U.H.V.D.R. is an unpolitical and non-party organisation that will link the state and veterans. Delegates named retired general Martin Špegelj, a 65-year-old veteran of both W.W.II. and 1990s war, as U.H.V.D.R.'s president, while there was no counter-candidate. In his speech, Špegelj said that his role demands a person with spare time and will to use it for 'resolving many problems'.[245] Problems were numerous: unemployment of demobilised soldiers (up to fifty per cent of demobilised in Zagreb) and lack of jobs in general (a result of the transformation of the economy), war-torn families, difficult re-socialisation, psychological traumas, and physical disability.[246] Špegelj often stressed that U.H.V.D.R. would actively work on drafting the law on veterans and advocate the creation of a government office or ministry dealing solely with veteran issues.[247]

U.H.V.D.R. became the only general veteran association on a national level with flexible criteria for receiving new members.[248] The U.H.V.D.R.'s statute introduced it as the umbrella organisation, a Piedmont entity gathering other veteran associations. Therefore, U.H.V.D.R.'s central committee comprised the association's president and four vice presidents, representatives of H.V.I.D.R. and U.H.D.R., and observant representatives of the Association of Widows and Parents of Deceased Croatian Defenders.[249] By the end of 1993, U.H.V.D.R.

[244] Zaključci Osnivačkog sabora 'Udruge hrvatskih veterana Domovinskog rata', undated (1993), U.H.V.D.R., registrator Dokumenti 1992 – 1995; Izvješće o radu Središnjeg odbora Udruge hrvatskih veterana Domovinskog rata, 10 Jan. 1994, U.H.V.D.R.,registrator Dokumenti 1992 – 1995.
[245] *Vjesnik*, 1 Aug. 1993.
[246] *Večernji list*, 2 Aug. 1993; Martin Špegelj, *Sjećanja vojnika* (Zagreb, 2001), pp 288-9.
[247] *Vjesnik*, 24 Oct. 1993.
[248] *Večernji list*, 2 Aug. 1993; Špegelj, *Sjećanja vojnika*, p. 289.
[249] Zaključci Osnivačkog sabora.

incorporated twenty veteran organisations from eighteen counties, with 60,000 members.[250] By July 1994, the organisation had grown to 92,318 members.[251]

U.H.V.D.R.'s aspiration to become the umbrella association of the whole veteran movement was precisely why Tuđman publicly supported its formation. Head of Tuđman's Military Cabinet, colonel Krešimir Kašpar, advised the President to support the formation of U.H.V.D.R. as it offered possibilities for political control of veterans. He explained that once the association is financially and logistically supported, the state could align it with its policies. If U.H.V.D.R. was established as an umbrella association, Kašpar noticed, it could monitor and control all veteran associations, aligning them with state policies.[252]

The statute also envisaged that U.H.V.D.R. would be 'conveying the truth on Homeland War for Croatia's freedom' domestically and internationally.[253] In years to come, the struggle to convey the truth or its perspective of the War will become one of veteran associations' most visible activities and goals. For this reason, U.H.V.D.R. joined the World Veteran Federation (W.V.F.) and contacted veteran organisations in the U.S., Germany and Slovenia.[254] Finally, as set in the Statute, one of U.H.V.D.R.'s goals was 'maintaining the readiness of members to defend the homeland'.[255] U.H.V.D.R. promoted itself as an association supporting the state, with members ready to defend the country.[256] U.H.V.D.R.'s founders did not treat its

[250] Izvješće o radu Središnjeg odbora; By the end of 1994, U.H.V.D.R. had over 100,000 according to Špegelj. See: Špegelj, *Sjećanja vojnika*, p. 289.
[251] Zapisnik sa sastanka Središnjeg odbora U.H.V.D.R.-a, 7 Jul. 1994, U.H.V.D.R., registrator Dokumenti 1992 – 1995.
[252] Mišljenje o zamolbi Inicijativnog odbora udruge 'Hrvatski veterani Domovinskog rata', 7 Jul. 1993, Croatian State Archives (*Hrvatski državni arhiv*, H.D.A.), fond H.R.-H.D.A.-1741 Ured predsjednika R.H. Franje Tuđmana, fascikl 573.
[253] Zaključci Osnivačkog sabora.
[254] Izvješće o radu Središnjeg odbora; Špegelj, *Sjećanja vojnika*, p. 289.
[255] Zaključci Osnivačkog sabora.
[256] *Glas Slavonije*, 2 Aug. 1993; *Večernji list*, 3 Aug. 1993; At the founding assembly, Galović was named vice-president.

members as mere retired soldiers but as soldiers currently inactive and demobilised, but prepared for a new combat engagement if the war escalates again.

While they publicly promoted unity as one of the priorities for the Croatian nation, in 1993, the first differences among veteran associations appeared. Despite the initial support of U.H.D.D.R., the cooperation with U.H.V.D.R. quickly deteriorated. According to U.H.V.D.R. records, U.H.D.D.R. were weary of cooperating with them, as they feared subjugation – allegedly despite proposals for different modes of cooperation.[257] Volunteers' leaders may felt that the regime installed U.H.V.D.R. – personified in Galović and some other prominent members like general Ivo Prodan or Herman Vukušić – to serve as Piemonte of defenders' associations, an umbrella under which all defenders would be easier to control.[258] This perception of U.H.V.D.R. will remain present among many defenders' associations in years to come. Due to this perception, among the general fragmentation of Croatia's veteran movement, U.H.V.D.R. would never succeed in becoming the umbrella association.

U.H.V.D.R. quickly became active in policy advocation, as in February 1994, it passed the Declaration on the Veterans of the Homeland War. The Declaration emphasised how veterans were not 'aged, retired' but experienced soldiers ready to quickly take on the 'hardest war tasks'.[259] The goals set out by the Declaration were the liberation of the country, welfare for disabled veterans and families of killed soldiers, investigation and prosecution of war profiteers, saboteurs, deserters, war crimes (on all sides), as well as those who were

[257] Izvješće o radu Središnjeg odbora, article 2.
[258] Others, such as volunteer leader from Rijeka, Ratko Bubanj, had a similar view of U.H.V.D.R., especially under its post-Špegelj leadership, calling it a 'S.U.B.N.O.R.-like' organisation. See: Ratko Bubanj, *Za što smo se borili: mozaik sjećanja: svjedočanstvo jednog vremena 1991. – 2000.* (Rijeka, 2001), pp 264-5.
[259] Deklaracija o veteranima domovinskog rata, 12 Apr. 1994, U.H.V.D.R., registrator Dokumenti 1992 - 1995; *Večernji list*, 13 Mar. 1994.

responsible for military defeats and unnecessary war casualties.[260] The Declaration showed how veterans paid particular attention to enemies within, who either profited from the war, sabotaged war efforts or were responsible for losses of human lives. Another goal set out by the Declaration was a fair redistribution of the load of the war in society.[261] This goal mirrored the bitter feeling among veterans, especially disabled ones, that they have sacrificed the most and taken the most significant part of the weight of the war. At the same time, some other sections of society have barely felt the consequences of the conflict.[262]

The Declaration also set out some symbolical goals: telling the truth about the Homeland War, protecting the dignity of killed soldiers, and cherishing the memory of the War through art, academic, religious and memorial activities.[263] The protection and promotion of 'the truth about the Homeland War' would, in the early 2000s, morph into 'the dignity of the Homeland War', functioning as a trope in the veteran movement in the years to come. The 'truth' or 'dignity' of the war was necessary as the base from which all other rights and privileges were derived. Veterans tried to stress their perennial importance in the state-funding process by telling 'the truth' about the war. Furthermore, U.H.V.D.R. presented all of the Declaration's goals as ones of state importance, while veterans, who have already sacrificed so much, are more prepared to promote the general interest.[264]

U.H.V.D.R. accompanied the Declaration with a survey conducted among veterans, who demanded benefits as compensation for the time spent on the battlefront: positive discrimination in employment, housing, tax deductions and other financial benefits, healthcare, rehabilitation and social integration and schooling.[265] On multiple occasions,

[260] Deklaracija o veteranima; *Večernji list*, 13 Mar. 1994.
[261] Deklaracija o veteranima; *Večernji list*, 13 Mar. 1994.
[262] *Večernji list*, 1 Jun. 1994; This corresponds to conclusions on veteran disappointment with post-war benefits made by Žunec. See: Žunec, 'Apsolutna žrtva i relativna kompenzacija'.
[263] Deklaracija o veteranima.
[264] *Večernji list*, 14 May 1994.
[265] Deklaracija o veteranima.

veterans rejected the label of a socially endangered group but saw these benefits as integration tools.[266]

The Declaration was the first fully articulated demand of the veterans towards the state. By conducting surveys and including experts across fields, U.H.V.D.R. tried to constructively tackle numerous issues troubling veterans. This Declaration marks the type of rhetoric veteran associations and groups would use in the following years, combining wartime symbolism, tropes and concrete policies for improving the benefit or – at least in this example – veterans' re-integration into society.

1994-5 – splits among volunteers

In 1994, the first cracks appeared within organisations, often emerging from personal disagreements or ideological and political (party) interests within leadership. U.H.D.D.R., although quickly expanding as an organisation, was the first association to experience such divisions. Groups around the lifelong honorary president Merčep and executive president Trusić, two men of the same reserve police battalion primarily stationed in Western Slavonia, were soon pinned against each other.[267]

The split took place at U.H.D.D.R.'s annual assembly, organised in the 'Vatroslav Lisinski' concert hall in Zagreb in February 1994, where a small number of association delegates voted in Merčep instead of Trusić, who rhetorically wanted to reaffirm the association as an unpolitical organisation that should not be used for political battles. Upon his surprising victory, Merčep included high-ranking H.D.Z. members from Croatia and Bosnia and

[266] *Večernji list*, 13 Mar, 25 Oct. 1994; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 24 Oct. 1994.
[267] Bubanj recalled how soon upon U.H.D.D.R.'s foundation, the cleavage between Trusić and Merčep was becoming deeper, as the former was criticising the regime. See: Bubanj, *Za što smo se borili*, p. 266.

Herzegovina as U.H.D.D.R.'s new vice presidents.[268] Trusić would complain about irregularities and death threats because he insisted that the party remains an 'independent, non-governmental and non-party organisation'.[269] He said the whole process was a 'farce' organised by 'the worst part of H.D.Z.', with which ninety per cent of U.H.D.D.R. members disagree.[270] Volunteers from different branches, especially from the region around Split, complained about numerous irregularities that breached the statute, pointing to H.D.Z.'s role in tempering the vote. Among other things, they complained that non-members – even reporters – in a rump assembly voted Merčep in, while organisers around Merčep banned veterans from talking about the political and social situation so they would not offend state officials present.[271]

Merčep was not successful in hiding his political agenda of tying U.H.D.D.R. with H.D.Z., as he pointed to the adverse reaction to speeches of H.D.Z. representatives. Merčep did admit his H.D.Z. membership but insisted that he was never 'anyone's pawn'. Highly unconvincingly, Merčep explained that U.H.D.D.R. was a non-political but not 'apolitical' organisation and non-governmental, but also not 'anti-governmental', as they respected the government chosen by the Croatian people.[272] He accused Trusić and his followers of alleged links with high-ranking H.D.Z. members – Stjepan Mesić and Josip Manolić – that left the party in 1994. Merčep added that this was a coordinated attack to destabilise Croatia,

[268] Juraj Njavro, Minister without a portfolio, became U.H.D.D.R.'s vice-president. See: *Večernji list*, 27 Feb. 1994; Zagreb Bishop Juraj Jezerinac was present at the assembly, as it became customary for high representatives of the Catholic Church to attend such veteran meetings, attesting to the important place of religion in Croatian society and veteran movement at the time. See: *Večernji list*, 27 Feb. 1994.
[269] According to Bubanj, Trusić was also making threats with his pistol. See: Bubanj, *Za što smo se* borili, p. 319.
[270] *Novi list*, 2, 17 Mar. 1994; *Glas Podravine i Prigorja*, 26 Aug. 1994.
[271] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 2, 8, 24 Mar. 1994; *Večernji list*, 2 Mar. 1994; *Novi list*, 2, 5, 17 Mar. 1994; *Vjesnik*, 7 Mar. 1994; Bubanj, *Za što smo se borili*, p. 317-24.
[272] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 3 Mar. 1994; *Vjesnik*, 7 Mar. 1994; *Glas Slavonije*, 8 Mar. 1994; *Nedjeljna Dalmacija*, 8 Mar. 1994.

organised by leftovers of secret service from former Yugoslavia.[273] The way Merčep dismissed Trusić's claims was indicative, somewhat confirming claims that H.D.Z.'s right wing supported him.

Finally, the formal split within U.H.D.D.R. was officially formalised in July 1995, as delegates close to Branko Borković 'Young Hawk', a famous last commander of Croatian forces in Vukovar in 1991, gathered for an assembly in Zagreb. As state officials completely ignored this group of volunteers at their assembly, the guests of honour were retired officers and former veteran leaders, most of whom had been promptly retired or fallen out of the grace with the regime. At the assembly, Borković and other speakers stressed the importance of gathering real volunteers who joined the war in 1991, reaffirming their difference from Merčep's association that tried to build a massive organisation. The assembled delegates again chose Borković as their President while changing the name to the Association of Croatian Defenders-Volunteers of the Homeland War (*Udruga hrvatskih branitelja-dragovoljaca Domovinskog rata*, U.H.B.D.D.R.).[274] Under the new name and statute, the state administration officially registered the association in December 1995.[275]

In parallel with the foundation of U.H.B.D.D.R., dissatisfied Trusić announced his new volunteers' association – Independent Croatian Volunteers (*Nezavisni dragovoljci hrvatski*, N.D.H.). Trusić and a few founders of U.H.D.D.R. from 1993 explained how they founded a new organisation as two U.H.D.D.R. organisations brought confusion. He stressed how N.D.H. would be a truly independent, non-political, and non-party organisation, accepting only members that helped 'establish the Croatian state'. Trusić announced that there would be

[273] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 16 May 1994; For more on Mesić's and Manolić's confrontation with H.D.Z., see: Žižić, 'Analiza izvora moći', pp 92-8; Mate Granić, *Vanjski poslovi: iza kulisa politike* (Zagreb, 2005), pp 101-2.
[274] The only exception among military officers was Anton Tus, who was Tuđman's chief military advisor. See: *Novi list*, 2 Jul. 1995; *Večernji list*, 2 Jul. 1995; *Vjesnik*, 2 Jul. 1995.
[275] Bubanj, *Za što smo se borili*, p. 339.

no active political, state, military, police, or court officials in N.D.H.'s membership.[276] One of the most prominent features of N.D.H. was Ustaša nostalgia, visible with its acronym corresponding to the Ustaša state.[277]

Thus, the representation of volunteers was split between three associations: U.H.D.D.R., U.H.B.D.D.R. and N.D.H. While U.H.D.D.R. had the most extensive media coverage from the three organisations, their presence fell through time.[278] The other two volunteer associations were without the regime's support, with no significant ties with H.D.Z. – unlike U.H.D.D.R., U.H.V.D.R. (since 1995) or H.V.I.D.R.[279] At the same time, while U.H.B.D.D.R. decided to participate in U.H.V.D.R.'s coordination body of associations from the Homeland War, Merčep's volunteers did not.[280] Besides Trusić and Borković, others also believed how H.D.Z. created these divisions within the volunteers' movement.[281]

1995 – leadership changes in U.H.V.D.R.

While the state supported U.H.V.D.R.'s foundation in 1993, it did not financially support its work afterwards. The government often did not respond to U.H.V.D.R.'s letters or calls for meetings.[282] Additionally, the association struggled to attain monetary funds from the state.

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[276] *Večernji list*, 1 Jul. 1995; *Vjesnik*, 1 Jul. 1995.
[277] The founders of the association went out of their way so the association would have the acronym N.D.H. upon Ustaša state, as the literal translation of its name in Croatian would be 'Independent Volunteers Croatian'. If the association was indeed called the Independent Croatian Volunteers (*Nezavisni hrvatski dragovoljci*), its acronym would be N.H.D. For more on association's Ustaša nostalgia in both U.H.B.D.D.R. and N.D.H., see: *Vjesnik*, 1 Jul. 1995; *Večernji list*, 10 Feb. 1996; Bubanj, *Za što smo se borili*, p. 346; U.H.B.D.D.R., ran a magazine, founded initially in U.H.D.D.R. under Trusić's leadership, called 'Za dom', a clear reference to the Ustaša chant.
[278] Presence in the media was often a topic in U.H.B.D.D.R.'s presidency. See: Bubanj, *Za što smo se borili*, pp 328-37.
[279] Bubanj, *Za što smo se borili*, p. 264.
[280] *Večernji list*, 21 Jul. 1995.
[281] Bubanj, *Za što smo se borili*, p. 265.
[282] Central Committee concluded that the financial situation of local U.V.D.R. branches was 'very poor'. See: Zapisnik sa sastanka Središnjeg odbora U.H.V.D.R.-a.

Its local branches mainly relied on the support of local authorities – cities/towns and municipalities. The state institutions suggested that U.H.V.D.R.'s leadership link itself to the ruling party, H.D.Z., to receive state funds. At the same time, seventy per cent of all members were not members of any political parties. Consequently, with time, a part of U.H.V.D.R.'s leadership – some of which H.D.Z. members themselves – turned their backs to Špegelj, known as a *persona non grata* in the eyes of the regime.[283] Some veteran leaders testified how the Defence Ministry forbade associations to cooperate with U.H.V.D.R. because Špegelj publicly criticised the Ministry's officials. The Ministry's criticism was so severe that the U.H.V.D.R. did not even receive the funds Prime Minister Nikica Valentić promised.[284]

Rifts within the U.H.V.D.R. leadership became visible as local branches nominated candidates for the upcoming elections for association president and Central Committee members. Zagreb branch unanimously rejected Špegelj's candidacy due to 'bad management of the association, an unfulfillment of the program and instrumentalisation of the association in political purposes' and unanimously supported the nomination of active general Đuro Dečak.[285] Dečak, an H.D.Z. member, known for organising the defence in Virovitica, was by then also known for controversies regarding his wealth.[286] Špegelj and Dečak were no strangers as they originated from Virovitica and cooperated in the first secret operations of smuggling arms from Hungary in 1990.[287] The two also collaborated on executing a military

[283] Špegelj, *Sjećanja vojnika*, p. 289.
[284] *Nedjeljna Dalmacija*, 4 Aug. 1995.
[285] Ibid.
[286] *Slobodni tjednik*, 12 Mar., 2 Apr. 1994; *Feral Tribune*, 24 May 1994; *Večernji list*, 6 Aug. 1994.
[287] Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1918-2008*, p. 669; Špegelj, *Sjećanja vojnika*, p. 126-45; Marcus Tanner, *Croatia – A nation forged in war* (New Haven & London, 2001), pp 238-9; Večernji.hr, 'Đuro Dečak', Večernji list, 1 Dec. 2016, https://www.vecernji.hr/enciklopedija/duro-decak-18550 (1 Apr. 2020); Saša Paparella, 'Špijun, Hrvat i oficir J.N.A.: Za Zagreb smeće, za Beograd heroj', Express, undated, https://express.24sata.hr/top-news/spijun-hrvat-i-oficir-jna-za-zagreb-smece-za-beograd-heroj-20433 (1 Apr. 2020).

operation in Western Slavonia in 1991 and had a dispute over that operation in the media in 1993.[288]

In a heated atmosphere, at U.H.V.D.R.'s assembly in Bjelovar in February 1995, delegates criticised Špegelj's work and the lack of success of the Central Committee in talks with state bodies. With such resentment among delegates, Dečak overwhelmingly won the presidential spot.[289] Špegelj later claimed that Dečak's victory was organised by H.D.Z., with persons close to the regime – Galović and Vukušić – turning against him and supporting Dečak. As the association grew to 100,000 members, H.D.Z. wanted to put a loyal person as its president so it could more easily keep them under control. According to Špegelj, agents of the Ministry of Defence's Security and Intelligence Service (*Sigurnosno-informativna služba Ministarstva obrane,* S.I.S.) applied pressure on delegates and presidents of local U.V.D.R. branches to secure Dečak's victory. As a result, some high-ranking U.H.V.D.R. members resigned before the assembly, while other representatives asked to be relieved from their duty as a delegate. Špegelj claims that the money started to flow in from the Government after the victory – something that did not occur under his presidency.[290] The change caused additional friction in the veteran movement, as other prominent veteran leaders were also unsatisfied with Špegelj's removal.[291] Some veteran leaders saw U.H.V.D.R. as becoming H.D.Z.'s version of S.U.B.N.O.R., keeping veterans in line with party and state politics.[292]

Dečak claimed that Špegelj was politicising his role, unwilling to separate politics from the military, a leftover from Yugoslav times. He also rejected claims that his victory was an

[288] *Slobodni tjednik,* 12 Mar., 2 Apr. 1994; *Feral Tribune,* 24 May 1994; *Večernji list,* 6 Aug. 1994.
[289] *Vjesnik,* 12-13 Feb. 1995; *Večernji list,* 13 Feb. 1995.
[290] Špegelj, *Sjećanja vojnika,* p. 290-91; The media claimed that U.H.V.D.R. received massive financial support from the state immediately upon Dečak's victory. See: *Nedjeljna Dalmacija,* 4 Aug. 1995.
[291] *Novi list,* 13, 31 Mar. 1995.
[292] Bubanj, *Za što smo se borili*, p. 265; *Nedjeljna Dalmacija*, 4 Aug. 1995.

attempt to put the association under H.D.Z.'s control.[293] While Špegelj's accusations may be far-fetched, it is a fact that Dečak represented a person loyal to the regime, one of the founders of H.D.Z. in Virovitica, who ran for M.P. on their list.[294] Even on the assembly on which he was elected President, he acted as the special envoy for President Tuđman at U.H.V.D.R.'s assembly.[295] As an active officer and H.D.Z. member, his accusations against Špegelj were hypocritical. On the other hand, Špegelj was a dissident who criticised H.D.Z. and the regime. In 1994, he gave a public support to H.D.Z.'s renegades, Manolić and Mesić, who left the party and formed the Croatian Independent Democrats (*Hrvatski nezavisni demokrati*, H.N.D.). With them, Špegelj shared criticism of Croatia's involvement in the war in Bosnia and criticism of Tuđman's style of rule.[296]

As H.D.Z.'s regime was known for the lack of tolerance for any opposition, especially as the war still lasted – like the mentioned Tuđman's refusal to confirm an opposition-led government in Zagreb – and concerning the initial President's support of U.H.V.D.R. – an attempt to control the veterans – it made sense that the regime, known for its semi-authoritarianism, interfered into elections in the association.[297] Additionally, it is possible that U.H.V.D.R.'s leadership around Špegelj saw the pragmatic advantage of putting a high-ranking H.D.Z. official at the head to tighten the links to the regime and gain access to much-needed state funding. Thus, in March, the association's delegation headed by Dečak met with

[293] *Nedjeljna Dalmacija*, 21 Apr. 1995., *Panorama*, 26 Apr. 1995.
[294] In 1995 elections Dečak again entered Parliament's Chamber of Representatives as an H.D.Z. candidate. See: *Večernji list*, 31 Oct. 1995.
[295] *Vjesnik*, 12-13 Feb. 1995; *Večernji list*, 13 Feb. 1995.
[296] Špegelj criticised Tuđman for negotiating with Bosnian Serbs on dividing Bosnia and Herzegovina and turning against the former allies, Bosniaks. Additionally, he was asking for responsibility of officials that ordered opening of prison camps for Bosniaks in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which he saw as a war crime. In this criticism, Špegelj jorpilained H.D.Z. dissidents that soon left the party, led by Stjepan Mesić and Josip Manolić, who soon left the party. See: *Feral Tribune*, 11 Apr. 1994; Špegelj, Sjećanje vojnika, pp 275-80.
[297] For example, after local elections in Zagreb in 1995, Tuđman refused to name the candidate of the united opposition Mayor of Zagreb, despite the overwhelming majority in the city assembly. See: Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1918 – 2008*, pp 757-8; Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1990. – 2020.*, pp 206, 219; Granić, *Vanjski poslovi*, pp 137-9.

Prime Minister Nikica Valentić, something Špegelj never succeeded. At the meeting, Valentić and Dečak agreed on joint working groups to draft the new legislation and secure funds for defenders. Finally, only now, Tuđman became U.H.V.D.R.'s honorary life-long president, like he was in H.V.I.D.R.[298]

1996 – the rise of disabled veterans

In 1996, as wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia ended, Croatia started to feel the consequences that took a toll on the state's limited financial resources. While promising a broad palette of privileges and benefits to veterans publicly, behind the scenes, some government officials were pondering how to secure the funds to finance the growing welfare system. The officials within the government and H.D.Z., including Prime Minister Mateša, Vice Prime Minister Borislav Škegro, Economy Minister Davor Štern and a few other officials, were widely referred to as techno(cratic)-managers due to their technocratic style of government. This group of former managers of major companies from socialist Yugoslavia focused on economic reforms and the privatisation of state companies. This group feared massive social welfare would prevent economic development and enlarge Croatia's foreign debt.[299]

On the other side of the H.D.Z. and government was the nationalist hardliner stream, headed by Šušak, which had numerous links to associations, seeing veterans as a massive electoral body.[300] Retired general and Committee for War Veterans President Janko Bobetko supported

[298] *Večernji list*, 28 Mar. 1995.
[299] Domagoj Mihaljević, 'Povijest H.D.Z.-a i stvaranja političko-ideološke hegemonije', Maz.hr, 19 Nov. 2018, http://www.maz.hr/2018/11/19/povijest-H.D.Z.-stvaranja-politicko-ideoloske-hegemonije/ (14 Oct. 2020).
[300] Ibid; Boris Raseta, 'Veterans threatening the government', AIM, 22 May 2000, http://www.aimpress.ch/dyn/trae/archive/data/200005/00522-007-trae-zag.htm (14 Oct. 2020); Boris Pavelić, 'H.D.Z.-ovi dragovoljci puča', Novi list, 1 Nov. 2014,

Šušak's stream. Bobetko's Committee pressured the Government to quickly revise existing laws regulating veteran welfare and allot more funds for it in 1996.[301] In H.D.Z., disputes between fractions existed almost from the beginning. At the same time, Tuđman claimed to have taken a central, 'Tuđmanist' position, as the party had an ambition of functioning as a 'supra-ideological' party.[302] Due to the semi-presidential system at the time, Tuđman – somewhat closer to hardliners and Šušak – had the last say, trying to keep H.D.Z. and the Government together.[303] Thus, according to Mateša, the role of the Government was to implement state policies articulated by Tuđman, which showed the level of its subordination to the President's wishes.[304] The divide between running the country and choosing priorities between two streams – with Tuđman somewhere in the middle – would soon become visible.

At the same time, things changed in H.V.I.D.R.'s leadership, as on 30 November 1995, association members voted in a new president, Marinko Liović.[305] Despite Šušak's endorsement, Mladen Jurković, H.D.Z. M.P. was removed due to allegations of massive embezzlement and downgraded to vice president.[306] Both Jurković and Liović were close to

https://www.novilist.hr/Vijesti/Hrvatska/H.D.Z.-ovi-dragovoljci-puca/?meta_refresh=true (14 Oct. 2020); *Jutarnji list*, 4 May 2000; *Feral Tribune*, 15 Feb. 1999; I. Ćimić, 'Što je uopće H.V.I.D.R.A i zašto ju se pita za sve?', Index, 8 Oct. 2019, https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/sto-je-uopce-hvidra-i-zasto-ju-se-pita-za-sve/2122049.aspx (14 Oct. 2020); Šimičević, 'Kruženje Hvidre'; Fisher, 'Contentious politics in Croatia', pp 78-9.

[301] Zapisnik 2. sjednice Odbora za ratne veterane, održane 9. siječnja 1996. godine, 9 Jan. 1996, H.S., fond Hrvatski sabor, podfond Hrvatski sabor, 3. saziv (1995-2000), serija Odbor za ratne veterane, podserija Sjednice, podpodserija 2. sjednica, podpodserija Zapisnik; Unnamed (Speech of Janko Bobetko after the session of the Committee for War Veterans on 9 January 1996), 19 Jan. 1996, H.S., fond Hrvatski sabor, podfond Hrvatski sabor, 3. saziv (1995-2000), serija Odbor za ratne veterane, podserija Sjednice, podpodserija 2. sjednica, podpodserija Materijal sjednice; Zapisnik 5. sjednice Odbora za ratne veterane, održane 29. veljače 1996. godine, 29 Feb. 1996, H.S., fond Hrvatski sabor, podfond Hrvatski sabor, 3. saziv (1995-2000), serija Odbor za ratne veterane, podserija Sjednice, podpodserija 5. sjednica, podpodserija Zapisnik.

[302] Žižić, 'Analiza izvora moći', pp 84-98; The conflict between the technocratic and Šušak's circle started in 1992-3. See: Granić, *Vanjski poslovi*, pp 55-6, 62-3, 145-6, 163-5.

[303] Granić, *Vanjski poslovi*, pp 77-8.

[304] Žižić, 'Analiza izvora moći', p. 146.

[305] *Večernji list*, 9 Dec. 1995.

[306] *Feral Tribune*, 11 Dec. 1995; Already in 1995, Jurković was suspected of embezzlement of humanitarian aid and misuse of association's company – H.V.I.D.R. Centar. In 1999, the media put Jurković in connection with giving management rights over seventeen per cent of company Tisak's –

Šušak and his stream in H.D.Z.[307] Although he seemed like a person of continuity initially, Liović soon expressed his readiness to use protests to press authorities into submission.[308]

Thus, at the press conference after H.V.I.D.R.'s convention in May 1996, Liović expressed H.V.I.D.R.'s dissatisfaction with budget cuts at the expense of disabled veterans, which threatened to bring them closer to the edge. They demanded a new single law regulating veteran rights, along with subvention of rents, better implementation of healthcare measures, defining the status of veterans by avoiding all divisions between active and reserve forces (which meant differences in pensions), jobs and a moratorium on selling property in the ownership of the Defence Ministry. Also, their demands included the abolition of veterans for all criminal acts and a law on associations, which would categorise H.V.I.D.R. and other associations of war victims as organisations enjoying the state's special care. H.V.I.D.R. gave the government until 15 September to respond to their list of demands. If not, according to Liović, associations of disabled veterans and other victim associations could stage a protest or even unite into a political party.[309] H.V.I.D.R. also demanded a revision of the current disability status of all veterans, claiming that some of these fake ones are members of the association.[310] H.V.I.D.R. leaders claimed that disabled veterans were mistreated and humiliated by different state officials and bureaucrats, complicating their lives.[311]

Once again, the fact that the war ended worked in veterans' favour. Although the financial situation did not improve during wartime, most politicians and media were powerless when

shares given to H.V.I.D.R. by the state – to Miroslav Kutle, the 1990s entrepreneur and influential H.D.Z. member. See: *H.V.I.D.R.A: Glasilo Saveza H.V.I.D.R.a*, Jun. 1996; *Nacional*, 27 Jan. 1999; *Feral Tribune*, 15 Feb. 1999.

[307] *Feral Tribune*, 15 Feb. 1999; *Jutarnji list*, 4 May 2000.

[308] *Zora: hrvatski tjednik*, 11 Jan. 1996.

[309] *Večernji list*, 21 May 1996; *H.V.I.D.R.A: Glasilo Saveza H.V.I.D.R.-a*, Jun. 1996; Konvencija Saveza H.V.I.D.R.-a, Baško Polje, 17-20. svibnja, 1996., 17 Jun. 1996, H.D.A., fond H.R.-H.D.A.-1741 Ured predsjednika R.H. Franje Tuđmana, file 1266.

[310] *Nedjeljna Dalmacija*, 13 Sep. 1996.

[311] *H.V.I.D.R.A: Glasilo Saveza H.V.I.D.R.-a*, Jun. 1996; Jul/Aug. 1996.

confronted by the demands of disabled veterans. While one could argue about the merits of going to the front and returning to civilian lives, their physical contribution to 'building a country' was self-evident. Their disability was their advantage in advocating change. The strong entitlement claim gave disabled veterans a high moral ground where critics could not touch them. The regime that put so much energy into emphasising the war merits became a victim of its own discursively outlined patriotism.

In this period, Croatian veterans pushed the discourse of their uniqueness, as they were veterans of a defensive war and thus had a higher moral ground than some of their counterparts in the West, coming out of different post-colonial conflicts in Africa and Asia.[312] H.V.I.D.R. did not want only benefits; it demanded symbolic capital upon which they could build a system of privileges. It demanded amendment of the preamble of the Constitution to define the war and veterans and discursively outline the enemies of the state – war profiteers and deserters.[313] Therefore, such demands showed how veteran advocacy of material benefits can be a basis for other ideas. Such demands represented the beginning of a long process of transforming the war into a value, upgrading their prestige.

On the other hand, the government did not want associations to 'wield' such a powerful symbol as the Homeland War. Since the emergence of the first associations, the state wished to avoid direct political involvement of veterans to set the pace for their welfare. H.D.Z. saw veterans as their loyal electoral body, which would vote for the party if it fulfilled their needs. Their independent political mobilisation would be a nuisance or even a risk. It was an even

[312] *Zora: hrvatski tjednik*, 11 Jan. 1996; *Večernji list*, 11 May 1996; *Glas Slavonije*, 1 Aug. 1996; In certain occasions, this notion of moral uniqueness backfired, as Croatian officials claimed that Croatian veterans could not suffer from the P.T.S.D. because of their patriotic sentiments and fighting morale. See: *Globus*, 17 Sep. 1999; *Večernji list*, 6 Nov. 1999; In 1999-2000, veteran associations used the same anti-colonial discourse to resist the prosecution of Croatian officers at the I.C.T.Y., calling for establishing tribunals that would persecute Americans for Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Vietnam, or French for Algeria. See: *Ruža hrvatska: novine hrvatskih branitelja i članova njihovih obitelji*, Sep. 1999; *Večernji list*, 7 Mar. 2000; *Jutarnji list*, 8, 10 Mar. 2000.
[313] *Večernji list*, 21 May, 8 Jun. 1996; Slobodna Dalmacija, 8 Sep. 1996.

bigger problem for the techno-managers, who were not directly involved in organising the country's defence. These officials did not possess the symbolic capital of Tuđman and Šušak, whom most associations saw as wartime leaders. Veterans often did not see Šušak as a member of the Government. In the case of any shortcomings of the Defence Ministry, H.V.I.D.R. blamed the Government, as it did not give enough money to Šušak. Unlike other officials, H.V.I.D.R. leaders communicated with Šušak directly, complaining about the Government, bureaucracy, and implementation of laws while explaining the reasons for their protest.[314] Finally, H.V.I.D.R. leaders praised him, making him one of the speakers at the upcoming protest against other officials in the executive power.

Šušak supported H.V.I.D.R.'s protest by claiming its goal was raising awareness for disabled veteran issues.[315] This scepticism towards other politicians was transparent in Liović's statement that disabled veterans 'don't have enough support from a part of Croatian authorities'.[316] He singled out those who reacted to their cry for help. Besides Tuđman and Šušak, the politicians whom he mentioned are the ones that either belonged to the right-wing clique – like Mintas-Hodak – or were close to Tuđman – like Vice Prime Minister for Humanitarian Affairs Ivica Kostović and H.D.Z. vice president and M.P. Jadranka Kosor.[317] Thus, Šušak, Mintas-Hodak, Kostović and Kosor were called to the extraordinary

[314] Unnamed (Correspondence from the Alliance of H.V.I.D.R. to Defence Minister Gojko Šušak), 23 Jul. 1996, Central Military Archives of the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Croatia (*Središnji vojni arhiv Ministarstva obrane Republike Hrvatske*, S.V.A.M.O.R.H.), fond Ministarstvo obrane Republike Hrvatske, Uprava za skrb 1996, registrator 11/1, spis br. 11; Unnamed (Correspondence from the President of the Alliance of H.V.I.D.R. Marinko Liović to Defence Minister Gojko Šušak), 6 Sep. 1996, S.V.A.M.O.R.H., fond Ministarstvo obrane Republike Hrvatske, Uprava za skrb 1997, registrator 13/1, spis br. 9.
[315] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 10 Sep. 1996.
[316] Ibid.
[317] Ibid; *Obzor*, 9 Sep. 1996; Regardless of different fractions, Tuđman had a line of 'president's people' those who publicly expressed their loyalty to Tuđman. See: Kasapović, 'Demokratska konsolidacija', p. 22.

H.V.I.D.R.'s Central Committee meeting in July 1996 to discuss the pressing issues that triggered the call for the protest.[318]

However, even Tuđman and Šušak were not completely untouchable within H.V.I.D.R., where the dissatisfaction over the treatment of disabled veterans grew. In their report on the Convention, H.V.I.D.R. noted that even Tuđman and Šušak avoided them for months before the event.[319] In the days before the protest, Perković, President of H.V.I.D.R.'s Central Committee, stated how disabled defenders 'did not need President Tuđman … in 1991' as much as they did not need him in 1996. Although Perković later denied saying this, it was evident that the situation was spiralling out of control.[320] H.V.I.D.R.'s bulletin even mocked the President by running a cartoon caricature of Tuđman, showing him as greedy and unsympathetic to the needs of citizens.[321] Such a portrayal of Tuđman was uncommon in Croatian media at the time, except in just a few anti-establishment magazines, like *Feral Tribune*. These acts showed how even the most loyal associations had grievances with the regime that could not control them fully. At the same time, populism, with its disgust for political elites, took root among dissatisfied veterans.

U.H.V.D.R. supported H.V.I.D.R.'s cause by stating that veterans fought together in trenches during the war and would come again to fight 'against the growing and ineffective bureaucracy'.[322] U.H.V.D.R.'s President Dečak explained how some veterans were dissatisfied with mid-level officials who implemented government policies even at their

[318] Poziv na 1. izvanrednu sjednicu Središnjeg odbora Saveza H.V.I.D.R.-a, 19 Jul. 1996, S.V.A.M.O.R.H., fond Ministarstvo obrane Republike Hrvatske, Uprava za skrb 1996, registrator 10, spis br. 3.
[319] Konvencija Saveza H.V.I.D.R.-a.
[320] *Večernji list*, 14 Sep. 1996.
[321] *H.V.I.D.R.A: Glasilo Saveza H.V.I.D.R.-a*, Jul/Aug. 1996.
[322] Pismo podrške zahtjevima hrvatskih vojnih invalida i ostalih stradalnika Domovinskog rata, 20 May 1996, U.H.V.D.R., registrator Nerazvrstano; U.H.D.D.R. President Merčep also supported H.V.I.D.R.'s demands. See: *Glas Slavonije*, 11 Sep. 1996.

assembly at Plitvice.[323] In other words, he also pointed his finger at the bureaucracy, a shared faceless enemy of the veterans.

Although Yugoslavia and its successor states did have a powerful bureaucracy on all levels, this was a populist trope pursued in times of financial and social hardships. In the late 1980s, Slobodan Milošević – then leader of Serbian Communists – used the bottom-up initiatives, known as the anti-bureaucratic revolution, to consolidate his power and crush potential opposition in Serbia.[324] In the 1990s, Tuđman used the bureaucracy as a scapegoat from an anti-communist and anti-Yugoslav position. He claimed that the bureaucracy was staffed by cadres from Yugoslav times, with 'elements that were against Croatian national democratic interests' even before the independence and blocking the state from fully developing itself.[325]

Tuđman's anti-bureaucratic rhetoric formulated in anti-communist and anti-Yugoslav language went well together with the political views of mainstream associations, always uneasy with Croatia's internal enemies. Some prominent H.V.I.D.R. leaders, like the President of Zagreb County H.V.I.D.R. branch, Ante Pandžić, suggested that some bureaucrats should not even have Croatian citizenship.[326] This notion of everything from Yugoslav times as inherently anti-Croatian was present in H.V.I.D.R.'s state administration and media critique.[327] Additionally, by accusing the phantom bureaucracy loyal to Yugoslavia, H.V.I.D.R. did not have to criticise the Croatian state directly.

[323] *Nedjeljna Dalmacija*, 24 May 1996.
[324] For more on Milošević's antibureaucratic revolution, see: Nebojša Vladisavljević, *Serbia's Antibureaucratic Revolution: Milošević, the Fall of Communism and Nationalist Mobilization* (2008, New York).
[325] *Glas H.D.Z.*, 8 Oct. 1993; *Večernji list*, 11 Aug. 1992; 28 Dec. 1994.
[326] *H.V.I.D.R.A: Glasilo Saveza H.V.I.D.R.-a*, Jun. 1996.
[327] *H.V.I.D.R.A: Glasilo Saveza H.V.I.D.R.-a*, Jul/Aug. 1996

Following the trope of inefficient and corrupt bureaucracy, veteran associations articulated their anger as the battle against it.[328] In their view, this bureaucracy was dismissive of their suffering during and after the conflict. According to associations, the bureaucracy used administrative instruments to cut veteran benefits and break and bend existing laws while helping non-fighters obtain certain benefits. Veterans saw this bureaucracy within the executive branch, often not specifying where exactly.[329] For H.V.I.D.R. officials, the executive branch did not implement the laws passed by the legislative.[330] The only institution H.V.I.D.R. especially condoned for its treatment of disabled defenders was the Defence Ministry.[331]

At the same time, veteran associations tried to gain support from the general population by voicing some of the pressing issues in Croatia's bleak post-war reality. One of the major concerns was the 1990s fraudulent transformation and privatisation process of the once public-owned property. Many factories and businesses went under, laying off thousands of people, while a tiny elite, close to or part of the regime, thrived. As the transformation and privatisation process went parallel with wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, some veteran leaders, like H.V.I.D.R.'s vice-president Tomislav Madi, thought that the state should not have privatised companies before soldiers returned to work from the front. The national liberation and end of socialism did not bring a better future promised by leaders and imagined by many. N.D.H. President Trusić sent a letter to Tuđman, Šušak and the public, saying that the property of the most prominent Croatian tycoons tied to H.D.Z. – including former Prime Minister Valentić – who made a fortune during privatisation and transformation, should be

[328] H.V.I.D.R. complained to Tuđman about the bureaucracy back in 1994. See: *Večernji list*, 28 Dec. 1994.
[329] *Večernji list*, 26 Jul, 22 Aug, 6 Sep. 1996; *Nedjeljna Dalmacija,* 23 Aug., 13 Sep. 1996.
[330] Zapisnik sa sjednice Središnjeg odbora održane 12. rujna 1996. u Zagrebu, 12 Sep. 1996, U.H.V.D.R., registrator Središnji odbor, p. 4.
[331] *H.V.I.D.R.A: Glasilo Saveza H.V.I.D.R.-a,* Jun. 1996.

confiscated and used to cover veteran welfare costs. He even provoked Tuđman directly by stating that volunteers 'won't allow their children to be wageworkers' of the President's grandson, businessman Dejan Košutić.[332]

Although veterans framed their discourse solely to gain popular support, diverting attention to shared problems, they corresponded to overall veteran movement dissatisfaction. Realising that social and economic reality does not conform to pre-war fantasies of a better life, veterans asked themselves, 'is this what we fought for?' or 'haven't we fought for this country?'.[333] Thus, as the protest drew closer, H.V.I.D.R. officials started to insist that the state revise the privatisation process – a radical and unfeasible idea.[334] H.V.I.D.R.'s rhetoric became more radical as its leaders realised officials ignored them. Until that point, H.V.I.D.R. had seemed like an exclusively regime-aligned association, while their rhetoric was quickly becoming anti-system – especially pointed against members of the techno-managerial clique.

In early July, Pandžić said they were prepared to save the country from itself by rising against all those who wished to marginalise Croatia; in the same way, they rose in 1991 against those who did not want Croatia at all. Marijo Filipi, a prominent H.V.I.D.R. leader, expressed his dissatisfaction over promises the state did not keep, reminding H.D.Z. that it is in power thanks to them. Liović went even further, claiming that the state controls the media, hypocritically claiming to care about veterans by giving false promises that sparked false hope among them.[335]

[332] *Nacional*, 20 Sep. 1996; Priopćenje naciji u povodu prosvjeda H.V.I.D.R.-e ispred Hrvatskog sabora 15. rujna, 10 Sep. 1996, S.V.A.M.O.R.H., fond Ministarstvo obrane Republike Hrvatske, Uprava za skrb 1996, registrator 11/1, spis br. 9.
[333] *Nedjeljna Dalmacija*, 23 Aug, 13 Sep. 1996; *Globus*, 13 Sep. 1996.
[334] *Večernji list*, 6 Sep. 1996; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 8 Sep. 1996; *Globus*, 13 Sep. 1996.
[335] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 5 Jul. 1996.

Besides issues related to veteran welfare, H.V.I.D.R. also pushed for demands that worked against the feeble reconciliatory practices of the state at the time. Thus, H.V.I.D.R. protested the General Amnesty Act, according to which the state pardoned Serbs involved in the armed rebellion. At the same time, Liović again requested full amnesty for all veterans.[336] The condemnation of the General Amnesty Act as something protecting Serbian war criminals is a veteran and right-wing trope that would survive for decades and surface in situations when Croatian soldiers were tried for war crimes. This is why it goes hand in hand with demands for amnesty for Croatian soldiers.

Despite high-ranking H.D.Z. officials announcing amendments to the Law on Defenders in August, H.V.I.D.R. did not want to abandon the idea of a protest, as the threat gave them leverage and secured them full media attention. Therefore, Liović confirmed that the planned protest would occur on 15 September.[337] H.V.I.D.R.'s leadership hid behind its numerous members and claimed it had an obligation toward its members, who supported the idea of the protest.[338]

H.V.I.D.R. pointed its finger towards the state, claiming that protest activities are a veteran response for depriving them of their fully deserved rights. Disabled veterans claimed that their entitlement spurs from the fact that they 'put their body and life at the altar of the homeland'. They saw themselves 'largely marginalised, neglected, humiliated and offended', with numerous fake disabled veterans unrightfully enjoying their rights. However, H.V.I.D.R. did not want to stand alone against the Government, and it called all veterans and victims of war and state officials and Church representatives to join them.[339] H.V.I.D.R. leaders wanted popular mass support to pressure the authorities for the interests of disabled veterans.

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[336] Ibid.
[337] *H.V.I.D.R.A: Glasilo Saveza H.V.I.D.R.-a*, Jul/Aug. 1996.
[338] Ibid.
[339] *Večernji list*, 26 Jul. 1996; *Obzor*, 9 Sep. 1996; *Nedjeljna Dalmacija*, 13 Sep. 1996.

Additionally, the idea transformed veterans from – as they portrayed themselves – apolitical ex-soldiers into a political force formulating policies. They started presenting themselves as political opposition, the opposition with entitlement gained during the War. Therefore, H.V.I.D.R. leaders stressed that politics are no longer reserved for politicians and government and that their role in building the country gives them legitimacy to shape its politics.[340]

However, despite opposing the regime – or at least the techno-managers – veterans did not see themselves as anti-statist. As veterans viewed the state as their *raison d'etre*, they never framed their actions as pointed against the state. They often emphasised how the state and ordinary citizens have nothing to fear, trying to tackle media speculations of their potential use of violence. As the regime had not faced a significant veteran protest before, mainstream media speculated about the event turning violent in front of the central state institutions, like parliament and government. H.V.I.D.R. also battled media speculations that they were Šušak's puppets in doing his bidding against his opponents in the government and H.D.Z. – the techno-managers. Thus, H.V.I.D.R. assured the media and politicians that protesters did not plan to use violence, nor did they plan to overthrow the regime in what was said to be Šušak's attempt to topple Mateša's government.[341] They pointed their criticism against nameless and faceless elites, whom they saw as robbing them and their families of a decent life by laying them off from work or stealing money from once-public companies. Sometimes, these – usually non-identified individuals – were former Communists or remnants of Yugoslav elites.[342] At the same time, although it avoided mentioning specific names in their statements, H.V.I.D.R. strongly implied that the media could read out whom they saw as culprits for their ill-treatment.[343]

[340] *H.V.I.D.R.A: Glasilo Saveza H.V.I.D.R.-a,* Jul/Aug. 1996.
[341] *Globus*, 13 Sep. 1996.
[342] *Novi list*, 14 Sep. 1996.
[343] *Globus*, 13 Sep. 1996.

At first, the Government seemed paralysed in trying to find the solution to the issue, probably avoiding tackling challenging social problems in a time of imminent budget cuts, as they could potentially bring bad publicity from different audiences.[344] Therefore, in late August, Tuđman got involved, issuing a formation of the Coordination for Help in Resolving Issues of Disabled of the Homeland War (*Koordinacija za pomoć u rješavanju pitanja invalida Domovinskog rata*). The Coordination was made up of H.VI.D.R.'s leaders and representatives of the Parliament, Government, President's Office, and several different state institutions, working on finding solutions for the problems of disabled veterans.[345] Despite this and the Government's decision to send the law into parliamentary procedure on 5 September, H.V.I.D.R. persisted in its idea of organising a protest. By now, the wheels among more radical members were in motion and backing up from the protest would have been seen as a sign of the leadership's weakness or corruption. However, although other associations supported H.V.I.D.R.'s demands, they were reluctant to support the protest. Other associations did not see disabled veterans as an especially disenfranchised group, but rather, it was the others. U.H.V.D.R.'s internal committee, comprised of association representatives and legal experts, analysed the existing proposal for the Law and concluded that it focused too much on the disabled and too little on the general category of veterans.[346]

[344] 3. izviješće o problemima H.V.I.D.R.-e, 13 Sep. 1996, H.D.A, fond H.R.-H.D.A.-1741 Ured predsjednika R.H. Franje Tuđmana, fascikl 1254.
[345] 3. izviješće o problemima H.V.I.D.R.-e; - Problemi Saveza H.V.I.D.R.-e, - Prosvjed sazva za 15. rujna 1996, - Izvješće o dosad poduzetom, 4 Sep. 1996, H.D.A., fond H.R.-H.D.A.-1741 Ured predsjednika R.H. Franje Tuđmana, fascikl 1254; Priopćenje, 26 Aug. 1996, H.D.A., fond H.R.-H.D.A.-1741 Ured predsjednika R.H. Franje Tuđmana, fascikl 1254; Priopćenje, 27 Aug. 1996, H.D.A., fond H.R.-H.D.A.-1741 Ured predsjednika R.H. Franje Tuđmana, fascikl 1254; Priopćenje, 3 Sep. 1996, H.D.A., fond H.R.-H.D.A.-1741 Ured predsjednika R.H. Franje Tuđmana, fascikl 1254; Priopćenje, 10 Sep. 1996, H.D.A., fond H.R.-H.D.A.-1741 Ured predsjednika R.H. Franje Tuđmana, fascikl 1254; Priopćenje, 12. Sep. 1996, H.D.A., fond H.R.-H.D.A.-1741 Ured predsjednika R.H. Franje Tuđmana, fascikl 1254.
[346] Zaključci sa sjednice Povjerenstva održane dana 09. srpnja 1996. godine na temu Prijedloga Zakona o hrvatskim braniteljima, 9 Jul. 1996, U.H.V.D.R., registrator Nerazvrstano.

Another reason was that some associations, such as U.H.V.D.R., traditionally tried to pacify veterans, insisting on institutional advocacy. Therefore, a session of U.H.V.D.R.'s Central Committee and other veteran and war victims' leaders occurred just three days before the announced protest. Most participants expressed their general support for H.V.I.D.R.'s cause but spoke strongly against the protest, believing that such an approach is against the state and against what they fought for. Others claimed the left – with the help of human rights activists – is using this protest to topple the government, provoke snap elections or even trigger violence on the protest that could jeopardise Croatia's entrance into the Council of Europe.[347] As a part of the European disapproval of Tuđman's rule in the second part of the 1990s, although applying for admission to the Council of Europe in 1992, Croatia still awaited the membership in 1996. Firstly, Croatia's accession was put on hold due to Croatia's role in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1993 and 1994, while in 1995, crimes and treatment of the Serb population during operations Flash and Storm again postponed the decision on Croatia's membership. Additional reasons were the state's discriminatory practices against Serb returnees, the lack of respect for minority rights, the state's control of the public media and libel suits against independent media outlets.[348] Thus, as discussions on when Croatia would officially join the Council of Europe were still present in September 1996, some in veteran

[347] Zapisnik sa sjednice Središnjeg odbora održane 12. rujna, pp 9, 11-2.

[348] Although it was announced in April, Croatia officially joined the Council of Europe in November 1996 after it promised to fulfil a list of twenty-one demands from the field of human and minority rights. Due to the lack of respect for human rights, the following year the E.U. blocked Croatia's request to start membership negotiations. For more on the whole process of Croatia's attempt to politically integrate into European associations, see: Ana Bojinović Fenko, Soeren Keil and Zlatko Šabič, 'Europeans from the start? Slovenia and Croatia between state-building, national identity and the European Union' in *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, xvii (2023), no. 2, pp 136-55; Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1918.-2008.*, p. 813; Maple Razsa and Nicole Lindstrom, 'Balkan is beautiful: Balkanism in the political discourse of Tudman's Croatia' in *East European Politics and Societies,* xviii (2004), no. 4, pp 628-50, at p. 629; Antonija Petričušić, 'Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities in the Republic of Croatia' in *European Yearbook of Minority Issues*, ii (2002-3), pp 607-29.

circles thought potential violent escalation would strengthen accusations of the state suppressing human and civil rights.[349]

Again, veteran associations could not blindly support a protest against the state they saw as the product of their war effort and sacrifices. At the same time, potential foreign backlash would hurt Croatia's national interests. Additionally, veteran associations reproduced a belligerent opposition to protests that characterised Tuđman's regime. Considering all the objections raised at the meeting, the Central Committee unanimously decided that U.H.V.D.R. would not participate in the protest.[350] Therefore, once more, they were divided despite promoting unity as one of the highest values.

There was possibly a combination of reasons why U.H.V.D.R. and other associations did not support H.V.I.D.R.'s protest. Some did not want to protest the state and H.D.Z.'s government, as associations like U.H.V.D.R. always tried to pacify the veteran population and promote institutional advocacy, avoiding street activism. Some of the associations' representatives were possibly intimidated by a representative of the Defence Ministry and Parliament Vice-Chair Kosor at the session of U.H.V.D.R.'s Central Committee. As most organisations' financing came from the state budget, association representatives did not wish to 'bite the hand that feeds them'. Ultimately, the regime may have enticed some, like U.H.V.D.R., to alleviate the resistance within veteran ranks.

As the protest date drew closer, H.V.I.D.R.'s protest appropriation became increasingly transparent. H.V.I.D.R.'s leaders tried to institutionalise the protest by cooperating with authorities and institutions. Thus, on 12 September, probably under the critique of other associations, Liović referred to the protest as 'an institutional gathering of warning', blaming

[349] *Večernji list*, 6, 12 Sep. 1996.
[350] Zapisnik sa sjednice Središnjeg odbora održane 12. rujna, pp 8-10, 12.

the executive branch for not implementing existing laws.[351] Liović understood how his ground for manoeuvre was limited as more and more voices condemned the protest. To guarantee that it has no intention of the violent toppling of the government, H.V.I.D.R. organised a press conference with high representatives of the regular and military police. The event became a highly regulated exclusive gathering of H.V.I.D.R. members – with a few hundred members of other veteran associations – with special accreditation and state-funded buses. At the same time, the public was banned from joining in.[352] In this way, H.V.I.D.R.'s protest lost all characteristics of a protest. At this point, Tuđman's advisor, Slobodan Lang, involved in the work of the Coordination, said that there was much more benefit in allowing a peaceful protest than banning it altogether.[353]

To further defuse the protest atmosphere and avoid potential violent breaking up or political misuse of the event, Lang advised Tuđman to come to H.V.I.D.R.'s assembly a day before the announced protest. According to Lang, disabled veterans looked up to Tuđman and followed him during the war, so the President could use this opportunity to strengthen these ties in building a welfare state.[354] At the assembly, Tuđman stressed that although veterans could be unsatisfied with how much the state did for them, he warned that they should not help 'opponents of Croatia's democratic government'. Tuđman assured the gathered H.V.I.D.R. members that the state would resolve their problems and that the government would report to him directly on implementing the new law. He again pointed the finger at nameless and faceless bureaucrats who work against the democratic and independent Croatia, against state policies.[355] Not perceived as a politician or civilian in veterans' eyes, Tuđman vouched that he would monitor the government's policies, which veterans did not trust. Upon

[351] *Nedjeljna Dalmacija*, 13 Sep. 1996.
[352] *Večernji list*, 14 Sep. 1996.
[353] - Problemi Saveza H.V.I.D.R.-e.
[354] Ibid.
[355] *Vjesnik*, 15 Sep. 1996; *Večernji list*, 15 Sep. 1996, *Glas Slavonije*, 16 Sep. 1996.

Tuđman's visit, Liović stated that H.V.I.D.R. did not have any demands but wanted to raise awareness that the state did not implement laws, although he did not entirely abandon the idea of associations' political engagement.[356]

Tuđman's and the state's intervention pacified the protest, where members of H.V.I.D.R. and a few other associations were sole participants, wholly isolated from the public. Their protest transformed into an event supporting the government's implementation of laws. Speaking at the gathering, H.V.I.D.R.'s Vice-President Damir Varaždinec stressed the government's initial inertia as one of the triggers for the protest. He again demanded names of those responsible for embezzlement in the privatisation and transformation process and asked for legal definitions of veterans, profiteers, and deserters. Besides H.V.I.D.R. leaders, Interior Minister Ivan Jarnjak and Šušak were the main speakers at the event, vouching to fulfil Tuđman's wishes. While Prime Minister Mateša and Parliament Chair Vlatko Pavletić did not show up – probably fearing a bad reception – Šušak was the star of the protest. He said that upon taking power in 1990, H.D.Z. vouched that there would be no revanchism towards old officials and bureaucrats but that there would be 'purges'. Šušak added that the protest was proof that the pace of these purges was dissatisfying – again pointing a finger towards the unnamed and faceless bureaucrats working against veterans.[357]

In the end, H.V.I.D.R.'s protest became an assembly of primarily disabled veterans who supported the state's policies on veterans' issues. Although media speculations on the right-wing clique's attempted *coup* were somewhat overdramatic, the protest allowed Šušak and other politicians to build their public personas further while directing criticism towards the government personified in Mateša and other techno-managers. The narrative of Šušak as the only one thinking of veterans was constructed for days before the protest, contributing to his

[356] *Vjesnik*, 15 Sep. 1996.
[357] *Večernji list*, 16 Sep. 1996.

warm welcome by protesters.[358] Disabled veterans and their issues did become visible in public but at the price of being linked to exclusive associations – such as H.V.I.D.R. – and political links to politicians like Šušak. Disabled veterans became the backbone of Šušak's support for 'purging' state institutions and replacing the purged with people loyal to him.[359]

The roles of Šušak as the main speaker and Tuđman's position as the mediator worked perfectly into the agenda of defying the technocratic clique within the government and H.D.Z. The protest helped Tuđman and Šušak once again reassert themselves as the most prominent political figures, backed by veterans with strong symbolic capital. In that aspect, the protest directly served a political purpose in the power struggle between the Government and H.D.Z. Veteran physical trauma was weaponised in pursuing new benefits, accompanied by some non-democratic elements (advocating impunity for war crimes committed by Croatian forces) and promotion of a specific political agenda. Some veteran leaders, like Trusić, were perplexed by the whole point of the protest by claiming that the politicians were more prominent speakers than veterans. He said the protest was a support rally for specific fractions in H.D.Z.[360] Opposition politician Dobroslav Paraga shared a similar view, claiming that the 'H.D.Z.-isation' of H.V.I.D.R. was at hand.[361]

With their protest activities, disabled veterans alienated themselves from other non-disabled veterans. Although non-disabled veterans did not encounter problems concerning their physical disability, they still faced economic and social marginalisation problems: lack of jobs, no economic prospects, and problematic integration into peacetime society. According to research by U.H.V.D.R., forty-six per cent of veterans lived in economically challenging

[358] *Nacional*, 20 Sep. 1996.
[359] Šušak later disputed the critics of his speech, by claiming that the government will purge the bureaucracy of incompetent and unprofessional cadres. See: *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 9 Oct. 1996.
[360] *Nacional*, 20 Sep. 1996.
[361] *Feral Tribune*, 23 Sep. 1996.

conditions, and fifteen per cent had no income. At the same time, half of them stated they had economically regressed compared to the pre-war period. Additionally, twenty-six per cent said they have problems integrating back into society, forty-five per cent claimed that society did not ease their integration, while thirty-one per cent recorded bad physical health.[362]

The campaign further alienated veterans from the public, personified even in how the protest was organised – open only to H.V.I.D.R. members, bused in at the state's expense. It was the beginning of viewing the veterans as a particular status group in society who can solve some of its issues by pressuring private links to the state. While Croatian society tried to escape the war that dominated life for more than four years, veteran activities again brought back the rhetoric and divisions. At the same time, some of the disabled veteran complaints were authentic and not a product of a political agenda. There were real issues with welfare for disabled veterans, some of whom were in a difficult position, having a hard time fitting in the post-war society, with limited job prospects and access to medical services.

1996 – U.H.V.D.R. takes the torch of veteran dissatisfaction

As talks over H.V.I.D.R.'s protest and drafting of the new Law on Defenders dominated the late summer of 1996, other associations saw this as an excellent opportunity to push forward their agenda. Thus, in September, U.H.V.D.R. announced the launch of a petition to amend the draft Law on Defenders. Calling upon examples from complementary veteran legislation worldwide, U.H.V.D.R. cautiously framed its petition as 'a collective veterans' plea', issued by those who 'with unseen bravery, stopped the advance of the immensely stronger enemy and then fully liberated the country'. By appealing to the public's sympathies, U.H.V.D.R. asked that their good deeds be replied to in the same way, by caring for all veterans, not just

[362] *Večernji list*, 25 Sep. 1996.

disabled ones. Claiming to have been forgotten by the state, U.H.V.D.R. said they had to use democratic tools to advocate their rights, once again tiptoeing, so the regime did not label their activities as anti-state.[363]

U.H.V.D.R. leaders showed veterans as losers of the transition, like the ones that 'were good enough when they fought' but forgotten afterwards. The leadership stressed how veterans, because they fought on the front, were left out when opportunities opened for some to resolve their socio-economic position or climb the social ladder. Thus, veterans did not open private companies, buy stocks of recently privatised companies, buy out apartments to which they had tenants' rights in socialism or even keep their jobs.[364] U.H.V.D.R. emphasised that the state only took care of ten per cent of the veterans' population, the disabled ones.[365] However, as it did not want to cause rifts with H.V.I.D.R. – or political cliques supporting it – U.H.V.D.R. claimed that the state owes the same rights to all veterans and additional ones for disabled ones. Other associations, such as U.H.B.D.D.R., shared U.H.V.D.R.'s view, claiming that the new law lacks provisions regarding non-disabled veterans.[366] However, neither U.H.V.D.R. nor U.H.B.D.D.R. wanted to transform veterans into a group dependent on welfare but wanted to elevate this population to the rest of society.[367]

U.H.V.D.R. distributed the ballots for signing the petition to members through branch offices nationwide.[368] Although announced as a petition open to members, the instructions on ballots

[363] U.H.V.D.R. announced a possibility of organising a fully public petition if authorities ignore this plea. If the government would ignore that as well, U.H.V.D.R. would be 'forced to search support' from the World Veteran Federation. See: Zašto organiziramo potpisivanje peticije?, 24 Sep. 1996, U.H.V.D.R., registrator Nerazvrstano.
[364] *Novi list*, 2 Oct. 1996.
[365] Ibid; At the time, out of the estimated 350,000 veterans, some 30,000 were disabled, including those with a lower disability status. See: *Globus*, 18 Oct. 1996.
[366] *Globus*, 18 Oct. 1996.
[367] Ibid.
[368] *Novi list*, 2 Oct. 1996; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 1 Oct. 1996; *Vjesnik*, 1 Oct. 1996; *Večernji list*, 6, 8 Oct. 1996; Zaključci sa 14. sjednice Središnjeg odbora U.H.V.D.R.-a RH od 8. listopada 1996, 15 Oct. 1996, U.H.V.D.R., registrator Središnji odbor, pp 2-3.

instructed the person receiving it to pass it along to family members and friends. These filled-out ballots sometimes contained short narratives about U.H.V.D.R. members' economic and social hardships in life.[369] Along with the petition, U.H.V.D.R. listed fifteen fundamental demands it could not back down. These included the right to stocks in privatised companies, monthly veteran supplements, special unemployment fees, free education, free healthcare, free school textbooks for veteran children, special healthcare centres, and affordable housing loans.[370]

In fifteen days of October, U.H.V.D.R. managed to gather 89,864 signatures of support for its initiative.[371] Attempting to gain further media visibility, U.H.V.D.R. presented the collected signatures and their demands at a public ceremony in the Vatroslav Lisinski concert hall in Zagreb. At the ceremony, completely drawn into Tuđman's narrative of Croats' 1000-year-dream of an independent country, U.H.V.D.R.'s President Dečak spoke about veterans who had stood against 'the hordes from the east', who wanted to 'burn, destroy and kill everything that is Croatian'. According to him, as victors, veterans were entitled to special state care for which they had waited long enough, disappointed with the draft law that did not resolve their fifteen fundamental demands.[372] Again was the war memory, emphasising the heroism of veterans and using emotionally loaded language to advocate material benefits.

However, a part of Dečak's speech went against Tuđman's narrative of Croats who came together and fought the aggressor. Dečak furiously rejected these 'politicians' empty phrases' that the whole nation took part in the 'defence of the Homeland'. For him, it was not that the entire nation was both the victim and victor. He made it clear that there were heroes and those

[369] Peticija za podršku izmjenama i dopunama Zakona o pravima hrvatskih branitelja, undated (1996), U.H.V.D.R., Registrator nerazvrstano.
[370] *Novi list*, 2 Oct. 1996.
[371] Ukupan broj potpisa peticiji U.H.V.D.R.-a, undated (1996), U.H.V.D.R., Registrator nerazvrstano.
[372] Dvorana 'Vatroslav Lisinski' – proglašenje rezultata peticije, pp 1-3.

who were not, and U.H.V.D.R. would not allow anyone to turn veterans, the winners in the war, into 'moral losers in peacetime'. Justifying the demand for stocks in privatised companies, Dečak stressed that others were buying factories while they were at the front. UHDVR wanted jobs in the public sector to bypass harsh treatment from bureaucrats, those 'deserters and war profiteers' who provoked veterans by belittling their wartime merits. According to Dečak, those officials would quickly turn their backs on Croatia.[373] Bobetko, an adamant supporter of the veteran cause, present at the ceremony, saw this initiative 'as a warning and humane appeal' to those 'we brought to power'. Supporting U.H.V.D.R.'s demands, he vowed not to turn veterans to the mercy of bureaucrats.[374]

The whole presentation of the petition revealed known tropes about veteran sacrifice in the war, their 'creation' of the state, illegal enrichment of profiteers, and anti-veteran bureaucracy. Like H.V.I.D.R. leaders just a month earlier, these reflected the veterans' popular images of contemporary post-war Croatia. The supposed harsh reality veterans encountered after returning from the front, where some suffered, while others, usually labelled as 'profiteers' or 'deserters', had climbed the social ladder. While the media referred to this as 'the Vietnam syndrome', Croatian veterans called it the 'Croatian syndrome'.[375] For veterans, the Croatian syndrome came from deprivation fuelled by the realisation that those who 'didn't create or defend Croatia' are now the winners of the transition. The 'profiteers' and 'deserters' were the new class of entrepreneurs or tycoons who privatised – and often liquidated – factories and companies that were once state or publicly-owned due to political clientelism. While veterans were on the front, others made their riches by illegally or unfairly privatising companies that generations of Croatian workers made. Besides tycoons, veterans

[373] Ibid, pp 1-5.
[374] *Večernji list*, 27 Oct. 1996; *Vjesnik*, 27 Oct. 1996.
[375] Veteran associations and leaders often rejected the term 'Vietnam syndrom', as they saw a major difference in their role in a defensive war. See: *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 26 Oct. 1996.

recognised ‘profiteers’ and ‘deserters’ in the ranks of the state bureaucracy as they enjoyed job security. At the same time, their qualifications were not a primary criterion for their employment but rather their political connections. Simply put, many veterans felt disenfranchised by the state they, in their view, created. They could not believe that the state was pushing them towards the margins of society.[376]

U.H.V.D.R. rode the wave of veteran exclusivity feelings, according to which their role in the war is unparalleled with other social categories. As they were the ones who defended the country, they felt that they were not the same as the rest of the population. This feeling would become a veteran mantra in the decades to come. Although U.H.V.D.R. tried to balance an emotional and pragmatic engagement, some of its leaders and branches supported a radical view of their war merits and position in society. One of the less moderate U.H.V.D.R.’s views was Dečak’s, countering Tuđman’s vision of the War as a ‘Croatian nation’s struggle’. Dečak thought that only veterans and war victims were winners and victims of the war.

Upon publicly presenting the petition results, U.H.V.D.R. sent its initiative to Tuđman, Mateša and Pavletić.[377] Mateša and Pavletić met with U.H.V.D.R. representatives, assuring them that the state would care for veterans. Dečak and Pavletić agreed that there are ‘no two sides’, but they are trying to find a solution together.[378] However, U.H.V.D.R. was dissatisfied with how the initiative was presented to the public as an anti-state action. According to U.H.V.D.R., even Tuđman was a victim of such misinformation, due to which association representatives wanted to meet him in person to clarify its demands.[379]

The portrayal of Tuđman as a leader whom his advisors disinformed was widespread. Veterans and many others presented Tuđman as a ‘wise ruler’ who is misled by people close

[376] *Vjesnik*, 1 Nov. 1996.
[377] *Vjesnik*, 1 Nov. 1996.
[378] *Večernji list*, 9 Nov. 1996; *Vjesnik*, 9 Nov. 1996.
[379] Ibid.

to him, taking advantage of his old age and illness, which became publicly known by late 1996.[380] This interpretation ascribed everything wrong with the Croatian state to other officials, usually unnamed and faceless advisors, politicians, and bureaucrats. Veterans could not believe that Tuđman was to be blamed for Croatia's shortcomings, as he promised them a country where they would flourish. Veterans saw Tuđman as a fair, wise, and flawless ruler, taken advantage of by his associates and other politicians. Simply put, veterans saw Tuđman as their supreme wartime commander, not as a politician. After all, despite no such specification in the Constitution and laws, he was often referred to as *vrhovnik* (best translated as supremo or supreme commander) and referred to himself as the head of state.[381]

The joint pressure of H.V.I.D.R., U.H.V.D.R., and other associations resulted in the Government's acceptance of most of their possible amendments to the Law.[382] The amended Law gave many more rights to families of disabled and killed soldiers and police officers; unemployed soldiers received unemployment supplements and could apply for loans; reserve policemen from the war were defined as volunteers.[383] According to the new Law, the spending for veterans and their families took some ten per cent of the 1997 state budget.[384] The law was voted on 13 December 1996 and came into power on 1 January 1997.[385]

[380] Express, *Kako su na Pantovčaku tajili Tuđmanovu bolest*, Express, undated, https://express.24sata.hr/top-news/kako-su-na-pantovcaku-tajili-tudmanovu-bolest-23900 (22 Jun. 2021); *Feral Tribune*, 18 Nov. 1996; Milekić, 'The myth of a good king'.
[381] Goldstein, *Kontroverze hrvatske povijesti*, p. 247.
[382] *Večernji list*, 29 Nov. 1996; *Vjesnik*, 29 Nov. 1996.
[383] *Večernji list*, 11 Dec. 1996, 27 Jan. 1997.
[384] Zapisnik 13. sjednice održane 5. prosinca 1996, 5 Dec. 1996, H.S., fond Hrvatski sabor, podfond Hrvatski sabor, 3. saziv (1995-2000), serija Odbor za ratne veterane, podserija Sjednice, podpodserija 13. sjednica, podpodserija Zapisnik, p. 2.
[385] Ružica Terze, Pero Kovačević, Katica Hrkač-Tkalčec, Marinko Liović, *Komentar Zakona o pravima hrvatskih branitelja iz Domovinskog rata i članova njihovih obitelji* (Zagreb, 1997), p. 99.

1997-9 – veteran criticism of the regime surfacing

Very quickly upon coming into force in 1997, the Law on Defenders was once again the main reason for veteran dissatisfaction due to the flaws that became obvious to mainstream associations.[386] Thus, U.H.V.D.R. claimed it favours disabled veterans, while the non-disabled ones are not enjoying any rights. As H.V.I.D.R. was at the head of a protest wave in 1996, the lawmakers focused on that demographic in drafting the new law.

Dissatisfaction in the veteran association became diffused, searching for enemies and scapegoats in different places. Thus, veterans complained about the implementation of the law, again pointing the finger at the nameless bureaucracy, blocking veterans from fulfilling their rights. Along with tycoons and war profiteers, bureaucracy was the enemy of the new-born country, those 'Yugo-sympathisers' and 'Communists' that 'never wanted an independent Croatia'.[387] Besides the bureaucracy, H.V.I.D.R. continued their rhetorical battle against its 'fifth column' – fake disabled veterans.[388] The association wanted to identify these fake disabled veterans among its ranks, who, helped by individuals in state institutions, took advantage of the system. H.V.I.D.R. leaders accused fake disabled veterans of taking symbolic credit and state funds, leaving the state without money to compensate the real disabled veterans.[389]

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[386] In reviewing the Law's implementation in the second half of 1998, M.P.s and veteran representatives expressed dissatisfaction on how the Law was implemented. See: Izvješće s rasprave o Izvješću o provedbi Zakona o pravima hrvatskih branitelja iz Domovinskog rata i članova njihovih obitelji za razdoblje srpanj – prosinac 1998. godine s Izvješćem o provedbi Programa stambenog zbrinjavanja stradalnika Domovinskog rata za razdoblje siječanj 1997. – prosinac 1998. godine, 14 Jun. 1999, H.D.A., fond H.R.-H.D.A.-2017. 3 Hrvatski sabor, Županijski dom, kutija 157.
[387] *Globus*, 2 Jan. 1998; *Jutarnji list*, 10 Jun. 1999; *Novi list*, 25 Sep. 1999.
[388] *Vjesnik*, 31 Jan. 1998, 14 Mar. 1999; *Večernji list*, 22, 28 Mar. 1998; At a later point, H.V.I.D.R. President Liović would claim that he never spoke of 'fake' disabled veterans. See: *Jutarnji list*, 10 Jun. 1999.
[389] *Globus*, 2 Jan. 1998.

The mainstream associations saw all these as the betrayal of the 'values of the Homeland War', which worked into 'is this what we fought for' or 'this isn't the country I fought for' tropes that would remain dominant among veterans for years.[390] Although this trope was born in wartime and later amplified in the veteran campaign leading to the 1996 protest, it became commonplace in the 1997-99 period.[391] In this period, many associations started to question the country's direction. Veteran leaders were angry over the parliamentary system and M.P.s, who 'only quarrel' while receiving hefty salaries from the state budget. While veterans created the country during the War, the politicians were now squandering it while thinking only of their interests.[392] According to veterans, those who invested nothing were now enjoying the fruits of their work. Such a perception gave birth to the 'won in war, lost in peace' trope, according to which veterans were winners in the war while losers in peace.[393]

Many veteran associations considered the state's concessions to the Serb community – special legal protection as a national minority – as one of these peacetime losses. One of the most significant issues was the return of Serb refugees and returnees to areas once part of the R.S.K. and the reconstruction of their destroyed houses and infrastructure. Although Croatian authorities largely obstructed their return, veteran associations and leaders viewed these minor concessions as provocations.[394] Some veteran leaders, like Mile Dedaković 'Hawk', served as the regime's puppets, voicing their disagreement over the massive return of Serbs.

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[390] Ibid.
[391] Izvješće predsjednika Vijeća U.H.V.D.R.-a Drugom izvještajnom saboru U.H.V.D.R.-a, 10 Jan. 1998, U.H.V.D.R., registrator Izvještajni sabori, p. 5.
[392] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 8 Mar. 1998; Milekić, 'The myth of a good king', p. 5; Proglas, 1 Jun. 1998, H.D.A., fond H.R.-H.D.A.-1741 Ured predsjednika R.H. Franje Tuđmana, fascikl 1709.
[393] This trope is not uncommon among veterans throughout history, and especially not Croatia's region. Newman shows how Serbian World War I veterans sometimes claimed that what they fought for and won during the war – national liberation and unity of the South Slavs – was squandered during the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. See: Newman, *Yugoslavia in the shadow of war*.
[394] Human Rights Watch, Croatia: a decade of disappointment: continuing obstacles to the reintegration of Serb returnees, 5 Sep. 2006, D1807, https://www.refworld.org/docid/4517cceb4.html (accessed 9 November 2021); Ivana Djuric, 'The post-war repatriation of Serb minority internally displaced persons and refugees in Croatia – between discrimination and political settlement' in *Europe-Asia Studies* lxii, no. 10 (2010), pp 1639-60.

For Dedaković, the return of a significant number of Serbs was impossible, and they could choose to stay, sell their property to the state or go live somewhere else in Croatia.[395] Local veteran associations echoed the regime's claims that their return was endangering Croatia's stability and peace by targeting Serb returnees.[396]

Some local veteran leaders claimed they were now persecuted on account of returning Serbs, unfairly accused of discrimination and intimidation.[397] Moreover, according to some associations –Serbs were discriminating, intimidating or even physically attacking Croats, some of whom were veterans themselves.[398] Veteran leaders complained that Serbs were free to wander around, unrightfully protected, with impunity for crimes committed.[399] In veterans' eyes, the state focused on fulfilling the rights of the Serbs instead of them, the winners of the war.[400] Sometimes, this lack of tolerance was not only a result of the war but rather a grounded ethnic nationalism. Thus, there was no place for Serbs or other ethnic communities in Croatia for some veteran leaders, as they 'created' a country only for Croats.[401] On some occasions, associations complained about certain officials who mistreated them, who happened to be Serb. Veteran leaders claimed that they protested criminals, not Serbs.[402] Although veterans targeted individuals with such complaints, sometimes it turned into an attempt to bar Serbs from assuming office in Croatian institutions.[403] Nevertheless, the

[395] *Novi list*, 26 Apr. 1996; *Obzor*, 14 Jun. 1997.
[396] Untitled (Correspondence from H.V.I.D.R. Lipik President Mario Novoselac, Association of Defenders of the Municipality of Lipik President Vinko Dolić, U.H.D.D.R. Zagreb President Zvonimir Bišćan to Croatian President Franjo Tuđman), 9 Apr. 1998, H.D.A., fond H.R.-H.D.A.-1741 Ured predsjednika R.H. Franje Tuđmana, fascikl 1709.
[397] *Novi list*, 12 Oct. 1997; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 20 Mar. 1999.
[398] Untitled (Correspondence from U.H.B.D.D.R.'s Central Committee President Petar Marković and U.H.B.D.D.R.'s President Branko Borković to Croatian President Franjo Tuđman), 31 Dec. 1996, H.D.A., fond H.R.-H.D.A.-1741 Ured predsjednika R.H. Franje Tuđmana, fascikl 1501; *Glas Slavonije*, 14 Apr. 1999.
[399] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 22 Aug. 1997, 20 Mar. 1999.
[400] *Nacional*, 14 Jun. 1996; *Večernji list*, 7 Sep. 1999.
[401] *Feral Tribune*, 15 Feb. 1999.
[402] *Večernji list*, 2 Jul. 1997; *Glas Slavonije*, 7 Jul. 1997.
[403] Zamolba za prijem, dostavlja se, 30 Mar. 1999, H.D.A., fond H.R.-H.D.A.-1741 Ured predsjednika R.H. Franje Tuđmana, fascikl 1930.

growing anti-Serb sentiment led to veteran threats of resolving these problems with brute force.[404]

All these veteran expressions of dissatisfaction were often just poorly disguised expressions of chauvinism. The anti-Serb rhetoric would become one of the relatively present markers among veteran associations in decades to come. They collectively viewed Serbs as 'enemies', 'war criminals', 'aggressors' or 'Chetniks'.[405] In their rhetoric, veterans saw the Serb minority as a collectively guilty community that needed to apologise to Croat victims of the war.[406]

However, the anti-Serb sentiment in veteran associations was not only a consequence of their wartime experience against the ethnic other or their gravitation towards the right wing. This direct or indirect rhetoric was emblematic of the regime in the late 1990s. In this period, Tuđman was notorious for his anti-Serb remarks in the context of Croats' victory in the war. Despite Croatia's obligations according to international law, most of these comments focused on limiting the return of Serb returnees.[407] In this sense, veteran anti-Serb rhetoric served a purpose for the ethno-nationalist regime. By criticising concessions made towards the Serb community as a sign that the regime is awarding losers and 'aggressors', veteran associations directly voiced the regime's position. While state officials feared foreign criticism for anti-Serb rhetoric, veteran associations were mostly inward-looking, not caring about their image abroad. In the end, such chauvinist rhetoric served the regime's purpose, as it could still show itself loyal to the goals of the nationalist cause. At the same time, it gave concessions to the Serb community, a price for improving the already tarnished state image abroad.

[404] *Glas Slavonije*, 14 Apr. 1999; *Večernji list*, 28 Apr. 1999.
[405] *Glas Slavonije*, 25 Oct. 1998, *Novi list*, 4 Nov. 1998.
[406] *Novi list*, 12 Feb. 1999.
[407] *Novi list*, 15 Dec. 1998; *Jutarnji list*, 17 Oct. 1999.

The criticism of the regime was also limited as mainstream associations depended on state funds and personal ties with officials. Some of these associations tried to sit in two seats simultaneously, criticising the regime while supporting it. While condemning the Government, politicians, and bureaucracy, H.V.I.D.R. handed special awards to different officials while naming Minister Šušak its honorary president.[408] For them, despite all the problems with the current government, the potential opposition's electoral victory in the future would be a step backwards.[409] Thus, H.V.I.D.R. would claim to be apolitical while announcing that it would instruct its members to vote for those 'who helped the foundation of a sovereign Croatian state'.[410] As H.D.Z. had branded itself as a 'state-forming party', such a call was clear for H.V.I.D.R. membership. In private exchanges, H.V.I.D.R. and other associations openly supported H.D.Z. in the elections, praising state policies and often advocating for putting their members on the party's candidates' lists.[411]

Some veteran leaders, like Liović, justified their political alignment as mere pragmatism aimed at helping disabled veterans.[412] Additionally, as elections drew closer, associations and

[408] *Večernji list*, 31 Jan. 1998, 28 May, 4 Nov. 1999.
[409] *Nedjeljna Dalmacija*, 27 Mar. 1998.
[410] *Večernji list*, 4 Nov. 1999.
[411] Unnamed (Correspondence from the President of U.H.V.D.R. Split-Dalmatia County Tonći Turić to Croatian President Franjo Tuđman), 11 Feb. 1997, H.D.A., fond H.R.-H.D.A.-1741 Ured predsjednika R.H. Franje Tuđmana, fascikl 1501; Unnamed (Correspondence from the President of U.H.D.D.R. Dubrovnik-Neretva County Ivan Gabelica to Croatian President Franjo Tuđman), 19 Feb. 1997, H.D.A., fond H.R.-H.D.A.-1741 Ured predsjednika R.H. Franje Tuđmana, fascikl 1501; Unnamed (Correspondence from the President of the Central Committee of the Alliance of H.V.I.D.R. Ivica Perković to Croatian President Franjo Tuđman), 11 Apr. 1997, H.D.A., fond H.R.-H.D.A.-1741 Ured predsjednika R.H. Franje Tuđmana, fascikl 1501; Unnamed (Correspondence from the President of the Central Committee of the Alliance of H.V.I.D.R. Ivica Perković to Croatian President Franjo Tuđman), 20 Jan. 1997, S.V.A.M.O.R.H., fond Ministarstvo obrane Republike Hrvatske, Uprava za skrb 1997, registrator 13/1, spis br. 6; Unnamed (Correspondence from H.V.I.D.R. Croatian Republic Herzeg-Bosnia, Posavina County to Defence Minister Gojko Šušak), 6 Mar. 1997, S.V.A.M.O.R.H., fond Ministarstvo obrane Republike Hrvatske, Uprava za skrb 1996, registrator 11/1, spis br. 1; Unnamed (Correspondence from H.V.I.D.R. Trogir and U.H.D.D.R. Trogir to Defence Minister Gojko Šušak), 24 Feb. 1997, S.V.A.M.O.R.H., fond Ministarstvo obrane Republike Hrvatske, Uprava za skrb 1996, registrator 11/1, spis br. 2; Unnamed (Correspondence from H.V.I.D.R. Sinj to Defence Minister Gojko Šušak, President's Advisor Ivić Pašalić), 19 Feb. 1997, S.V.A.M.O.R.H., fond Ministarstvo obrane Republike Hrvatske, Uprava za skrb 1996, registrator 11/1, spis br. 3.
[412] *Novi list*, 8 Feb. 1999; *Vjesnik*, 14 Mar. 1999.

their leaders seemed somehow involved in H.D.Z.'s power struggle in the late 1990s. The associations supported individuals and fractions within H.D.Z., which they saw ideologically and institutionally close while condemning others, blaming them for all of the regime's transgressions.[413]

Finally, despite criticism of the government and H.D.Z., upcoming parliamentary elections – initially planned for later 1999 – opened many potential issues for associations as they could not predict how the new system would treat veterans. By 1999, some veteran associations realised that cuts in the welfare system were inevitable due to Croatia's financial constraints.[414] Despite being aware of pressing welfare cuts, H.D.Z. avoided amending the Law throughout 1999 to pursue veteran votes in the elections. Later, the media revealed that by 1999, Tuđman was aware that cuts were needed. Even more so, on a meeting with his close associates in May 1999, Tuđman expressed his dissatisfaction over the massive funds allocated to veterans, inflated by 'fake defenders', which had constrained the state budget. However, Tuđman and his associates decided not to cut the veteran welfare, fearing backlash ahead of upcoming elections with uncertain outcomes.[415] Tuđman and H.D.Z. opted not to confront veterans in the election year, primarily because veteran leaders threatened to shift their political support elsewhere and initiate a new wave of public distress.[416]

In the last months in power in 1999, the Government could not entirely avoid veteran dissatisfaction over the state funds allocated to veterans. The Coordination of Associations from the Homeland War demanded the Government's resignation to reject proposed Law amendments, pushed ahead by a group of M.P.s. A group of M.P.s – including some H.D.Z. members – advocated an amended Law on Defenders drafted by the Coordination. The

[413] *Globus*, 2 Jan. 1998; *Jutarnji list*, 27 Sep. 1999; *Večernji list*, 4 Nov. 1999.
[414] *Večernji list*, 7 Jun. 1999.
[415] *Nacional*, 17 May 2000.
[416] *Jutarnji list*, 10 Jun. 1999.

proposal offered changes demanding additional funds in an already stretched state budget. Fearing additional financial constraints, the Government rejected the proposal as an opposition's election campaign pamphlet, calling the M.P.s 'destroyers of the Croatian state and enemies of defenders'.[417] The Government knew that the funding needed to implement the current law was unrealistic and did not want to burden the state budget with such 'megalomanic' demands.[418] While admitting that the Law requires amendment, Government officials avoided a straight answer on how and when it would change it. They were stressing the financial constraints and a need for realistic promises on the state's side.[419]

Such a move by the government angered the veteran associations that were a part of the Coordination. Veteran leaders claimed that there was money for financing the proposed amendments, and they reminded the officials that without them, there would be no state to run. The Coordination called for the resignation of Prime Minister Mateša and his vice-presidents, even calling Tuđman to remove them from office – following his institutional and political legitimacy.[420] Bobetko was also shocked by officials' accusations and claimed that not passing the proposed amendments would be a missed opportunity for H.D.Z.[421] Veterans blamed H.D.Z. for the betrayal of the values of the Homeland War and for housing 'crooks' that 'robbed' the country in the privatisation and transition process. Veteran leaders began to disown H.D.Z. publicly, warning how they would radically change the state after the elections.[422]

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[417] *Jutarnji list*, 30 Oct. 1999, *Vjesnik*, 7 Nov. 1999; Zapisnik 31. sjednice održane 21. rujna 1999., 21 Sep. 1999, H.S., fond Hrvatski sabor, podfond Hrvatski sabor, 3. saziv (1995-2000), serija Odbor za ratne veterane, podserija Sjednice, podpodserija 31. sjednica, podpodserija Zapisnik.
[418] *Nedjeljna Dalmacija*, 5 Nov. 1999.
[419] *Vjesnik*, 7 Nov. 1999, *Ruža hrvatska: novine hrvatskih branitelja i članova njihovih obitelji*, Dec. 1999.
[420] *Nedjeljna Dalmacija*, 5 Nov. 1999; *Vjesnik*, 3 Nov. 1999.
[421] *Vjesnik*, 11 Nov. 1999.
[422] *Jutarnji list*, 27 Sep. 1999, *Novi list*, 27 Sep. 1999.

While some veteran leaders, more prone to H.D.Z. and right-wing parties, presented the upcoming elections as a new Homeland War, some, like U.H.B.D.D.R.'s President Borković, claimed that those who voiced such ideas should reconsider their conscience. The projected end of H.D.Z.'s domination was not necessarily bad for him.[423] Aligned with their despise for political parties, some veteran associations knew that promises given to them before elections should not be taken for granted.[424] Indirectly, some associations started advocating political change. In its proclamation, the Association Defenders of Croatia (*Udruga branitelji Hrvatske*) emphasised that it would support political powers that would bring radical changes in Croatian society and domestic and foreign policy. It urged the end of Croatia's isolationism, the rule of law, and the fight against corruption.[425] The proclamation strongly critiqued H.D.Z. and its public perception as a party prone to cronyism and corruption, authoritarian tendencies, and the fragile rule of law, combined with weak diplomatic ties to Western democracies.

More and more associations began openly defying the government in protocolary activities where their role was necessary for the crumbling Government. The Coordination of Associations from the Homeland War, led by Borković's U.H.B.D.D.R., decided not to take part in the commemoration of the fall of Vukovar in 1991. According to the veteran associations, the government wanted to use the veterans to stage a pre-election rally for H.D.Z., thus disrespecting the victims of Vukovar, which played (and still plays) a pivotal role in Croatia's culture of victory.[426]

[423] *Novi list*, 25 Sep. 1999.
[424] *Ruža hrvatska: novine hrvatskih branitelja i članova njihovih obitelji*, Oct. 1999.
[425] Novi list, 14 Oct. 1999; Proglas Branitelja Hrvatske povodom predstojećih izbora, 30 Oct. 1999, H.D.A., fond H.R.-H.D.A.-1741 Ured predsjednika R.H. Franje Tuđmana, fascikl 1931.
[426] *Jutarnji list*, 18 Nov. 1999.

1998-99 – the death of fathers

In 1998-99, many could see that political changes were on the horizon, while the potential regime change carried a major ideological shift that could stop or revert the 1990s nationalist politics. One of those values was the Homeland War, heavily promoted by Tuđman's regime. The potential growth in values made some associations look at upcoming changes as a time of uncertainty. Some veteran leaders thought that veterans must petrify the narrative in its form from the 1990s, along with its truths promoted by wartime leaders – Tuđman and Šušak, above others. In this period, veterans started to vow against changes, coining the phrase 'defending the dignity of the Homeland War' that would dominate the 2000-03 period. The attacks on the War's dignity included alleged witch hunts and slander against veterans, pacifistic equalisation of guilt among belligerents of the War, revisions of veteran disability statuses, 'marginalising and belittling of deeds and dignity of war veterans and Homeland War', 'equalising the victim and aggressor' and characterising the War as a civil one.[427] 'Defending the dignity' of the War also included confronting the I.C.T.Y. on the issue of prosecuting war crimes committed by Croatian forces. Therefore, veteran associations used this constructed memory as screen memory by evoking the dominant war narrative encapsulated in the 'dignity of the Homeland War'. By emphasising one-dimensional memories of the war, the associations wanted to screen unpleasant episodes of crimes committed by Croatian forces.

In his last years in power, Tuđman spoke about the I.C.T.Y. as one of the 'foreign factors' working against Croatia's independence.[428] Although H.D.Z.'s government did comply with

[427] Izvješće predsjednika Vijeća U.H.V.D.R.-a Drugom, p. 5; Zaključci Vijeća U.H.V.D.R. R.H. od nadnevka 13. veljače 1998. godine, 13 Feb. 1998, U.H.V.D.R., registrator Nerazvrstano, p. 2; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 11 Jun. 1998; Zaključci 2. Izbornog Sabora U.H.V.D.R., održanog 27. ožujka 1999. godine u zgradi I.N.E.-NAFTAPLIN, Zagreb, 1 Apr. 1999, U.H.V.D.R., registrator Izvještajni sabori; *Novi list*, 25 Nov. 1999.
[428] *Jutarnji list*, 15 December 1998, *Večernji list*, 16 Aug. 1999; *Novi list*, 19 Oct. 1999.

the I.C.T.Y. in some cases during the late 1990s, this cooperation was limited. In some instances, Croatian authorities disrupted or stalled the procedure, sometimes offering sanctuary to war crimes suspects on the run and even openly defying the Tribunal.[429] The regime vowed not to comply if Croatian officers were indicted for operations on Croatian territory, preventing the suspects from cooperating with the I.C.T.Y. investigators.[430] While Tuđman could somewhat tolerate cases against some Bosnian Croat officials – this would change later – the possibility of prosecuting officers for 1995 operations Flash and Storm was seen as unacceptable.[431]

Veteran associations fully supported Tuđman and the state's limited cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. They agreed that Croatian heroes, who fought against a much stronger enemy, must not stand trial for their homeland's defence and any criminal deeds they may have committed.[432] Feeling that the I.C.T.Y. unjustly persecuted veterans, veteran leaders portrayed it as the new enemy that they had to confront. According to veterans, I.C.T.Y.'s shadow hung over veterans and their families as 'Damocles' sword of supposed guilt'.[433] Association leaders picked up on the conspiracy theories triggered by the regime. Associations saw the international pressure to comply with the I.C.T.Y. as this international conspiracy seeking to 'destroy Croatia', looking to 'criminalise' or 'marginalise' the Homeland War or veterans, overturning the results of Croats' victory and committing the final crime of Yugoslav Communists over Croats.[434] Some veteran leaders, like Liović,

[429] Peskin and Boduszyński, 'International justice and domestic politics', p. 1125.
[430] *Večernji list*, 13 May 1998, 24 Mar, 5 Sep. 1999.
[431] *Večernji list*, 28 Mar. 1999; *Jutarnji list*, 27 Sep. 1999; *Novi list*, 19 Oct. 1999; Peskin, 'Beyond victor's justice?', at p. 218.
[432] Konvencija Saveza H.V.I.D.R.-a; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 11 Jun. 1998; *Vjesnik*, 30 Jul. 1998; *Večernji list*, 30-31 Jan. 1999; *Novi list*, 12 Feb. 1999.
[433] Završni govor predsjednika udruge na 2. Izbornom saboru, 27 Mar. 1999, U.H.V.D.R., registrator Izvještajni sabori.
[434] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 28 Nov. 1997, 11 Jun. 1998; *Večernji list*, 10 Jan. 1999; *Vjesnik*, 25 March 1999; Zaključci 2. Izbornog Sabora, p. 4; *Jutarnji list*, 27 Sep. 1999.

succumbed to conspiracy theories by claiming that American Free Masons and Jews founded I.C.T.Y. to impose collective guilt on Croats.[435]

With time, some veteran associations and leaders started calling to action, showing that they would not peacefully comply with potential prosecutions of Croatian officers and soldiers. To tackle that, some veteran leaders, like Bobetko, asked for a national mobilisation to counter I.C.T.Y.'s demands.[436] For him, defying the Tribunal was a matter of 'preserving a Croatian state', again defending the country from its foreign enemies.[437] This anti-I.C.T.Y. atmosphere mobilised associations into vouching to prevent extraditions of Croatian officers to the Hague.[438]

On the other hand, moderate veteran leaders advocated revealing the truth about 'the Croatian defensive war' that would contextualise all potential transgressions and result in the I.C.T.Y. dropping all charges against Croatian officers and soldiers.[439] For them and some state officials, war crimes committed by Croatian forces were isolated individual crimes for which the state had no responsibility. Such crimes, in their eyes, could be condemned. At the same time, these veteran leaders did not allow claims that would potentially tarnish the image of the Homeland War and question operations like Flash and Storm.[440] Veteran associations supported the regime's decision to protect Croatian interests by fully controlling and banning their officers from talking to I.C.T.Y. investigators.[441]

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[435] *Novi list*, 8 Feb. 1999; Liović was known as a political extremist, once saying on a radio show that 'dogs, cats, women, Serbs, and Jews' were not allowed in his basement where he plays cards with friends. See: *Nacional*, 16 Jun. 1999.
[436] *Novi list*, 14 Jan. 1999.
[437] *Novi list*, 25 Sep. 1999.
[438] *Novi list*, 12 Feb. 1999; Zaključci 2. redovnog izvještajnog sabora H.V.I.D.R.-a RH, 12 Feb. 1999, H.D.A., fond H.R.-H.D.A.-1741 Ured predsjednika R.H. Franje Tuđmana, fascikl 1930; Završni govor predsjednika udruge; *Večernji list*, 28 Aug. 1999.
[439] *Glas Slavonije*, 29 Mar. 1999.
[440] *Večernji list*, 13 Sep. 1997; *Vjesnik*, 28 Mar. 1999.
[441] Zaključci sa sjednice Središnjeg odbora održane 14. svibnja 1998. godine u prostorijama Udruge u ul P. Hatza 16, Zagreb, s početkom u 13,00 sati, 8 Jun. 1998, U.H.V.D.R., registrator Središnji odbor,

While veteran associations became much more critical of the regime, Tuđman's treatment, despite some dissenting or silent voices, was radically different. Even when some associations were critical towards the H.D.Z., Tuđman's persona transcended the party and political elites. Even when veterans specifically named those responsible for their misfortunes – from the Prime Minister to the President's closest associates – Tuđman was again omitted.[442] According to this interpretation, Tuđman was not an ordinary politician or official but a leader and supreme commander concerned with more significant issues and could not oversee his subordinates.[443] In their imagination, as a state leader, Tuđman dealt with Croatia's numerous problems around the clock, and veterans often submissively approached Tuđman, apologising for taking his time.[444] Veteran leaders addressed Tuđman how one would address kings and autocratic rulers rather than democratically-elected officials.

In Croatia's political mythology, nationalists – including many veteran associations – saw Tuđman as 'a good king' or 'father of the homeland', a 'wise old man' who had proved

p. 3; Otvoreno pismo povodom tajnog svjedočenja gospodina Stipe Mesića na Medjunarodnom sudu u Haagu u postupku protiv gen. Tihomira Blaškića, 26 March 1998, H.D.A., fond H.R.-H.D.A.-1741 Ured predsjednika R.H. Franje Tuđmana, fascikl 1709.

[442] Unnamed (Correspondence from the Association 'Defenders of Croatia' President Božo Budimir to the Office of the President of the Republic), 20 Jul. 1999, H.D.A., fond H.R.-H.D.A.-1741 Ured predsjednika R.H. Franje Tuđmana, fascikl 1931; Unnamed (Correspondence from Šimun Horvat and Marijan Bišćan, representing a group of 130 Croatian veterans, to Croatian President Franjo Tuđman), 27 May 1999, H.D.A., fond H.R.-H.D.A.-1741 Ured predsjednika R.H. Franje Tuđmana, fascikl 1931.

[443] *Za dom*, Oct. 1994.

[444] Unnamed (Correspondence from the President of the First Croatian Police Officer Nenad Zovak to Croatian President Franjo Tuđman), 1 Aug. 1995, H.D.A., fond H.R.-H.D.A.-1741 Ured predsjednika R.H. Franje Tuđmana, fascikl 1043; *Novi list*, 8 Feb. 1996; Zamolba, 18 Oct. 1996, H.D.A., fond H.R.-H.D.A.-1741 Ured predsjednika R.H. Franje Tuđmana, fascikl 1266; Dodjela počasne iskaznice, 23 Feb. 1998, H.D.A., fond H.R.-H.D.A.-1741 Ured predsjednika R.H. Franje Tuđmana, fascikl 1709; Unnamed (Correspondence from the President of U.H.V.D.R. Garčin Mijo Kovačević to Croatian President Franjo Tuđman), 24 Aug. 1999, H.D.A., fond H.R.-H.D.A.-1741 Ured predsjednika R.H. Franje Tuđmana, fascikl 1931; In one rare exemption, Liović demanded that Tuđman 'explains himself' for not approving all honorary ranks for disabled veterans, which annoyed the President's advisor receiving the letter. See: Dodjela činova hrvatskim ratnim vojnim invalidima – očitovanje traži se, 2 Jun. 1997, H.D.A., fond H.R.-H.D.A.-1741 Ured predsjednika R.H. Franje Tuđmana, fascikl 1501.

himself in times of war.[445] Here, veterans saw Tuđman's role through the lenses of the Homeland War myth, fixated on creating an independent Croatian state. Tuđman was undisputed simply because he had led the nation towards independence. As a supreme military commander in a liberation war, his role outshined all potential downfalls of the politics and regime he built. At times, veterans presented themselves as soldiers obeying Tuđman's orders on the front.[446] Besides wartime bonds between them, veterans also tied Tuđman's charisma, amplified by his cult of personality, portraying him as a historical figure in Croatian history. Similarly, veteran associations saw Tuđman as a historical figure and aimed at tying him personally to their organisations by making him an honorary president or member.[447] Some of them felt so close to him that they even named themselves 'Tuđman's men', 'the unit [that] will always stay in one corner of his heart'.[448]

At times, veterans almost acted as Tuđman's Praetorian Guard, rhetorically defending him from all potential enemies. Associations claimed to have defended Croatia and its territorial integrity by defending him. This fixation on Croatia's territorial integrity was another proof of their loyalty to Tuđman, as it was a crucial part of his doctrine that functioned as a political taboo in the eyes of nationalists.[449] According to this doctrine, Croatia's territorial integrity, or the unity of the state and Croats as a nation, was in constant danger from domestic and

[445] Dejan Jović, *Rat i mit: politika identiteta u suvremenoj Hrvatskoj* (Zagreb, 2017), p. 361; Milekić, 'The myth of a good king'.
[446] Unnamed (Correspondence from the President of U.H.B.D.D.R. Branko Borković to Croatian President Franjo Tuđman), 23 Nov. 1996, H.D.A., fond H.R.-H.D.A.-1741 Ured predsjednika R.H. Franje Tuđmana, fascikl 1501.
[447] Unnamed (Correspondence from President of U.H.V.D.R. Đuro Dečak to Croatian President Franjo Tuđman), 2 May 1996, U.H.V.D.R., Registrator nerazvrstano; Unnamed (Correspondence from the President of H.V.I.D.R. Lipik Mario Novoselac to the Office of the President of the Republic), 26 Feb. 1998, H.D.A., fond H.R.-H.D.A.-1741 Ured predsjednika R.H. Franje Tuđmana, fascikl 1709.
[448] Unnamed (Correspondence from association First Croatian Police Officer President Nenad Zovak).
[449] *Vjesnik*, 3 May 1996; Zaključci 2. redovnog izvještajnog sabora H.V.I.D.R.-a; For more on Croatian political taboos, see: Nebojša Blanuša, 'Trauma and taboo: forbidden political questions in Croatia' in *Politička misao*, liv (2017), no. 1-2, pp 170-96.

foreign forces.[450] For veterans, Croatia's territorial integrity was one of the central values of the Homeland War, a value they were ready to defend.[451] In this way, defending the 'dignity of the Homeland War' was a continuation of the war by other, not necessary, violent means. In the sense of radically endangered ontological security, veterans felt Croatia would cease to exist if they did not defend the War's dignity.

Veteran associations sometimes also supported Tuđman's regime in confronting many enemies, such as the independent media, accused of working against Croatia's independence and wartime achievements.[452] As Tuđman's administration saw enemies of the state in everyone disagreeing with the *status quo,* it used the same label for opposition parties. Thus, some veteran groups took part in intimidating Tuđman's political opponents.[453] As enemies could be found even within 'own ranks', there were cases of dramatic internal disputes within the governing H.D.Z. In such internal struggles within H.D.Z., veteran associations would again support Tuđman, condemning those creating divisions when unity was needed 'in the moment of struggle for fulfilling the full territorial integrity and strengthening only recently established Croatian state'.[454] Some veteran leaders, like Dečak, saw Tuđman as H.D.Z.'s anchor, positioned in the centre, with left and right factions battling for power. The problem for these veteran leaders was that H.D.Z. did not follow Tuđman's path, which would bring stability.[455] Finally, associations watched over Croatia's foreign enemies – neighbouring states and the international community. The association expressed their readiness to protect

[450] *Vjesnik,* 6 Aug. 1996.
[451] Zaključci 2. redovnog izvještajnog sabora H.V.I.D.R.-a.
[452] *Jutarnji list*, 8 Mar. 1999; *Vjesnik,* 14 Mar, 16 Nov. 1999; *Zora: hrvatski tjednik,* 25 Jan. 1996.
[453] *Nacional*, 4 June 1997; *Večernji list*, 7 June 1997.
[454] *Večernji list*, 3 May 1994.
[455] *Jutarnji list*, 16 Feb. 1999.

Tuđman, the political establishment and Croatia from these 'international factors' working against the country's independence.[456]

Through time, commitment to Tuđman and protecting Croatia's independence became so tied that promoting one without the other was impossible. Therefore, the critique of Tuđman was limited in its form, and some mainstream associations successfully eliminated political opposition within their ranks under the guise of apolitical tendencies.[457] For veteran associations, Tuđman was an overarching apolitical symbol, a crucial building block in Croatia's foundations. Thus, by the late 1990s, even some dissident veteran leaders eventually gave in and embraced Tuđman and his political doctrine, rationalising their previous dissent with him.[458] Dedaković, once a prominent and fierce Tuđman's critic, transformed himself into his loudspeaker, issuing threats against those who would harm Croatia's unity.[459]

The regime did not directly coerce these dissident veterans into submission. In some cases, they did this out of conformism and pragmatism, securing funding for their associations or perks for themselves. However, this change of heart sometimes came from a genuine belief that Tuđman, despite some flaws, was Croatia's Messiah, a mythical leader who had led Croatia to its historical destiny. For almost the whole veteran movement, Tuđman became a myth-like person – someone they could not criticise without shaking the symbolic foundations of the country they helped build.

[456] Unnamed (Correspondence from the President of U.H.V.D.R. Đuro Dečak to Croatian President Franjo Tuđman), 13 Jun. 1997, H.D.A., fond H.R.-H.D.A.-1741 Ured predsjednika R.H. Franje Tuđmana, fascikl 1709; *Večernji list*, 25 Jul. 1999.
[457] As described earlier in the chapter with internal rifts in U.H.V.D.R. and U.H.D.D.R.
[458] *Novi list*, 24 Apr. 1996; *Feral Tribune*, 30 September 1996; Correspondence from Branko Borković.
[459] N*ovi list*, 24 April 1997.

However, veteran adoration for Tuđman demanded his attention. Veterans turned to him when they felt the system had forgotten them, either by not fulfilling their rights or providing adequate welfare. Veterans believed that their loyalty to Tuđman obliged him to take an interest in their affairs.[460] Although veterans were always careful not to sound disloyal, they called Tuđman to action, asking him to intervene actively.[461] In rare cases when veteran leaders criticised Tuđman and his actions, they chose their words, offering a mild and constructive critique.[462]

The only official treated similarly was Defence Minister Šušak, a person especially disabled veterans saw as their benefactor, fighting for their rights with other politicians.[463] This perception entered the mainstream during the H.V.I.D.R. protest period in 1996 when he acted as a mouthpiece for disabled veterans in the political arena.[464] Although some in H.V.I.D.R. preferred Šušak to Tuđman, the former always publicly expressed his personal and institutional loyalty to the latter, presenting himself as a fulfiller of his will.[465] H.V.I.D.R. saw Šušak as 'their man' in the government, which was turning toward fiscal conservativism, while he echoed the association's rhetoric in fighting the bureaucracy.[466] For Liović, it was 'the God himself' that sent Šušak to disabled veterans – similarly to the divine intervention in Tuđman's case.[467]

[460] *Vjesnik*, 18 Feb. 1999.
[461] Zašto su hrvatski dragovoljci pali u zaborav, 28 Feb. 1996, H.D.A., fond H.R.-H.D.A.-1741 Ured predsjednika R.H. Franje Tuđmana, fascikl 1266; *Novi list*, 13 Mar. 1995.
[462] *Nedjeljna Dalmacija*, 27 Mar. 1998; Unnamed (Correspondence from the President of the Alliance of H.V.I.D.R. Marinko Liović to the President of H.D.Z. Franjo Tuđman), 23 Feb. 1998, S.V.A.M.O.R.H., fond Ministarstvo obrane Republike Hrvatske, Uprava za skrb 1997, registrator 13/1, spis br. 1.
[463] *Glas Slavonije*, 6 Jun. 1996.
[464] *Globus*, 13 Sep. 1996.
[465] *Večernji list*, 16 Sep. 1996; *Vjesnik*, 13 Jan. 1998.
[466] *Globus*, 13 Sep. 1996; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 9 Oct. 1996.
[467] *Obzor*, 9 Sep. 1996.

Associations' perception of Šušak as a 'non-politician' was created. He built his reputation as a charismatic war leader by using populist language to claim he was not a politician who amasses wealth like others – a popular trope grounded in rampant clientelism.[468] Through the work of state-controlled media, veterans bought into that presentation and saw Tuđman and Šušak as two of them. [469] To these associations, Šušak and Tuđman were not part of a corrupt political elite that only bickers but contributed to their struggle for a free and independent Croatia.[470] Šušak's positive image among veterans was not only a product of his charisma or propaganda. Still, it derived from his ties to Tuđman, who publicly treated him differently than other ministers or even prime ministers.[471] Šušak enjoyed unconstitutional prerogatives and considerable unofficial authority in the government. He saw himself as the 'second most powerful man' in Croatia, behind Tuđman, who represented the source of all state politics.[472]

In return for their support, Šušak's commitment to H.V.I.D.R. was almost pious, surpassing the client-patron relationship. Šušak visited the association's assembly in January 1998, visibly ill and coming from his medical cancer treatment, and promised to find funds for growing veteran expenses.[473] Due to these, almost personal links to the Defence Ministry and Šušak, H.V.I.D.R. remained sceptical of the newly formed War Veterans Ministry in late 1997.[474] Practically rejecting the newly established institutional framework, H.V.I.D.R. continued to refer to the Defence Ministry, remaining loyal to Šušak. Liović best encapsulated this loyalty by referring to himself as 'Šušak's man'.[475]

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[468] *Vjesnik*, 13 Jan. 1998.
[469] *Vjesnik*, 8 May 1995; *Večernji list*, 16 Sep. 1996; 17 Jan. 1998.
[470] *Novi list*, 13 Mar. 1995.
[471] *Feral Tribune*, 2 May 1994.
[472] *Vjesnik*, 2 Sep. 1994, 13 Jan. 1998.
[473] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 13 Jan. 1998; Zapisnik s Redovnog izvještajnog sabora H.V.I.D.R.a od 12. siječnja 1998, 14 Jan. 1998, S.V.A.M.O.R.H., fond Ministarstvo obrane Republike Hrvatske, Uprava za skrb 1997, registrator 13/1, spis br. 2.
[474] *Globus*, 2 Jan. 1998; *Glas Slavonije*, 12 Jan. 1998.
[475] *Novi list*, 23 Jan. 1998

Nevertheless, the *status quo* in which the veteran association had its place was radically disturbed in 1998-99. Šušak passed away in May 1998, and the state turned his death into a nationwide process of mourning, with the highest state officials – including Tuđman and Mateša – and generals acting as ceremonial guards for Šušak's coffin.[476] In his speech on the official commemoration, Tuđman stressed Šušak's 'special merits for the Croatian nation as a whole, for the state independence won' during the War.[477]

While holding Croatia's independence as their highest value, veterans saw Šušak's death as a massive loss.[478] In the words of U.H.V.D.R. President Dečak, 'his death created a big void' in veteran hearts. Immediately upon his death, veteran associations turned Šušak into a mythological figure whose legacy they posthumously defended. In their eyes, by defending Šušak, they defended the 'memory of the Homeland War' and themselves.[479]

The *status quo* was shattered entirely in December 1999 when Tuđman died after battling cancer for years. Just a day before the campaign for parliamentary elections, H.D.Z. used Tuđman's funeral to gather its voters' ranks in a futile attempt to avoid losing to the centre-left coalition.[480] Veteran associations across Croatia opened books of condolences in their offices, accessible non-stop as a sort of religious wake for Tuđman.[481] Veterans saw Tuđman as the 'father of the homeland' who managed what no one else in Croatian history did – win the war and create an independent state.[482] In their obituaries, veteran leaders emphasised

[476] *Vjesnik*, 7 May 1998.
[477] *Večernji list*, 7 May 1998.
[478] *Hrvatski vojnik*, May 1998.
[479] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 2 November 1998.
[480] For the dynamics of losing the support of its voters and H.D.Z.'s defeat on the 2000 elections, see: Vesna Lamza Posavec, 'Što je prethodilo neuspjehu H.D.Z.-a na izborima 2000.: rezultati istraživanja javnoga mnijenja u razdoblju od 1991. do 1999. godine' in *Društvena istraživanja: časopis za opća društvena pitanja*, ix (2000), no. 4-5, pp 433-71; For the thanato-sociological analysis of Tuđman's funeral, see: Todor Kuljić, 'Grob i moć – tanatosociološka analiza sahrana Tita, F. Tuđmana i S. Miloševića' in *Sociologija*, liv (2012), no. 4, pp 595-606.
[481] *Glas Slavonije*, 13 December 1999; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 13 December 1999.
[482] *Ruža hrvatska: novine hrvatskih branitelja i članova njihovih obitelji*, Dec. 1999.

what Tuđman had done for Croatia's independence and victory in the War, promising he would remain in their hearts forever.[483] At the same time, Tuđman's presence became transcendental, and veterans transformed him into a symbol, an idea that veterans will follow in the future. According to one veterans' group, their unit pledged never to betray his 'great ideals and life principles' during the War. Veterans vouched to continue down Tuđman's path, same as they knew how to follow him a decade earlier.[484]

Conclusion

Starting as an entitlement group with no particular place in the new-born Croatian society, still at war, veterans slowly became a recognised group. They were still relatively marginalised, with no political power or opportunity to initiate social change. Forming associations did help veterans articulate their demands and prompt the state to start legislative changes. However, the state did not solve numerous veteran problems, such as high unemployment and housing.

Some veteran associations sought political power by trying to link themselves to political parties, mostly H.D.Z., while staying independent at the same time. Some, like Merčep, sought power in U.H.D.D.R. to strengthen their political position at the cost of breaking the volunteers' movement. The continuous fragmentation of the veteran movement worked in the regime's favour, which, along with the leadership change in U.H.V.D.R., had a presence in all mainstream associations. This presence and control were never absolute and depended on internal dynamics in H.D.Z. and state institutions. H.D.Z. or certain party officials possibly triggered some of these leadership changes and fragmentation. Still, it is also likely that

[483] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 12 December 1999
[484] *Ruža hrvatska: novine hrvatskih branitelja i članova njihovih obitelji*, Dec. 1999; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 13 December 1999.

veteran leaders used the party and different institutions to fulfil their leadership or political ambitions.

Despite this, veterans were still not as influential as they had wanted to be before the war ended, as they were not a status group yet. A greater number of associations and numerous branch offices with high autonomy did not necessarily bring better representation as much as it contributed to more internal conflicts, power struggles, and proliferation of party politics among their ranks. Numerous associations and leadership changes created resentment, even among veterans.[485]

The situation changed with the end of the war in late 1995. Associations saw the immediate post-war period as a perfect opportunity to push for veteran rights. In combination with political ties, primarily through connections with Šušak, H.V.I.D.R. was most successful in advocating veteran rights. With their months-long pressure, H.V.I.D.R. managed to push many of its amendments into the new law. Although their protest turned into an event supporting benevolent officials open to resolving their problems, the whole campaign had some effect. As a result, the techno-manager fraction in H.D.Z.'s government lost the pace of rerouting Croatia towards a less costly post-war reconstruction. Also, from 1996, H.V.I.D.R. was publicly perceived as heavily connected to politics and Šušak personally, which would come to haunt in the years to come, when their initiatives would be perceived exclusively through the lenses of them acting as Šušak's or H.D.Z.'s proxy organisation. However, veterans became a social status group during this period.

Despite the almost unanimous support of H.D.Z., especially Tuđman, veterans had second thoughts on the crumbling regime in this period. Besides dissatisfaction with the passed Law and its poor implementation, veteran associations also perceived some of the transgressions

[485] Ratko Bubanj is interesting in that aspect.

of the crumbling regime. Additionally, with the announced inevitable financial cuts, veteran associations started to become more aggressive in their advocacy, discursively finding their enemies in H.D.Z. as well. While Tuđman remained almost untouchable, some veteran associations openly expressed dissatisfaction with the country's situation and direction – international isolation and financial insecurity. Besides often paying lip service to Tuđman's regime in promoting anti-Serb and anti-I.C.T.Y. rhetoric, some veteran associations became openly hostile to H.D.Z., advocating for its loss in the upcoming parliamentary elections.

However, the regime kept the veteran associations in check, giving funds and perks. The influential figures of Šušak and Tuđman were crucial in tackling veteran dissatisfaction. Most veteran associations did not see them as politicians or corrupt officials who did not contribute to the war effort. They saw them as their wartime commanders who had them in their hearts. Šušak's and Tuđman's deaths in 1998-99 represented a clear cut with the *status quo*. The two fathers passed away without leaving competent successors behind during parliamentary elections (with almost certain opposition victory), financial restrictions and the I.C.T.Y.'s indictments looming over them. Therefore, veteran associations turned towards protecting the Homeland War and its dignity. Despite claims that the idiom of the 'dignity of the Homeland War' was meaningless, its vagueness worked in veterans' favour.[486] 'Dignity of the Homeland War' worked almost like an empty signifier, as it could include cooperating with the I.C.T.Y., veteran welfare, or giving concessions to the Serb community. Veterans now needed to protect the Homeland War myth with its interpretation to keep their societal position after the elections.

[486] Goldstein argues that the idiom is meaningless, as only persons and some institutions may possess dignity. See: Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1918 - 2008*, p. 852.

Chapter 2

Grounding of the Homeland War narrative (2000)

Introduction

With the passing of Tuđman in December 1999, on 3 January 2000, the centre-left opposition parties came on top, heavily beating H.D.Z., which had led the country for a decade. The large post-election coalition, gathering social-democrat, liberal and moderately conservative parties, won ninety-five out of 151 seats in the Parliament (Chamber of Representatives). As the winning coalition divided the positions in the executive branch according to parties' electoral results, S.D.P.s President Ivica Račan became Prime Minister of the 'Government of the Six [parties]'. In separate presidential elections, opposition candidate Stjepan Mesić, former H.D.Z. dissident, became the new Croatian president, completing the first full political transformation.[487] With such a convincing electoral victory, the Government had the mandate for substantial political reforms.[488]

Therefore, as the Coalition of the Six gathered on an anti-Tuđmanist platform, it agreed to de-Tuđmanise Croatia, which included a range of measures for radically changing the country. De-Tuđmanisation included rooting out corruption and clientelism fostered by the old regime and Tuđman's cult of personality and ethnonationalism and replacing it with a commitment to European values, transforming the country into a genuinely pluralistic democracy. In the campaign leading to parliamentary and presidential elections, Račan and Mesić stated that Croatia did not need a 'father' or 'leader' anymore. Still, it needed to alter its political system so the Parliament could pass decisions autonomously. On the institutional level, it included

[487] *Večernji list,* 5 Jan., 8 Feb. 2000; Ivo Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1918 – 2008*; pp 818-9; Ivo Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1990. – 2020. Godine velikih nada i gorkih razočaranja* (Zagreb, 2021) pp 295-6; Mirjana Kasapović, 'Coalition governments in Croatia: first experience 2000-2003' in *Politička misao*, xl (2003), no. 5, pp 52-67, at pp 54, 57-61.
[488] Kulenović and Petković, 'The Croatian Princes', p. 118.

constitutional changes that would transform Croatia from a semi-presidential to a parliamentary system of Government. Coalition members vowed to turn around the failing economy, attract foreign investment, and reduce high unemployment. These were all consequences of the war and corruptive and criminal activities during the transformation and privatisation of public companies during the 1990s – the process the coalition promised to revise.[489]

As part of its foreign policy, the new Government set membership in the European Union (E.U.) as its primary foreign policy goal. In expediting the path towards the E.U. membership, which had been static for years, the new government promised to 'reverse the anti-democratic and anti-Western policies of its predecessor' and improve cooperation with the I.C.T.Y.[490] Although under Tuđman, the Government did officially cooperate with the Tribunal, the cases in which it did so were exclusively against Bosnian Croats for crimes committed in Bosnia and Herzegovina. While 'projecting' the image of full compliance with the I.C.T.Y., Tuđman's regime pursued legalistic strategies for obstructing and sabotaging the cooperation with the Tribunal. One of the clear examples of the obstruction was a parliamentary declaration from March 1999 that denied the Tribunal's jurisdiction over Croatia's 1995 military operations Flash and Storm. Tuđman did not allow I.C.T.Y. to investigate Croatian operations Medak Pocket and Storm, forbidding his officers to talk to the Tribunal's investigators, which indirectly – together with other factors – led to Croatia's international isolation. Besides this partial cooperation with the I.C.T.Y., during the 1990s,

[489] Lamont, 'Defiance or strategic compliance?', p. 1691; Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1990. – 2020.*, pp 297-9; Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1918 – 2008*, pp 819-21; Kulenović and Petković, 'The Croatian Princes', pp 117-8; Jović and Lamont, 'Croatia after Tudjman', pp 1615-7; Trickytape, 'Novo, novo vrijeme'.
[490] Peskin and Boduszyński, 'International Justice and Domestic Politics'; p. 1125.

the Croatian judiciary showed little interest in prosecuting war crimes committed by Croatian forces, consequently leading to more interest on the side of the I.C.T.Y.[491]

As the Government set up de-Tuđmanisation and improved cooperation with the I.C.T.Y., veteran associations instantly became a potential source of the problem, as they directly opposed the Tribunal's jurisdiction in adjudicating potential crimes committed in Croatia.[492] With many associations closely tied to Tuđman's ideas concerning Croatia's statehood, Homeland War and even foreign policy, such a divorce was painful. Tuđman's regime and H.D.Z. penetrated memberships and, especially, leaderships of these associations, making them a directly interested party in the announced radical changes in Croatian society and politics – indirectly presented as minimising the party's role in many areas of life. These associations feared announced state budgetary cuts that would limit their funds, as well as financial audits on associations' use of those funds and revisions of veterans' disability status. These associations decided to tackle this by monetising the war memory.

Veteran construction of the 'dignity of the Homeland War'

Croatia's cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. came to the forefront in the first weeks after the new Government took power. On 3 March 2000, the I.C.T.Y. Trial Chamber convicted H.V.O. General Tihomir Blaškić to forty-five years in prison, finding him guilty of ordering crimes against humanity against Bosniak civilians. Besides establishing that the H.V. took an active part in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Trial Chamber characterised the conflict as international,

[491] *Večernji list*, 13 May 1998; Lamont, 'Defiance or strategic compliance?', p. 1689-90; Pavlaković, 'Bolje grob nego rob', pp 439-42.
[492] *Panorama*, 15 Nov. 1995; Jutarnji list, 9 May 1998, 28 Mar. 1999; Vjesnik, 30 Jul. 1998; Večernji list, 16, 21, 31 Jan., 28 Aug. 1999; Novi list, 12 Feb. 1999; Feral Tribune, 15 Feb. 1999; Otvoreno pismo povodom tajnog svjedočenja gospodina Stipe Mesića na Međunarodnom sudu u Hagu u postupku protiv gen. Tihomira Blaškić, 26 Mar. 1998, Croatian State Archives, fond HR HDA 1741 Ured predsjednika R.H. Franje Tuđmana, fascikl 1709.

specifying that Croatia enjoyed effective control over the H.V.O. and secretly hoped to partition the country.[493] The government, which had taken power only five weeks prior, was already in front of a great challenge – improving the cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. while trying to gain the support of the public for the court that passed long sentences against ethnic Croats.[494] As it was the longest sentence given before the Tribunal at the time, leaders of the governing parties were shocked, swearing for Blaškić's innocence. Although coming from the governing coalition, the President of the Croatian Social-Liberal Party (*Hrvatska socijalno-liberalna stranka*, H.S.L.S.) Dražen Budiša said the verdict would likely complicate Croatia's cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. Government officials criticised the Tribunal and expressed their hopes that the appeal would squash such a severe verdict.[495] As the main opposition party, H.D.Z. was especially concerned, warning about the Tribunal characterising Croatia as an aggressor in Bosnia and Herzegovina.[496] Additionally, the government could not entirely dismiss the issue as it was discursively connected to the position of Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina, some of whom perceived the verdict as a verdict to the whole people.[497] This perception functioned within Tuđman's discourse of 'homeland and emigrated Croatia', with Bosnia and Herzegovina lying within these two categories. This discourse was even introduced into the Constitution, mentioning that Croatia guarantees special care and protection for 'parts of the Croatian people in other states', in this case, Bosnian Croats.[498]

[493] Prosecutor v. Blaškić IT-95-14 (Trial Chamber judgement), International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia, 3 Mar. 2000, https://ucr.irmct.org/scasedocs/case/IT-95-14#eng (3 Jan. 2023).
[494] Less than two weeks before the new government took power, the Trial Chamber passed its first verdict against five H.V.O. soldiers and officers, issuing prison sentences between six and twenty-five years of prison. See: Prosecutor v. Kupreškić *et al.* IT-95-16 (Trial Chamber Judgement), International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia, 14 Jan. 2000, https://ucr.irmct.org/scasedocs/case/IT-95-16#eng (3 Jan. 2023).
[495] *Jutarnji list*, 4 Mar. 2000; *Večernji list*, 4 Mar. 2000.
[496] *Večernji list*, 5 Mar. 2000.
[497] *Večernji list*, 4 Mar. 2000.
[498] Narodne novine, Ustav Republike Hrvatske.

On the other hand, veterans were much more specific in finding the culprit for what they saw as injustice. H.V.I.D.R. called the public to a protest in front of the U.S. embassy in Zagreb due to 'known activities of the official American policy concerning the 'trial' in The Hague'.[499] Using the quotations for the word 'trial' in their press release pointed to H.V.I.D.R.'s view of the Blaškić trial. The association saw the trial as unfair and orchestrated by the U.S. in what will become a common trope in the coming years, an attempt to 'equalise the victim and aggressor', 'defence and crime'. The media discourse soon turned Blaškić into a figure of a scapegoat or sacrificial lamb for the shortcomings of H.D.Z.'s policies towards Bosnia.[500]

Some 5,000 protesting veterans, former H.D.Z. ministers, right-wing politicians, far-right activists, and others gathered in front of the embassy in Zagreb centre, throwing a few stones and eggs at the building. The central theme of the protests was great powers who joined forces with domestic traitors, as they referred to the I.C.T.Y as a 'big deception of the powerful ones'. The protesters combined criticism of 'H.D.Z.'s rotten policy' and the current Government as they chanted to replace Račan, take Mesić for Blaškić, as well as late President Tuđman and Defence Minister Gojko Šušak.[501] The main organiser of the protest, Liović, demanded that Croatian state authorities, the E.U. and the international community establish an international tribunal that would try war crimes committed at 'Bleiburg, Hiroshima, Nagasaki', while protesters shouted anti-Semitic slurs in the back.[502] Liović's statement encapsulated the resentment towards great powers presiding over Croatia's faith.

[499] *Jutarnji list*, 4 Mar. 2000; *Večernji list*, 4 Mar. 2000.
[500] *Večernji list*, 4-6 Mar. 2000; *Jutarnji list*, 5 Mar. 2000.
[501] *Večernji list*, 7 Mar. 2000; *Jutarnji list*, 7 Mar. 2000.
[502] *Večernji list*, 7, 10 Mar. 2000; *Jutarnji list*, 7 Mar. 2000.

By pointing out Bleiburg, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, all unprosecuted war crimes in his view, Liović wished that the same standards for victors' justice be applied to Croatia.[503]

While liberal media portrayed the protest as a marginal event of Croatia's far-right radicals and dodgy veterans' leaders connected to clientelism, corruption, war crimes and anti-Semitism, the event caused initial unease within the government.[504] Although the Government that had taken over weeks ago was not responsible for the outcome of Blaškić's trial, veteran associations were developing a rhetoric repertoire they would apply during the following years. They accused the Government of planning further cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. as they served foreign powers. Associations were especially critical of governing officials' general position towards the wartime legacy as they embarked on the 'criminalisation of the Homeland War', the war that functioned as a 'sanctity' for them. In their understanding, the Government did not have the right to question veterans because, as state-makers, they were not to be challenged in the eyes of history. Veteran associations did not appreciate comments of them being the proxies of the opposition – the H.D.Z. – while claiming their patriotism was authentic and not stimulated by political gains.[505] According to the associations' explanation, veteran associations did not do politics. Still, politics dealt with them, forcing them to abandon apolitical positions and react to statements of certain politicians that belittled and insulted the 'dignity of the Homeland War'.[506]

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[503] In a later statement for the press, Liović added other crimes and military interventions for which an international tribunal should be formed: Vietnam, Chechnya and crimes committed by the French in Algeria. Liović outlined his view of U.S. policy in the former Yugoslavia, accusing it for helping Serbs and working against Croats and even Bosniaks. See: *Jutarnji list*, 10 Mar. 2000.
[504] In 1999, Liović stated that the I.C.T.Y. was established by 'Free Masons and Jews'. That was not his only anti-Semitic or chauvinistic statement. See: *Novi list*, 8 Feb., 20 Aug., 22 Oct. 1999; *Večernji list*, 10 Feb., 19 Jun. 1999; *Nacional*, 16 Jun. 1999; *Feral Tribune*, 21 Jun. 1999; *Obzor*, 26 Jun. 1999; *Vjesnik*, 15 Jul. 1999; *Jutarnji list*, 8 Mar. 2000.
[505] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 5 Mar. 2000; *Jutarnji list*, 6-7 Mar. 2000; *Večernji list*, 6-7, 9-10, 15 Mar. 2000; Priopćenje o svim političkim zbivanjima.
[506] Unnamed (Conclusions of the meeting of the Coordination of Associations from the Homeland War of Brod-Posavina County on 21 Jun. 2000), 21 Jun. 2000, H.D.A., fond H.R.-H.D.A.-2017.3 Hrvatski sabor, Županijski dom, kutija 160.

Such intense mobilisation of Croatian veteran associations for trials of H.V.O. officers was out of the ordinary. Although Croatian veterans had ties with their H.V.O. counterparts, while a considerable part fought in Bosnia and Herzegovina or served both in H.V. and H.V.O., associations rarely emphasised the issue. While the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina was primarily seen as part of the Greater-Serbian aggression, Croatian veteran associations did not focus on the problem of Croatia's involvement – especially during the Croat-Bosniak conflict – in the neighbouring country. One of the probable reasons could be read out of Croatian veterans' position on the Bosnian war more than a decade later, where they often claimed not to know much. The reason for such oblivion comes from the fact that the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina was a problematic issue because it went against the dominant narrative of the Homeland War. According to that narration, the Homeland War was an exclusively defensive conflict. Proving that it was a case of selective oblivion, Croatian veterans remembered Croatia's role in housing Bosniak civilians and helping Bosnia and Herzegovina to arm itself.[507]

The dust had only settled when the Tribunal's Chief Prosecutor Carla Del Ponte came to Zagreb on 4-5 April 2000, meeting with Croatia's political leadership, including Justice Minister Stjepan Ivanišević. In discussions with Del Ponte, officials promised full cooperation with the Tribunal and to prosecute all war crimes committed during the war, regardless of perpetrators. Although Del Ponte and officials were careful not to reveal details of their discussions, the media called upon sources that specified names of specific officers rumoured to be indicted by the I.C.T.Y.[508] The open talks about the new I.C.T.Y.s indictment triggered veteran mobilisation.

[507] Sokolić, 'Denying the unknown'.
[508] *Večernji list*, 4-7 Apr. 2000; *Feral Tribune*, 8 Apr. 2000.

At the meeting of U.H.V.D.R.'s Central Committee before the press conference, Dečak held a long speech in which he complained about what he saw as the *Zeitgeist* of post-Tuđman's Croatia, where the Homeland War was 'dragged through the mud', along with its heroes – veterans and generals. Dečak announced it was a time for a 'counterattack', as Croatian generals, 'pillars' of the state's defence, were unjustifiably attacked – through revisions of disability and I.C.T.Y.'s indictments. Dečak was worried over a 'neo-colonial' treatment of Croatia and the region, as the international community wished to present the conflicts as a civil war, trial 'all three peoples' – Croats, Serbs, Bosniaks – to send a 'message to humanity'. Veteran associations tried to use the 'equalising the victims and aggressor' trope to prevent policy change towards Croatian Serbs. As a part of that *Zeitgeist*, the treatment of the Serb national minority changed, as they were allowed and called to return. At the same time, the state rebuilt their houses. Throughout his speech, Dečak stressed how the media and governing politicians framed veteran associations as proxy organisations for H.D.Z. However, many veterans never belonged to any political party and fought for an independent state. Therefore, Dečak planned to distance themselves from H.D.Z. and draw in some independent intellectuals, high clergy, and President Mesić to support forming the Headquarters. If all failed, Dečak added, the association was ready to show its 'strength in the streets'.[509]

Other Committee members agreed with Dečak's views of the contemporary climate in society, claiming that the Government openly confronted veterans, aiming to 'suppress everything that became nationally continuous'. Committee members discussed how Blaškić's case disturbed the veterans' peace, wandering 'who is next' to be indicted and extradited to the I.C.T.Y., which called for their swift reaction. Although some Committee members called

[509] Nastavak 7. sjednice Središnjeg odbora od 7. travnja 2000. godine u Zagrebu, 14 Apr. 2000, U.H.V.D.R., registrator Središnji odbor, pp 1-3, 8.

for ‘defending’, the association’s Vice-President and active general Slavko Barić suggested that U.H.V.D.R. should work on motivating the Government and Parliament to defend the individuals by defending the context of the Homeland War in which certain acts were committed.[510] Because time was of the essence, U.H.V.D.R. decided to raise public awareness of these issues.

At a press conference, U.H.V.D.R. announced the forming of the Headquarters for the Defence of Dignity of the Homeland War (*Stožer za obranu digniteta Domovinskog rata*, Headquarters) that would organise round tables and discussions to shed light on the positive aspects of the War that was ‘criminalised’ and ‘marginalised’ and ‘flush out Balkanism’ from the heads of individuals. Connected to that, U.H.V.D.R. announced writing to the Government, asking that it reassess its compliance with the I.C.T.Y. as countless Croatian officers are accused in ‘secret indictments’ which the state accepted at face value. Finally, as veteran associations built their identity around the persona of late President Tuđman and some officials promised de-Tuđmanisation, U.H.V.D.R. also suggested a parliamentary debate and possibly a declaration on his historical importance for Croatia. Unlikely for U.H.V.D.R., their leaders announced the possibility of calling the public to ‘civic disobedience’ if Justice Minister Stjepan Ivanišević continued to provoke.[511]

Despite focusing on the Government’s compliance with the I.C.T.Y. at the press conference, Dečak later admitted they were motivated into direct action, not following its usual institutional advocacy, by media reports that called him out for receiving his disability status

[510] Ibid, pp 3-7.
[511] Prva sjednica radnog kolegija U.H.V.D.R., 6 Apr. 2000, U.H.V.D.R., registrator Nerazvrstano; *Jutarnji list*, 8 Apr. 2000; *Večernji list*, 8 Apr. 2000; On media speculations regarding new indictments against Croatian officers. See: *Večernji list*, 8 Apr. 2000.

through corruption.[512] Therefore, once again, ideas like the 'defence of the dignity of the Homeland War' were used to hide certain veteran leaders' present transgressions.

Therefore, the syntagm of 'defending the dignity of the Homeland War', which soon became the unofficial slogan of the veteran movement, was not only a metaphor, but it conveyed much more than symbolism. Del Ponte's recent meeting with state officials that emphasised compliance with the I.C.T.Y. directly threatened the 'dignity of the Homeland War'. Thus, the Union of Associations of Croatian Volunteers of the Homeland War (*Zajednica udruga hrvatskih dragovoljaca Domovinskog rata*, Z.U.H.D.D.R.) pleaded the parliamentary Committee for War Veterans to initiate a debate in the Parliament that would defend the 'dignity' and 'protect the fundamental values of the Homeland War', as there was no institution that would present the 'truth' about the war – the truth conceived as dogma. The association, disturbed by Blaškić's verdict, saw media 'demonisation' of generals as creating a climate in which the I.C.T.Y. could file potential indictments against other Croatian officers. For this reason, Z.U.H.D.D.R. demanded that the Parliament establish some ground facts about the Homeland War – that it was a defensive conflict in response to international aggression, during which Croatia led 'legit' military operations Flash and Storm to liberate occupied territories. A parliamentary debate, formalised in a document, would establish that if crimes occurred during these operations, they were individual incidents with individual perpetrators and had to be prosecuted by the Croatian judiciary, not the I.C.T.Y.[513]

[512] *Jutarnji list*, 13 Apr. 2000; On allegations concerning Dečak's disability status, see: Jutarnji list, 11, 14, 16 Mar. 2000; *Večernji list*, 14 Mar. 2000.
[513] The memorandum also specified that the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina was a separate conflict, which Croatia aided only through bilateral agreements. See: Promemorija, 7 Apr. 2000, H.S., fond Hrvatski sabor, podfond Hrvatski sabor, 4. saziv (2000-3), serija Odbor za ratne veterane, podserija Sjednice, podpodserija 8. sjednica, podpodserija Zapisnik.

Unearthing Serb postmortal remains triggers veteran mobilisation

Associations' fears were soon realised, as in mid-April, the I.C.T.Y. started investigating war crimes committed by Croatian forces against Serb civilians in Gospić in 1991, preparing to start exhumations of mass graves in the city.[514] The I.C.T.Y. started investigating the Gospić crimes in 1996 when it talked to the first witnesses. In 1997, four Croatian veterans testified about massive crimes in Gospić in October 1991. These veterans, led by Milan Levar, spoke publicly in the media about the crimes they witnessed and even reported them to Croatian authorities. Josip Manolić, one of the founders of H.D.Z. who left the party in 1994, also spoke publicly about crimes in 1997, causing a backlash from some veteran associations.[515] Now, ahead of the exhumations, Levar talked again about the crimes he had testified to before, naming Croatian officers Mirko Norac and Tihomir Orešković as chief organisers of the crimes.[516] What made the crimes from Gospić incredibly politically delicate was that they were not spontaneous but organised. Additionally, even some officials from the centre-left coalition had been informed about them in 1991-92, when they were members of the H.D.Z.'s coalition Government.[517]

Immediately upon arrival of I.C.T.Y.'s investigators in Gospić, local government officials – from H.D.Z. – condemned the Government's decision to allow them to conduct exhumations and investigations without consulting them. H.D.Z. officials pointed to authorities to

[514] *Jutarnji list*, 11 Apr. 2000; *Večernji list*, 11 Apr. 2000.
[515] *Večernji list*, 28 Jan. 1998; *Globus*, 30 Apr. 1999; *Jutarnji list*, 12 Apr. 2000; Paulina Arbutina, 'Nije se više imalo u koga pucati', SKD Prosvjeta, Sep. 1996 http://casopis.skd-prosvjeta.hr/nije-se-vise-imalo-u-koga-pucati/ (1 Aug. 2020); For reactions of veteran associations at Manolić's statements, see: *Vjesnik*, 15 Nov. 1997; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 28 Nov. 1997.
[516] *Večernji list*, 10-2 Apr. 2000; While Norac claimed not to understand his motives for such accusations, Orešković called Levar 'mentally deranged'. See: *Jutarnji list*, 12-3 Apr. 2000; *Večernji list*, 13 Apr. 2000.
[517] *Večernji list*, 10-1, 14 Apr. 2000; *Jutarnji list*, 11, 16 Apr. 2000; *Feral Tribune*, 15, 22 Apr. 2000; Ivica Đikić, Domovinski obrat: politička biografija Stipe Mesića (Zagreb, 2004), pp 63-4; Some former members of the Government of national unity, like Budiša, denied having any knowledge about Gospić crimes. See: *Večernji list*, 15 Apr. 2000.

investigate crimes committed against Croats instead.[518] Very quickly, local veteran associations, completely coordinated and acting with Gospić and Lika-Senj County H.D.Z. officials, reacted to the planned exhumations by claiming their secrecy and 'unnormal security' caused unease among the local population. Local veteran associations emphasised that they would oppose the prosecution of any Croatian general and former soldier. At the same time, they called state bodies to investigate any potential war crimes if Croatian forces ever committed them. The associations and local officials claimed that no crimes against Serbs occurred, while they praised Norac and others for their heroic defence of the city.[519] In this way, the memory of Serbian crimes screened the memory of Croatian crimes.

Local wartime commanders and veteran leaders accused Levar of being 'a pawn' for real organisers, Manolić and others who wanted to pass the blame for their crimes onto others. Claiming they are only responsible before God, Croatia and its people, they claimed they would organise protests and petitions in their determination not to allow any extradition of Croatian veterans to The Hague.[520] The mention of 'God' demonstrated the growing presence of religion in veterans' rhetoric.

The planned exhumations in Gospić quickly became a major event in Croatian politics, mobilising other national veteran associations. Building upon demands made by U.H.V.D.R. and Z.U.H.D.D.R. before and local veteran associations after the exhumations started in Gospić, national H.V.I.D.R. demanded a parliamentary discussion on the 'protection of the dignity of the Homeland War'. Furthermore, association leaders demanded that the Parliament abolish the Constitutional Law on Cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. and that only state bodies could prosecute crimes committed by Croatian forces.[521]

[518] *Jutarnji list*, 11 Apr. 2000; *Večernji list*, 11 Apr. 2000.
[519] *Jutarnji list*, 12 Apr. 2000; *Večernji list*, 12 Apr. 2000.
[520] *Večernji list*, 14 Apr. 2000.
[521] *Jutarnji list*, 13 Apr. 2000.

With the situation developing, on 13 April 2000, U.H.V.D.R. sent a memorandum to the parliamentary Committee for War Veterans calling for passing a systematic strategy on protecting the 'dignity of the Homeland War and Croatian defenders'. Repeating demands formulated at the meeting of the Central Committee a week prior, U.H.V.D.R. warned that without any 'political sensitivity,' the Government passed decisions on allowing I.C.T.Y. investigators to perform exhumations or allowed Serbs – former members of 'armed rebel troops' – to return without consulting veteran associations. U.H.V.D.R. warned that such 'testing of limits of endurance' of veterans might end in unwanted outcomes if all small protests tie into one defence of their dignity. Veterans and their associations were framed as victims of media and political representations about war crimes and cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. Therefore, besides the proposed parliamentary debate and strategy on the protection of dignity, U.H.V.D.R. demanded changes in the Law on Veterans that would transform the Veterans Ministry into an institution forwarding veteran demands to the Government.[522] This showed a clear intention of associations to run state policies.

Besides directly cooperating locally, H.D.Z. was the associations' ally in the Parliament, accusing the Government of allowing 'secret' indictments and I.C.T.Y.'s exhumations in Gospić.[523] H.D.Z. also proposed a parliamentary discussion on the 'protection of the dignity of the Homeland War'. The Government promised to draft a Declaration on the Cooperation with the I.C.T.Y., while it stated that the Parliament would pass a permit for the exhumations conducted in Croatia. The governing coalition agreed upon a draft of the Declaration that admitted the Tribunal's jurisdiction for investigating all crimes committed during the war,

[522] Promemorija o zaštiti digniteta.
[523] Unnamed (Correspondence from H.D.Z. Novska, H.V.I.D.R. Novska, Association of Widows of Croatian Defenders of the Homeland War Novska and Association of Parents of Killed Defenders of the Homeland War Novska to the President of the Committee for Croatian Defenders of the Homeland War of the Chamber of Counties of the Croatian Parliament, Zvonimir Červenko), 14 Apr. 2000, H.D.A., fond H.R.-H.D.A.-2017.3 Hrvatski sabor, Županijski dom, kutija 160.

including the 1995 military operations Flash and Storm – a part vehemently opposed by H.D.Z. In a heated atmosphere, Vice-Prime Minister Goran Granić presented the declaration as a 'civilisational step', as Croatia needed to be responsible for events on its territory. He rejected opposition cries that accepting the Government's Declaration would lead to the 'criminalisation of the Homeland War'; for the Government, the War was a 'sanctity'. In the end, the Parliament passed the Government's proposal for the Declaration that politically established the jurisdiction of the I.C.T.Y. in prosecuting all war crimes committed on Croatian territory. Frustrated by being unable to push the draft in the Parliament, H.D.Z.'s M.P.s left the sessions before the vote.[524]

Seeing that H.D.Z. would most likely fail to stop the Government in Parliament, veteran associations decided to act directly. Seeing the Declaration and permit to proceed with exhumations as 'a grand treason', U.H.B.D.D.R.'s President Borković indirectly threatened that veterans were 'not unarmed' and would use everything to defend Croatia and their rights against those who wished to 'erase' and 'depreciate' the Homeland War.[525] As M.P.s were discussing the Declaration in the plenary hall, members of the U.H.B.D.D.R. and other associations made a performance in front of the Parliament by staying tied in chains. Meanwhile, the representatives of the Republic Coordination of Associations from the Homeland War (*Republička koordinacija udruga iz Domovinskog rata*, Republic Coordination) held a press conference in one of the press rooms within the Parliament.

[524] Zapisnik 3. sjednice, 13 Apr. 2000, H.S., fond Hrvatski sabor, podfond Hrvatski sabor, 4. saziv (2000-3), serija Odbor za ratne veterane, podserija Sjednice, podpodserija 3. sjednica, podpodserija Zapisnik; *Jutarnji list*, 13-5 Apr. 2000; *Večernji list*, 15 Apr. 2000; For the text of the Declaration, see: Zastupnički dom Hrvatskoga državnog sabora, Deklaracija o suradnji s Međunarodnim kaznenim sudom u Den Haagu, Narodne Novine, 14 Apr. 2000, https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2000_04_41_957.html (30 Mar. 2019).

[525] Like U.H.V.D.R. and H.V.I.D.R before, U.H.B.D.D.R. also tried to raise some other complaints under the umbrella of threatened 'dignity of the *Homeland War*'. Therefore, Borković complained about lack of veterans at managerial positions and Government's attempt to cancel voucher privatisations with which veterans got stocks of once state-owned companies. See: *Jutarnji list*, 14 Apr. 2000; *Večernji list*, 14 Apr. 2000.

Hosted by the President of the parliamentary Committee for War Veterans Dečak – also President of the U.H.V.D.R. and Republic Coordination of Associations from the Homeland War – veterans saw the Declaration as a 'liquidation' of Croatia as a state, as it allegedly derogated the jurisdiction of its institutions in favour of the I.C.T.Y, basically violating its sovereignty. At the conference, radical and populist rhetoric prevailed, as speakers saw the Declaration as an attempt to equalise the aggression of Serbia and Montenegro and the Croatian defensive war, 'Chetnik criminals' with the H.V. While veteran representatives supported the cooperation with the I.C.T.Y., they stood behind H.D.Z.'s position that all potential crimes committed during operations Flash and Storm should be left to the Croatian judiciary. There, in the Parliament, Borković repeated his threats by saying that if the Declaration were passed, they would have to 'take arms' and 'wage war for a creating a Croatian state again'. He concluded by saying that if the Government could breach the Constitution, the veterans could 'take down the Government'.[526]

Finally, local veteran associations organised a protest in Gospić, where a few thousand protesters gathered. Although protesters called Croatian authorities – and the I.C.T.Y. – to investigate the potential crimes, Ivica Čačić, President of the U.H.D.D.R. for Lika-Senj County, repeated that Croatian forces did not commit war crimes against civilians, and stated that veterans would protect the 'dignity of the Homeland War' by 'all means necessary'. Z.U.H.D.D.R. President Miro Laco warned that the Government did not have the mandate to question the legitimacy of the war by extraditing the generals.[527] Often emphasising that the crimes 'potentially' took place, veteran associations and groups tried to downplay their

[526] *Jutarnji list*, 15 Apr. 2000; *Novi list*, 15 Apr. 2000; *Večernji list*, 15 Apr. 2000; *Feral Tribune*, 22 Apr. 2000; Borković was prone to incidental behaviour, entering physical conflicts and using radical rhetoric. See: *Glas Slavonije*, 25 Oct. 1998; *Jutarnji list*, 25 Oct., 2 Nov. 1998; *Novi list*, 25 Oct., 4 Nov., 22 Dec. 1998; *Večernji list*, 25 Oct. 1998; *Vjesnik*, 25 Oct., 5 Nov. 1998; Denis Kuljiš, Majmuni, gangsteri, heroji, geniji, lupeži & papci: 52 lika u povijesnom spektaklu Denisa Kuljiša (Zagreb, 2005), pp 118-26.
[527] *Jutarnji list*, 20 Apr. 2000; *Večernji list*, 20 Apr. 2000.

importance and significance as much as possible. On the contrary, crimes committed by Serb forces were not a part of similar discussions.

The protest did not contribute to the veterans' cause, as the most prominent actors were politicians. Although associations claimed that they organised the protest without the help of political parties, protesters warmly welcomed Anto Đapić, President of the far-right Croatian Party of Rights (*Hrvatska stranka prava,* H.S.P.), who hijacked the protest and turned it into a party rally. Thus the protest was characterised by occasional anti-Communist rhetoric – some referred to the Government as 'Commies' – racial slurs and even Ustaša chants and Nazi salutes.[528] Đapić was a natural ally for radicalised veteran groups, as he harshly opposed the Government's Declaration and advocated rejecting any jurisdiction of the I.C.T.Y.[529] In the following months, H.S.P. tried to profit from the radicalised climate in society, discussions over the 'criminalisation' and 'dignity' of the Homeland War and H.D.Z.'s hesitance to ride the far-right platform. H.S.P. claimed that the Government had 'undermined the foundations of the Homeland War', forcing the party to resort to 'extra-parliamentary modes of political struggle'. H.S.P. shared with veteran associations their open dissatisfaction with the prospect of the return of Serb refugees that had left Croatia in 1995. In trying to block the policies that may ease this return, H.S.P. threatened with road blockades and organised rallies and protests around Croatia under the umbrella of the Alliance of Associations of Volunteers of the Croatian Defence Forces (*Savez udruga dragovoljaca Hrvatskih obrambenih snaga,* S.U.D.H.O.S.), in its attempt to use veteran associations for

[528] *Jutarnji list*, 20, 22 Apr. 2000; *Večernji list*, 20 Apr. 2000; *Feral Tribune*, 22 Apr. 2000.
[529] Velimir Veselinović, *Hrvatska stranka prava od 1990. do 2011. Na izvoru desnoga radikalizma i populizma* (Zagreb, 2019), p. 274.

political purposes.[530] Besides screening the memory of Serb suffering, H.S.P.'s involvement showed the potential of weaponizing the past for present political purposes.

Such radicalised rhetoric and the evident presence of party politics discredited the protest in the eyes of its participants. One of the prominent speakers in Gospić, Z.U.H.D.D.R. President Laco and veterans who participated in the protest were also not pleased by politicians' attempt to hijack the event. Laco disagreed with messages conveyed by Đapić and others at the protest, who came uninvited to the event, saying he did not share their ideas that Croatian soldiers could not commit crimes in a defensive war. He argued that the Government needed to prepare the public for what would happen next and, in that way, silence 'warmongers' and 'xenophobes'. Laco explained he was for prosecuting war crimes, but not by marginalising the domestic judiciary and labelling persons as 'war criminals' before issuing indictments.[531]

Other veteran associations distanced themselves from the Gospić protest. Although it advocated Croatian jurisdiction of the prosecution of war crimes, the Association of Volunteers of the Croatian War Navy (*Udruga dragovoljaca Hrvatske ratne mornarice*, U.D.H.R.M.) strongly criticised threats of armed violence and rebellion expressed concerning the Declaration, as Croatia 'needed peace, not war'. For U.D.H.R.M., political parties manipulated veterans through associations' leaders, usually members of these parties.[532] An

[530] Slobodna Dalmacija, 4 May 2000; *Jutarnji list*, 7, 31 May, 3, 7-9, 25 Jun. 2000; *Večernji list*, 12 May, 3 Jun., 8 Jul. 2000; *Feral Tribune*, 6 May, 3 Jun. 2000; Veselinović, *Hrvatska stranka prava*, pp 176-8; In 2000, far-right and neo-Nazi groups, aided by certain veteran leaders openly confronted anti-fascist groups, including physical attacks on activists, desecration and demolishing of monuments to victims of fascism, as well as open glorification of Ustaša. See: *Jutarnji list*, 7 May, 9, 14 Jun. 2000; *Večernji list*, 7-8, 10, 12, 18-9 May, 9 Jun. 2000; Feral Tribune, 13, 20 May 2000; *Globus*, 26 May 2000; Božo Udovičić, *Pad umjesto uspona: statisti u demokraciji – II dio* (Zagreb, 2006), p. 163; Boris Pavelić, *10 boljih godina: bilanca građanina-predsjednika Stjepana Mesića* (Zagreb, 2010), p. 23; Veselinović, *Hrvatska stranka prava*, pp 178-9; In 2000, there were also a couple of assaults on Serb returnees, one of which resulted in murder. After the murder, local H.V.ID.R. stated it would give all the support they could to the perpetrators. See: *Jutarnji list*, 6 Mar. 2000; *Večernji list*, 6 Mar. 2000; *Feral Tribune*, 27 Jun. 2000;.

[531] *Feral Tribune*, 22 Apr. 2000; *Jutarnji list*, 11 May 2000; *Globus*, 12 May 2000.

[532] *Jutarnji list*, 22 Apr. 2000; *Vjesnik*, 22 Apr. 2000; *Feral Tribune*, 20 May 2000.

article in a veteran magazine run by U.H.B.D.D.R. was especially critical in commenting on Đapić's presence and rhetoric used at the protest, scandalised about threats of violence and taking down a democratically elected Government.[533] Božo Budimir, retired general and President of the Association Defenders of Croatia, called the protest in Gospić and earlier and later protests proof of political 'manipulation' of veterans by the 'political forces' defeat in the 2000 elections.[534] U.H.V.D.R. also abandoned radical rhetoric, presenting the negative reactions of veteran associations to the Declaration as a big misunderstanding. In a meeting with President Mesić, U.H.V.D.R. President Dečak explained that protests result from veterans' 'lack of information' that the Declaration was not pointed against them but against those that caused damage to veterans' reputation with their 'inadmissible actions'. In his view, a preamble to the Declaration explaining that Croatia experienced 'Serbian aggression' would help alleviate veterans' anger.[535] In later interviews, Dečak also condemned the political appropriation of the protests, claiming no party had the mandate to speak on behalf of veterans or at least his association.[536]

Despite the growing climate of nationalist and chauvinistic incidents and protests on which political forces such as H.S.P. thrived, the issue of exhumations in Gospić was not enough to trigger massive veteran mobilisation. The fragmented veteran movement was not a unified front as the media often claimed, as many associations were still not ready for radical methods and open rebellion against the state despite an overwhelming season of protests in May-June of 2000.[537]

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[533] *Ruža hrvatska: novine hrvatskih branitelja i članova njihovih obitelji*, May 2000.
[534] *Feral Tribune*, 13 May 2000.
[535] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 21 Apr. 2000; *Večernji list*, 21 Apr. 2000.
[536] *Vjesnik*, 28 Apr. 2000; *Večernji list*, 26 Jun. 2000.
[537] About the protests during May-June, see: *Jutarnji list*, 7, 10, 11, 20, 26, 31 May, 3, 7-9, 14, 25, 27 Jun., 1 Jul. 2000; *Večernji list*, 7-8, 10-2, 18-9 May, 3, 9, 27-30 Jun., 1 Jul. 2000; Feral Tribune, 6, 13, 20 May 2000; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 10-1 May 2000; Vjesnik, 11 May 2000; *Globus*, 26 May 2000; Udovičić, *Pad umjesto uspona*, p. 163; Pavelić, *10 boljih* godina, p. 23; Veselinović, *Hrvatska stranka prava*, pp 176-9

A veteran's assassination creates a sense of urgency

Things escalated again in late summer, as on 28 August 2000, Levar, the witness of Gospić's crimes, was killed by a car bomb in front of his house. Just days before the assassination, Levar had told the media about threats against him and the families of other witnesses.[538] The authorities, completely caught off guard, reacted only a day later, with Mesić and Račan accusing the people tied to crimes as potential perpetrators of the assassination.[539] Many in society were shocked, especially human rights organisations and intellectuals who called it 'the most serious moral and political blow' to the new Government, demanding a swift and effective investigation of the assassination. While governing and some opposition parties condemned the act, H.D.Z. on both national and local levels focused their statements on how the issue was framed in the media and Government statements, claiming that no one can speculate that it was a terrorist act or who the alleged perpetrators were, thus creating a 'new Gospić case'. H.D.Z. for Lika-Senj County insisted that reporting based on 'half-truths' cast an unjustifiable doubt on the rule of law, diverting public attention from other significant everyday problems.[540] H.S.P. President Đapić said Levar was aware of what might happen after giving statements that were 'often contested in public'. Like H.D.Z., H.S.P. also focused on arguing that the authorities ascribed the assassination to perpetrators of war crimes in Gospić, thus 'prejudicing' that the crimes took place in the city without any criminal investigation.[541]

The assassination showcased that the new regime had not established control over the police and secret services. The police, especially at the local level, tried to avoid the responsibility

[538] *Jutarnji list*, 29 Aug. 2000; *Večernji list*, 29 Aug. 2000.
[539] *Jutarnji list*, 30 Aug. 2000; *Večernji list*, 30 Aug. 2000; *Feral Tribune*, 2 Sep. 2000.
[540] *Jutarnji list*, 30 Aug. 2000; *Večernji list*, 30-1 Aug. 2000; *Feral Tribune*, 2 Sep. 2000.
[541] Veselinović, *Hrvatska stranka prava*, pp 274-5.

of not guarding Levar despite I.C.T.Y.'s clear instructions some three years earlier.[542] Damir Kajin, an M.P. from the governing Istrian Democratic Assembly (*Istarski demokratski sabor*, I.D.S.), accused the Interior Ministry of allowing perpetrators to assassinate Levar, believing that the trail of crime led to military counter-intelligence agencies. Even Interior Minister Šime Lučin stated that the investigation would include military officials.[543]

The assassination caused unease in public, showing the risks of testifying about the crimes committed by Croatian soldiers. Testifying against potential domestic perpetrators was perilous in small, tightly-knit communities like Gospić. Knowing his cooperation with the investigators, Gospić dwellers had avoided Levar for months – either from fear of being associated with him or seeing him as a traitor.[544] Levar's ostracization and fear – which some openly admitted to Levar's widow – in the local community could be observed from the fact that only a handful of locals attended his funeral. The funeral attracted more people from liberal intellectual circles and peace activists from Zagreb, who were worried about the radicalisation in society.[545] Upon his assassination, many locals avoided answering questions about Levar, and when they spoke, they were either glad or indifferent regarding his assassination.[546] However, it was not only the local community that forgot Levar.

Although Levar was a veteran, associations showed utter animosity and indifference, except for the Association Defenders of Croatia, which called the authorities to bring the perpetrator of the 'heinous' crime before the 'face of justice'.[547] Luka Podrug, who would soon become

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[542] *Jutarnji list*, 30-1 Aug. 2000; *Večernji list*, 30-1 Aug. 2000; *Globus*, 1, 8 Sep. 2000; *Feral Tribune*, 2, 16 Sep. 2000.
[543] *Jutarnji list*, 30-1 Aug., 1 Sep. 2000; *Večernji list*, 30-1 Aug., 1 Sep. 2000; *Feral Tribune*, 2 Sep. 2000.
[544] *Večernji list*, 29-30 Aug. 2000.
[545] *Jutarnji list*, 1-2 Sep. 2000; *Večernji list*, 1 Sep. 2000; *Nacional*, 6 Sep. 2000; Zeljko Peratovic, 'Pogreb Milana Levara', YouTube, 19 Jun. 2006, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ncYImNkOo0&ab_channel=ZeljkoPeratovic (23 Mar. 2019).
[546] *Feral Tribune*, 2 Sep. 2000; *Jutarnji list*, 2 Sep. 2000.
[547] *Večernji list*, 31 Aug. 2000; Association's President Budimir was Levar's close friend. See: Večernji list, 6 Sep. 2000.

one of the most influential veteran leaders in Split, used Levar's assassination to threaten President Mesić with a similar destiny for betrayal.[548] Associations and veteran leaders openly despised him, calling Levar a 'traitor', 'revealed informant', 'fake Hague witness', and 'paid by Serbs', who testified against his 'people, army and homeland' and killed himself.[549] Upon his assassination, veteran associations tried to assassinate his character by asking the authorities to publish Levar's medical records – as war suspect Orešković challenged his mental health – a list of people he owed money to and even intelligence agencies for which he worked.[550] At best, veteran leaders like Laco claimed Levar was 'instrumentalised' by people who wanted to use him for clashes with their political opponents.[551]

Pressed to the wall, the Government decided to act. Fifteen days after Levar's assassination, police arrested nine suspects in the Gospić area and three others across Croatia – including Orešković, one of the main suspects, who resided in Zagreb.[552] Although the investigating judge soon dropped the charges for Levar's murder, Gospić County Court detained Orešković and four others under suspicion that they had committed war crimes in Gospić in 1991.[553] Soon, veteran associations across Croatia mobilised. In Đakovo, a local veteran association accused the Government of initiating a 'wild hunt' against people who may be innocent, while veterans from Vukovar promised to join.[554] From its annual assembly in Vinkovci, U.H.V.D.R. expressed its concerns regarding the 'criminalisation of the Homeland War',

[548] Podrug said on local Split T.V. station A.T.V. in October that 'Judases always end in the same way even if they are called Milan Levar or if they are a head of state'. See: *Jutarnji list*, 17 Oct. 2000; The police later reviewed the recording of the show and concluded that his statement did not constitute a threat. See: *Večernji list*, 31 Oct. 2000
[549] *Jutarnji list*, 14 Sep., 10 Oct. 2000; *Večernji list*, 15 Sep. 2000; *Feral Tribune*, 16 Sep. 2000.
[550] *Glas Slavonije*, 15 Sep. 2000; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 15 Sep. 2000; *Vjesnik*, 15 Sep. 2000.
[551] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 15 Sep. 2000.
[552] *Jutarnji list*, 13 Sep. 2000; *Večernji list*, 13 Sep. 2000.
[553] *Jutarnji list*, 14 Sep. 2000; *Večernji list*, 14 Sep. 2000.
[554] *Jutarnji list*, 14 Sep. 2000.

accompanied by creating a negative media picture of it. U.H.V.D.R. announced it would counter these criminalisation attempts by all political means available.[555] In Dubrovnik, the local Coordination of Associations from the Homeland War expressed their disappointment in those – including some officials and part of the media – that tried to 'criminalise and demonise the Homeland War', trying to impose guilt on those who took part in 'one of the brightest part of the whole Croatian history'. They called the officials to stop 'slandering' the Homeland War and stop the arrests, emphasising they would not use arms.[556]

In Zagreb, veteran associations defied the Government, alternating between issuing threats and calling for a reason. Thus, H.V.I.D.R.'s President Liović first told the authorities not to 'shove weapons' into veterans' hands by trying to incite fear among citizens with the 'use of violence' in massive arrests. However, his subordinates toned down the rhetoric and assured the press they were for tolerance, as they called the officials to public debates.[557] Associations like H.V.I.D.R. often used militaristic language, which was also vague, almost as an attempt to provoke the Government while subtly sending a threat.

Z.U.H.D.D.R.'s President Laco expressed bitterness for everyone who used every chance to 'spit' on veterans and the Homeland War. He stated that the volunteers would confront any arrests of Croatian generals Mirko Norac and Ante Gotovina. Laco appealed to the Government not to 'deepen the war' against veterans and not to 'tear down the dignity of the Homeland War'. Voicing their belief in unity, fully disabled retired officer Miodrag Demo, sitting next to Laco, concluded that 'an attack' on generals was an attack on them.[558] In line with its traditional non-radicalism, U.H.V.D.R. announced using 'all allowed political means'

[555] Zaključci sa III izvještajnog sabora.
[556] *Vjesnik*, 15 Sep. 2000.
[557] *Jutarnji list*, 15 Sep. 2000; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 15 Sep. 2000; *Večernji list*, 15 Sep. 2000; *Vjesnik*, 15 Sep. 2000; *Feral Tribune*, 16 Sep. 2000.
[558] *Glas Slavonije*, 15 Sep. 2000; *Jutarnji list*, 15 Sep. 2000; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 15 Sep. 2000; *Večernji list*, 15 Sep. 2000; One of the reasons Laco was so deeply involved in defending Norac was their childhood friendship. See: Nacional, 12 May 2000.

in confronting all attempts of 'criminalisation' of the war, while it supported the Headquarters in Lika and Dalmatia in their struggle to defend the dignity of the Homeland War.[559]

Again, the 'dignity' of the war, under threat of 'criminalisation', was used to divert the discussion over unpleasant transgressions from the wartime period: crimes committed by Croatian forces.

Headquarters for the Defence of the Dignity of the Homeland War

Responding to events from Gospić, leaders of twenty veteran associations from Split-Dalmatia County met in the building of the County administration, where they formed the Crisis Headquarters for the Defence of the Dignity of the Homeland War (*Krizni stožer za obranu digniteta Domovinskog rata*, Headquarters). The newly formed Headquarters now appropriated the logic of the opposition parties H.D.Z. and H.S.P. in accusing Račan of anticipating that the arrested were war criminals or that crimes occurred. The Headquarters demanded that the Government end the persecution of Croatian officers, as they did not commit organised crimes during a 'defensive war'. While saying they would not leave the building before authorities stopped manhunts, the Headquarters announced the possibility of using all democratic methods of opposition, including protests.[560]

The Crisis Headquarters – later renamed into Central National Headquarters for the Defence of the Dignity of the Homeland War (*Središnji nacionalni stožer za obranu digniteta Domovinskog rata*) – in Split would become the central player in contentious veteran politics

[559] Zaključci III izvještajnog sabora od 15. rujna 2000., 15 Sep. 2000, U.H.V.D.R., registrator Izvještajni sabor..
[560] *Jutarnji list*, 14-5 Sep. 2000; *Večernji list*, 14 Sep. 2000.

in the following months and years. While the word 'headquarters' did come out of their repertoire of militarised vocabulary, it also borrowed the term from numerous headquarters for defending companies and factories during workers' strikes in the late 1990s and early 2000s.[561] These headquarters were *ad hoc* groups, never formally registered – unlike veteran associations – organised on the town, county, and national levels, mainly transforming local Coordinations of Associations from the Homeland War into an entity with a new name. Unlike Coordinations, the Headquarters gathered diverse groups – veterans, H.D.Z. and other right-wing politicians, and active military officers – that tried to pressure the authorities to stop arrests and investigations.

Some veteran leaders tied to accusations of corruption, embezzlement and violent behaviour from local H.V.I.D.R. and U.H.V.D.R. branches, and marginal far-right politicians and H.D.Z. members gathered under the Headquarters' umbrella, fearing the changes the new Government may introduce.[562] H.D.Z. partially stood behind the emergence of the Headquarters, with party members directly involved in its forming on local levels, especially in Split.[563] It resulted from H.D.Z.'s penetration into many right-wing parties and associations in Split and other places during the 1990s.[564] With the situation escalating in Gospić, H.D.Z. decided to capitalise on veteran and local resentment for war crimes prosecution and cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. Its local party members were vital in providing the infrastructure and political and media support.[565] H.D.Z. President Sanader, hesitant to

[561] Marko Grdešić, 'Uspon i pad stožera za obranu kompanija u Hrvatskoj' in *Revija za sociologiju*, xxxviii (2007), no. 1-2, pp 55-67.
[562] Novi list, 18 Sep. 2000; *Nacional*, 20 Sep. 2000; *Feral Tribune*, 23 Sep. 2000; Active military officer Tonči Turić, President of U.H.V.D.R. Split and first President of the Central Headquarters, led a group of veterans that intimidated presidential candidate Zdravko Tomac – from S.D.P. – by chanting 'death to Tomac, death to Communists' and performing a Nazi salute during the 1997 elections campaign. See: *Nacional*, 4 Jun. 1997.
[563] *Nacional*, 20 Sep. 2000.
[564] *Feral Tribune*, 23 Sep. 2000.
[565] *Jutarnji list*, 15 Sep. 2000; *Večernji list*, 14-5 Sep. 2000; *Nacional*, 20 Sep. 2000; Although some media presented as if the Headquarters took control over a hall in the building of Split-Dalmatia County in a revolutionary manner, it was given to them for use by the County Prefect Branimir Lukšić

support earlier veteran protests fully and openly, had now decided to get fully involved, mobilising the party on national, regional and local levels.

Therefore, immediately upon the arrest, local H.D.Z. officials and veterans formed a similar Headquarters in Gospić, the centre of the veteran rebellion against the Government. Local veteran and victims' associations, led by the President of H.D.Z.'s city organisation, Darko Milinović – a veteran himself – used Gospić's central square as a stage for their performative protests against the arrests and the Government.[566] Since the arrests, locals, suspects' families and veteran leaders started to gather in front of the Gospić County Court, creating an agitated atmosphere while trying to exert pressure on judges and state attorneys leading the investigation. In Gospić, veterans and locals were extremely hostile to outsiders, especially reporters whom they attempted to assault physically in the presence of police, as they accused them of creating a media climate for their arrest.[567] In the eyes of many locals, the actual victims were Gospić veterans and dwellers persecuted by authorities. When asked about Levar's assassination, the local either said he was killed by the Government so that veterans could be persecuted for that, or he committed suicide – strengthened by ambivalent statements of the local investigative judge. Feeling that the authorities were punishing the whole city, some of its dwellers threatened to use arms to defend themselves.[568]

H.D.Z. was now wholly involved in the Headquarters' protests and actions, trying to direct their activities and rhetoric in the direction that would bring the party the most political gain. This coordination, cooperation, and probably partial control of H.D.Z. over the Headquarters was most evident in Split. Therefore, the Headquarters demanded that Mesić use his

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from H.D.Z., who would become one of the political sponsors of the local veteran movement in the following months. See: *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 15 Sep. 2000; *Feral Tribune*, 16, 23 Sep. 2000.
[566] *Jutarnji list*, 15 Sep. 2000; *Večernji list*, 15 Sep. 2000.
[567] *Jutarnji list*, 14-5, 18 Sep. 2000; *Večernji list*, 14-6 Sep. 2000; *Novi list*, 15 Sep. 2000; *Feral Tribune*, 16 Sep. 2000.
[568] *Feral Tribune*, 16 Sep. 2000.

constitutional prerogatives and dismiss the Government, as Račan did not respond to its demands – an attempt to exploit existing political disputes between the President and Prime Minister. The coordination between the Headquarters and H.D.Z. showed their similar statements regarding potential war crimes committed by Croatian forces, claiming those were individual criminal acts and not war crimes, according to the Geneva Conventions. This statement in the name of the Split-Dalmatia County was signed by Prefect Lukšić, openly defying the Government, complaining about the political and security situation in the country, radicalised through massive arrests that left the impression Croatia was 'an aggressor' instead of a 'victim' during the Homeland War.[569] Veteran groups used the aggressor-victim dichotomy to screen the memory of crimes committed against Serbs and divert attention to the established dynamic.

H.D.Z. based its strategy on accusing the Government of radicalising the situation in society and deepening the existing rifts by questioning the overall order of things in Croatia, implementing the de-Tuđmanisation process.[570] In that context, H.D.Z.'s President Vladimir Šeks said that more murders were possible in Croatia if one continued with the 'criminalisation of H.D.Z.' – a statement that some saw as a threat.[571] Sanader came to Gospić and accused the Government of bringing new social divisions, bringing 'uncertainty' and 'insecurity'. While condemning all war crimes and distancing himself from extremism or terrorism, Sanader echoed associations' demands concerning Levar – investigation to prove who the real perpetrators were to remove the anathema from veterans and particular arrested

[569] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 15 Sep. 2000; *Večernji list*, 15, 18 Sep. 2000; *Vjesnik*, 15 Sep. 2000; *Feral Tribune*, 16 Sep. 2000.
[570] *Večernji list*, 7, 14 Sep. 2000.
[571] Pavelić, *10 boljih godina*, p. 28.

individuals. If the authorities did not resolve the case in a week, Sanader would demand Račan's resignation.[572]

H.D.Z. was not the only party trying to benefit or reposition itself by appealing to veterans. Although part of the governing coalition, H.S.L.S. started to drift apart from the Government's course as its right-wing faction from Dalmatia, headed by M.P.s Ivan Škarić and Joško Kontić began to take part in Headquarters meetings, agreeing with their decisions of calling for an extraordinary session of Parliament where the Government would report on recent arrests.[573] As Split Mayor, Škarić provided most logistical support to the Central Headquarters besides Lukšić, also serving as its leading political supporter.[574] In the Parliament, the Committee for Internal Politics and National Security, headed by an H.S.L.S. M.P. Đurđa Adlešić, criticised Interior Minister Lučin for a too spectacular fashion of arrests, which resulted in adverse reactions within the public. Adlešić criticised Lučin based on negative comments she received from veterans at U.H.V.D.R.'s annual assembly a few days earlier.[575] In presenting the current political situation as the clash between two extremisms, H.S.L.S. President Budiša echoed veterans' thoughts when he criticised Mesić for claiming that the 1990s Croatian leadership advocated a 'Greater Croatia' as a parallel to 'Greater Serbia'.[576]

The authorities ultimately adopted protesters' rhetoric and tropes. Thus, S.D.P.'s Parliament Vice-Chair Tomac said a 'political consensus' was needed over the idea that there was no Croatia without 'preserving the dignity of the Homeland War'. He argued that veterans protested because they feared that the defensive character of the 'defensive war' would be

[572] *Jutarnji list*, 19 Sep. 2000; *Večernji list*, 19 Sep. 2000.
[573] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 15 Sep. 2000; *Jutarnji list*, 16, 19 Sep. 2000; *Večernji list*, 16-8 Sep. 2000
[574] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 20 Sep. 2000.
[575] *Jutarnji list*, 19 Sep. 2000; *Večernji list*, 19 Sep. 2000; Zapisnik III izvještajnog sabora.
[576] *Večernji list*, 24 Sep. 2000; *Jutarnji list*, 25 Sep. 2000.

questioned based on individual criminal acts.[577] Račan rationalised how state activities aimed at 'defending' the Homeland War and national interests from those who want to use it to hide certain illegal deeds. He stressed how the Government would never allow someone to accuse 'veterans as a whole' or the Homeland War, while investigations into potential war crimes were the best way to 'defend' the values of the war.[578] Governing officials also framed the prosecution of war crimes as 'cleaning up' the 'stains' that individuals made on the undisputed Homeland War.[579]

Although there were probably more veteran associations that did not agree with the methods and style of the Headquarters, only a handful of them, already known for their non-radical orientation, publicly offered alternatives. Thus, while it noted that the officials and media had to refrain from establishing guilt before court decisions, the U.D.H.R.M. appealed for normal communication between associations and authorities, as ultimatums, threats, and calls to arms were 'a direct attack' on veterans' dignity.[580] The association Defenders of Croatia also criticised any ultimatums or threats of violence made in defence of war crimes perpetrators. For the Association, defending the 'dignity of the Homeland War' with criminal acts was unacceptable, as this organisation did not want to screen crimes committed against Serbs.[581] Retired brigadier and wartime head of Split's Office for Defence, Mladen Bujas, claimed that the Headquarters did not represent all veterans despite presenting itself as an umbrella entity. Hence, he explained how certain groups within the Headquarters tried to use the whole campaign to pursue individual interests and preserve certain benefits received during the 1990s. Furthermore, he noted how some associations had already left the Headquarters due to

[577] *Večernji list*, 27 Sep. 2000.
[578] *Večernji list*, 16 Sep. 2000.
[579] *Večernji list*, 18 Sep. 2000.
[580] *Jutarnji list*, 18 Sep. 2000; *Vjesnik*, 18 Sep. 2000.
[581] The Association also noted that one of the arrested veterans, retired H.V.O. general Ivan Andabak, was suspected of smuggling cocaine, and not wartime acts. See: *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 20 Sep. 2000; *Večernji list*, 20 Sep. 2000.

disagreements with their activities.[582] Thus, despite an overwhelming number of associations and groups supporting the Headquarters, critical voices within the veteran movement still existed. These groups did not interpret the 'dignity of the Homeland War' as the Headquarters or the national H.V.I.D.R.

Some associations, like U.H.V.D.R., hid behind a moderate rhetoric shell while remaining closely tied to the Headquarters. There, Turić, President of the U.H.V.D.R. for Split-Dalmatia County – also Central Headquarters' President – explained that veterans were 'the last people' to cause harm to the state while portraying saying that the Headquarters were a headquarters for 'building and defending the state'. At the same time, Turić and presidents of other county organisations and guests from marginal veteran associations voiced equally, if not more, radical ideas: blaming Serb war criminals for setting up forest fires on the Croatian coast, demanding cutting ties with the I.C.T.Y. and Blaškić's release from detention prison in The Hague, claiming Croatian forces did not commit war crimes or that they were ready to commit any crimes to protect their families.[583] Thus, under the pretext of defending the dignity of the war, veterans wished to impose a range of radical and non-democratic ideas.

While the Headquarters' course of action was not coherent or apparent at the start, it soon initiated a petition for triggering an extraordinary session of Parliament, reducing the jurisdiction of the I.C.T.Y. and putting an end to arrests which gathered some 88,000 signatures in some ten days, which they delivered to the Parliament.[584] The organisation of Headquarters across Croatia also grew, and veteran associations formed local Headquarters across Croatia, thus spreading the revolt out of Dalmatia and Lika.[585] At the same time, the

[582] *Feral Tribune*, 23 Sep. 2000.
[583] Zapisnik III izvještajnog sabora.
[584] *Novi list*, 18 Sep. 2000; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 18 Sep. 2000; *Večernji list*, 18, 27 Sep. 2000.
[585] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 19, 20 Sep. 2000; *Večernji list*, 16, 19, 24 Sep. 2000; *Novi list*, 19 Sep. 2000; *Ruža hrvatska: novine hrvatskih branitelja i članova njihovih obitelji*, Oct. 2000.

individual Headquarters on county and city levels started to communicate among themselves, coordinating their activities, while a disabled veteran in a wheelchair, Mirko Čondić, led the Central National Headquarters in Split.[586]

Generals give new life to the dying veteran revolt

However, despite numerous ways Headquarters tried to pressure the authorities, the movement was dying out before a new development in late September that dramatically changed the dynamic of the ongoing protest cycle. A group of twelve wartime generals – seven active and five retired – sent a public letter that could serve as a manifesto of the early 2000s veteran contentious period. Acknowledging that the media allegedly slandered them by writing on their potential criminal prosecution – generals Ante Gotovina and Norac – as a part of a broader campaign of 'criminalising the Homeland War', generals showed bitterness over how a part of the media and politicians speak about the war solely in a negative context. For them, criminalising the war as the foundation on which 'Croatian freedom, sovereignty and independence' were created was a criminalisation of the will of the Croatian people to defend themselves from the 'Greater-Serbian aggression and occupation'. Although generals acknowledged that the state must prosecute all individual war crimes, they condemned the sensationalist way the police arrested veterans and labelled suspects guilty even before conducting the investigation or trial. While claiming that 'excessive force' in the arrests and speculations by media and politicians on potential I.C.T.Y. did not contribute to 'an atmosphere of tolerance and building of a democratic Croatia', generals strongly emphasised that they believed to speak for all veterans in claiming that no violence or terrorism would be used. In the end, they called institutions, media, civil society, and all other relevant actors in

[586] *Večernji list*, 19, 21-2 Sep. 2000; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 22 Sep. 2000; *Feral Tribune*, 23 Sep. 2000.

society to sustain from negative and 'historically inaccurate' representation of the war and thus protect the dignity of Croatian officers and soldiers because they were the foundations upon which 'the future of democratic and prosperous Croatia' lied.[587]

The authorities were shocked over the letter, calling it unacceptable and inappropriate, as they claimed it represented the military's interfering in police work and violated the principle of the military's involvement in politics. Considering that seven generals were active officers, including Deputy Chief of the General Staff Damir Krstičević and Chief of the Army Inspectorate Gotovina, most were either H.D.Z. members or tied to the party, the signs of political activation and 'politicisation' of the military were evident. In that aspect, many immediately characterised the letter as another H.D.Z. proxy operation.[588] Besides generals' ties to H.D.Z., the party participated in drafting the letter.[589] H.D.Z.'s role was evident in a slightly more moderate tone than in press releases from Headquarters across Croatia. Although some – even retired generals – characterised the letter as an attempted *coup d'état'*, such accusations were probably too radical.[590] Generals tried to use their real and perceived public authority to divert media attention from speculations on future war crimes investigations. Some commentators said that it probably was not a coup attempt but clearly showed the radicalisation of Croatia's public sphere.[591] Like veteran associations, generals wished to play on emotions surrounding the war memory in diverting the focus on prosecution and different war-related transgressions from the 1990s.

[587] *Jutarnji list*, 29 Sep. 2000; *Večernji list*, 29 Sep. 2000; Udovičić, *Pad umjesto uspona,* pp 153-5; Duka, *Račan*, p. 92.
[588] *Jutarnji list*, 29-30 Sep. 2000; *Večernji list*, 29-30 Sep. 2000; Pavelić, 10 boljih godina, p. 28-9.
[589] On the role of H.D.Z. in drafting the letter, see: *Nacional*, 3 Oct. 2000; ; Ivica Đikić, Davor Krile and Boris Pavelić, *Gotovina: stvarnost i mit* (Zagreb, 2010), p. 116; Đikić, Domovinski obrat, p. 32; Pavelić, 10 boljih godina, p. 28.
[590] *Feral Tribune*, 30 Sep. 2000; *Jutarnji list*, 1 Oct. 2000; Pavelić, 10 boljih godina, p. 29.
[591] *Feral Tribune*, 7 Oct. 2000.

Despite the relatively moderate tone, some officials immediately recognised this as a potentially dangerous politicisation of the military directly pointed against the authorities. This is why President Mesić did not hesitate and decided to use his constitutional prerogatives and immediately pensioned the seven active officers, telling them there would be no political speeches in the military. Although Mesić later admitted that prospects of a coup were probably meagre, he explained his worries over soldiers in the barracks following the generals' example. Before implementing Mesić's decision, generals tried to obstruct the decision by contacting Defence Minister Jozo Radoš – from H.S.L.S., which started to drift from the coalition Government – who wanted to help the generals.[592]

Although Mesić's move demonstrated the state's willingness to confront the protesters, the letter and especially the decision to retire generals, some of which enjoyed massive respect among veterans, ignited their resistance to the authorities. The newly established President of the Central National Headquarters, Čondić, characterised Mesić's decision as proof of authorities' lack of care for the 'dignity of the Homeland War and Croatian struggle for liberation'. While he praised the generals' letter as a 'highly moral and patriotic act', he warned that national security took a hit with their retirement.[593] The Headquarters in Šibenik organised a public debate, where they supported generals in the presence of both H.D.Z. and H.S.L.S. M.P.s who were critical of Mesić's decision to retire the generals.[594] Headquarters from Slavonian counties supported the generals who were the 'foundation of the new Croatian state'.[595] Janko Bobetko, one of the retired (before the President's decision) generals who signed the letter, compared Mesić's retirement decision with how he retired from the

[592] *Jutarnj list*, 30 Sep., 1, 3 Oct. 2000; *Večernji list*, 30 Sep., 1-4 Oct. 2000; *Feral Tribune*, 7 Oct. 2000; Pavelić, 10 boljih godina, pp 28-30; Đikić, Domovinski obrat, pp 32-5; Đikić, Krile and Pavelić, *Gotovina*, pp 116-9; Duka, *Račan*, p. 92.
[593] *Jutarnj list*, 30 Sep. 2000.
[594] *Jutarnj list*, 1 Oct. 2000; *Novi list*, 2 Oct. 2000.
[595] *Jutarnj list*, 1 Oct. 2000; *Večernji list*, 1 Oct. 2000.

J.N.A. in the 1970s due to his participation in the Croatian Spring.[596] Some veteran leaders admitted that active generals probably breached regulations in publishing the letter but believed the punishment was too severe, as such a move would not ease the existing tensions.[597] U.H.V.D.R.'s President Dečak expressed shock over such retaliation against officers that led the people to the most significant victories in history.[598] Dečak's view mirrored H.D.Z.'s claims, repeated for months, according to which the government was conducting retaliatory political purges and persecution of people from Tuđman's regime.

After a month of direct involvement, H.D.Z. under Sanader decided to ride the wave of veterans' dissatisfaction and build its platform on total radicalisation. Upon his election for H.D.Z. President in late April 2000, many saw Sanader as a much more moderate leader than his unofficial contender for party president, Ivić Pašalić.[599] Despite his victory at the party elections, the conflicts within H.D.Z. did not stop, and Sanader could not consolidate power. The reason was that only Tuđman could keep different party fractions in check for almost a decade. His death led to a power vacuum in the H.D.Z. and brought up numerous arguments among party leaders, showing the cracks kept together under Tuđman's strong hand.[600] Since the party elections, and especially after the summer, the two were in constant battles over dominance in the party, as Pašalić wanted to tie H.D.Z. to right-wing parties. In contrast, Sanader was keener on cooperating with centrist ones – the governing H.S.L.S. and H.S.S. As Sanader won the President position ahead of Pašalić's candidate by a small margin, the party was split between almost equally strong centrist and right-wing camps in constant conflict.

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[596] *Večernji list*, 5 Oct. 2000.
[597] *Jutarnj list*, 1 Oct. 2000; *Ruža hrvatska: novine hrvatskih branitelja i članova njihovih obitelji*, Oct. 2000.
[598] *Večernji list*, 30 Sep. 2000.
[599] *Večernji list*, 30 Apr., 2 May 2000.
[600] In the documentary 'Novo, novo vrijeme', Pašalić said that during Tuđman's presidency in the party 'everyone could state his opinion, but, more or less, the President made all the decisions'. See: Trickytape, 'Novo, novo vrijeme'.

These internal disputes led to H.D.Z. M.P. removing Pašalić as the Deputy Chair of the Parliament, supported by M.P.s from the governing majority.[601] As Pašalić was already personally tied to some of the protesters' leaders, Sanader had to enhance his political support for the protest movement to strengthen his position within H.D.Z.

Thus, two days after the generals' letter, H.D.Z. sent a proclamation, saying that the new Communist regime of 'anti-Croatian nature' had deliberately radicalised the political scene and caused strife within 'Croatian national being', provoking an armed conflict amongst the people with its state terrorism. At the same time, it criticised the Government for criminalising the 'defensive and liberating Homeland War' and veterans H.D.Z. supported the retired generals while claiming their forced retirement lowered Croatia's defensive capabilities, undermining its sovereignty and establishing a foreign protectorate. In its proclamation, H.D.Z. kept the generals' letter, finding it compatible with messages from the various Headquarters, the Catholic Church, and the party's draft declarations they initiated in the Parliament. To avoid accusations of prompting a coup, H.D.Z stressed against the use of violence – despite the terrorist behaviour of the state – but called the people and 'democratic parliamentary political parties' to remove the current Government at snap parliamentary elections democratically.[602] While the proclamation was not a call to a coup, its rhetoric and aggressive style appealed to emotions, trying to trigger a 'state of emergency'.[603] In its announcement, H.D.Z. tried to gather a critical mass by joining forces with generals, Headquarters and even the Catholic Church.[604] In line with Sanader's preferred centrist route,

[601] *Večernji list*, 5, 6, 26-7, 30 Sep. 2000; Dušan Bilandžić, *Povijest izbliza: Memoarski zapisi 1945.-2005.* (*History from close up: memoirs 1945-2005*) (Zagreb, 2006), pp 525-6.
[602] *Jutarnji list*, 1 Oct. 2000; *Večernji list*, 1 Oct. 2000.
[603] *Večernji list*, 14 Oct. 2000; Hrvatska radiotelevizija, 'Nedjeljom u 2 - Ivo Sanader, 2000.', YouTube, 7 May 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hatJwAGXviA&ab_channel=Hrvatskaradiotelevizija (21 Sep. 2019).
[604] Later, the Catholic Church accused H.D.Z. of instrumentalising the public announcement Croatian bishops sent in September. See: *Večernji list*, 12 Oct. 2000.

the calling to all 'democratic' parliamentary parties to abandon the Communists – indirectly S.D.P. – was a message for H.S.L.S. and H.S.S. in an attempt to undermine the Government from within.

Although the governing majority and Government dismissed H.D.Z.'s proclamation as an attempt to radicalise the political scene further, it nevertheless changed the dynamic in combination with other factors.[605] Thinking that Mesić's move radicalised the political scene, a part of the centre-left coalition believed that the Parliament needed to agree to some of the demands of the Headquarters and other protesting veteran associations to achieve national unity that would help the Government move on. Therefore, Tomac proposed that the Parliament pass some declaration on the Homeland War. Such a declaration would result from a consensus between all parliamentary parties and veterans that would re-enforce the common view about the 'sanctity' of the Homeland War while promoting the need to bring those that 'tainted' its purity before the face of justice. While claiming that he supported the prosecution of all potential war crimes, Tomac explained that the whole affair surpassed the principles of the rule of law and was connected with the Croatian identity tied around the shared memory and significance of the Homeland War.[606] Using the word 'sanctity' while referring to the war demonstrated how the memory was sanctified, already functioning as a secular religion.

Meanwhile, as before, the Headquarters and other veteran associations continued collecting signatures for pressuring the M.P.s to protect 'the dignity of the Homeland War'.[607] Toning down on radicalism and explicitly distancing themselves from any form of violence, the Headquarters denied having any connection to H.D.Z. or its proclamation. The Headquarters

[605] For political reactions to H.D.Z.'s proclamation, see: *Jutarnji list*, 1 Oct. 2000; *Večernji list*, 1, 2 Oct. 2000.
[606] *Večernji list*, 2 Oct. 2000.
[607] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 3 Oct. 2000.

insisted that both chambers of the Parliament schedule a discussion on the defence of the 'criminalisation of the Homeland War', receiving support from the governing H.S.L.S. and the opposition Democratic Centre (*Demokratski centar*, D.C.).[608]

By then, Budiša had already appropriated a lot of protesters' jargon and started speaking about left-wing 'Yugoslav' extremism threatening Croatia. He said Croatia needed to 'affirm the Homeland War' and not focus on its 'dark' spots.[609] Protesting veterans recognised H.S.L.S.'s change of heart and continued to woo the party directly and indirectly to their cause. Thus, when eleven out of twelve generals who sent the protest letter in September sent a new one in early October, they singled out only Budiša's statement regarding the importance of the Homeland War. In return, Budiša expressed his hopes that the Parliament would discuss the issue and show that all parties characterise the Homeland War and how to affirm it.[610] Budiša and H.S.L.S. were the weakest links and a pivotal junior partner of the centre-left Government. Dating from the pre-election coalition of the S.D.P. and the H.S.L.S., the latter supplied the coalition with nationalist credibility that an ex-communist party (S.D.P.) could never achieve. H.S.L.S., led by a former anti-communist dissident Budiša (who served prison time in the 1970s), opposed Tuđman and his isolationism in its wish to Europeanise Croatia.[611] Additionally, Tomac and Budiša, the ones triggering the change within the coalition, shared their views of the Homeland War legacy and were ideologically closer than Račan and Budiša as leaders of the biggest parties in the coalition.[612] Both veteran

[608] *Jutarnji list*, 3 Oct. 2000; *Novi list*, 3 Oct. 2000; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 4 Oct. 2000; *Večernji list*, 4 Oct. 2000.
[609] *Jutarnji list*, 25 Sep., 2 Oct. 2000; *Večernji list*, 2 Oct. 2000; Feral Tribune, 7 Oct. 2000.
[610] *Jutarnji list*, 6 Oct. 2000; *Večernji list*, 6 Oct. 2000.
[611] Jelena Subotić, *Hijacked justice. Dealing with the past in the Balkans* (Ithaca and London, 2009), p. 87.
[612] Zdravko Tomac, *Memoari* (Zagreb, 2012), pp 300-8, 314-8, 320-3.

groups and H.D.Z. tried to use these ruptures to subjugate the Government, sometimes directly appealing to Tomac and Budiša for their protection.[613]

The Declaration on the Homeland War: the consolidated narrative

As H.S.L.S.'s distancing from the centre-left coalition exposed it more to attacks from the right, H.S.S. announced sending a draft proposal of the Declaration on Fundamental Values of the Homeland War, just days after the H.D.Z. announced its draft of a similar document. In explaining the idea behind the Declaration, H.S.S. M.P. Luka Trconić said that divisions in society had gone too far, as the Government was wrongly accused of threatening 'fundamental values of the Homeland War', while it only wished to 'shed light' on individual cases to preserve the 'purity of a defensive war'. He tried reassuring the opposition that 'groups and media' that 'denied the defensive war' existed, as they did in 1991, but were a small minority.[614] The parliamentary Committee for War Veterans discussed both drafts, deciding that such a declaration needed to be 'an expression of mutual positions and maximal consensus', as M.P.s presented the situation as so severe that there was no room for a 'partisan' approach to the problem. There, S.D.P.'s M.P. Željko Malević tried to convince opposition members that the Homeland War was so 'great and holy' for him that its dignity was 'unquestionable' and thus could not be threatened by any government. Committee members agreed they had to resort to tensions to avoid the subject's 'politicisation' and 'ideologization', which harmed the 'dignity of the Homeland War' and Croatia.[615] The use of words such as 'great', 'holy' and 'unquestionable' coming from centre-left ranks proved how

[613] *Večernji list*, 24 Nov. 2000.
[614] *Jutarnji list*, 7 Oct. 2000; *Večernji list*, 7 Oct. 2000.
[615] Zapisnik 10. sjednice, 10 Oct. 2000, H.S., fond Hrvatski sabor, podfond Hrvatski sabor, 4. saziv (2000-3), serija Odbor za ratne veterane, podserija Sjednice, podpodserija 10. sjednica, podpodserija Zapisnik; *Jutarnji list*, 11 Oct. 2000.

quickly the nationalist narration worked its way bottom-up and how the Homeland War was sacralised, functioning as a secular religion.

The Committee's decision secured a discussion on the Homeland War in the scope of agreeing on the draft of the Declaration, as the Central National Headquarters demanded.[616] Furthermore, their continuous discursive reinforcing of the Homeland War affected governing politicians, as they now used their jargon and phrases to portray the conflict as an unquestioned sanctity. By now, ruling politicians accepted the dominant war narrative as 'holy' and an unquestioned sanctity, contributing to the galloping sacralisation of the Homeland War memory. Additionally, the M.P.s decided that the Declaration had to be passed unanimously despite their political and ideological differences, as the Homeland War was treated as a sanctity. It was another victory, as veteran associations and Headquarters often claimed that the Homeland War should be a value surpassing all other political and ideological particularities. Even more so, before the session of the Committee, the Headquarters instructed the M.P.s to have Croatia in mind when they vote, not their parties, telling them to rise above their political differences.[617]

In a heated atmosphere, with representatives of Headquarters present in the visitors' gallery, the Parliament discussed the Declaration on the Homeland War. Although members of the H.D.Z. and the H.S.P. were very vocal in accusing the government of the criminalisation of the War, some of the M.P.s from the governing majority responded with similar determination. Thus, H.N.S. and I.D.S. M.P.s replied by condemning the overall pressure of the Church, national football team and Headquarters on the Government and Parliament,

[616] *Večernji list*, 7 Oct. 2000.
[617] *Jutarnji list*, 7 Oct. 2000.

creating disorder, which prevented them from working on more pressing economic issues.[618] Their M.P.s tried to shed light on innocent Serb civilians killed in Gospić, Croatia's unnecessary 'adventure' in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. On the other hand, Budiša, although formally a part of the majority, offered a slightly more balanced version of Headquarters' ideas while firmly rejecting the notion that Croatia acted like an aggressor in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina – the idea that only a few opposed. Although officially not allowed to intervene, the visiting Headquarters members made comments and gestures when they disapproved of the parliamentary majority's comments.[619] The debate continued until late 13 October, when the Parliament passed the Declaration on the Homeland War with eighty-eight votes 'for' and four 'against'.[620]

In terms of substance, the Declaration subtly tried to counter the narrative produced by the I.C.T.Y., stating that Croatia was involved in an international conflict with neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina. Here, what the Declaration did not say was more important than what it did state. Therefore, while the Declaration does not mention Bosnia and Herzegovina, the document states that Croatia led 'a defensive and liberating' and not 'an aggression or war of conquest' against anyone.[621] M.P.s agreed that Croatia was not an aggressor in Bosnia and Herzegovina but decided to keep the mention of Bosnia out of the document. As Koren noticed, M.P.s did not mention Bosnia and Herzegovina in the Declaration to prevent further widening the cleavages in the society by having a public debate on the role of Croatia in the Bosnian War.[622] Thus, once again, the issue of Croatia's role in the Bosnian War was again

[618] Three days before the debate started in the Parliament, the whole football national team led by selector Miroslav Blažević signed the Headquarters petition. See: *Jutarnji list*, 10 Oct. 2000; *Večernji list*, 10 Oct. 2000.
[619] *Jutarnji list*, 13 Oct. 2000; *Večernji list*, 13 Oct. 2000.
[620] *Jutarnji list*, 14 Oct. 2000; *Večernji list*, 14 Oct. 2000; Snježana Koren, 'Korisna prošlost? Ratovi devedesetih u deklaracijama Hrvatskog sabora' in Tihomir Cipek (ed), *Kultura sjećanja: 1991. Povijesni lomovi i svladavanje prošlosti* (Zagreb, 2011), pp 123-56, at p. 136.
[621] Narodne novine, Deklaracija o Domovinskom ratu.
[622] Koren, 'Korisna prošlost?', p. 135-6.

one of the most contentious topics. Generally, the Declaration's dominant narrative functioned as a screen memory. The Declaration used memories of Croats' suffering to screen memories of unpleasant transgressions – such as organised war crimes against Serb civilians and Croatia's role in the Bosnian War.

Regarding the language used, the Headquarters could be satisfied as the officials ultimately picked up on veterans' rhetoric, taking over their tropes, such as the 'dignity of the Homeland War'. Thus, the Headquarters controlled the narrative. While the *ad hoc* Headquarters were created to protect the dignity of the war, an official document was passed that obliged and called all to respect that dignity. Furthermore, in Article Six, the Declaration stated that the Croatian judiciary needed to prosecute war crimes for the sake of the 'dignity of the war'.[623] Thus, dignity should motivate the judiciary to prosecute war crimes, not the rule of law. It was not only the veterans or victims of the war whose dignity people should have in mind, but also the War's dignity. The issue of the dignity of the War would remain a contested issue among Croatian peace activists.[624]

The Declaration represented a dogmatic recollection of the Homeland War, claiming its 'foundational values' were accepted by the Croatian nation and thus needed no discussion.[625] Thus, the document mimicked religious documents, setting out dogmatic interpretations not to be discussed. While this demonstrated the sacralisation of the Homeland War memory, it also introduced limitations of the freedom to seek different interpretations. While the Declaration had no strength that would trigger legal sanction, it nevertheless had the potential to limit police discussion over the dominant, and now also official, war narrative.

[623] Narodne novine, Deklaracija o Domovinskom ratu.
[624] Denis Romac, 'Teršelič: koji to rat ima dostojanstvo!?', Deutsche Welle, 8 Apr. 2019, https://www.dw.com/sr/ter%C5%A1eli%C4%8D-koji-to-rat-ima-dostojanstvo/a-48247555 (9 Apr. 2019).
[625] Narodne novine, Deklaracija o Domovinskom ratu.

Finally, the Declaration quickly showed its potential for policing discussions on the war. During a debate in the Parliament in February 2001, H.N.S. M.P. Pusić opened the topic of the Bosnian war and Croatia's role in it. Pusić said that 'the H.D.Z.'s government led an aggressive war in Bosnia and Herzegovina', a statement that caused anger among M.P.s of both the governing coalition and opposition. An S.D.P. M.P., Mato Arlović, corrected her by reading Article 2 of the Declaration, which states that Croatia led 'a defensive and liberating, not an aggressive and conquering war'. After Pusić refused to apologise to fellow M.P.s, Parliament Chair Tomčić issued her a symbolic sanction.[626] Thus, the Declaration was immediately applied to police the most contentious counter-narrative, the one implicating Croatia with waging an aggressive war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Conclusion

Besides practical difficulties, on an ideological level, political leaders of the early 2000s did not have the courage or will to start de-Tuđmanisation. One of the main actors that stopped the de-Tuđmanisation in the 2000-2 period – to be also discussed in the following chapter – were veterans' associations and *ad hoc* groups – various Headquarters. The pressure exerted in this period by many veterans' associations, helped by the H.D.Z. and other right-wing parties, brought the War back into the focus of public debates. Backed by domestic and foreign media attention, the protests and other activities again gave veterans an important societal role. Although they were an important group in society before the protest period, veterans boosted their visibility even more, with their leaders becoming pivotal political figures. By putting the War on the agenda, veterans' war merits became their most prominent credentials for enlarging their political capital. While the public may have seemed somewhat

[626] *Jutarnji list*, 16 Feb. 2001; *Večernji list* 16 Feb. 2001; Koren, 'Korisna prošlost?', p. 143.

tired of war-related topics in the late 1990s, veterans' associations successfully brought the subject of the War under a national spotlight. As the War became the main topic, veterans' symbolic capital grew even more as they directly experienced it, making them pivotal political players.

Through this political capital, veteran associations, helped by H.D.Z. and other right-wing parties and groups and a part of the clergy and media, initiated a few protest cycles – also to be discussed in the following chapter. Despite some media claims, these protests were not real attempted coups, as there was no substantial evidence that any of these groups could incite massive violence or armed uprising that police could not solve.[627] As protests are often threats with violence, these protest cycles incited fear on the part of the Government. At the same time, the protests served as an alibi not to pursue the compliance policy for other officials. In 2000, while protest activities in the spring only managed to postpone exhumations of mass graves slightly, the arrests in September initiated a whole myriad of protests, public letters and proclamations of Headquarters, associations, generals and H.D.Z. which ended with Parliament passing the Declaration of the Homeland War.[628]

Although the Declaration's narrative of the war almost mirrored the narrative advocated by the veterans, the protest period continued – as the following chapter will demonstrate. Despite the Declaration's commitment to secure 'full protection, dignity and care' for veterans, their families and victims of war, the Headquarters announced a day after that their protests would continue, and they would not disband themselves.[629] As a point of their discontent, the protesters pointed to the Declaration's Article Six, which dealt with

[627] The only victim of that period was Levar, whose assassination, although welcomed by some veterans, could not be attributed to any veteran association or group.
[628] It is possible that the first protest wave of 2000 delayed Norac's arrest, which came only in February 2001.
[629] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 14 Oct. 2000; *Novi list*, 16 Oct. 2000; *Jutarnji list*, 17 Oct. 2000.

prosecuting potential individual crimes. The Headquarters insisted that Croatian forces did not commit crimes.[630] Despite the partial disappointment, the Headquarters saw the passing of the Declaration as a significant success of the 32-day-long veterans' activities. Not only did their narrative, corresponding to the 1990s dominant narrative of the War, survive the period of change of power, but they also managed to silence and marginalise any potential counter-narratives further and impose the discourse on the opponent political elites. The Declaration enabled further institutionalisation of the dominant narrative on the war and screening of the memory of crimes against Serb and Croatia's role in the Bosnian War.

[630] *Jutarnji list*, 15 Oct. 2000.

Chapter 3

Indicted generals as Homeland War symbols (2001-3)

Introduction

After they successfully defended the dominant narrative of the War by pressuring the Parliament into passing the Declaration, veterans continued with further steps to obstruct state efforts to comply with the I.C.T.Y.'s requests for war crimes prosecution. As the Declaration was more a political statement or platform for institutional support, veterans used their ideologically reaffirmed position to pressure the government to slow down the war crimes prosecution. Veteran associations and groups could not resolve this issue with parliamentary documents. However, only months after the radicalisation, with numerous protests in September-October 2000, would the opportunity for a new contentious period present itself.

In the 2001-02 period, rumours of prosecution of Croatian generals for different war crimes allegations would soon materialise. The most important among them would be Mirko Norac, Ante Gotovina, and Janko Bobetko, who enjoyed massive support among veterans and the general population. While Norac would initiate the first and the most intense protest wave, indictments against Gotovina and Bobetko would become most problematic for the state as the I.C.T.Y issued them. In an established pattern from 2000, during 2001-02, various veteran associations and Headquarters, helped by H.D.Z. and other political parties, mobilised to stop or prevent the arrest and extradition of the three generals. As their discourse on the war was accepted and adopted as the official one, veteran associations and groups insisted that the state made concessions or altogether rejected cooperation with the I.C.T.Y., thus contesting the E.U. accession, which relied on that cooperation. Consequently, the potential obstruction of the negotiation with the E.U. and international community would likely trigger a sharp

drop in the Government's popularity, as European integration was one of the cornerstones of the political programme of the centre-left coalition.

The chapter examines how veteran associations and groups defended the three generals from arrest and extradition, fighting to enforce a heroic narrative around them. Going beyond their war merits and biographies, along with political and intellectual elites, veteran associations and groups worked on promoting these individuals into heroic figures. Like in 2000, veteran associations and groups confronted the Government, which tried to improve Croatia's cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. and de-Tuđmanise the country. These protest activities aimed at using generals to stop the prosecution and significant changes in the country that would lead to the rule of law and re-interpretation of Croatia's past. In veterans' eyes, if massive crimes committed by Croatian forces against Serb civilians were to be proven, that would destabilise the victim-aggressor dichotomy and devalue veterans' position in society and the political arena. Thus, if courts proved that Croatian forces also committed massive war crimes, establishing such crimes would question the 'sanctity' of the war and de-legitimise veterans. Furthermore, it could lead to other crimes and perpetrators in the political elite – almost exclusively H.D.Z. – that still occupied positions of power.

'We are all Mirko Norac'

On 7 February 2001, the Rijeka County State Attorney's office widened the investigation against recently retired general Mirko Norac and others for war crimes against Serb civilians in the Croatian town of Gospić in October 1991 – the ones that had caused the previous contentious period.[631] In a deal with the State Attorney's Office and Rijeka County Court,

[631] First speculations about potential indictment for Norac surfaced in early January 2001. See: Pavelić, *10 boljih godina*, p. 37.

Norac was supposed to give himself up on the same day to avoid triggering an arrest warrant. After Norac did not show up at the Court by the end of 7 February as agreed, the authorities issued an arrest warrant against him.[632]

His flight was not a single-man operation but involved a network of veteran leaders, former military intelligence officers and acting members of the special police. The most prominent were Norac's fellow combatants and friends, former S.I.S. members Mirko Ljubičić 'Šveps' and Miro Laco, who was also the founder of Z.U.H.D.D.R. and member of the opposition D.C. As his friend since childhood and later best man, Laco probably helped Norac hide from authorities while knowing first-hand his reasons to flee.[633] While supporting Norac, Ljubičić and Laco were not antagonistic towards the Government. Laco supported Veterans Minister Ivica Pančić since he took power and was an adamant critic of H.D.Z.'s veteran policy from the 1990s – accusing the party of controlling the associations – and being slightly more critical of the operations of various Headquarters.[634] As the two were intertwined with the regime, they quickly proved indispensable in communicating with authorities and Norac.[635] As they were not openly belligerent towards the Government but still helped Norac, it showed the complexity of the whole situation within the veteran movement, again not functioning through a simple H.D.Z.-S.D.P. dichotomy.

While this operation was in the background, veteran associations and groups, helped by the opposition, took the main stage. At the Central National Headquarters session, its President

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[632] *Jutarnji list*, 8 Feb. 2001; *Republika*, 8 Feb. 2001; *Vjesnik*, 8 Feb. 2001; *Večernji list*, 8 Feb. 2001.
[633] *Večernji list*, 14 May 2000; 7 Mar., 26 Apr. 2001; *Jutarnji list*, 8, 15, 24 Feb. 2001, 23 Aug. 2003; *Nacional*, 1 Jun. 2004; *Globus*, 16 Feb. 2001; *Feral Tribune*, 4 Jun. 2004; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 16 Jan. 2010; Vedran Brkulj, 'Miro Laco, Bandićev operativac s ključevima automobile', T-Portal, 27 Oct. 2014, https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/miro-laco-bandicev-operativac-s-kljucevima-automobila-20141022 (17 Apr. 2022).
[634] *Večernji list*, 5 Feb. 2000; *Globus*, 5 Dec. 2000.
[635] *Nacional*, 27 Feb. 2001; *Jutarnji list*, 23 Aug. 2003; Ivica Đikić, Domovinski obrat: politička biografija Stipe Mesića (Zagreb, 2004), p. 28; *Feral Tribune*, 4 Jun. 2004; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 16 Jan. 2010; Vedran Brkulj, 'Miro Laco'.

Mirko Čondić concluded that 'Croatia was attacked' and promised to react using democratic methods, as they developed a plan for a massive protest that would include other associations and political parties. Even when Čondić used terms like 'democratic methods', he used militaristic rhetoric, full of metaphors playing with the potential use of violence. Velimir Kvesić, President of S.U.D.H.O.S., was thinking in the same direction as Čondić – his fellow party member from H.S.P. – claiming something had to be done in alliance with other associations to stop the 'criminalisation of the Homeland War'. Even some of the more docile veteran leaders, like U.H.V.D.R.' President Đuro Dečak, condemned 'the state that forgets its heroes' while announcing a meeting of the Republic Coordination so that they would discuss how to support Norac further.[636]

On 8 February, as the police issued an arrest warrant against Norac, the situation quickly turned into a crisis created by veteran associations and ad hoc groups, helped by a part of the local population. The reaction was especially strong in Dalmatia, in places like Sinj, Norac's hometown. Some 2,000 people – predominantly veterans – blocked the town's main road to the nearby regional centre, Split and the capital, Zagreb. Protesters chanted 'we are all Mirko Norac', which would become the slogan of the whole protest cycle. Besides local U.H.B.D.D.R. Sinj, the Association of the Knights of Alka, a highly popular equestrian competition organised in Sinj since the early 18th century, supported Norac, as he was the association's leader, the Duke. The local Franciscans, demonstrating the strong presence of the Catholic Church, and even uniformed soldiers – which worried many who framed the protests as a *coup d'état* – were present during demonstrations. As thousands carried Norac's photos and lit candles, the rally looked like a popular revolt, as the protesters established the Headquarters for the Defence of Honour of the Croatian People and General Mirko Norac. They stressed that the blockade would last until they heard 'the general's voice', as rumours

[636] *Jutarnji list*, 8 Feb. 2001.

spread that the authorities knew Norac's whereabouts but were afraid to disclose that he was already at Rijeka County Court or, even worse, to the I.C.T.Y. in The Hague.[637]

In the neighbouring village of Otok, hamlet Norci, where Norac was born, residents, many of them Norac's relatives, expressed extreme bitterness over the whole situation, saying that they would defend him from the arrest, armed and 'until the last bullet'. Along with emotionally invested parents' reports, the media spread the feelings on regional and national levels.[638] This sentiment of defending Norac was present in Sinj the following day. Rehashing the ceremonial speech, where knights recite to the Duke at the opening of Alka, one of the knights from the association celebratory referred to Norac – although still in hiding – telling him that everything is ready to defend him, with their lives if needed.[639] The protest also moved to other towns nearby, receiving the full support of the locals – mostly H.D.Z. – officials.[640]

In the regional centre of the uprising, Split, Čondić called Croats to choose between 'Croatian heroes' and 'marionettes in the Government' that 'destroys the foundation of the Croatian state with the criminalisation of the Homeland War'. In the 'Proclamation to the Croatian people', written in a clear anti-Communist and right-wing populist tone, Čondić especially called out H.S.L.S. and H.S.S. members to think about supporting the 'traitorous authorities', trying to exploit already visible rifts within the governing coalition. Finally, as rumoured before, Čondić announced a massive protest under the slogan 'we're all Mirko Norac' on Split waterfront (*Riva*) in three days.[641] His subtle provocations triggered feedback in

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[637] *Jutarnji list*, 9 Feb. 2001; *Republika*, 9 Feb. 2001; *Večernji list*, 9 Feb. 2001; *Vjesnik*, 11 Feb. 2001.
[638] *Večernji list*, 9 Feb. 2001.
[639] AP Archive, 'Croatia: suspected war criminal Norac supporters', YouTube, 9 Feb. 2001, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJHtN0G5y6g&ab_channel=APArchive (30 Apr. 2019); *Novi list*, 10 Feb. 2001; *Večernji list*, 10 Feb. 2001.
[640] *Republika*, 9 Feb. 2001; *Vjesnik*, 9 Feb. 2001.
[641] *Jutarnji list*, 9 Feb. 2001; *Republika*, 9 Feb. 2001; *Večernji list*, 9 Feb. 2001; Additionally, Čondić wanted to provoke H.S.L.S. President Dražen Budiša, who was an anti-Communist dissident in

H.S.L.S., whose M.P. Joško Kontić, perceived as part of the party's right-wing close to protesting veteran associations, supported the protesters' cause. Hosted on local radio, Kontić said that as a Sinj native and not an H.S.L.S. member, he supported Norac and did not believe he would flee, thus supporting the widespread rumour that galvanised the atmosphere.[642]

In Zagreb, major veteran associations claimed that the Government was hiding Norac's whereabouts. Thus, H.V.I.D.R. President Marinko Liović contended that the Government and President Mesić must know about Norac's current locations as intelligence agencies followed him for months. According to Liović, Norac would 'never flee'.[643] The Republic Coalition, gathering fifteen more prominent mainstream associations, gave Račan an ultimatum to reveal Norac's whereabouts and end speculations that he was transferred to The Hague. At the same time, the Coordination demanded that Norac stand trial out of detention. An indirect threat followed the coordination's ultimatum if Račan failed to comply with demands.[644] After Račan told the media that he did not know Norac's whereabouts, the Coordination accused him of lying while announcing their protest in front of the government and Parliament buildings on St. Mark's Square. The Coordination also supported the protests in Sinj and called other county coordinations of associations to stage their own.[645]

In the following days, protesters blocked roads across Dalmatia, parts of Lika, Kvarner and even Slavonia. The blockades took a blow at Croatia's important north-south communication, resembling the notorious Log Revolution from the summer of 1990 when Serb rebels put

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socialist Yugoslavia, even serving prison time for his political activities as a student. See: Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1918. – 2008.*, pp 544, 545, 547, 550; Protesters hoped that the protests would cause Budiša and H.S.L.S. to leave the governing coalition and create the crisis. See: *Nacional*, 20 Feb. 2001.

[642] *Republika*, 9 Feb. 2001.

[643] *Republika*, 9 Feb. 2001; *Večernji list*, 9 Feb. 2001

[644] Untitled (Conclusions from a meeting of the Republic Coordination of Associations from the Homeland War on 8 February 2001), 8 Feb. 2001, U.H.V.D.R., registrator Republička koordinacija udruga iz Domovinskog rata.

[645] *Jutarnji list*, 9 Feb. 2001; *Republika*, 9 Feb. 2001; *Večernji list*, 9 Feb. 2001; Zaključci republičke Koordinacije udruga iz Domovinskog rata od 8. veljače 2001. godine u 20,00 sati, 8 Feb. 2001, U.H.V.D.R., registrator Republička koordinacija udruga iz Domovinskog rata.

barricades on main roads connecting Dalmatia with continental Croatia.[646] Headquarters also spread their presence and influence. Headquarters in Zagreb and Karlovac organised a train to take people to the 'we are all Mirko Norac' protest in Split, while local veterans set headquarters in Pula, Rijeka and Knin.[647]

Many protesters used radical rhetoric, right-wing symbols, and aesthetics. Protesters insulted and threatened officials, using different right-wing, anti-Communist tropes and racial slurs.[648] Thus, the protesters referred to the authorities as 'Communists', 'red rats', 'red zombies' and 'Khmer Rouge' while often sarcastically referring to them as 'comrades', playing into anti-Communist and anti-Yugoslav sentiments among the protesters and right-wing voters. Especially prominent were racial slurs, referring to Mesić as 'a Gypsy' – a racial slur that in everyday use also presents the person as dishonest and treacherous – or 'traitor of Gypsy blood'. In the context of prominent anti-Serb rhetoric, Mesić's and Račan's first names were often used in Serbian iterations – Stevica and Jovica – while the authorities were called 'Serb suck-ups'. Some protesters introduced Ustaša symbolism by shouting their chants and singing songs, along with more generally accepted patriotic songs. Protesters often used threats, sometimes disguised in playful, newly composed folk songs.[649]

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[646] *Jutarnji list*, 10-1 Feb. 2001; *Novi list*, 10 Feb. 2001; *Večernji list*, 10 Feb. 2001; *Vjesnik*, 10-1 Feb. 2001; Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1990. – 2020.*, p. 300.

[647] *Jutarnji list*, 10 Feb. 2001; *Novi list*, 10 Feb. 2001; *Večernji list*, 10 Feb. 2001; *Vjesnik*, 10 Feb. 2001.

[648] Croatian historian Ivo Goldstein referred to the outlook of these protests as proof that expression of 'primitive' right-wing sentiments returned to Croatian politics. See: Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1990. – 2020.*, p. 303.

[649] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 9, 12 Feb. 2001; *Feral Tribune*, 10 Feb. 2001; *Jutarnji list*, 10 Feb. 2001; *Novi list*, 10 Feb. 2001; *Vjesnik*, 10 Feb. 2001; *Večernji list*, 10 Feb. 2001; Folk singer Joško Tomičić composed a song, to a tune of an old Ustaša song, for Headquarters' campaign. The lyrics threatened that Račan and Mesić, would be 'eaten by black crows', 'the reds' (governing politicians) would 'end up in chains' after they lose power, while protesters would go into new 'storms', making a reference to the operation Storm, as an indirect threat to deal with the enemy. See: Hrvatske Domoljbne Pjesme 1991, 'Josko Tomicic - Oj Ivica i Stipane', YouTube, 13 Sep. 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-shOiCeFO1Q&ab_channel=HrvatskeDomoljbnePjesme1991 (31 Mar. 2019).

The explosion of right-wing extremism showed how different groups could use the memory of the 1990s to fight mnemonic counter-narratives about W.W.II. in Croatia and Yugoslavia. Therefore, Ustaša symbolism and rhetoric were revamped to represent current struggles in fighting for the narration of the 1990s war. This rhetoric and symbols discredited the protests in the eyes of many, especially the governing coalition. It also deepened the division between two camps: one that supported the protests and one who, either silently or not, opposed them.

This avalanche of radicalised groups and protests was further echoed by the political elites – on local, regional, and national levels. Thus, in Gospić, city and county leadership – coming from H.S.P. and H.D.Z. – met with the local Headquarters and other local veteran and victim associations. There they stood in defence of Čanić and Norac, complaining how they were 'equalised with the aggressors' while local Serb rebels were given amnesty despite war crimes committed against Croats – thus echoing Milinović's words from the previous day. H.S.P. President for the Lika-Senj County claimed that Croatian soldiers who fought a defensive war on domestic territory could not commit war crimes. At the same time, he stated that his party would not allow 'the criminalisation of the Homeland War', even if it meant defending it with all means necessary.[650]

On 8 February in Split, the Central National Headquarters and representatives of city organisations of right-wing opposition parties – along with H.S.S. and H.S.L.S. from the governing parties – met and agreed upon a joint organisation of the announced 'We are all Mirko Norac' protest.[651] The slogan 'We are all Mirko Norac' demonstrated how the Headquarters wanted to frame Norac's case: as something in which the whole Croatian nation had to persevere. Despite opposition pressures to discuss the arrest warrant in the Parliament, Račan, Mesić, and Parliament Chair Zlatko Tomčić stated that they would not breach the rule

[650] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 9 Feb. 2001.
[651] *Jutarnji list*, 9 Feb. 2001; *Republika*, 9 Feb. 2001; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 9 Feb. 2001.

of law and constitutional separation of powers by pressuring the judiciary in Norac's case. They also pledged to protect the right to freedom of expression and peaceful protests but would not tolerate road blockades and threats of violence. Račan and leaders of parliamentary clubs of six governing parties agreed that some groups used the whole situation to topple a democratically elected government and take down the constitutional order.[652]

As the protest approached, H.D.Z. took a more active role in organising it. To galvanise the local population in Dalmatia ahead of the protest, Sanader and a few H.D.Z. leaders toured cities, meeting up with local party organisations. In Šibenik, Sanader called for peace and said that the Government might send provocateurs to the protest in Split. H.D.Z. Vice-President Drago Krpina promised their party supporters that 'both (Račan and Mesić) will fall'.[653] The choice of words was accidental, as it played on the local memory of war in Šibenik, when in September 1991, Croatian air defence in a nearby village shot down two J.N.A. jet planes, while a soldier shouted, 'both of them, both have fallen'.[654]

All these events contributed to a perfect storm, as on 11 February 2001, several protests started in cities and towns across Croatia, organised by local Headquarters in cooperation with other veteran associations and opposition parties.[655] At the central 'We are all Mirko Norac' protest in Split, a crowd of some 100,000 stacked up against the *Riva*, gathering people from all over Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.[656] Protesters organised a train and

[652] *Jutarnji list*, 10 Feb. 2001; *Večernji list*, 10 Feb. 2001.
[653] *Jutarnji list*, 11 Feb. 2001; *Večernji list*, 11 Feb. 2001.
[654] Maja Juratović, 'Oba su pala 21. 9. 1991.', YouTube, 4 Jul. 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4A_JkmFx6jI&ab_channel=MajaJuratovac (Accessed 1 Sep. 2021).
[655] *Jutarnji list*, 12 Feb. 2001; *Večernji list*, 12 Feb. 2001; Pavlaković, 'Bolje grob nego rob', p. 444.
[656] The figure of gathered protesters somewhat varied. Police claimed only 50,000 gathered, the media reported figures from some 60,000 to over 150,000, while Headquarters leaders claimed 200,000. These higher figures (150,000-200,000) can probably be discarded due to Riva's limited capacity. See: *Jutarnji list*, 12 Feb. 2001; *Novi list*, 12, 14 Feb. 2001; *Republika*, 12 Feb. 2001; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 12 Feb. 2001; *Večernji list*, 12 Feb. 2001.

numerous buses to transport people across Croatia to Split.[657] Besides members of many local Headquarters, veterans from different associations were present, often carrying insignia or flags of their organisations. Students, clergy, uniformed soldiers, and possibly people from police and security services, unsympathetic to the centre-left Government, were present. On the stage decorated by a huge banner, 'we are all Mirko Norac', Headquarters and leaders of the most prominent associations got to talk to a massive crowd. Čondić was the main veteran star among them, as his speech was interrupted by enthusiastic applauses and cheers, chanting 'let's march on Zagreb' and 'we want elections'. Čondić articulated the 'we are all Mirko Norac' slogan by saying that by trying him, the Government wishes to try 'the whole nation', thus imposing 'the feeling of guilt' and reaffirming the claims of 'Serbian' Vesna Pusić – president of H.N.S. – that 'Croatia was born out of crime'.[658] He concluded his speech by saying that 'innocent hero' Norac would not be tried for defending Croatia as long as protesters live while calling the Government to resign if it 'isn't ready to feel the pulse of its people'.[659]

In front of the galvanised audience, other veteran leaders were equally as radical in their speeches, working into comments of many media reports that saw the event as a creeping coup. Thus, Podrug stated that either 'the government would fall' or they would 'lose the

[657] *Novi list*, 13 Feb. 2001; *Jutarnji list*, 18 Feb. 2001; Zapisnik sa sastanka Središnjeg odbora održanog 23. veljače 2001. godine u Zagrebu, Galovićeva 12, 26 Feb. 2001, U.H.V.D.R., registrator Središni odbor, p. 6.
[658] *Večernji list*, 12 Feb. 2001; Micika34, 'Sanader riva', YouTube, 30 Oct. 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdPJUXaJ3lo&t=68s&ab_channel=micika34 (2 May 2019); AP Archive, 'Croatia: protest against war crimes investigation', YouTube, 21 Jul. 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fU2oWCMKnCE&ab_channel=APArchive (2 May 2019); AP Archive, 'Croatia: protest against war crimes investigation (V)', YouTube, 21 Jul. 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JLUOUrFpcu4&ab_channel=APArchive (2 May 2019); Božo Udovičić, *Četiri jahača hrvatske apokalipse* (Zagreb, 2011), p. 118; Renéo Lukić, 'Civilno-vojni odnosi u Hrvatskoj (1990. – 2009.)' in Renéo Lukić, Sabrina P. Ramet and Konrad Clewing (eds), *Hrvatska od osamostaljenja: Rat, politika, društvo, vanjski odnosi* (Zagreb, 2013), pp 181-200, at p. 196; As the war with Serb rebels ended a only five years earlier, labelling Pusić as one had a purpose to present her as the enemy.
[659] *Večernji list*, 12 Feb. 2001; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 12 Feb. 2001.

state'. He concluded that protesters do not recognise the 'martial court in Rijeka' – in charge of the Norac case – and sarcastically challenged the authorities to arrest them all, emphasising that the state did not have 'so many jails nor police' to do it.[660] Janko Bobetko, an eighty-two-year-old veteran of W.W.II. and the 1990s war, also addressed the public. In a theatrical speech, Bobetko said that the people gathered to 'defend the dignity and historical rights of the Croatian people' while stressing that veterans 'make the decisions' in Croatia. He said they could not betray the fallen comrades and would 'fight till the last breath'. Known for his motivating wartime speeches, Bobetko called the protesters to act brave, as they had shown that they knew 'how to die'.[661]

Although the protest organisers referred to it as a 'support gathering', claiming it did not align with any political party or option, politicians had a prominent place among eighteen speakers at the protest. All the politicians who held speeches, except Mayor Škarić, were members of the H.D.Z. and other right-wing opposition parties. The most prominent among them was Sanader, who called all to defend Croatian interests. In a relatively short speech, in his charismatic and energetic style, he stressed that just as the Croatian people did not fear confronting the J.N.A. unarmed during the war, they would not fear facing the current authorities. He stated that no nation would 'give up on its heroes'; thus, Croatian people

[660] Damir Pilić, 'Što je bilo poslije: Svi su oni nekad bili Mirko Norac', Slobodna Dalmacija, 31 Jan. 2011, https://www.slobodnadalmacija.hr/novosti/hrvatska/clanak/id/123319/sto-je-bilo-poslije-svi-su-oni-nekad-bili-mirko-norac (3 Mar. 2019); *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 12 Feb. 2001; *Večernji list*, 12 Feb. 2001.

[661] *Jutarnji list*, 12 Feb. 2001; *Novi list*, 12 Feb. 2001; *Republika*, 12 Feb. 2001; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 12 Feb. 2001; *Večernji list*, 12 Feb. 2001; Bobetko's overuse of the word 'we' in combination with the emphasis on Croatian national identity is one of the features of nationalism, recognised by Michael Billig in his seminal work, Banal nationalism. According, words such as 'we' function as 'the devil in details', which is often neglected by scholars of nationalism. See: Michael Billig, *Banal nationalism* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, 1995), pp 89-90, 94.

would not give up on its 'most shining Croatian sons', including Norac. Sanader emphasised that the people are proud of all Croatian officers, veterans, and their 'knight' Norac.[662]

The Headquarters wanted to counter notions of organising a coup by introducing tools of direct democracy. Therefore, during the protest, attendees could sign a petition for snap elections at all levels – national, local and presidential. Additionally, all speakers at the rally signed a joint declaration and announced an even bigger protest on Zagreb's central square on 15 February. They issued an ultimatum to the government to be fulfilled by the same date. Protesters thus demanded that the Government immediately suspend prosecution of Norac and all other veterans 'unrightfully accused' by Chetniks they defeated in the war, give information on Norac's whereabouts, put the cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. on stand-by, apologise to the Central Headquarters for their conclusions made about an attempt to take down the constitutional order, cease illegal monitoring and tapping of the Central Headquarters and that the Croatian Radio-Television (*Hrvatska radio-televizija*, H.R.T.), as a public broadcaster, becomes open to the public and stops discriminating veterans.[663]

The whole protest was marked by extreme nationalist rhetoric and symbolism, as speakers used anti-Communist, anti-Yugoslav, and anti-Serb remarks, which were also present in protest signs in the audience. Many in the audience and among speakers also flirted or openly exhibited Ustaša insignia or sang their songs.[664] Therefore, the 'feeling of guilt' imposed on the Croatian people Čondić referred to as a reference post-W.W.II. relations in former Yugoslavia, perceived through far-right glasses.[665] Protesters used fascist chants and racial,

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[662] *Večernji list*, 12 Feb. 2001; Micika34, 'Sanader riva'; Drago Krpina, *Tiranija kameleona* (Zagreb, 2007), pp 104-5; Bilandžić, *Povijest* izbliza, p. 552.
[663] *Jutarnji list*, 12 Feb. 2001; *Republika*, 12 Feb. 2001; *Večernji list*, 12 Feb. 2001.
[664] Pilić, 'Što je bilo poslije'; *Feral Tribune*, 17 Feb. 2001.
[665] The fact that a part of the Croatian nation joined the Ustaša – which led genocidal policies against Serbs, Jews and Roma – was used by the Serbian propaganda in the 1980s and 1990s for demonising Croats. At the same time, during the 1990s, Croatian officials often flirted with Ustaša sentiments and symbols, employed former Ustaša officials, while claiming Yugoslavia and Serbs tried to impose the 'feeling of guilt' on Croats. For the use of Ustaša legacy for political purposes, see: Mate N. Tokić,

chauvinist, homophobic, and misogynistic slurs in insulting officials.[666] The year-long presence of right-wing extremism within and surrounding the veteran movement revealed an ambition to rewrite Croatia's 20th-century history extensively.

Veterans issued indirect and direct threats against political leaders in different ways – speeches, chants, songs, and protest signs. Thus, U.H.D.D.R. President Merčep vowed that protesters would get hold of the officials, as there would be no reconciliation but punishment for what they had done in the last year.[667] The most radical comment was the one by Milinović, who dramatically told the authorities 'not to force weapons in their hands', as they would instead take them down in a democratic way, through elections.[668]

While saying they support people's right to free assembly and are thankful that there were no incidents, the governing parties criticised some of the protesters' ultimatums and demands, as well as the feeling of trying to topple the Government, introducing 'chaos' and 'extra-institutional forms of fighting for power'. They unanimously condemned the Declaration from Riva protest as a tool for introducing that chaos and 'taking down the constitutional order'. Party leaders were cautious in ridding veterans of all the blame for these protests and their messages, saying H.D.Z. organised them and manipulated veterans and Headquarters, using Norac for its political goals – snap elections. They called on the veterans and the general population to resist H.D.Z.'s manipulations of the war memory. They pleaded with the veterans to protect the constitutional order and state for which they fought while

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'Framing and reframing the past: ethnic relations, political legitimacy and the legacy of the Second World War in socialist Yugoslavia, 1945–1991' (PhD thesis, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 2007), pp 249-298; Vjeran Pavlaković, 'Flirting with Fascism: The Ustaša legacy and Croatian politics in the 1990s' in *The Shared History: the Second World War and National Question in ex Yugoslavia* (Novi Sad, 2008), pp 115-144.

[666] The crowds referred to Mesić as 'Gypsy', Račan was called 'faggot' and 'Serb', while Pusić was called a 'whore'. See: *Vjesnik*, 13 Feb. 2001; AP Archive, 'Croatia: protest against war crimes investigation'; AP Archive, 'Croatia: protest against war crimes investigation (V)'.

[667] *Novi list*, 12 Feb. 2001.

[668] *Večernji list*, 12 Feb. 2001; Milinović later claimed he did not threaten violence. See: *Jutarnji list*, 13 Feb. 2001.

explaining they could not act as state institutions – deciding who should be prosecuted – and remove road blockades.[669]

Although on the surface calm, Račan and a part of the Government were worried over the whole situation and the prospects of a coup. The presence of uniformed soldiers at the protest – not clear if active or reserve ones – concerned many, as parts of the military showed defiance to the Government and especially towards Mesić, as the superior commander.[670] Media speculations and rumours about armed protesters in Split probably further instigated the Government's fears.[671] The media widely reported that a hundred men from the particular police unit Alpha, responsible for counter-terrorist tasks, handed in their badges disagreeing with the arrest of Norac.[672] The media also spread a similar false story about another special police unit.[673] Even if it was the protesters or their sympathisers who leaked rumours to the press, certain individuals in special police forces opposed Norac's arrest. There was a dispute in the Alpha unit on the day Norac went missing and when the first road barricades appeared. Alpha's commander, Milijan Brkić, did not want to remove road barricades and proposed negotiations with protesters. When his supreme officer rejected his proposal, Brkić took unpaid medical leave and passed the command to his deputy.[674] It later turned out that Brkić was Norac's fellow combatant from the war and friend.[675]

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[669] *Jutarnji list*, 12 Feb. 2001; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 12 Feb. 2001; *Vjesnik*, 12 Feb. 2001.
[670] *Nacional*, 16 Feb. 2001; Lukić, 'Civilno-vojni odnosi', pp 195-6.
[671] *Globus*, 16 Feb. 2001; Although this report was probably an exaggeration picking up on rumours, veteran leader Ljubičić, who was involved in the organisation of the event, claimed that violence may had broken out easy. See: *Feral Tribune*, 4 Jun. 2004.
[672] *Jutarnji list*, 11 Feb. 2001.
[673] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 12 Feb. 2001; *Vjesnik*, 12 Feb. 2001.
[674] *Večernji list*, 14 Feb. 2001.
[675] Rtl.hr, 'Biografija: Milijan Brkić', Danas.hr, 27 Oct. 2021, https://danas.hr/zanimljivosti/biografija-milijan-brkic-f7dd07ae-b9f4-11ec-8dfc-0242ac120034 (1 Feb. 2022); Davorka Blaževič, 'Portret tjedna: Glavni tajnik H.D.Z.-a Milijan Brkić Vaso: Autentično domoljubno – plagiranje', Tris portal, 29 Mar. 2014, https://tris.com.hr/2014/03/portret-tjedna-glavni-tajnik-H.D.Z.-a-milijan-brkic-vaso-autenticno-domoljubno-plagiranje/ (1 Feb. 2022).

All these events further enhanced Račan's fears of a creeping coup. He feared that by facing the right-wing frontally, Croatia might fall into a political crisis that would tarnish Croatia's fragile democracy.[676] As he had a scheduled two-day official visit to Poland a day after the protest, he feared the coup would begin as he was away from the country.[677] Therefore, Račan decided to solve the problem in a 'conspiratorial' manner.[678] He contacted Ljubičić and Laco, who were both in connection with Norac – as probable organisers of his disappearance – and protesters, serving as a bridge between the two. As they met just a day or two before the protest, Ljubičić asked Račan not to use riot or special police forces to break the protest in Split as it may erupt in massive violence. Ljubičić, a link between protesters and Račan, reassured the Prime Minister that violence would not break out and that he could travel to Poland.[679]

However, it seemed that Riva's protest was the climax of the protest movement. Despite numerous activities scheduled by veteran associations and Headquarters, the protest movement was losing momentum.[680] One of the reasons was political support. In light of this, in calling for their protest to be held on St. Mark's Square in Zagreb four days after the Riva protest, Republic Coordination decided to be the sole organiser of the protest, rejecting co-optation by 'any political party'.[681] This meant that the Coordination, controlled by U.H.D.D.R. and U.H.V.D.R., wished to break free from H.D.Z.'s control or organisational support, often facilitated through local Headquarters. Therefore, the Coordination did not call for a protest for Norac but for a vaguer 'dignity of the Homeland War' and 'national dignity

[676] *Nacional*, 1 Jun. 2004; Zdenko Duka, *Račan: Biografija* (Zagreb, 2005), p. 91.
[677] *Nacional*, 1 Jun. 2004; *Feral Tribune*, 4 Jun. 2004.
[678] Duka, *Račan*, p. 91.
[679] *Nacional*, 1 Jun. 2004; *Feral Tribune*, 4 Jun. 2004; Duka, *Račan*, p. 91; Đikić, Krile and Pavelić, *Gotovina: stvarnost ili mit*, pp 140; Granić, *Vanjski poslovi*, p. 203.
[680] Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1990. – 2020.*, p. 301.
[681] Zaključci sa sastanka Republičke koordinacije udruga iz Domovinskog rata održanog 12. veljače 2001. godine, 12 Feb. 2001, U.H.V.D.R, registrator Republička koordinacija udruga iz Domovinskog rata.

of the Croatian people'.[682] The Coordination advocated passing a Law that would protect 'the dignity and honour of the Homeland War'. Stepping away from Headquarters' radicalism, they called for a peaceful and dignified protest without politicians as speakers. The Republic Coordination would allow only the Prime Minister, President and Parliament Chair to speak, as they would represent institutions and not particular individuals or parties.[683] In securing full institutional support, Coordination's leaders met with Deputy Prime Minister Goran Granić, who supported a peaceful protest.[684]

The reaction of other veteran associations and *ad hoc* groups to the Republic Coordination's initiative reflected the complexity, fragmentation, and internal dynamics of the veteran movement. Coordination's unilateral approach instantly displeased the Central National Headquarters, who thought the timing and venue for the protest were wrong.[685] This apparent Headquarters aversion towards the Coordination's initiative probably came from power struggles within H.D.Z., reflected in veteran associations.[686] In light of this, H.V.I.D.R., although initially supporting the protest in Zagreb, suggested their members not come a day before as the Government deceived the people by claiming they did not know Norac's whereabouts.[687]

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[682] Ibid; *Jutarnji list*, 13 Feb. 2001; *Novi list*, 13 Feb. 2001; *Republika*, 13 Feb. 2001; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 13 Feb. 2001; *Večernji list*, 13 Feb. 2001.
[683] *Novi list*, 13 Feb. 2001; *Republika*, 13 Feb. 2001; *Jutarnji list*, 14 Feb. 2001; *Večernji list*, 14 Feb. 2001; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 15 Feb. 2001.
[684] *Večernji list*, 14 Feb. 2001.
[685] *Jutarnji list*, 13, 14 Feb. 2001; *Novi list*, 13 Feb. 2001; *Večernji list*, 14 Feb. 2001.
[686] *Globus*, 16 Feb. 2001; *Feral Tribune*, 17 Feb. 2001; *Jutarnji list*, 17 Feb. 2001. It is highly likely that the leader H.D.Z.'s right wing, Ivić Pašalić, in conflict with Sanader, was behind the Central National Headquarters and Riva protest. Pašalić would remain in close ties with the Central National Headquarters and Čondić even after he leaves H.D.Z. According to this interpretation, Sanader decided to speak at Riva protest to stay at the head of H.D.Z. although the protesters were more ideologically closer to Pašalić. See: *Jutarnji list*, 17 Feb. 2001, 23 Nov. 2013; Granić, *Vanjski poslovi*, p. 203.
[687] *Jutarnji list*, 15 Feb. 2001; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 15 Feb. 2001; *Večernji list*, 15 Feb. 2001; H.V.I.D.R.'s boycott seriously hurt the prospects of the protest. Additionally, smaller organisation decided to follow H.V.I.D.R.'s lead and boycotted the protest as well. See: Zapisnik sa sastanka Središnjeg odbora održanog 23. veljače.

This veteran fragmentation, conflicted interests among many actors and different, more institutional approach transformed the protest at St. Mark's Square into a politically unattractive event. Despite announcing 200,000 protesters, the rally gathered only some 10,000 people.[688] Protesters used extremist insignia, anti-Communist and misogynist insults and indirect threats against officials, and generally all traits – calling for elections – and tropes – the 'criminalisation of the Homeland War' – that dominated the protests in the previous week. Merčep opened the protest, calling it a dialogue between authorities and veterans, while he accused the politicians of the lack of it. However, he quickly turned into ultimatums, giving the Government thirty days to fulfil the demands of the Coordination Declaration. After the deadline, Merčep threatened with an 'all-Croatian assembly' where veterans would 'go until the end' while the Government would pay when their patience ran out. Dečak called the Government to arrest Serb war criminals and 'leave our patriots alone'. Veteran leaders accused the authorities of labelling them as 'extremists', 'wreckers of the Croatian state', 'mob manipulated by political parties' or threatening with a coup. Accusing Minister Pančić of trying to divide veterans into 'left and right-wing ones', Slavica Huškar, President of N.D.H., said their 'party is Croatia' – another trope of a supposedly non-ideological veteran umbrella identity in Croatia. Corresponding to earlier protests for Norac, many protesters also exhibited Ustaša symbols and shouted and sang their chants and songs.[689] The protesters mentioned Norac in passing, alongside general complaints of the alleged state's mistreatment of veterans, formulated through populist aesthetics.

[688] *Jutarnji list*, 15 Feb. 2001; *Globus*, 16 Feb. 2001.
[689] *Jutarnji list*, 16, 17 Feb. 2001; *Novi list*, 16 Feb. 2001; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 16 Feb. 2001; *Večernji list*, 16 Feb. 2001; *Vjesnik*, 16, 17 Feb. 2001; Feral Tribune, 17 Feb. 2001; AP Archive, 'Croatia: protestors outside government building', YouTube, 23 Jul. 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3O08AXiE7Lg&ab_channel=APArchive (1 Feb. 2020); AP Archive, 'GNS: Croatia: demonstrators 2', YouTube, 23 Jul. 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jmeiy3t8JJM&ab_channel=APArchive (1 Feb. 2020).

In the end, the protest in Zagreb did not produce much success. The size of the protest was not impressive, and it did not incite fear like the Riva protest. The low turnout was a result of probable internal H.D.Z. disputes and fragmentation of the movement. Despite radical rhetoric, insults, and threats, it did not resonate with either Zagreb dwellers or Croatia's population. Almost grotesque aesthetics, with folkish songs and soundbites, did not give substance or produce critical energy to mobilise larger masses. Unlike the Split protest, the one in Zagreb did not mobilise political forces or promote a more meaningful political programme. The extremism seemed almost staged, while protesters' threats and demands seemed more a part of folklore and not something that could trigger massive unrest. Thus, in sharp contrast to the Headquarters' defiance of state authorities, six days after the protest, the Republic Coordination thanked the city of Zagreb, Bandić and the police for giving them logistical support for organising the protest.[690]

At the same time, while spending city funds in organising the Coordination's protest, Bandić was critical of a protest organised by leftist and liberal N.G.O.s and non-parliamentary parties on Zagreb's central square dubbed 'One Hour for the Rule of Law', mobilised by the growing tensions in society triggered by veteran and right-wing protests. There, around 10,000 people gathered to advocate the rule of law under the slogan 'a crime is a crime', voicing the need to prosecute every crime and stray away from threats with violence. While he was proud of his logistical help for veterans, Bandić sarcastically referred to the initiative 'One Hour for the Rule of Law' as a protest of those who 'don't have anything else to do', warning protesters to respect the public order. After the protest, Bandić emphasised that each civic protest, no

[690] Zaključci Republičke koordinacije udruga proizašlih iz Domovinskog rata od 21. veljače 2001. godine, 21 Feb. 2001, U.H.V.D.R., registrator Republička koordinacija udruga iz Domovinskog rata.

matter how ridiculous, costs taxpayers the same amount of money needed to run Zagreb's public kitchen for a month.[691]

Ultimately, the Government pacified the Republic Coordination by signing an Agreement on Cooperation, positioning the Coordination as the central Ministry's partner in negotiating veteran welfare and politics.[692] According to one of the Coordination's leaders, Merčep, they organised the protest due to the lack of communication between the Government and Coordination. The protest was unnecessary once the contact was re-established, and the two sides started cooperating.[693] Six months after the protest, the Republic Coordination tried to use that political capital in negotiating for a more favourable Law on Veterans and a new strategy for the state's social policy, as the Government announced budget cuts in the light of pressure coming from the International Monetary Fund (I.M.F.).[694] Although the Coordination's success was only partial, after weeks of negotiating, its demands were much more integrated into the new Law, unlike demands from H.V.I.D.R., which was out of favour with the Ministry.[695] Although the Republic Coordination was dissatisfied with the new law

[691] *Večernji list*, 15, 19-21 Feb. 2001; *Feral Tribune*, 17, 24 Feb. 2001.
[692] Sporazum o suradnji, 19 Mar. 2001, U.H.V.D.R., registrator Republička koordinacija udruga iz Domovinskog rata.
[693] *Ruža hrvatska*, Nov. 2001; Regular meetings between the Ministry and Coordination started in a matter of weeks since signing the Agreement. See: *Večernji list*, 12 Apr. 2001.
[694] *Jutarnji list*, 29 Aug., 6, 7 Sep. 2001; *Večernji list*, 28-31 Aug., 15 Sep. 2001.
[695] *Večernji list*, 9 Oct. 2001; Zapisnik 21. sjednice, 17-8 Oct. 2001, H.S., fond Hrvatski sabor, podfond Hrvatski sabor, 4. saziv (2000-3), serija Odbor za ratne veterane, podserija Sjednice, podpodserija 21. sjednica, podpodserija Zapisnik; *Ruža hrvatska*, Nov. 2001; For H.V.I.D.R.s dissatisfaction over rejected amendments, see: *Jutarnji list*, 30 Aug., 16 Sep. 2001; *Večernji list*, 30 Aug., 11, 16 Sep., 20 Oct. 2001; The Ministry also rejected to wire money to H.V.I.D.R., crippling the association. See: *Večernji list*, 10 Nov. 2001; H.V.I.D.R. Rijeka, which supported Minister Pančić, wrote to the Government a day before the vote in the Parliament and listed all the problems the new Law would bring. While understanding Government's need for budgetary cuts, the document showed a great blow to the lives of disabled veterans and their families the new Law would bring upon. In a conciliatory tone, the association pleaded Račan to accept their amendments that would prevent transformation of disabled veterans and their families into socially disenfranchised group. See: Unnamed (Correspondence from H.V.I.D.R. Rijeka President Tomislav Tomečić to the Government of the Republic of Croatia), 18 Oct. 2001, fond Hrvatski sabor, podfond Hrvatski sabor, 4. saziv (2000-3), serija Odbor za ratne veterane, podserija Sjednice, podpodserija 21. sjednica, podpodserija Materijali sjednice; According to the World bank, in Croatia in 2001 pensions for disabled war

and the way it was passed – with almost no discussion and a very small quorum – it did not formulate its disappointment in the forms of protests or other disruptive behaviour, once again proving its constructive relationship with the regime.[696]

The Agreement ultimately poisoned the relationship between the Central National Headquarters and the Republic's Coordination, although the Coordination's member associations still supported Headquarters activities.[697] Along with H.V.I.D.R. and some smaller associations, the Central National Headquarters accused Coordination of 'making a pact' with Pančić, the 'carrier of the criminalisation of the Homeland War'. They accused veteran leaders of dividing the veterans for Pančić's political benefit, trying to bring him veteran votes ahead of the local elections.[698] Ministry's privileged treatment of the Coordination's leading associations, U.H.D.D.R. and U.H.V.D.R., was visible from the amount of money from the state budget in the years to come. In contrast, associations like H.V.I.D.R. witnessed radical cuts, partially due to problematic results of the financial audits.[699] For the next fifteen years, these associations would be the most supported by different governments, while in return, these associations would remain relatively timid, with

veterans were three and a half times bigger than the average pension. See: *Feral Tribune,* 27 Oct. 2001.

[696] *Jutarnji list*, 19, 20 Oct. 2001; *Ruža hrvatska*, Nov. 2001; The only disruptive behaviour was Coordination's call to their members to boycott payment of mandatory subscription for H.R.T., accusing the public broadcaster for not providing content related to veterans and Homeland War. See: *Večernji list*, 4 Dec. 2001; Calling for the boycott of paying H.R.T.'s subscription was a common and re-occurring course of action among veteran associations when did not agree with broadcaster's editorial policies. See: Unnamed (Correspondence from Marinko Liović, President of the Alliance of H.V.I.D.R., to Ivica Mudrinić, director of H.R.T.), 20 Sep. 1996, H.D.A., fond H.R.-H.D.A.-1741 Ured predsjednika R.H. Franje Tuđmana, fascikl 1266; *Jutarnji list*, 3 Oct. 1999, 8 Nov. 2005; *Večernji list*, 5 Oct. 2001.

[697] Priopćenje za javnost, 15 Jun. 2001, U.H.V.D.R., registrator Republička koordinacija udruga iz Domovinskog rata.

[698] *Novi list*, 21 Mar. 2001; *Jutarnji list*, 22, 23 Mar. 2001; *Večernji list*, 22, 28 Mar. 2001; Priopćenje za javnost povodom istupa predstavnika Stožera za zaštitu digniteta Domovinskog rata i čelnika pojedinih udruga iz Domovinskog rata na tiskovnoj konferenciji održanoj 27. ožujka 2001. god, 28 Mar. 2001, U.H.V.D.R., registrator Republička koordinacija udruga iz Domovinskog rata.

[699] *Jutarnji list*, 23 Nov. 2001, 3, 4 Apr. 2003; *Novi list*, 8 Mar. 2002; *Feral Tribune*, 9 Mar. 2002; *Nacional*, 19 Apr. 2002; *Globus*, 4 Apr. 2003; *Vjesnik*, 4 Apr. 2003.

only exceptional outbursts of individual leaders within these massive associations.[700] It also demonstrated how material and welfare demands often stood behind mnemonic battles, with certain facets of memory open to negotiation despite seemingly irreconcilable differences.

As the protest climate was slowly dying out, the authorities ignored protesters' demands and turned more to resolving the Norac predicament. After the Split protest ended without any major incidents or violence, Račan continued the secret negotiating over Norac's peaceful surrender with Ljubičić and Laco.[701] Although at first Norac demanded to wait for the trial in Croatia as a free person, the Government did not want to succumb to that General's wish.[702] When the two sides agreed, Račan gave Granić a task to negotiate with I.C.T.Y. Chief Prosecutor Carla Del Ponte over guarantees that Norac would be tried before Croatian courts in all potential future cases.[703] In the end, the I.C.T.Y. gave the assurances, and on 21 February, after two weeks on the run, Norac handed himself to the police.[704] When surrendering, he told H.R.T. he wished to thank all those who supported him in the last two weeks, explaining that 'it was not his intention' to hide from the judiciary and the accusation he faced. He emphasised that he fought for a state with legal institutions and could counter the charges against him before the court.[705] The following day, Brkić – as Norac's personal choice – drove him, without handcuffs, to Rijeka County Court, where he pleaded 'not guilty' before an investigative judge.[706] In March, the Rijeka County State Attorney's Office filed an

[700] Both U.H.D.D.R. and U.H.V.D.R. claimed of following the way of institutional advocacy.
[701] *Nacional*, 27 Feb. 2001, 1 Jun. 2004; *Feral Tribune*, 4 Jun. 2004.
[702] *Nacional*, 13 Feb. 2001.
[703] *Jutarnji list*, 16 Feb. 2001; *Večernji list*, 16 Feb. 2001; *Nacional*, 27 Feb. 2001, 1 Jun. 2004; *Feral Tribune*, 4 Jun. 2004; By that point, media rumoured about Tribunal's investigations of crimes committed in Medak Pocket in September 1993, Apparently, Norac was afraid of the potential indictment for crimes committed in the Medak Pocket. See: *Nacional*, 27 Feb. 2001.
[704] Pavlaković, 'Bolje grob nego rob', p. 444.
[705] *Jutarnji list*, 22 Feb. 2001; *Večernji list*, 22 Feb. 2001; *Nacional*, 1 Jun. 2004.
[706] *Jutarnji list*, 23 Feb. 2001; *Večernji list*, 23 Feb. 2001.

indictment against Norac and the rest of the Gospić Group, while the trial started in January 2002.[707]

The Government presented the full resolution as its success, securing Norac a trial before domestic courts and avoiding his extradition to The Hague. Račan stated that he was sure Norac would defend himself before Croatian courts. For governing officials, this was proof that the Government was not 'Communist' nor did it 'criminalise the Homeland War'.[708] Central National Headquarters, on the other hand, tried to take all the credit for the newest twist in the Norac crisis and argued that without their activism, Norac would be extradited to the I.C.T.Y. They stated it did not change a lot, as Croatian veterans are tried for 'acts committed while defending the homeland', announcing their further actions.[709] Like the Headquarters, retired generals also took the credit for resolving the Norac crisis.[710]

Although the Headquarters and Coordination, helped by other social groups, continued their activities, there was no more disruption of everyday life or prolonged political crisis.[711] In March, the Headquarters announced that it had collected 400,000 signatures for triggering the referendum, which it brought to Parliament a month later. However, it was apparent that the Parliament, controlled by centre-left parties, could ignore the petition for years due to flawed referendum legislation.[712] Even within the Coordination, officially supporting the Headquarters, serious worries about the referendum existed. Thus, the Coordination's President Dečak said that even if the Parliament called for a referendum, it would still represent a 'huge risk' for the veteran community, as they would need a fifty per cent turnout to trigger potential legal and constitutional changes. If a considerable number of voters would

[707] *Jutarnji list*, 6 Mar. 2001; Pavlaković, 'Bolje grob nego rob', p. 444.
[708] *Jutarnji list*, 22 Feb. 2001; *Večernji list*, 22 Feb. 2001.
[709] *Jutarnji list*, 22 Feb. 2001; *Večernji list*, 22 Feb. 2001; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 23 Feb. 2001.
[710] *Jutarnji list*, 24 Feb. 2001; *Novi list*, 24 Feb. 2001; *Večernji list*, 24 Feb. 2001.
[711] *Jutarnji list*, 26 Feb., 10 Mar., 1, 10 Apr. 2001; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 26, 28 Feb. 2001; *Večernji list*, 26 Feb., 1 Apr. 2001.
[712] *Jutarnji list*, 18 Mar. 2001, 21 Apr. 2001; *Republika*, 21 Apr. 2001; *Vjesnik*, 21 Apr. 2001.

not turn out to vote, Dečak explained, it would mean the people are not supporting veteran associations.[713] Another legal issue was that the referendum would introduce impunity for crimes sanctioned by international humanitarian law, making it automatically unconstitutional.[714]

Although the Government managed to tame the veteran groups and resolve the Norac crisis, the protest period had lasting consequences. Seeing a massive public backlash over the prosecution of war crimes committed by Croatian forces, Račan realised how unpopular these indictments were and the negative effect they would have on his political prospects. Thus, Norac's case introduced a precedent in the Government's behaviour regarding I.C.T.Y. indictments: denying the existence of indictments and trying to resolve things in secrecy instead of revealing them and preparing the public for it.[715]

General Ante Gotovina – 'hero and not a villain'

While one saga over the prosecution of war crimes committed by Croatian forces was over, the other was starting. After securing the extradition of former Serbian President Slobodan Milošević from Belgrade to the I.C.T.Y. in late June 2001, Chief Prosecutor Del Ponte decided to approach the Croatian Government concerning Croatian officers suspected of war crimes.[716] Therefore, in mid-June 2001, the I.C.T.Y. sent the Government two sealed indictments against Croatian generals Ante Gotovina and Rahim Ademi. However, the

[713] Zapisnik sa sastanka Središnjeg odbora održanog 23. veljače, p. 2.
[714] *Večernji list*, 28 Mar. 2001.
[715] Pavlaković, 'Bolje grob nego rob', p. 444; Already in March 2001, the Government tried to hide the fact that General Petar Stipetić, the General Chief of Staff, was an I.C.T.Y. suspect. See: *Večernji list*, 28 Mar. 2001; Already in 2000 Laco told Pančić that the Government should publicly disclose against whom the indictments are filed to avoid speculation and anxiety among veterans. See: *Jutarnji list*, 11 May 2000.
[716] Del Ponte and Sudetic, *Gospođa tužiteljica*, pp 95-125; Peskin, 'Beyond victor's justice?', p. 220; Peskin and Boduszyński, 'International justice and domestic politics', pp 1120, 1128.

Government again opted for the strategy of secrecy, hiding the indictments from the public and media. Del Ponte finally met with the Government on 6 July 2001 in Zagreb, insisting on the arrest of the accused. As the press leaked the names of the accused, Gotovina had enough time to go into hiding before the arrest warrants were issued.[717] According to Račan, Gotovina received the information that he was indicted before this was publicly disclosed, most likely from intelligence agents loyal to the former regime. By the time the indictment came to Zagreb, the intelligence agencies tasked with monitoring Gotovina's movement had lost track of the general's whereabouts.[718] The same day, the media reached Gotovina over the phone to comment on unofficial claims that he was indicted. Gotovina asked the media to defend him, as the Homeland War was not his 'private war' but a Croatian war. While he refused to state his whereabouts, Gotovina concluded that if he were guilty, all of Croatia would be.[719] Those close to him claimed that Gotovina would never give himself up.[720] On the other hand, Ademi quickly stated that he would cooperate and go to The Hague.[721]

While I.C.T.Y.'s indictment against Ademi for crimes committed against Serb P.O.W.s and civilians during and after the 1993 military operation Medak Pocket did not attract much attention, the one against Gotovina for crimes committed during and after Operation Storm did. Gotovina' was accused of not preventing and sanctioning attacks on Serb civilians, as he took part in a 'joint criminal enterprise' led by President Tuđman and Minister Šušak that planned and organised the 'ethnic cleansing' of Krajina Serbs.[722] The sole mention of the 'joint criminal enterprise' was indeed problematic. For many, not only the right-wing and

[717] *Jutarnji list*, 7 Jul. 2001; *Večernji list*, 7 Jul. 2001; Del Ponte and Sudetic, *Gospođa tužiteljica*, p. 248; Peskin, 'Beyond victor's justice?', p. 220; Peskin and Boduszyński, 'International justice and domestic politics', p. 1128; Pavlaković, 'Bolje grob nego rob', pp 444-5.
[718] Duka, Račan, pp 93-4.
[719] *Jutarnji list*, 7 Jul. 2001.
[720] *Večernji list*, 10 Jul. 2001; Pavlaković, 'Bolje grob nego rob', p. 445.
[721] *Jutarnji list*, 9 Jul. 2001.
[722] Pavlaković, 'Bolje grob nego rob', pp 444-5.

veterans, it served as proof that the I.C.T.Y. wanted to criminalise the Homeland War.[723] Although I.C.T.Y. did not try states, the notion of the highest political and military leadership planning ethnic cleansing threatened to disturb Croatian society and political establishment.[724]

Furthermore, as a legitimate operation of gaining back control over occupied territories, which effectively ended the war in Croatia, operation Storm was seen as the 'rebirth' of Croatia's nation, which was now whole. Questioning Storm questioned the dominant, master narrative of the Homeland War and the Croatian nation and state.[725] Probing officials who planned and executed Operation Storm questioned both traits of the Homeland War myth: Croatia as a victor and a victim. Both features were equally crucial for Croatia's contemporary nation-building process and were grounded in reality. The Storm itself encapsulates the victor dimension of the war, a heroic narrative, as the operation successfully defeated – although weaker – Serb forces.[726] The claims that the Storm's goal was the ethnic cleansing of Croatian Serbs questioned the essence of the victim-perpetrator dichotomy. As the discourse on the Homeland War more and more resembled a secular religion, some of its traits, and especially the victim-perpetrator dichotomy, could not be rationally discussed or problematised anymore. Victimisation was Croatia's foreign policy strategy for receiving international recognition, and it became the 'central pillar of national identity'.[727] In a sense, the memory of Croatia's victory and victimhood screened the memory of Serb suffering.

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[723] Ibid, pp 459-60; For more on the problems of using the institute of 'joint criminal enterprise' in international criminal law, see: Allison Marston Danner and Jenny S. Martinez, 'Guilty Associations: Joint Criminal Enterprise, Command Responsibility, and the Development of International Criminal Law' in *California Law Review*, xliii (2005), no. 1, pp 75-169.
[724] Pavlaković, 'Croatia, the International Criminal Tribunal', p. 1715.
[725] Ana Ljubojević, 'Judging 'values of the Homeland War': International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and historical narratives in Croatia' in *Studia Universitatis Cibiniensis. Series Historica*, xi (2014), no. supplement, pp 163-79, at p. 164.
[726] Jović, Rat i mit, p. 201; Banjeglav, 'Conflicting memories, competing narratives', pp 19-20.
[727] Pavlaković, 'Bolje grob nego rob', pp 456-7; Macdonald, *Balkan holocausts?*, p. 4; Peskin, *International justice in Rwanda*, p. 99.

Gotovina owed a part of his popularity to his role in Operation Storm, which occupied the central place in Croatia's contemporary national identity built on the memory of the Homeland War. While Gotovina's biography offers details from his life before joining the Croatian forces in 1991, that part of his life remained mysterious. During the years, and especially as he became a fugitive, rumours and unconfirmed information fused into his biography promoted through media and popular culture.

Born on the Croatian island of Pašman in 1955, Gotovina spent his childhood and youth in Pakoštane on the mainland, close to Zadar. Leaving Yugoslavia at sixteen or seventeen, he soon joined the French Foreign Legion, fighting across Africa during the 1970s, acquiring French citizenship. Sources on Gotovina's life in the early 1980s disagree. However, he did work as a military instructor in Latin America, spending considerable time in Columbia, where he had a daughter. In South America, he also spent time in Argentina and Paraguay, where he trained right-wing paramilitaries. While some claimed he was working for French intelligence agencies, according to other sources, he worked for security companies tied to the French far-right planning a coup d'état. In these circles, he was involved in different criminal activities, taking part in a robbery in 1981, for which he was sentenced to five years in prison in 1986 by a French court but released a year later. In 1989 and 1990, he allegedly took part in extortion and kidnapping but fled France. In two separate trials, he was sentenced to prison in 1992 and 1995 in absentia, as he was already fighting in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Gotovina's lawyers would later deny these criminal acts by saying that he was unlawfully persecuted by the National Gendarmerie Intervention Group (*Groupe d'intervention de la Gendarmerie nationale*, G.I.G.N.), loyal to French President Francois Mitterrand, targeting right-wing intelligence officers, for which a French court found them guilty in 2005. His lawyers argued that accusations did not make sense, as during the war, he

cooperated with the French Army, later officially meeting the French attaché and even renewing his French passport in 2001.[728]

Gotovina returned to Croatia in June 1991, like many Croats who were active and retired members of the Legion. Soon, upon arrival, he took over the command of units fighting in Western Slavonia, ending up wounded. With the war breaking up in neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina in April 1992, military leadership transferred Gotovina to H.V.O., where he fought against the V.R.S. and J.N.A. in Livno. As these fights ended by fall, he was transferred back to Croatia and took control of the Split Military District, responsible for operations in Dalmatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In January 1993, he participated in Operation Pirate – commonly known as Operation Maslenica – in northern and central Dalmatia, Croatia's first large-scale offensive. In late 1993, Gotovina established a modern training centre for special units in Šepurine, near Zadar. The centre was another source of controversy, as reports claimed that some officers close to Gotovina smuggled drugs through the centre, contributing to higher drug abuse in Zadar. During 1994-95, he commanded different military offensives in Western Bosnia, preparing for the most extensive operation of Croatian forces, Storm, in August 1995. Besides Storm, there were reports about crimes committed against Serb civilians and their property after Operation Summer 95 in Grahovo and Glamoč in Western Bosnia, the limited military offensive that prepared the troops for

[728] Đikić, Krile and Pavelić, *Gotovina: stvarnost i mit*, pp 11-3, 20-5; Nenad Ivanković, *Ratnik: pustolov i general (jedna biografija)* (Zagreb, 2001), pp 1-121; Marlise Simons, 'War crimes case revives passions in a divided Croatia', New York Times, 12 Dec. 2005, https://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/12/world/europe/war-crimes-case-revives-passions-in-a-divided-croatia.html (13 Apr. 2019); Axis Information and Analysis, 'Ante Gotovina: gangster, general, national hero... war criminal?', Wayback Machine, 19 Dec. 2005, https://web.archive.org/web/20060522200903/http://www.axisglobe.com/article.asp?article=548 (Accessed 1 Feb. 2023); The Prosecutor v. Ante Gotovina, Ivan Cermak and Mladen Markac IT-06-90-PT, 'Defendant Ante Gotovina's motion to strike appendices 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, and 18 from the Prosecution's response opposing Gotovina's motion for provisional release (public), International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia, 28 Aug. 2007, https://ucr.irmct.org//LegalRef/CMSDocStore/Public/English/Motions/NotIndexable/IT-06-90/MRA13989R0000203518.pdf (1 Feb. 2023); *Globus*, 17 Jun. 2005.

launching the Storm. These crimes took place when Gotovina was temporarily in Croatia. After the success of Storm, he moved with H.V. into Bosnia, where he took part in final joint offensives with H.V.O. and the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina against V.R.S. before the ceasefire in late 1995 that led to the Dayton Peace Agreement. As the war ended, Gotovina wanted to retire from military life. Still, Tuđman and Šušak, his political protector, persuaded him in March 1996 to take the role of Chief Inspector of H.V., tasked with helping the transformation of the military in peacetime. His role in Operation Storm and other offensives secured his legendary status during the war, as his subordinates loved him. Gotovina kept to himself, rarely giving interviews or attracting attention, as he disliked being 'a public person'. Although he did join H.D.Z. in 1998, unlike many other officers during the 1990s, he did this in secrecy, only to be revealed years later. Immediately after Šušak's death in May 1998, I.C.T.Y. called Gotovina to take his statement regarding Storm. Tuđman's regime ordered Gotovina not to communicate with the Tribunal's inspectors, while he had a very belligerent view of the I.C.T.Y. and denied crimes ever taking place. As speculations of I.C.T.Y.'s indictment against him grew in 2000, Gotovina joined other protesting generals and veterans, taking part in the famous generals' letter. Gotovina also took part in organising the Riva protest. Back then, he reaffirmed his decision not to cooperate with the I.C.T.Y.[729]

Considering the vital place of Operation Storm in Croatia's public memory and Gotovina's almost legendary status among many groups in society, as well as fear of a right-wing backlash, were among the chief reasons the centre-left Government avoided disclosing his indictment to the public. However, buying time and hiding the indictments against Croatian

[729] Đikić, Krile and Pavelić, *Gotovina: stvarnost i mit*, pp 35-58, 64-107, 112-21; Marko Hajdinjak, smuggling in southeast Europe: the Yugoslav wars and the development of regional criminal networks in the Balkans (Sofia, 2002), pp 22-3, http://pdc.ceu.hu/archive/00001572/01/Smuggling_in_SE_EU.pdf (17 Jan. 2023); Ivanković, *Ratnik: pustolov i general*, pp 117-247; *Večernji list*, 22 Jan. 1994, 5 Aug., 8, 13 Oct. 1995, 14 Mar. 1996, 12-3 May 1998, 22-3 Mar. 1999, 8 Apr. 2000, 17 Apr. 2001; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 31 May 1996; *Vjesnik*, 22 Mar. 1999; *Feral Tribune*, 3 Feb. 2001; *Jutarnji list*, 2 Mar. 2001.

officers again backfired for the Government, as Gotovina's indictment was the 'litmus test' for Croatia's cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. – the test Croatia failed. Although Račan promised Del Ponte to cooperate and arrest Gotovina and Ademi, the Government tried to stall and buy time to navigate complex relations within the governing centre-left coalition, fearing the backlash of nationalist forces – including veterans – that still held a grip over the Homeland War's memory. The Government's hesitation allowed Gotovina to flee or – in the words of some – he 'was allowed to flee'.[730] Minister of Public Works, Construction, and Reconstruction Radimir Čačić later confirmed that Gotovina was allowed to flee as the state did 'nothing effective' to arrest him as Račan often made decisions by not making them at all.[731] The issue immediately became a national political crisis, causing parliamentary and extra-parliamentary turmoil.[732] Račan's fears of potential cracking of the governing coalition, already weakened by the departure of junior partner I.D.S. in April, soon materialised.[733]

H.S.L.S. immediately decided that their Deputy Prime Minister and three other ministers had to give their resignation and vote against the extradition of generals. As exhibited before, H.S.L.S. President Budiša had mixed feelings regarding the role of the I.C.T.Y. in prosecuting war crimes committed by Croatian forces, and Gotovina's indictment started to generate problems in the coalition.[734] Wanting to anchor the party in opposition to the left and right-wing blocks, Budiša explained that the party would not take part in extraditing Croatian citizens to The Hague in cases when those individuals are accused upon 'commander

[730] This was the formulation used by both the President of the I.C.T.Y. Claude Jorde in his report to the U.N. Security Council in October 2002 and by Del Ponte in her book. See: *Večernji list*, 29 Oct. 2002; Del Ponte and Sudetic, *Gospođa tužiteljica*, p. 248.
[731] Duka, *Račan*, p. 95.
[732] Lamont, 'Defiance or strategic compliance?', pp 1693-4; Pavlaković, 'Croatia, the International Criminal Tribunal', p. 1707; Peskin, 'Beyond victor's justice?', pp 219-20; Peskin and Boduszyński, 'International Justice and Domestic Politics', p. 1128; Del Ponte and Sudetic, *Gospođa tužiteljica*, p. 248; Pavlaković, 'Bolje grob nego rob', pp 444-5.
[733] Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1990. – 2020.*, p. 299.
[734] Duka, *Račan*, pp 92-6.

responsibility' and when those indictments hold 'unacceptable political evaluations' that bring into question 'the basic values of the Homeland War'. Although H.S.L.S. did not leave the governing coalition for the time being, it stated that by accepting such an indictment, the Government would admit genocide over Serbs.[735] H.S.L.S., now drifting even more from the governing coalition, would become a political ally of veteran associations and groups. Despite the H.S.L.S.'s resistance and albeit late to apprehend Gotovina, Račan opted for issuing the arrest warrants as Croatia risked being politically isolated – especially in the context of Milošević's extradition only weeks prior.[736]

As expected from the recent Norac crisis, veteran associations and *ad hoc* groups were appalled by the indictments. Criticising the Government's 'hypocritical' silence over indictments for a month, the Republic Coordination supported all parties and N.G.O.s opposing the extradition of Croatian veterans. Along with the claims of H.D.Z., the Coordination called the Parliament an extraordinary session, as Croatia's very statehood was in question. The Coordination concluded that the Croatian people could perish, as nations who do not value their 'defenders' do not 'deserve' a state of their own.[737] The Central National Headquarters called on the Government to reach a consensus with other political actors in Croatia, decide against extraditions, and protect national interests. The Headquarters saw the newest indictments as fresh evidence of attempts to equalise the victim and aggressor and re-characterise the conflict as a civil war. In the case of arrests, the Headquarters threatened further protests and road and border passing blockades. Finally, the Headquarters threatened with 'the most radical measures' if the Parliament ignored their petition for a

[735] *Jutarnji list*, 8 Jul. 2001; *Večernji list*, 8 Jul. 2001.
[736] *Jutarnji list*, 8 Jul. 2001; *Večernji list*, 8 Jul. 2001; Peskin and Boduszyński, 'International justice and domestic politics', p. 1129; Račan presented the issue as shire necessity, as he sent his complaints on indictments to Del Ponte. See: *Jutarnji list*, 9 Jul. 2001; *Večernji list*, 9 Jul. 2001.
[737] Priopćenje za javnost, 7 Jul. 2001, U.H.V.D.R., registrator Nerazvrstano.

national referendum on cooperation with the I.C.T.Y.[738] At a joint press conference in Makarska, Liović and Čondić stated the Government should not extradite the generals as the I.C.T.Y. tried to equalise 'the victim and aggressor'. Both organisations vowed to protect the indicted with 'all appropriate democratic means', slightly toning down on radicalism.[739] The clean-cut victim-aggressor dichotomy served to divert the attention and downplay the memory of Serb suffering. Retired generals close to Gotovina claimed that the Government 'betrayed the national interests' and that the arrests would start the 'extinction of the Croatian state'. However, generals were relatively confident that M.P.s and parties would stop this.[740]

Despite the sense of national urgency, the Central National Headquarters and other veteran associations chose a slightly different approach, as the public protest method seemed inappropriate in the post-*Riva* context. Therefore, representatives of the Headquarters visited the Parliament to pressure M.P.s ahead of the closed plenary session about Croatia's cooperation with the I.C.T.Y., trying to persuade them to pause the cooperation before holding a national referendum.[741] A delegation of ten representatives of the Republic Coordination came to the session of the parliamentary Committee for War Veterans – headed by H.D.Z. M.P. and Coordination President Dečak – to advocate calling for Central National Headquarters' referendum. Although veteran representatives supported the H.D.Z.'s proposal to call for a referendum, the Committee remained split and could not pass a decision. While acknowledging that the 'dignity of defenders' was at stake and that there was a need to 'establish the truth about the Homeland War', resisting international attempts for 'equalising

[738] *Jutarnji list*, 8 Jul. 2001; *Večernji list*, 8 Jul. 2001; Coordination of Associations from the Homeland War for the of Nova Gradiška fully supported the Republic Coordination and the Central National Headquarters, asking them for information on their course of action and suggestions how to contribute to the overall campaign. See: Zaključci sa koordinacije održane 9. srpnja 2001. g., 9 Jul. 2001, U.H.V.D.R., registrator Republička koordinacija udruga iz Domovinskog rata.
[739] *Jutarnji list*, 11 Jul. 2001.
[740] *Jutarnji list*, 9 Jul. 2001.
[741] *Jutarnji list*, 11 Jul. 2001; *Večernji list*, 11 Jul. 2001.

the victim and perpetrator', the governing M.P.s saw the whole petition as not in compliance with legal and constitutional standards for organising the referendum.[742]

Other influential associations promised not to use radical means, such as road blockades. National H.V.I.D.R. stated it would not block the roads before the vote in the Parliament, although it did not exclude protests. They vowed to 'physically protect' Gotovina from extradition to The Hague – but not going into detail over it.[743] Rather than protests, H.V.I.D.R. now opted for public discussions across Croatia in round tables.[744] Despite claiming that generals' extradition would 'deny everything they fought for', U.H.V.D.R. of Rijeka-Primorje County stressed that it would not block roads but only peacefully protest at St. Mark's Square. They called on the Government to stop the extradition of generals and call for a national referendum, even at the cost of international sanctions.[745] Veterans' new course of abandoning radical acts, especially road blockades that would be detrimental to Croatia's vital tourism industry, came with the understanding that they may lose public support. Although divided on supporting the Government in accepting the indictments, the public was firmly against road blockades.[746]

On 13 July 2001, Zagreb County Court issued an arrest warrant against Gotovina, while the Government gave Ademi ten days to go to The Hague directly – as he publicly stated he would cooperate with I.C.T.Y. and expressed a wish to go by himself.[747] The arrest warrant came just before the parliamentary debate. Račan was supposed to recap the letter with complaints he sent to Del Ponte, stressing the 'political nature' of the indictments and

[742] Zapisnik 17. sjednice, 12 Jul. 2001, fond Hrvatski sabor, podfond Hrvatski sabor, 4. saziv (2000-3), serija Odbor za ratne veterane, podserija Sjednice, podpodserija 17. sjednica, podpodserija Zapisnik; *Jutarnji list*, 13 Jul. 2001.
[743] *Jutarnji list*, 12 Jul. 2001; *Večernji list*, 12 Jul. 2001.
[744] *Večernji list*, 15 Jul. 2001.
[745] *Jutarnji list*, 12 Jul. 2001.
[746] *Jutarnji list*, 9 Jul. 2001; *Večernji list*, 14, 16 Jul. 2001.
[747] *Jutarnji list*, 14, 15 Jul. 2001; *Večernji list*, 14, 15 Jul. 2001.

potential ‘criminalisation of the Homeland War’. Present at the gallery of the plenary hall, representatives of the Central National Headquarters wanted to exert pressure on M.P.s of parties that seemed to be parting ways from S.D.P. They tried to use rifts within the governing coalition to their advantage, accusing H.S.S. and H.S.L.S. – who were of anti-Communist origin – of siding with the ‘Communist Party’, which aimed at ‘accusing Croatia of an ethnic cleansing and genocide’. However, H.S.S. and H.S.L.S. M.P.s supported the Government, as Račan promised state help for the accused. The Government received overwhelming support in the confidence vote – with only four H.S.L.S. M.P.s voting ‘against’ – and could continue the cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. The Parliament passed a conclusion that condemned the ‘politicised’ work of the Tribunal’s Prosecution Office and rejected ‘incorrect qualifications of liberating actions Flash and Storm’. In conclusion, the Parliament called on the Government to use all means to fight for ‘truth’ and justice while insisting that the I.C.T.Y. change ‘unacceptable remarks and relation towards events from the Homeland War’.[748] Here, the truth about the 1990s war was to follow the official narrative and not something open to discussion or probing, as the Homeland War functioned as a sanctity.

Although this was a significant victory for Račan and the Government, a new veteran engagement campaign began.[749] As the police and Zagreb County Court were still processing the arrest warrant against Gotovina, he had the time – or was given time – to go into hiding. Not finding Gotovina at any of his registered addresses, the police issued an arrest warrant, officially making him a fugitive.[750] As things unravelled, Gotovina was quickly propelled into a nationwide hero on the run, formulated in the message ‘Hero, and not a villain’ –

[748] *Večernji list*, 16-8 Jul. 2001; Only some ten days later, Račan revealed to the media his letter to Del Ponte, which earned him the support of a part of the opposition. See: *Večernji list*, 28, 31 Jul. 2001.
[749] Udovičić, *Pad umjesto* uspona, p. 183.
[750] *Večernji list*, 20, 23, 24 Jul. 2001.

which would become the unofficial slogan of his escape – present on a billboard with Gotovina's photo and placed on the medieval walls of Zadar, the region he originated from.[751] In combination with his flight, the arrest warrant would initiate a process that would mark the next four and a half years, in which Gotovina would evade capture. At the same time, considerable parts of society supported him.[752]

Additionally, with the help of local veteran associations, the general population's dissatisfaction surfaced in the town of Zadar, where Gotovina originated.[753] In the coming years, the Zadar region and local veteran groups would become the hotbed of revolt against Gotovina's persecution. As an act of defiance to the Government, the Zadar City Council named Gotovina its honorary citizen in November 2001.[754] His legend, built through media and popular culture, would only grow through the years, and he would become a figure, a symbol around which veterans, some political parties and different groups in society would revolve. He would function as almost an empty signifier, as other groups would start to appropriate Gotovina and speak in his name on different issues, from veterans defending the 'dignity of the Homeland War' to right-wing groups advocating against Croatia's E.U. membership.[755] As the memory of the Homeland War functioned as a secular religion, Gotovina became one of its saints and a 'value' of the war. For many veteran associations and groups, helping and supporting Gotovina while defying the state would become the source of their identity, the final value they had to defend.

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[751] *Večernji list*, 21 Jul. 2001.
[752] Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1990. – 2020.*, p. 304.
[753] *Večernji list*, 21 Jul. 2001.
[754] *Jutarnji list*, 23 Nov. 2001; *Večernji list*, 23 Nov. 2001; The municipality of Proložac was the first to declare Gotovina its honorary citizen. See: *Večernji list*, 14 Aug. 2001; *Jutarnji list*, 16 Aug. 2001; A few other cities, towns and municipalities followed during the next few years. See: *Večernji list*, 15 Apr. 2002, 13 Jun. 2003; *Jutarnji list*, 7 Jun., 12 Jul., 25 Oct. 2003.
[755] Through the years, different neo-Fascist, neo-Nazi and Ustaša-sympathising groups appropriated Gotovina as a symbol. See: *Večernji list*, 8 Dec. 2004, 15 May, 12 Dec. 2005; *Jutarnji list*, 10 Apr. 2005.

While Gotovina's flight gathered the most public and media attention in Croatia and abroad, the other indicted general, Ademi, fully cooperated with the I.C.T.Y.[756] The lack of interest of many veteran associations and H.D.Z. in Ademi's case was evident, which he attributed to his Albanian ethnicity.[757] Almost the only contact he received from the Headquarters was from the active brigadier Ante Kotromanović, who tried to convince him to flee.[758] Ademi's case showed a particular bias among veteran associations and how different individuals were treated differently despite their wartime merits. It showed how mainstream associations and *ad hoc* groups had a selective approach to advocating the rights of specific individuals, hiding different personal and political agendas behind mnemonic battles.

Ademi was especially aggravated that his direct superior commander, Bobetko, did not contact him upon hearing about his indictment.[759] Asked to comment, Bobetko said that 'the world won't end' if Ademi was extradited to The Hague.[760] In the end, Ademi went to The Hague, travelling by plane in his military uniform, upon his demand granted by President Mesić. At Zagreb airport, where only a handful of people came to see him off, Ademi stated that he was not hiding as he was 'not guilty'. In his comments, Ademi expressed bitterness regarding the behaviour of Bobetko, former H.D.Z. Government and President Tuđman, who 'sacrificed' people on the ground. In The Hague, Ademi pleaded 'not guilty' to all the charges in the indictment.[761]

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[756] *Jutarnji list*, 15 Jul. 2001; *Večernji list*, 15, 22 Jul. 2001.
[757] *Jutarnji list*, 15 Jul. 2001; *Večernji list*, 15 Jul. 2001; Ademi probably picked up on animosity towards non-Croat officers in H.V. Thus in October 1993, soon after 'Medak Pocket', Orešković complained to the reporter that in Gospić local command all officers joined H.V. from J.N.A., while almost half of them were not Croats, but Macedonians, Albanians, Bosniaks. He most likely referred to Ademi and another general of Albanian ethnicity, Agim Çeku. See: *Globus*, 8 Oct. 1993.
[758] *Nacional*, 17 Jul. 2001; *Večernji list*, 26 Jul. 2001; AP Archive, 'Croatian officer gives himeslf up to the war crimes tribunal', YouTube, 21 Jul. 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RTt8-_nLocQ&ab_channel=APArchive (23 Jun. 2019).
[759] *Nacional*, 24 Jul. 2001.
[760] *Novi list*, 25 Jul. 2001.
[761] *Večernji list*, 25-7 Jul. 2001; AP Archive, 'Croatian officer'.

Although various headquarters and veteran associations continued with more minor, mostly politically unsuccessful protests and initiatives, Ademi's willing extradition and Gotovina's escape once again boiled down the sense of urgency that had periodically appeared since March 2000. Veteran efforts after the governing majority's victory in the Parliament were not fruitful as no extraordinary event would mobilise the masses: Norac and Ademi were awaiting trial, while Gotovina was at large, presumably already out of Croatia. It also seemed that the general population was fed up with protests and disruption of everyday life. It showed that it was not easy for veteran associations and *ad hoc* groups to re-enact the Riva protest, with its energy and political implications that may paralyse the Government.[762] In the post-protest period, protesters needed new ways to push their agenda.

The Bobetko crisis – the final defence of the dignity of the Homeland War

Unlike a turbulent 2001, in 2002, there were no more disruptive events organised by veteran associations and Headquarters, and political parties could not gain political capital over the issue of defending the 'dignity of the Homeland War'. 2002 also resolved the creeping political crisis in the governing majority, caused by junior partner H.S.L.S., who started drifting from the coalition during the crisis over I.C.T.Y.'s indictment against Gotovina. Budiša returned to the helm of H.S.L.S. in February 2002 and entered a conflict with S.D.P. over the Government's reconstruction. As Budiša demanded snap elections while pressured by junior government partners, Račan resigned in July and immediately sought a mandate for forming a new government from President Mesić. Račan managed to gather parliamentary support, and the new Government, without H.S.L.S., was voted in the Parliament. As some H.S.L.S. M.P.s supported the new Government, the splinter group formed a new party, the

[762] Bilandžić, *Povijest izbliza*, p. 584; Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1990. – 2020.*, pp 303.

Party of Liberal Democrats (*Stranka liberalnih demokrata*).[763] Although the Government resolved this political crisis, another came in just months.

In June 2002, rumours about new I.C.T.Y. indictments reached the media, mentioning, among other names, retired general Bobetko. Upon media inquiries, the Government responded that the Tribunal was investigating crimes and that new indictments were possible. However, the Government called on the media to stop speculating about names as speculations were 'disturbing the public'.[764] However, Del Ponte informed Račan about the indictment against Bobetko in May. Still, the Government once again applied its strategy of secrecy, stalling and buying time instead of adequately presenting the criminal charges against Croatian officers to the public.[765]

Bobetko, eighty-three at the time, had high standing in society as one of the rare officers that took part in wars half a century apart, both a Partisan and defender, a 'legend' of his own. After fighting in Partisan units during W.W.II., Bobetko remained in the J.N.A., where he climbed through military ranks and the League of Communists of Croatia (*Savez komunista Hrvatske*), entering the Central Committee and Parliament of the Socialist Republic of Croatia. However, he was abruptly pensioned and removed from public life by the regime in 1972, allegedly for supporting Croat nationalists during the 1971 Croatian Spring. In 1992, after twenty years of pension, he joined the H.V. and was named the Chief of the General Staff by the end of the year. In this position, he planned all of Croatia's major military operations while visiting soldiers across Croatia, who adored him for his character, energy, and motivational speeches. He held the position until July 1995, when he was again abruptly pensioned, this time by Tuđman, just weeks before the start of Storm. However, as an H.D.Z.

[763] Duka, *Račan*, pp 94-8; Bilandžić, *Povijest izbliza*, pp 570-1, 588, 596-7; Pavelić, *10 boljih godina*, pp 50, 77-9; Udovičić, Pad umjesto uspona, pp 169-73; Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1990. – 2020.*, p. 299.
[764] *Glas Slavonije*, 17 Jun. 2002; *Večernji list*, 27 Jun. 2002.
[765] Pavlaković, 'Bolje grob nego rob', p. 446.

member, Bobetko entered Parliament the same year and took over the newly formed Committee for War Veterans. There, he continued to advocate for veterans' rights, focusing primarily on the disabled, remaining adored among many veteran associations he visited for years. Although known to 'talk too much' and prone to personal conflicts, he remained loyal to Tuđman. He often confronted right-wing tendencies in veteran circles and society that challenged the President's authority and policies. As a former Partisan general, Bobetko was an ideal person and embodiment of Tuđman's pan-Croat reconciliation between Ustaša and Partisans and their descendants. Bobetko's involvement in two wars and ambivalent ideological position resulted in anti-fascist and right-wing organisations respecting his dedication to Croatia, but also the fact that he was both a former Partisan and a political dissident from Yugoslav times. At the same time, he took part in historical revisionism (and negationism) in favour of the Ustaša, aligning with far-right groups and reframing the anti-fascist struggle along Tuđman's politics of history. Even out of military and veteran circles, politicians – both governing and opposition – intellectuals, academics, and clergy admired Bobetko. More than any other senior officer, he was present in the media. After Tuđman's death, as the new regime issued criminal proceedings for war crimes against Croatian officers – probably fearing for himself as well – and planned the revision of veterans' disability status, Bobetko aligned himself with other officers and Headquarters in 'defending the dignity of the Homeland War'. In this context, besides his already present anti-I.C.T.Y. positions, he succumbed to far-right and anti-Serb rhetoric. Many pointed to his character traits, as some saw him as a vain person deeply in love with himself, who tried to build a myth of his military bravery, even forging details from his wartime biography and proclaiming a dissident position during Yugoslav times. He was proud of his wartime achievements, described in his book *Sve moje bitke* (*All my battles*). The book, rumoured to

serve the Tribunal's investigation of crimes committed by Croatian forces, implicated him and Croatia in commanding the H.V.O. in Bosnia and Herzegovina.[766]

In the afternoon of 19 September 2002, the Government informed the public that the I.C.T.Y. Prosecution Office delivered an indictment against Bobetko, confirming media speculations and H.D.Z.'s inquiries from earlier.[767] The indictment accused Bobetko of planning, organising, commanding and instigating war crimes committed against Serb civilians and P.O.W.s during and after the Medak Pocket operation, when he, as Chief of the General Staff of the H.V., acted as Ademi's superior.[768] Realising it would open a new political crisis, Račan promised that the Government would not make any decisions on Bobetko before it discussed the issue in the Parliament. Račan pleaded against political radicalism and called for unity to bring what was best for Croatia, national interests, democracy and Bobetko. The situation in the Parliament was almost in a 'state of emergency'. The Government and opposition used similar rhetoric, viewing Bobetko's indictment as a 'question of national security' and that 'the creation of the Croatian state' and Homeland War were indicted. Therefore, the opposition demanded that the Parliament pass a moratorium on extraditions according to the Constitutional Law on Cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. until the Constitutional

[766] *Večernji list*, 27 May, 6, 28 Nov. 1992, 27 Jun., 29 Jul., 8 Nov. 1993, 20 Feb., 6, 27 Jun. 1994, 11 Mar., 29 Jul., 19 Sep., 20 Oct. 1995, 13 Jan. 1996, 14 Apr., 24 Jun. 1998, 21 Jan., 12 Mar. 1999, 15 Mar., 3, 22 Apr. 2000, 20 Sep. 2002, 30 Apr. 2003; *Slobodni tjednik*, 29 Jan. 1993; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 17 Jun. 1995, 31 Jan., 19 Oct. 1996, 15 Apr., 11 Jun. 2000; *Glas Slavonije*, 30 Dec. 1995, 15 Feb. 1997; *Državnost*, 15 Mar. 1996; *Vjesnik*, 7 Feb., 11 May, 13 Jun. 1996, 7 Jan., 11 May, 23 Jun. 1998, 6 Feb., 11 Nov. 1999, 21 Jan. 2000, 21, 27 Sep. 2002; *ST ekskluziv*, 16 Apr. 1996; *Nedjeljna Dalmacija*, 23 Aug. 1996, 25 Jul. 1997; *Novi list*, 18-9 Aug. 1997, 14 Jan. 1999, 7 Oct. 2000; *Jutarnji list*, 9 May 1998, 11 Jun. 2000, 24 Feb., 1, 11, 25 Apr., 7 Jul., 1, 8 Aug., 9 Dec. 2001, 20 Sep. 2002, 30 Apr. 2003; *Nacional*, 19 Jul. 2000; Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1990. – 2020.*, p. 187; Janko Bobetko, *Sve moje bitke* (Zagreb, 1996); Udovičić, *Četiri jahača*, p. 120; Udovičić, *Pad umjesto uspona*, p. 623-4; Volim Hrvatsku, 'General Janko Bobetko – dokumentarni film', YouTube, 11 Jun. 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mhfWqEMJ-6Q&ab_channel=VolimHrvatsku (25 May. 2021); For less favourable accounts of Bobetko's character and actions, see: *Feral Tribune*, 28 Sep., 5 Oct. 2002; *Nacional*, 5 Nov. 2002, 6 May 2003; Denis Kuljiš, *Majmuni, gangster, heroji, geniji, lupeži i papci* (Zagreb, 2005), pp 146-55; Pavelić, *10 boljih godina*, p. 82; Del Ponte and Sudetic, *Gospođa tužiteljica*, pp 246-7; Žunec, 'Rat u Hrvatskoj 1991.-1995. 2. Dio', p. 116.

[767] *Jutarnji list*, 20 Sep. 2002.

[768] *Jutarnji list*, 20-1 Sep. 2002; *Večernji list*, 21 Sep. 2002.

Court conducts a constitutional review of the law. On the other hand, President Mesić spoke slightly differently, saying that Bobetko, like every other Croatian citizen, was bound by law to cooperate with the I.C.T.Y. At the same time, the state should provide him with all the documentation he would need for his defence.[769]

Meanwhile, Bobetko stated he was not going to The Hague alive and that the police could only carry him 'dead out of the house', threatening to resist the arrest. Bobetko explained that as many of his subordinates were already in prison, persecuted or awaiting trial – Norac, Gotovina, Ademi – while chief commanders passed away – Tuđman and Šušak – he was the last remaining piece of the puzzle to condemn Croatia, 'equalising the victim and aggressor'. Bobetko saw himself as an embodiment of Croatia's sixty years of struggle and victories by concluding that, as 'the oldest anti-fascist of Europe' – as he referred to himself – he would not be extradited and tried by the 'impotent' Europe that lost W.W.II. in eight days. He stated that he believed that after two wars, all his 'battles' were behind him, now facing yet another battle against a new aggressor – I.C.T.Y. – which aimed at 'erasing' Croatia's history, condemning its freedom and chasing away their 'memories of glory days of struggle' for that freedom. He called the public, especially his fellow combatants and families of fallen soldiers, to unite regardless of political and other alignments that divide them.[770]

Bobetko exhibited an anti-I.C.T.Y. sentiment before, a product of his worldview centred around a culture of victory he built his whole life. In Bobetko's worldview, the Croatian people did not have anything if one would take their 'brightest moments from the Homeland War'. Bobetko saw this persecution of people aiming at creating 'psychosis', a situation where no one is safe, as the Homeland War was the 'Rubicon' for the Croatian people, where

[769] *Jutarnji list*, 20 Sep. 2002; *Večernji list*, 20 Sep. 2002; Pavlaković, 'Bolje grob nego rob', p. 446; Udovičić, Pad umjesto uspona, p. 623.
[770] *Globus*, 20 Sep. 2002; *Jutarnji list*, 20-21 Sep. 2002; Glas Slavonije, 21 Sep. 2002; *Večernji list*, 21 Sep. 2002; Pavlaković, 'Bolje grob nego rob', p. 446.

they would have to resist as they did in 1991.[771] In a self-victimising narrative, Bobetko believed he always fought for justice and sacrificed himself for the Croatian nation and state three times, in 1941 (beginning of W.W.II.), 1971 (Croatian Spring) and 1991 (Homeland War).[772] In 2002, Bobetko was ready for his final sacrifice, his 'final battle', as an old man sacrificing for the younger generations at what he characterised as the 'end of the Homeland War'.[773]

Bobetko was not alone in his defiance of the I.C.T.Y., as his family, friends and fellow combatants unconditionally supported him, standing next to him while he gave a speech.[774] His son Ivan, a retired wartime officer, told the media he blamed the Government for trying to conceal the indictment. At the same time, they served 'rotten Europe', like Croatian Communists were 'vassals to Belgrade'. However, he added how his father did not allow Tito or Tuđman to 'mess around with him' so he would not allow the same to I.C.T.Y. Chief Prosecutor Del Ponte. He concluded that he and his fellow combatants would not look 'peacefully' on investigators coming to the house.[775] Gathered retired generals, all Bobetko's former subordinates, and opposition politicians referred to the issue as an indictment against all who served and against the War, the 'foundations on which the Croatian state was created'. Retired general and M.P. Ljubo Ćesić 'Rojs' said that 'defenders' never surrender, adding they would defend Bobetko from the arrest.[776] Thus, after defending Norac and Gotovina from getting arrested, veterans tried to repeat the same with Gotovina, symbolically asserting themselves as 'defenders'.

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[771] *Vjesnik*, 21 Jan. 2000*; Slobodna Dalmacija*, 15 Apr. 2000; *Glas Slavonije*, 25 Sep. 2001.
[772] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 11 Jun. 2000; Pavelić, *10 boljih godina*, p. 82.
[773] *Glas Slavonije*, 21 Sep. 2002; Pavelić, *10 boljih godina*, p. 82.
[774] *Glas Slavonije*, 21 Sep. 2002.
[775] *Jutarnji list*, 20 Sep. 2002; *Večernji list*, 20 Sep. 2002; *Vjesnik*, 20 Sep. 2002; Other public figures were also pointing to Government's concealment of Bobetko's indictment. See: *Jutarnji list*, 20 Sep. 2002; *Večernji list*, 21 Sep. 2002.
[776] *Jutarnji list*, 20 Sep. 2002; *Večernji list*, 20 Sep. 2002; *Vjesnik*, 20 Sep. 2002.

The dramatic statements from veteran and far-right circles soon dominated media reports.[777] Headquarters also immediately got involved, as its President Čondić was one of Bobetko's closest confidants. Čondić supported Bobetko in his decision not to be deported alive, offering the Headquarters help, as he called the indictment the 'final blow to the Homeland War and Croatian state'. He said that veterans are 'pressed against the wall' as 'ultra-leftists' planned to 'equalise the aggressor and victim' to integrate Croatia into the Western Balkans further, inflicting political and economic damage to the state.[778] The Headquarters swore to transform his house into a 'fortress' that veterans would defend. For the Headquarters, it was a defence of their 'past, present and future', calling the public to unite and join them.[779]

Bobetko's dramatic speech and galloping public support further fuelled veteran groups. Presidents of all U.H.V.D.R. county organisations supported 'brave' Bobetko in his battle against the indictment that aimed to put the War and 'present and future generations of Croats on trial'.[780] U.H.V.D.R. President Dečak, usually one of the non-radical veteran leaders, said there was 'no force' that would take Bobetko to The Hague that veterans were not ready to oppose.[781] In Sisak, the region from which Bobetko originated, the local Coordination of Associations from the Homeland War was helped by the local H.D.Z. branch started a petition to support the indicted general.[782] In Split, local H.V.I.D.R. stated that the association would fulfil Bobetko's commands without questions, as they did during the war.[783] Other retired officer from across the country sent their telegrams of support, while members of veteran groups came to Bobetko's house to guard him against a potential arrest.[784] A group of

[777] Udovičić, *Pad umjesto uspona*, p. 627.
[778] *Jutarnji list*, 20 Sep. 2002; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 20 Sep. 2002.
[779] *Jutarnji list*, 21 September 2002.
[780] Unnamed (Letter of support for Bobetko from U.H.V.D.R. Central Committee), 20 September 2002, U.H.V.D.R., registrator Središnji odbor.
[781] *Jutarnji list*, 22 Sep. 2002.
[782] *Večernji list*, 22 Sep. 2002.
[783] *Večernji list*, 24 Sep. 2002.
[784] *Jutarnji list*, 21 Sep. 2002; *Večernji list*, 21 Sep. 2002; Arena, 26 Sep. 2002.

twenty generals, including the authors of the famous generals' letter, organised a press conference in a hotel in Zagreb, saying it was an indictment against all veterans and Croatia. In their interpretation, Croatia would either be the one they fought for or none. Finally, they called the public to unite and protect veterans' – Croatia's 'best sons' – constitutional rights and people's 'right to self-defence'.[785]

Bobetko's house quickly became the centre of Croatia's political life, almost a shrine visited by H.D.Z., H.S.L.S. and other opposition officials, as well as different far-right and veteran leaders.[786] After steering away from wartime topics, H.D.Z. President Sanader again took the opportunity to enter the media and public spotlight. Unlike his radical speech on the Riva protest nineteen months prior, it was a reformed Sanader, calling for unity and 'national consensus' on things that question the state's foundation. Although he mentioned protests and the need to be determined in defending 'national interests', Sanader explicitly called for the respect of public order and peace. Finally, Sanader announced that H.D.Z. would propose the Parliament call for a referendum on the 'protection of the dignity of the Homeland War'. At the same time, he added that it would be easiest to amend the Constitutional Law on Cooperation with the I.C.T.Y.[787] Although called out for his inconsistencies concerning cooperation with the Tribunal, Sanader explained that the situation was now different and that he advocated cooperation only upon indictments where someone is accused of ordering crimes, which was not the case with Bobetko.[788]

Pressured by prospects of foreign sanctions for non-compliance with international agreements and renewed domestic pressures from H.D.Z. and Headquarters to call for a referendum, the

[785] *Jutarnji list*, 22 Sep. 2002.
[786] *Vjesnik*, 25 Oct. 2002; Later, all the highest state officials visited Bobetko, except President Mesić. See: *Jutarnji list*, 15 Oct. 2002; *Večernji list*, 15 Oct. 2002.
[787] *Jutarnji list*, 21 Sep. 2002; Legal experts warned that the amendment of the Constitutional Law on Cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. would not postpone anything, as then the I.C.T.Y. could directly apply its Statute, as Croatia supported the foundation of the Tribunal. See: *Večernji list*, 22 Sep. 2002.
[788] *Jutarnji list*, 24 Sep. 2002.

Government did what it had before – stall.[789] The Government tried to buy time by sending back the indictment to the I.C.T.Y., claiming it was 'unconstitutional' due to a procedural mistake that ordered the Tribunal's investigators to arrest Bobetko – instead of telling Croatian authorities to do so. Besides this tactical move, Government officials claimed that the indictment was unconstitutional because it stated that Bobetko planned the persecution of Serbs, while the operation was 'legitimate' as it aimed at protecting Croatia's constitutional order. The I.C.T.Y. was shocked that the Government defied it, claiming it was not up to the Government to decide how legally grounded the indictment was.[790]

Besides this, to divert the attention of hiding the prospects of the upcoming indictment, the Government was eager to prove it was doing all it could to help Bobetko. Thus, it provided Bobetko with a lawyer specialising in the Tribunal's cases and promised all possible state help.[791] Officials from the governing majority supported the Government, while Parliament Chair Tomčić added that Croatia needed to apply all legal possibilities to 'defend the dignity of Bobetko and Homeland War'.[792] The Government's actions were enough to muster the support of the opposition, even the far-right Croatian Bloc (*Hrvatski blok*, H.B.), led by former H.D.Z. leader Ivić Pašalić.[793]

The Government and opposition mirrored the reported situation in public, its opinion formulated through media reportages in the situation that presented the situation as a state of emergency and uncertainty for Croatia's future. Therefore, sixty per cent of surveyed citizens supported the Government's decision not to extradite Bobetko despite potential international sanctions. In comparison, almost eighty per cent supported the Government's manoeuvre of

[789] *Jutarnji list*, 21 Sep. 2002; *Večernji list*, 21 Sep. 2002.
[790] *Jutarnji list*, 21-2 Sep. 2002; *Večernji list*, 21-2 Sep. 2002.
[791] *Jutarnji list*, 20-1, *Večernji list*, 20-23 Sep. 2002.
[792] *Jutarnji list*, 21 Sep. 2002.
[793] *Jutarnji list*, 22 Sep. 2002; *Večernji list*, 22 Sep. 2002.

sending back the indictment.[794] Another survey showed that nearly sixty-four per cent stated that the Government should not respect the Constitutional Law on Cooperation with the I.C.T.Y.[795] According to a third survey, at the height of the Bobetko crisis, eighty-four per cent opted against the extradition. Regarding Bobetko's role in the war, forty-seven per cent saw it as 'completely positive', while another forty per cent saw it as 'mostly positive'.[796] A week later, the same agency found that seventy per cent of the surveyed were still against Bobetko's extradition, while seventy-seven per cent were against it in the case of eminent international sanctions.[797] Although the number of those opposing the extradition fell, they were still an overwhelming majority.[798]

After the I.C.T.Y. delivered the amended indictment, Račan, supported by his junior partners, stated the Government would not implement the indictment as it was, in part, unconstitutional, incriminating the fight for 'territorial integrity' and against 'the aggressor'. Račan stated that in defending Bobetko, the Government would protect 'the struggle for independence, Homeland War, its values and liberating operations'. While saying that the Government was ready to pay the price for 'fighting for the truth about the Homeland War', he asked for unity to avoid international sanctions with their devastating economic consequences.[799] In this way, Račan asked the political elites and public to support the Government, as it would be easier to argue that Bobetko's arrest and extradition went against the backdrop of the nation.

However, the Government did not convince I.C.T.Y. by claiming it did not want to implement the indictment due to its content, portraying Operation Medak Pocket negatively.

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[794] *Večernji list*, 22 Sep. 2002.
[795] Twenty-nine per cent of the surveyed refused to answer, implying that people potentially feared to express their opinion. See: *Nacional*, 24 Sep. 2002.
[796] *Jutarnji list*, 25 Sep. 2002.
[797] *Jutarnji list*, 1 Oct. 2002.
[798] *Jutarnji list*, 4 Oct. 2002.
[799] *Jutarnji list*, 24-5 Sep. 2002; *Večernji list*, 24 Sep. 2002.

The Tribunal described the operation similarly in its indictment against Ademi, implemented a year prior.[800] It looked like the Government wished to protect Bobetko while ignoring Ademi, as he complained on multiple occasions. Ademi's lawyer claimed that the Government was only interested in accused individuals whose prosecution could pull 100,000 people on the streets, like Norac, Gotovina or Bobetko, but not Ademi.[801] This different treatment of Ademi compared to Bobetko demonstrated particular interests behind specific actions of the veteran movement.

Račan speculated avoiding the I.C.T.Y.'s jurisdiction by initiating investigation and prosecution of war crimes before domestic courts.[802] Račan met with veteran leaders from the Republic Coordination in search of allies, asking them to help create positive relations towards prosecuting individual crimes to avoid potential sanctions. While some veteran leaders – like H.V.I.D.R. President Damir Varaždinac – were open to punishing individual direct crimes, prosecuting crimes upon general commander responsibility was out of the question, and associations would oppose them with 'all democratic means'. The Coordination, strongly against Bobetko's extradition and prosecution, asked that Croatia reject the indictment because of his legally disputed guilt. His case would then serve as a blueprint for rejecting Ademi's and Gotovina's cases. Although Coordination representatives were not completely satisfied with Račan's promises, it called the other political parties to support the Government as the indictment for Bobetko was an indictment against the Homeland War.[803] The Republic Coordination was back to institutional advocacy, as it called on the unity of all parliamentary parties, as it was not the time for gaining political points, as

[800] *Večernji list*, 26 Sep. 2002; Udovičić, *Pad umjesto uspona*, p. 624.
[801] *Feral Tribune*, 5 Oct., 7 Dec. 2002.
[802] Croatian State Attorney Office hastily investigated crimes committed during and after the 'Medak Pocket'. See: *Večernji list*, 11, 18, 24 Oct. 2002.
[803] *Jutarnji list*, 24 Sep. 2002; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 24 Sep. 2002; *Večernji list*, 24 Sep. 2002.

Croatia faced 'the battle for the truth of the Homeland War' in the international community.[804]

Meanwhile, Bobetko took a different path to avoid extradition. Despite his defiant and bold appearance, Bobetko feared extradition, trial and prison, which made him even more susceptible to those around him. Surrounded by retired officers, veteran leaders, far-right political colleagues, friends and other associates, Bobetko opted for defiance till the end, rejecting any possibility of cooperating with the I.C.T.Y. In that aspect, he rejected state help, dismissing the experienced lawyer instead of a colleague from veteran and H.D.Z.'s right-wing circles that now aligned themselves with H.B. and other radical groups. People around Bobetko convinced him that the Government was playing tricks on him. At the same time, different veteran groups tried to appropriate him for political needs, proving once more how even they could be used for non-veteran purposes. Bobetko's inner circle turned his secessionist villa in an elite Zagreb neighbourhood into – in Čondić's words – 'a fortress', a headquarters. From his house, he communicated with the Government and negotiated the withdrawal of police patrols around the house. Contributing to the image of a fortress, Bobetko's inner circle allegedly even smuggled arms into the house to be used in case special police came to arrest him. They announced building trenches and organised sentries and patrols of guards wandering in the area while sarcastically claiming they were 'picking up chestnuts'. Bobetko and those around him seemed to develop a siege mentality, sceptical of any information coming from the outside world.[805] Although there was no evidence of

[804] *Jutarnji list*, 25 Sep. 2002; *Vjesnik*, 25 Sep. 2002.
[805] *Jutarnji list*, 21, 27 Sep. 2002; *Večernji list*, 21 Sep., 21 Oct. 2002; *Nacional*, 24 Sep., 22 Oct. 2002; Arena, 26 Sep. 2002; *Globus*, 27 Sep. 2002; *Feral Tribune*, 28 Sep., 12, 26 Oct. 2002; *Glas Slavonije*, 24 Oct. 2002; *Vjesnik*, 24-5 Oct. 2002; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 8 Nov. 2002; Goldstein, Hrvatska 1990. – 2020., p. 305; Udovičić, *Četiri jahača*, p. 120; Udovičić, *Pad umjesto uspona*, p. 625-7, 632; Pavelić, *10 boljih godina*, pp 81-2; Duka, *Račan*, p. 104; H.D.Z. denied having anything to do with organising patrols of veterans in vicinity of Bobetko's house. See: *Vjesnik*, 26 Sep. 2002.

smuggling in arms or that the guards were armed, these allegations and provocations were causing unease.

This detachment from the outside world and siege mentality was evident. When the media asked Bobetko about the prospects of international sanctions over the government's non-compliance with the I.C.T.Y., he called the people to persevere despite consequences as 'historical moments' like that one rarely came.[806] As time went on, anxious about the ongoing crisis, Bobetko accused other officers of crimes committed during and after Medak Pocket – including Ademi, who was awaiting trial – countering what he wrote in his book. He even tried to connect some other officers to crimes from Operation Storm.[807] These officers were not in his inner circle or were still part of the military establishment, loyal to the authorities. Bobetko was only partially interested in the Government's strategy as he cynically said officials were trying to save face – echoing the position of the Headquarters, which had now again gained political prominence.[808]

Bobetko and his close circle formed the Committee for the Truth about the Homeland War. The Committee was just another name for Headquarters, planning to organise protests, referendums, and other ways to force the amendment of the Constitutional Law on Cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. or ways to force the Tribunal not to question the legitimacy of Croatia's operations and the Homeland War. Unlike the Headquarters, it was now open to all political parties to join in, as national unity was one of its core principles that surpassed all party politics. Although on the surface a peaceful initiative, gathering representatives even

[806] *Jutarnji list*, 25 Sep. 2002.
[807] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 26 Sep. 2002; *Globus*, 27 Sep. 2002; *Jutarnji list*, 27-9 Sep. 2002; *Večernji list*, 27 Sep. 2002; *Nacional*, 1 Nov. 2002; *Feral Tribune*, 7 Dec. 2002; After his accusations were published in an interview for the weekly Globus, Bobetko denied ever saying this. See: *Jutarnji list*, 29 Sep. 2002; In the part of the book describing the operation 'Medak Pocket', Bobetko did not mention Ademi at all. See: Bobetko, *Sve moje bitke*, pp 378-84.
[808] *Jutarnji list*, 22 Sep. 2002.

from governing parties, the Committee flirted with the possibility of using violence.[809] Through the Committee, Bobetko's inner circle wished to control party politics, especially the H.D.Z., pressuring it to confront the Government's activities on Bobetko's case and escalate the issue further.[810] These veteran and far-right groups, led by Bobetko's inner circle, appropriated the general for their political needs in the hope of snap elections in which they could mobilise the right-wing votes.[811] For some of these groups, Bobetko became simply a tool or a vessel for advocating large-scale political changes and satisfying political ambitions. Therefore, the battle for the war memory and its symbols – one of which was Bobetko – was a battle for present-day political power and influence.

While the Government succumbed to pressure from the right-wing and veteran groups, President Mesić opted to defy these forces and remind the public of Croatia's international obligations. He addressed the people on T.V., saying that Croatia was one of the I.C.T.Y.'s founders, obligated through international agreements to cooperate with the Tribunal and that the international community rightfully expected fulfilment of these obligations. Mesić accused the 'extreme political circles' – most likely thinking about Bobetko's inner circle and radical groups around it – for claiming that the indictment questioned 'the legitimacy of the Homeland War' and threatened the 'existence of the Croatian state', with which he disagreed. Mesić specified that the I.C.T.Y. accused Bobetko of these crimes according to command responsibility that also included responsibility for knowing about crimes and not preventing them or not sanctioning the perpetrators. He said 'extremist political forces' used the 'anti-

[809] *Glas Slavonije*, 23 Sep. 2002; *Jutarnji list*, 23 Sep. 2002; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 23 Sep. 2002; *Večernji list*, 23-4 Sep. 2002; *Globus*, 11 Oct. 2002; Udovičić, *Pad umjesto uspona*, pp 626-7.
[810] *Jutarnji list*, 30 Sep. 2002; *Večernji list*, 30 Sep. 2002
[811] *Jutarnji list*, 26-7 Sep. 2002.

European', 'anti-democratic' platform to isolate the country and transform 'the Bobetko case' into the 'Croatian case'.[812]

The Republic Coordination accused Mesić of referring to eighty per cent of citizens – the ones who were against Bobetko's extradition according to surveys – as 'extremists', deepening political divisions in society and weakening the Government's position towards the I.C.T.Y. The Coordination 'strongly protested' Mesić's claims that the crime was committed, thus affecting investigative and judicial bodies. According to the Coordination, the veterans did not create Croatia upon crimes and therefore did not want to burden future generations with such a moral burden. Finally, they called everyone to 'preserve the national dignity' and 'fight for the truth about the Homeland War' to preserve the state.[813] Other associations, such as U.H.B.D.D.R. and H.V.I.D.R., criticised Mesić for disagreeing with most Croatian people and against the achieved national unity.[814]

Despite disagreement with Mesić, with the support of the opposition, the Government continued with its mission to legally dispute the indictment by launching a complaint to the I.C.T.Y. and one to the Croatian Constitutional Court as it claimed it was unconstitutional.[815] The Government, supported by the opposition that gave up on trying to amend the Constitutional Law for Cooperation with the I.C.T.Y., continued to use all the legal means to avoid Bobetko's extradition.[816] An additional argument on its side was Bobetko's age and deteriorating health, as the Government and Mesić claimed he was unfit to stand trial, which

[812] For the full Mesić's statement, see: *Jutarnji list*, 26 Sep. 2002; Udovičić, *Pad umjesto uspona*, pp 629-31.
[813] Priopćenje za javnost, 26 Sep. 2002, U.H.V.D.R., registrator Nerazvrstano.
[814] *Jutarnji list*, 27 Sep. 2002.
[815] *Jutarnji list*, 28 Sep., 10-1, 15 Oct. 2002; *Večernji list*, 28 Sep., 1, 10-1, 15 Oct. 2002; *Globus*, 1 Oct. 2002.
[816] The Government received the support in a confidence vote in the Parliament on 9 October 2002, while most of the opposition boycotted the vote. After the vote, Račan promised to resign if he did not resolve the dispute with the I.C.T.Y. See: *Jutarnji list*, 10 Oct. 2002; *Večernji list*, 10 Oct. 2002; On opposition's decision to drop the idea of pushing for amending the Law, see: *Jutarnji list*, 15 Oct. 2002; *Večernji list*, 15 Oct. 2002.

was an issue raised in an interlocutory appeal to the I.C.T.Y. If Bobetko received the indictment, to accommodate him further, the Government would try to arrange that he gave his plea from his home, via video link.[817]

The Government did all these manoeuvres while navigating through potential international sanctions for Croatia's non-compliance with the I.C.T.Y., one of the prerequisites for its E.U. path. U.K. and E.U. representatives were clear that Croatia had to comply with the I.C.T.Y. or it would jeopardise its E.U. path, the Government's top foreign policy goal.[818] This foreign pressure was formalised in Interpol's arrest warrant against Bobetko and the U.K.'s and Netherlands' suspension of its ratification of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement between the European Communities and Croatia.[819] The Government claimed it was ready to face potential full sanctions over the Bobetko case, as it rightfully estimated no harsh sanctions would follow.[820]

Already in poor health, receiving constant medical help, Bobetko and his lawyers refused to cooperate and accept the indictment, which would give the Government ground to manoeuvre. Although the Government offered to transfer him to a hospital upon receiving the indictment, where a medical team could confirm he was unfit to stand trial in The Hague, Bobetko and his inner circle were suspicious, thinking that it was all a part of a plan to capture him and extradite him to the Tribunal. While his lawyers accepted medical treatment, they still insisted he would not receive the indictment. Avoiding extradition was the primary

[817] *Nacional*, 1 Oct. 2002; *Jutarnji list*, 2-5 Oct. 2002; *Večernji list*, 2 Oct. 2002; *Globus*, 4, 18 Oct. 2002; Lamont, *International Criminal Justice*, p. 40.
[818] *Jutarnji list*, 27-8 Sep., 12 Oct. 2002; *Večernji list*, 27-8 Sep., 12, 22 Oct. 2002; Goldstein, Hrvatska 1990. – 2020., p. 305; Pavlaković, 'Bolje grob nego grob', p. 447.
[819] *Jutarnji list*, 13-5 Oct. 2002; *Večernji list*, 13, 15, 17, 19 Oct. 2002; *Globus*, 18 Oct. 2002; Pavlaković, 'Bolje grob nego grob', p. 447.
[820] *Globus*, 18 Oct. 2002; *Večernji list*, 18-9 Oct. 2002; Peskin and Boduszyński, 'International justice and domestic politics', pp 1133-4.

goal for Bobetko and his lawyers.[821] Scared of extradition, his lawyers allegedly demanded 'a written guarantee' that the authorities would not 'forcefully serve' Bobetko the indictment while hospitalised.[822]

As almost four weeks passed since the start of the crisis, Račan finally decided to visit Bobetko's house. In a private two-hour conversation with Bobetko, he convinced him to accept hospital treatment.[823] Račan was concerned that Bobetko would die during the arrest or extradition and that his death would fuel the far right.[824] However, Bobetko was already fully radicalised with the help of his inner circle.[825] Fearing the prospects of authorities handing Bobetko the indictment and losing him as a symbol for a political platform, the inner circle decided to step up on their radicalism. Thus, besides insisting on the referendum on the cooperation with the I.C.T.Y., the Central National Headquarters stated they would defend Bobetko 'till the last drop of blood' – which became the mantra of Bobetko's inner circle.[826] Despite doctors' appeals for Bobetko's hospitalisation due to deteriorating health, the inner circle opposed and further radicalised their activities. The inner circle convinced Bobetko to reject Račan's offer to transfer him to the hospital. While some of them were genuinely emotionally invested and loyal to Bobetko, frustrated with the prospect of his extradition and potential death in prison – due to old age and poor health – it seemed as if many of them were trying to use the political crisis that developed around the general's case and use this for their

[821] *Večernji list*, 27-8, 30 Sep., 12-3, 15, 19, 20, 22 Oct. 2002; *Globus*, 4 Oct. 2002; *Jutarnji list*, 4, 10, 12-4 Oct. 2002.
[822] *Večernji list*, 19 Oct. 2002.
[823] *Jutarnji list*, 15 Oct. 2002; *Večernji list*, 15 Oct. 2002; Duka, *Račan*, p. 104.
[824] Del Ponte and Sudetic, Gospođa tužiteljica, p. 250; Duka, *Račan*, p. 105.
[825] Some media reports claimed Bobetko was still 'calling the shots', while advised, and supported by his inner circle. See: *Globus*, 25 Oct. 2002.
[826] *Večernji list*, 21 Oct. 2002; *Nacional*, 29 Oct. 2002.

personal political or party gain.[827] Even his lawyers, tasked with fighting Bobetko's legal battle, stated determinedly that no one and nowhere could try Bobetko.[828]

Račan accepted this defeat and blamed Bobetko's inner circle and 'political mentors' for his refusal to cooperate, as this group wanted to 'topple the Government'. He added that besides relieving Croatia of the potential risk of international sanctions, Bobetko would be better off in a hospital instead of receiving ongoing medical treatment at home.[829] However, the Government stated it would not open a new crisis by trying to deliver the indictment to Bobetko and provoke violence forcibly.[830] Račan's rhetorical concessions to right-wing demands backfired, as the Headquarters accused him of hypocrisy – if the indictment was threatening 'the dignity of the Homeland War' a month earlier, this threat did not pass.[831] Račan's end of negotiations also triggered the radicalisation on which Bobetko's inner circle counted.

Therefore, Headquarters' President Čondić was defiant and claimed that 'they made the decision' that the authorities would not arrest Bobetko.[832] H.V.I.D.R. and Headquarters members started gathering around the villa in more significant numbers. Some of them, like now already forgotten veteran leader Zvonimir Trusić, admitted they were armed and ready to confront even the special police that would try to arrest Bobetko. For Trusić, veterans – 'the people who created the state' – protecting Bobetko saw a similar situation at the beginning of the war. In his words, they wanted to prevent a 'potential treason' and fulfil

[827] *Nacional*, 22 Oct. 2002; *Večernji list*, 22 Oct. 2002; *Vjesnik*, 25 Oct. 2002; *Feral Tribune*, 2 Nov. 2002; Del Ponte and Sudetic, Gospođa tužiteljica, p. 250.
[828] *Nacional*, 29 Oct. 2002.
[829] *Večernji list*, 23, 26 Oct. 2002; Duka, *Račan*, p. 104.
[830] *Glas Slavonije*, 24 Oct. 2002; *Večernji list*, 24 Oct. 2002.
[831] *Večernji list*, 23 Oct. 2002; For threats of the Headquarters members witnesses at the ongoing trial for war crimes committed in the military prison Lora in Split during the 1990s, see: *Jutarnji list*, 17 Sep. 2002; *Večernji list*, 24 Oct. 2002.
[832] *Jutarnji list*, 24 Sep. 2002.

Bobetko's wishes not to be arrested alive, as for Trusić, the general was 'only a symbol' of something greater than themselves.[833]

As tensions grew over veterans wandering around Bobetko's house, H.D.Z.'s Vice-president and general's friend Andrija Hebrang, also a member of the inner circle, stated that Bobetko would not receive the indictment because he did not 'recognise' the Tribunal as such. Like Čondić, Hebrang reminded Račan of his initial comment that the indictment was 'unconstitutional'. When it came to potential violence used, Hebrang dramatically stated that it was a 'critical moment in Croatian history' as 'one light spark could ignite a fire', and the spark was the Government's potential decision to try and hand in the indictment to Bobetko.[834] Bobetko's lawyer, Petar Šale, spoke about veterans surrounding the house as something out of their control, adding there was a slight chance that the arrival of police would pass 'without incidents'.[835]

Although the protesters were trying to dramatize the event and exaggerate the possibility of violence breaking out, media reports did contribute to spreading panic, fostering the Government's policy of pleasing the right wing. Despite these factors, the authorities could not discard the potential for escalation of violence in post-war Croatia.[836] Along with reports against members of the Headquarters for threatening witnessed in war crime trials against Croatian soldiers, intelligence agencies were concerned because they could not assess what some veteran leaders – singling out Trusić and Čondić – could do at some point.[837] A member of the inner circle, retired general Ivan Korade was known for physical violence – including beating up an S.I.S. officer – since the war, which was a reason for his early

[833] *Glas Slavonije*, 24 Oct. 2002; *Jutarnji list*, 24 Sep. 2002; *Vjesnik*, 25 Oct. 2002; Pavelić, *10 boljih godina*, p. 87.
[834] *Večernji list*, 25 Oct. 2002; Pavelić, *10 boljih godina*, p. 87.
[835] *Nacional*, 29 Oct. 2002; Pavelić, *10 boljih godina*, p. 87.
[836] Weekly *Nacional* claimed that Bobetko's family persuaded him to commit suicide, which the general later denied. See: *Nacional*, 24 Sep. 2002; Volim Hrvatsku, 'General Janko Bobetko'.
[837] *Feral Tribune*, 26 Oct. 2002.

discharge from the military in 1997. He ended his life in 2008 by killing four civilians and one policeman before committing suicide.[838]

Agata Račan, the Prime Minister's former wife, also reported anonymous death threats against their sons.[839] Media reports cited sources from the intelligence agencies that warned about the possibility that a few hundred recently retired First Croatian Guards Corps members may intervene if the police tried to arrest Bobetko. The Corps formed in 1994 under Šušak's direct command – and not the General Staff of the Armed Forces – was responsible for the personal security of President Tuđman. Therefore, the unit was loyal to the regime – Tuđman, Šušak and H.D.Z. – and did not look kindly on the centre-left Government that disbanded it in 2000.[840] Even if all these reports and indirect threats were only rumours and bluffs, they incited panic, paralysed politicians, and strengthened Bobetko's inner circle's negotiating position.

At the height of these tensions, Del Ponte visited Zagreb and met with Račan to discuss Croatia's cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. Del Ponte was displeased that the Government was not giving up on its complaints over Bobetko's indictment and arrest warrant, as the Tribunal could not accept the plea related to general's poor health. Furthermore, Del Ponte noted she informed Račan regarding the indictment well before the issue of Bobetko's health became pressing. Without essentially resolving anything, the Government was pleased with how the

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[838] Renata Rašović, 'General Korade ubio je petero ljudi i danima se skrivao u Zagorju'('General Korade killed five people and hid in Zagorje for days'), Večernji list, 22 Jan. 2020, https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/general-korade-ubio-je-petero-ljudi-i-danima-se-skrivao-u-zagorju-1374120 (31 Jan. 2021).

[839] Duka, *Račan*, p. 106.

[840] The former commander of the First Croatian Guards Corps, Miljenko Filipović, was a part of Bobetko's inner circle. See: *Feral Tribune*, 2 Nov. 2002; Pavelić, *10 boljih godina*, p. 87; On the loyalty of the unit to Tuđman's regime and criminal and violent behaviour of their members, see: *Večernji list*, 7, 11 Jun. 1997; *Feral Tribune*, 4 Sep. 1995, 9, 16 Jun, 7 Jul. 1997, 9 Mar. 1998; *Nacional*, 11, 18 Jun. 1997; Amnesty International, 'Croatia: ill-treatment including rape in the Zuzija apartment', Amnesty International, February 1996, https://www.amnesty.org/fr/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/eur640031996en.pdf (24 Jul. 2019).

meeting went and continued with its strategy of filing complaints with the Tribunal.[841] While the Tribunal's report on Croatia's compliance presented at the U.N. Security Council in late October was positive, the General Assembly finally called Croatia to arrest and extradite Gotovina and Bobetko.[842]

With all other options falling through and fearing international sanctions and prospects of not applying for the E.U. membership before the elections expected in a year, Račan opted for a more radical – albeit legal – option: he informed Bobetko's inner circle that the Government would use police to resolve the issue.[843] Bobetko understood that his options were limited, toned down his radical rhetoric, and accepted to go to the hospital because he received a written guarantee that the authorities would not try to hand him the indictment nor extradite him to the I.C.T.Y. The idea was that Bobetko would cooperate with the I.C.T.Y. only to the degree that a medical team could establish he was fit to stand trial. Once proven, the Tribunal would drop the charges for 'process inability' to hand in the indictment. Račan gave him a personal, hand-written guarantee, and Bobetko was transported to the hospital. Račan presented recent developments to the public due to the Constitutional Court's decision and his care for Bobetko's health, which was at a critical stage then.[844]

After two weeks, the medical team established that Bobetko was unfit for trial, and Zagreb County Court suspended the process against Bobetko.[845] The medical resolution came at the

[841] *Večernji list*, 24-6 Oct. 2002; Del Ponte and Sudetic, *Gospođa tužiteljica*, pp 250-1.
[842] *Večernji list*, 29 Oct. 2002.
[843] *Feral Tribune*, 9 Nov. 2002; Duka, *Račan*, p. 104.
[844] Večernji list, 14-6 Nov. 2002; *Feral Tribune*, 16 Nov. 2002; Duka, *Račan*, p. 104-5; The Constitutional Court confirmed that operations conducted by Croatian forces during the war were in accordance with the Constitution, as they were supressing the armed rebellion and effects of the international suppression. However, the Court stated it was not constitutionally competent to pass judgement on the legality of operations or for establishing potential crimes committed during particular offensives. Finally, the Court found it was not competent to decide if certain decisions made by U.N. bodies or institutions found by them – like the I.C.T.Y. – were in compliance with the Constitution. See: *Večernji list*, 13 Nov. 2002
[845] *Večernji list*, 29 Nov. 2002.

last moment, as the Tribunal's Appeals Chamber rejected both Government's complaints the next day, seeing them as 'confusing'.[846] Two months later, the Tribunal's physicians established that Bobetko, permanently hospitalised, was unfit for extradition and to stand trial. Therefore, the I.C.T.Y. decided in February 2003 not to demand extradition until his health improved.[847] In the context of new criticism of Del Ponte regarding Croatia's non-compliance in the Gotovina and Bobetko cases, the I.C.T.Y. decided in late March 2003 that the Government must hand in the indictment to Bobetko, who was still hospitalised. In early April 2003, the Government delivered the indictment to Bobetko's lawyers, who refused to receive it.[848]

In the end, on 29 April 2003, Bobetko passed away in his home and was given a large funeral in Sisak, gathering people from his inner circle, as well as other retired officers, veteran leaders, right-wing politicians, but also Račan, Minister Pančić and Parliament Chair Tomčić. Although Bobetko's last testament asked for a funeral without political speeches or politicians as speakers, this was not fulfilled. Despite an otherwise moderate address at the funeral, Sanader stated that no one could or would change the 'truth about the Homeland War' and Bobetko's role in it. The funeral also served as Bobetko's inner circle's last symbolic victory over the Government. Thus, in his speech, General Basarac called Bobetko to report to Tuđman in heaven and told him they would not allow anyone to bring down 'the foundation of the Croatian state'. Basarac assured them the veterans would defend the 'freedom of the Croatian people' and watch over the dignity of the veterans and the whole nation.[849]

[846] *Večernji list*, 30 Nov. 2002.
[847] *Jutarnji list*, 1 Feb. 2003; *Večernji list*, 2, 6 Feb. 2003.
[848] *Jutarnji list*, 27-9 Mar., 5 Apr. 2003; *Večernji list*, 26, 28 Mar., 5, 15 Apr. 2003.
[849] Jutarnji list, 30 Apr., 2 May 2003; *Večernji list*, 30 Apr., 2-4 May 2003

Bobetko's death symbolised the end of the massive veteran contentious period over the cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. and prosecution of war crimes.[850] The crisis once more revealed the weaknesses of the centre-left Government, which did not have the strength to deal with Tuđman's legacy. Račan's Government continued to pursue policies of secrecy, stalling, non-compliance, and concessions to veterans and the right wing. In tackling Bobetko's indictment, same as with Gotovina's, Račan applied a tactic in which he satisfied the international community by – at the surface – cooperating with the I.C.T.Y. and then trying to find solutions to avoid that cooperation. Although he presented the Government as cooperative, he defied the Tribunal's authority. The Government's tactic of waiting out so that Bobetko became too ill to stand trial worked but at the price of the country's image in the international community.[851] Although Račan feared that the Bobetko Crisis might topple the Government and provoke snap elections or massive violent demonstrations, these assumptions were probably wrong. Although the population did support Bobetko in his defiance of the I.C.T.Y. and the Government's policy to help him in that cause, that support changed through time and was shaped by media reports.

Additionally, even if they supported Bobetko, this problem was not high on people's agenda – concerned with the falling living standard – and could not mobilise the masses.[852] The crisis represented a significant step backwards in Croatia-I.C.T.Y. cooperation, one of the Government's primary objectives on its E.U. path, which tarnished its image internationally.[853] The veteran associations and *ad hoc* groups were, thus, successfully

[850] The issues related to fugitive general Gotovina would spill into the next period 2004-11, causing veteran contentious activities, but never a significant platform for political engagement.
[851] Peskin, 'Beyond victor's justice?', p. 220.
[852] Pavlaković, 'Bolje grob nego rob', pp 447-8.
[853] Lamont, 'Defiance or strategic compliance?', p. 1705.

amassing pressure for the state to either use its jurisdiction to try Croatian officers themselves and transfer cases or to avoid processing I.C.T.Y.'s indictments and arrest warrants.

Conclusion

The chapter demonstrated the centre-left Government's failures to improve Croatia's cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. as part of announced radical reforms. Thus, instead of enhancing Croatia's compliance with the I.C.T.Y., the Government ended with a greater lag in complying than Tuđman's semi-authoritarian regime.[854] One of the reasons for this limited compliance came from within the governing coalition, where H.S.L.S. and Budiša quickly joined the opposition's and veterans' anti-I.C.T.Y. front. At the same time, Račan lacked the political will to pursue the cooperation policy at all costs. The Government's decision to pursue the policy of secrecy and stalling hurt Croatia's international image, tarnished Račan's image personally and contributed to building Croatia's culture of impunity for crimes committed. The Government did not use the initial support it had upon taking power to pursue a different and more honest approach to what compliance with the I.C.T.Y. might bring. The policy of secrecy and stalling hurt these prospects because of preparing the public for future indictments and explaining the crimes individuals were accused of – not the nation or the Homeland War – it might have brought long-lasting changes in Croatian society. Besides these inconsistencies, the authorities had technical difficulties securing cooperating with the I.C.T.Y. as it lacked complete control over the police, secret services and even the military, loyal to H.D.Z. or some of their members.

In all three cases – Norac, Gotovina and Bobetko – veteran activities, helped by the political opposition and H.S.L.S. and others, managed to secure favourable positions for the suspects.

[854] Lamont, 'Defiance or strategic compliance?', p. 1693.

Thus, veteran activities from February 2001, climaxing in the Riva protest, managed to negotiate terms of Norac's surrender and guarantees that he would be tried before Croatian courts for any potential future Tribunal indictment – which probably resulted in a lower prison sentence, as the maximum penalty for war crimes was twenty years in prison.[855] When the indictment for Gotovina and Ademi came, veteran activities, Budiša's opposition and other factors persuaded Račan to continue his policy of stalling, allowing Gotovina to flee, which would, undeservedly, become one of the most important political issues in the country for the next four-and-half years. Finally, with Bobetko's and veterans' resistance to the indictment, arrest, extradition and even hospitalisation of the elderly general, the Government succumbed to a complete list of concessions. These concessions included expensive field hospitals, officials' house visits, complaints to different bodies, and avoiding handing in indictments and arrests at all (political) costs. It shows that veteran associations acted as veto players besides pivotal political actors, preventing, obstructing, and even entirely stopping the implementation of policies and laws.

During 2001-3, veteran associations and groups, helped by political elites across the spectrum, further grounded the dominant narrative on the Homeland War. In the process initiated in 2000, veteran associations and groups continued deifying the war and its memory. Thus, by 2003, the Homeland War myth was turned into a secular religion with dogmas that

[855] In April 2004, the I.C.T.Y. issued an indictment against Norac for crimes committed during the 1993 military operation 'Medak Pocket' in Gospić area. However, in September 2005, the Tribunal transferred the case to the Croatian judiciary. See: The Prosecutor v. Rahim Ademi and Mirko Norac IT-04-78-PT, Decision for Referral to the Authorities of the Republic of Croatia Pursuant to Rule 11bis, International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia, 14 Sep. 2005, https://www.I.C.T.Y..org/x/cases/ademi/tdec/en/050914.htm (3 Jan. 2023); Although found guilty for both crimes committed in Gospić in 1991 and in villages near Medak in 1993, Norac received a combined sentence of eighteen years, which was cut to fifteen altogether. He was released on parole in 2011, after serving more than two thirds of his sentence – as customary for all prisoners with good behaviour. See: Jutarnji.hr, 'Mirko Norac izlazi na slobodu 25. studenog. Isti mjesec na slobodu izlaze Hrvoje Petrač i Leon Sulić', Jutarnji list, 15 Sep. 2011, https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/mirko-norac-izlazi-na-slobodu-25.-studenog.-isti-mjesec-na-slobodu-izlaze-hrvoje-petrac-i-leon-sulic-1819704 (3 Jan. 2023).

could not be scrutinised and were accepted by all major political parties and veterans. While the war had already become ‘a sanctity’, it was not time to glorify and worship individuals that contributed the most – in the eyes of veteran associations and groups – to the victory in the armed conflict that constituted Croatia’s foundations. While late Tuđman and Šušak were already cast into Messiah-like figures, brushing away their transgressions with their war merits, using particular positive memories to screen the unpleasant transgressions, it was not the time to do the same with living generals. Thus, veteran associations turned the three generals into symbols around which the movement and country could mobilise. They were not mere war heroes; they became the embodiment of the war victory, a part of the war itself. Veterans, helped by political elites, turned the generals into a value of the war, which could be defended like many other values in a democratic society – like democracy, human rights, freedom of speech or the rule of law. Even more so, with the war serving as Croatia’s foundational myth, these newly promoted values could override the aforementioned democratic values. Such an interpretation was incompatible with Croatia’s E.U. path that would pay a negative dividend for the country in years to come.

Chapter 4

Negotiating the Homeland War narrative (2004-11)

Introduction

After three years of veteran and right-wing backlash against the centre-left government over cooperation with the I.C.T.Y., late 2003 and 2004 brought dramatic change. Although the Government did manage to enhance Croatia's international image and stabilise the country, along with introducing some structural reforms, Croatia only saw limited success in improving the living standard, curbing the growing unemployment, and improving the rule of law. The bickering between coalition partners and numerous splits contributed to the fall of the parties' popularity.[856]

In the 2003 general elections, the centre-left coalition was broken into smaller blocks, resulting in weaker electoral success. The electoral campaign was not as much centred on contentious and divisive issues such as the cooperation with the I.C.T.Y.[857] Turning away from the topic from recent history and focusing on the toping of desired E.U. membership somewhat benefited Sanader as H.D.Z. did not have to deal with party's transgressions from the past. In turn, unlike the previous elections, the party turned away from recalling the events from the 1990s war and Croatia's recent history and focussed on joining the E.U.[858] Additionally, Sanader engaged in a highly personalised but also professionally organised

[856] Dražen Lalić, 'Obilježja pakiranja politike u izbornoj kampanji H.D.Z.-a i S.D.P.-a 2003. godine' in *Politička misao*, xli (2004), no. 1, pp 55–73, at p. 58; Marijana Grbeša, 'Privatisation of politics in Croatia: analysis of the 2003 and 2007 parliamentary elections' in *Medijska istraživanja: znanstveno-stručni časopis za novinarstvo i medije*, xvi (2010), no. 2, pp 57-79, at p. 61.
[857] Dragan Bagić, 'Društveni rascjepi i stranačke preferencije na izborima za Hrvatski sabor 2003. Godine' in *Politička misao*, xliv (2007), no. 4, pp 93–115, at p. 94;
[858] Lalić, 'Obilježja pakiranja politike', p. 68.

campaign, where he found yet another comparative advantage than his biggest rival, S.D.P.'s Račan. The swing voters voted for H.D.Z. as it conveyed the self-image of self-confidence.[859]

Although Račan had a slim chance of forming a broad government despite S.D.P.'s poor results in the end, he dropped out of the race, leaving the door open for H.D.Z., led by Sanader, to return to power. Unlike before, Sanader ran H.D.Z. on a pro-European platform, emphasising E.U. accession as one of its primary goals.[860] Sanader and H.D.Z. leadership realised they had to either transform the party into a modern conservative, Christian-democratic party or that the party would cease to exist. This transformation included removing or silencing radical groups in the party and promoting inter-ethnic tolerance.[861] Therefore, immediately after the elections, Sanader instantly boosted Croatia's and the Government's image by assuring political support from the Independent Democratic Serb Party (*Samostalna demokratska srpska stranka*, S.D.S.S.) while avoiding a coalition with the far-right H.S.P., which would have isolated the country in its E.U. path. In various symbolic gestures, Sanader and H.D.Z. reached the hands of ethnic minorities, mainly Serbs, in an attempt to gain European sympathies. While centre-left parties avoided such gestures, as they opened them to criticism from the right – especially S.D.P. with the baggage of Communism hanging over them – H.D.Z. did not have to prove its Croatian national, but rather their European credentials.[862] As most of the opposition saw E.U. membership as Croatia's primary goal, Sanader had free hands to stir the country in that direction.

In the first six months in power, the new Government put all efforts into securing Croatia's E.U. candidate status.[863] As the E.U. demanded Croatia's full cooperation with the I.C.T.Y.,

[859] Grbeša, 'Privatisation of politics', p. 61; Romana Vlahutin, 'The Croatian exception' in Judy Batt (ed), *The Western Balkans: Moving On* (Paris, 2004), pp 21-36, at p. 28.
[860] Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1990. – 2020.*, pp 348-9; Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1918.-2008.*, pp 840-1.
[861] Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1918.-2008.*, pp 840-2; Vlahutin, 'The Croatian exception', at p. 28.
[862] Dekanić, *Demokratizacija Hrvatske*, pp 323-4; Udovičić, *Pad umjesto uspona*, pp 224-5; Pavelić, *10 boljih godina*, p. 126; Udovičić, *Četiri jahača*, pp 135-6; Vlahutin, 'The Croatian exception', p. 29.
[863] Vlahutin, 'The Croatian exception', p. 30.

Sanader had to change the paradigm of cooperating with the Tribunal.[864] Thus, upon taking office, Sanader promised cooperation with the Tribunal based on I.C.T.Y.'s Statute, the mandate of the U.N. Security Council, and Croatian laws.[865] The Government's diplomatic efforts to convince the I.C.T.Y. that Croatia would fully cooperate were somewhat successful.[866] Besides that, Sanader explained how his government would help the accused defend themselves while convincing the Tribunal to transfer the cases to Croatian courts.[867] The Government had to win over veterans who built their identity by defying the cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. The collaboration was sensitive in the case of I.C.T.Y. indictments concerning war crimes committed during and after Croatia's 1995 military operation Storm. In Croatia's politics and public memory, especially among veterans, Storm is central to the country's culture of victory.

Thus, during the 2004-05 period, faced with upcoming indictments and the ongoing hunt for fugitive general Ante Gotovina, the Government and veteran associations worked on changing the paradigm of sending Croatian officers to the Hague and Croatian patriotism. Changing the paradigm could cause further fragmentation of the veterans, even within more prominent mainstream associations. Because the Government depended on veterans' cooperation, desperately wanting to avoid massive protests like during the 2000-02 period, this was an opportunity for associations to ask for trade-offs: pragmatic, political, material, financial, legal and symbolic. The Chapter will demonstrate the success of changing the dominant paradigm and certain oppositions that existed but did not prevail. Thus, once more, the myth of unity among veterans was shattered.

[864] *Jutarnji list*, 8 Jan, 1, 18 Feb. 2004.
[865] Udovičić, *Pad umjesto uspona*, p. 230.
[866] Vlahutin, 'The Croatian exception', p. 31.
[867] Pavlaković, 'Bolje grob nego rob', p. 452.

The Chapter will show how, despite avoiding large and politically instrumental protests, Gotovina's arrest in December 2005 brought some turbulence to the veteran community, again contributing to the disunity among veterans. However, it would demonstrate why veterans did not manage to dispute the new paradigm on Croatia's cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. or to break their client-patron relationship with the H.D.Z. Other political options tried to use these chasms and appropriate veterans, stealing H.D.Z.'s voter base while pushing their specific agenda. However, as the Chapter demonstrates, these chasms were not deep enough to endanger the client-patron relationship on a larger scale – although it shows the complexity of that relationship.

Finally, after Veterans Minister Jadranka Kosor took over from Sanader in July 2009, the veteran community was affected by a devastating recession. It announced budget cuts, affecting their state grants, benefits and pensions. Triggered by new arrests of Croatian veterans, numerous veteran associations and ad hoc groups joined general protests against the Government. The divide existing on the issue of cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. persisted on the issue of participating in demonstrations. The short protest period of 2011 again demonstrated the shifting loyalty of specific veteran associations and groups and another case of a lack of unity.

2004 – changing the paradigm on cooperation with the I.C.T.Y.

Less than three months in office, Sanader's Government faced a new round of I.C.T.Y. indictments. The Tribunal accused generals Ivan Čermak and Mladen Markač of taking part in war crimes against Serb civilians during and after the 1995 Operation Storm.[868] As an offensive that liberated huge territories under Serb control since 1991, enabled the return of

[868] *Jutarnji list*, 3 Feb. 2004.

non-Serb refugees and normalised communication between the country's north and south, Operation Storm was essential for present-day independent Croatia and held a special place in the country's culture of victory.[869] Although Čermak and Markač did not enjoy the heroic public image of Gotovina, they were still respected, especially among veterans. Therefore, Sanader's government had to tread lightly regarding securing the generals' extradition and try to ensure the veterans' blessing.[870]

Despite the initial hesitancy, Sanader quickly found a way to incorporate the cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. into the newly formed patriotism. Sanader revamped the rhetoric of Croatian nationalism, transforming it into a modern, pro-E.U. nationalism. Sanader replaced the veterans' mantra from the early 2000s about how Croatian 'officers didn't commit crimes and therefore shouldn't go to the Hague' with the notion that they 'didn't commit crimes but have to prove it in the Hague'. According to Sanader's new paradigm, Croatian soldiers could have committed crimes in a defensive and just war, and these individual transgressions had to be prosecuted. The same truth about the Homeland War from the early 2000s had to be defended before the I.C.T.Y.[871] While the indicted officers were still publicly treated as heroes and innocent beyond any doubt, their cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. was important for respecting the rule of law and helping Croatia clear its name. The Government presented the defendants' defence before the court as the defence of the Homeland War and Croatia. In the light of the new paradigm, Vice Prime Minister Andrija Hebrang publicly conveyed to the fugitive general Gotovina that I.C.T.Y. Chief Prosecutor Carla Del Ponte called him to give himself in

[869] Peskin, 'Beyond victor's justice?', p. 218; Pavlaković, 'Bolje grob nego rob', pp 460, 477; Clark, 'Courting controversy', pp 399-400, 419; Pavlaković, 'Croatia, the International Criminal Tribunal', pp 1123-4; Tamara Banjeglav, 'Conflicting memories, competing narratives and contested histories in Croatia's post-war commemorative practices' in *Politička misao*, il (2012), no. 5, pp 7-31, at pp 19-20.
[870] *Jutarnji list*, 3 Feb. 2004; Just three days before elections, Sanader denied saying to foreign press that his government would extradite Gotovina. H.D.Z. claimed that Sanader said that his government is ready to cooperate with the I.C.T.Y. See: Pavelić, *10 boljih* godina, p. 125.
[871] *Večernji list*, 2 Apr. 2004.

and stand trial as a free man – without detention in the Hague. Hebrang, emphasising the proposal as a success of the government's guarantees, told Gotovina that he has a chance to stand trial and defend 'himself, his honour, the Homeland War and Croatia'.[872]

Sanader's new paradigm transformed the perception of the I.C.T.Y. and prosecution of Croatian officers, strengthening the dominant narrative on the Homeland War, as it incorporated a part of the counter-narrative about prosecuting crimes committed by Croatian forces. While before taking power in 2003, H.D.Z. openly opposed I.C.T.Y.'s jurisdiction over operations Flash and Storm – seen as legitimate liberating offensives on Croatia's territory – now this was possible. This switch alienated some H.D.Z. leaders who did not appreciate the party's new direction.[873] This change in rhetoric and policy – as Croatia improved its cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. – showed how some aspects of the dominant narrative, regardless of Homeland War's sacral character, could be altered in a limited way.

Čermak and Markač and six Bosnian Croat officials supported Sanader's idea of defending the truth about the Homeland War and Croatia and its national interests before the I.C.T.Y. The officers felt loyal to the new government and did not want to 'cause problems for their homeland'.[874] The accused officers demanded prosecution of war crimes to clear their names, as they were sacrificial lambs of high politics from the past who tried to hide the real perpetrators.[875] The government secured the officers' voluntary extradition by redefining their role as defendants, boosting the country's image abroad.[876] Boarding the plane, Markač said that they were going to the Hague 'with a clear conscience and would return as victors', again referencing the rhetoric used in Croatia's culture of victory.[877] The trials were framed

[872] *Večernji list*, 4 Feb. 2004.
[873] Drago Krpina, *Tiranija kameleona* (Zagreb, 2007), pp 65-6.
[874] *Nacional*, 2 Mar. 2004.
[875] *Feral Tribune*, 12 Mar. 2004.
[876] *Jutarnji list*, 6 Mar. 2004.
[877] *Jutarnji list*, 12 Mar. 2004.

as their final battle, the Homeland War's final stage, defending the War's honour. Concluding on a note of the new patriotism coined by Sanader, according to which they should defend the homeland at the I.C.T.Y., Čermak concluded that he and Markač were ready to part for The Hague because they loved their homeland too much.[878] Following Čermak and Markač, Bosnian Croat officers and Croatian general Mirko Norac, once the trigger for massive veteran protests – now indicted by the I.C.T.Y. for war crimes committed in Medak Pocket operation – all cooperated and quickly turned themselves in.[879]

Although associations' support for H.D.Z.'s new course on cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. seemed like an expected outcome due to the party's link to these organisations, it took much negotiating, persuading, and coercing.[880] The absence of veteran protests resulted from the Government's activities towards the associations in the first weeks after taking power. Therefore, the Government announced a new, more favourable Law on Veterans and a stop to all revisions of veteran disability - something H.V.I.D.R. advocated.[881] At the same time, the Government tried to cut the financial costs of paying extensive welfare. Worried over the budgetary constraints, it promised fulfilment of their rights in 2005-06, which many associations accepted as a fact of harsh reality.[882] Sanader framed veterans as 'reasonable', aware of the fiscal constraints of the state budget.[883] The Government formed a coordination body made up of members of associations and state institutions to draft a law that would tackle all the issues among the veteran population. H.V.I.D.R. asked that the Government reintroduce the 1997 Law on Veterans, which guaranteed forty per cent larger disability

[878] *Večernji list*, 12 Mar. 2004.
[879] Peskin, 'Beyond Victor's Justice?'; I.C.T.Y.'s indictment against six Bosnian Croat officials was an especially sensitive topic because it stated Croatian political and military leadership took part in a joint criminal enterprise – along with the accused – in annexing a part of Bosnia and Herzegovina. See: *Jutarnji list*, 3-4 Apr. 2004.
[880] *Feral Tribune*, 11 Jun. 2004.
[881] *Jutarnji list*, 13 Jan, 25 Mar. 2004; *Večernji list*, 4 Feb. 2004.
[882] *Jutarnji list*, 4 Feb. 2004.
[883] *Jutarnji list*, 18 Feb. 2004.

fees.[884] Besides the announced benefits and a more favourable law, the rhetoric and symbolism used by the Government in public meetings with veterans showed how much they tried to win their hearts. At one of the formal meetings with veterans, Sanader stated that no one would ever humiliate them, as they 'weren't seeking privileges but respect'.[885]

Ultimately, mainstream associations were satisfied with the new Law, granting them maximal benefits given Croatia's fiscal possibilities. It gave veterans bigger pensions while defining veteran status more extensively, with projections reaching a staggering 600,000.[886] After a few months of intensive negotiating, the government drafted a relatively beneficial Law, which brought back some benefits cut by the centre-left government and introduced a few other perks: broadening tax and customs deductions for importing cars, introducing the guaranteed lowest veteran pension at the level of forty-five per cent of the average salary, introducing waivers for healthcare participation for disabled veterans with the disability of thirty per cent or higher.[887] The Parliament passed the Law without significant amendments, while most veteran associations were satisfied.[888]

Some in the veteran community were still not satisfied. Former U.H.B.D.D.R. President Borković said the associations' support is proof of their political instrumentality. According to him, a simple veteran who was not a member of these associations would not support this law. At the same time, these organisations kept their membership high because individuals were members of multiple associations simultaneously.[889] H.V.I.D.R.'s Zagreb branch was also dissatisfied, not accepting budgetary restrictions as reasons for not improving veteran

[884] *Jutarnji list*, 6 Feb. 2004.
[885] *Jutarnji list*, 5 Feb. 2004; *Večernji list*, 6 Feb. 2004.
[886] *Jutarnji list*, 12 Sep. 2004; *Večernji list*, 14-17 Sep. 2004.
[887] *Jutarnji list*, 16 Oct. 2004.
[888] *Večernji list*, 1 Dec. 2004.
[889] *Večernji list*, 15 Sep. 2004.

benefits. According to the association, the Law widened the number of veterans but not their rights.[890]

Once again, the way the Government secured the support from veteran associations showed how sometimes particular and material interests stood behind their public discontent over certain symbolic issues or policies not relating to welfare. Thus, the Government could mitigate many veterans' discontent through material incentives. The result was as expected, as the Government's attempts to improve the veteran position persuaded many associations not to protest new indictments.[891] Therefore, compared to those against Norac, Gotovina, Ademi and Bobetko from 2001-2, the recent indictments did not cause massive protests, roadblocks or a state of emergency.[892] The reaction of veteran associations to all these indictments and extradition was mild, almost *pro forma*.[893] Unlike during the 2000-02 period when veteran associations *a priori* reacted negatively to any indictment against Croatian officers, now these organisations were careful in how they commented on such acts. Therefore, in responding to reporters' questions, U.H.V.D.R. did not want to speculate regarding indictments before it saw their content.[894] H.V.I.D.R. placed their hopes that the government would know how to fight the indictments, mentioning protests as the final solution – only if everything else fails. Some local association branches went as far as to claim that many government members were veterans and that this guaranteed they would preserve the dignity of the Homeland War.[895]

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[890] Prijedlozi za izmjene i dopune Zakona o pravima hrvatskih branitelja i članova njihovih obitelji, 24 Sep. 2004, H.S., fond Hrvatski sabor, podfond Hrvatski sabor, 5. saziv (2003-7), serija Odbor za ratne veterane, podserija Sjednice, podpodserija 10. sjednica, podpodserija Materijal sjednice.
[891] *Večernji list*, 7 Feb. 2004.
[892] Pavlaković, 'Bolje grob nego rob', p. 452.
[893] *Feral Tribune*, 23 Apr. 2004.
[894] *Jutarnji list*, 8 Mar. 2004; Zaključci sa sastanka Središnjeg odbora U.D.V.D.R. R.H. održanog 5. ožujka 2004. Godine u Zagrebu, Galovićeva 12, Street, 9 Mar. 2004, U.H.V.D.R., registrator Središnji odbor.
[895] *Jutarnji list*, 16 Mar. 2004.

One of the rare exceptions was Čondić, a slightly forgotten veteran leader leading H.B.'s Community of Defenders of Croatia at the time. He found the Government responsible for the whole situation as they made deals with the I.C.T.Y., seeing it as an act of grand treason by Sanader and Mesić.[896] However, despite his harsh words, relatively counter-intuitively, Čondić concluded that protests would not change anything.[897]

The Republic Coordination, 'appalled' by the content of indictments against Čermak and Markač, condemned the 'unfounded constructions' about the Homeland War as 'a criminal enterprise' to expel or remove the local Serb population. Claiming it goes against the constitutional foundations of the state, the Coordination contended that it was an attack on Croatia and its people. In their words, defence from such accusations was needed to protect the national 'dream of a great victory' and prevent the development of 'the guilt for a collective crime'.[898] In this way, the memory of victory screened the memory of crime.

However, even though the rhetoric of the Coordination echoed earlier discursive construction of great danger looming over Croatia and the legacy of the Homeland, the announcement nevertheless supported the Government. Unlike the former government, which was always an agent of foreign powers trying to destroy Croatia, the new one should unite with the people in defending the dignity of the Croatian people and state. While earlier Tribunal's arrest warrants or indictments were the reason to dismiss the cooperation with the I.C.T.Y., now, the Coordination stressed it was not putting that cooperation in question nor jeopardising the state. The Coordination echoed Sanader's words that 'freedom is defended at the battlefield, while the truth [is defended] in court', condoning officers' voluntary extradition to The Hague, where they could defend themselves and their homeland's honour. Finally, in stark

[896] *Večernji list*, 9 Mar. 2004; *Jutarnji list*, 10 Mar. 2004.
[897] *Jutarnji list*, 11, 13 Mar. 2004; *Večernji list*, 13 Mar. 2004.
[898] Priopćenje za javnost, 9 Mar. 2004, Association of Volunteers of the Croatian War Navy (*Udruga dragovoljaca Hrvatske ratne mornarice*, U.D.H.R.M.), registrator Ulazna pošta iz 2003.

contrast to how veterans' associations treated I.C.T.Y.'s indictments previously, the Coordination was assured that the Government would know how to protect officers' interests and defend the honour and dignity of the Homeland War.[899]

The Association of Special Police from the Homeland War, whose members were Markač's direct subordinates, also stressed how the organisation would not 'undertake any activities that may discredit general Markač, the Association or Croatia'. The Association declared it would help by providing witnesses for Markač's defence, while the organisation was confident that the lawyers would know how to deal with such legally problematic indictments.[900]

Associations reacted radically differently to the 2004 indictments against Croatian officers than the 2000-02 ones. The explanations of veteran leaders were unconvincing, and their political ties to H.D.Z. – as many were its members – pointed to the reason behind their change of hearts.[901] Many personal and political interests stood behind the lack of criticism of the Government from mainstream associations. Mainstream associations, especially their main headquarters, rarely criticised H.D.Z. and Sanader in this period. H.D.Z. secured ties with the biggest associations as its M.P., a loyal party soldier, Josip Đakić, became H.V.I.D.R.'s President in May 2004.[902] Đakić would become one of H.D.Z.'s crucial persons for controlling and pacifying mainstream associations, especially H.V.I.D.R.

Croatian generals also changed the way they communicated with the state. Unlike in 2000, when they openly defied the state and criticised the criminalisation of the Homeland War and veterans' dignity, now retired high-ranking officers supported the activities of the

[899] Ibid.
[900] *Jutarnji list*, 9 Mar. 2004.
[901] *Feral Tribune*, 23 Apr. 2004.
[902] *Jutarnji list*, 9 May 2004.

Government in promoting the truth about the war.[903] The truth about war crimes committed during and after Storm or Croatia's role in the Bosnian War remained the same. However, veterans, government, and symbolically all of Croatia were discursively united in defending the truth, which could only be defended before the I.C.T.Y. The significant difference was that veteran associations did not see the new government as the enemy – or collaborator of the enemy – as they did with S.D.P.'s Government.[904]

In the end, successful cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. bore fruit, as in late April, the European Commission recommended that the E.U. start its negotiations with Croatia.[905] While the Government won 'round one', the unresolved issue of locating fugitive general Gotovina loomed over Croatia.

2004-6 – Poster Wars turn Gotovina into Croatia's Che Guevara

Despite having a loyal party soldier as H.V.I.D.R. President, H.D.Z.'s control over veteran associations was fragile. Even in the case of his association, Đakić was often incapable of controlling local H.V.I.D.R. branches.[906] Due to his support for the Government's new policy of cooperating with the I.C.T.Y., Đakić's reputation eroded dramatically. Some H.V.I.D.R. and other association leaders publicly ridiculed and dismissed Đakić for his political opportunism, claiming that he tried to silence the veterans.[907]

Although most of this veteran dissent with the Government was of low intensity, in the end, it built up a perfect storm. Many associations ended up between pragmatism and idealism: wanting to cooperate with the Government due to state funds while rejecting the I.C.T.Y. and

[903] *Večernji list*, 6 Apr. 2004.
[904] *Feral Tribune*, 23 Apr. 2004.
[905] *Jutarnji list*, 21 Apr. 2004.
[906] *Večernji list*, 8 Jun. 2004; *Jutarnji list*, 8-9 Jun. 2004; *Feral Tribune*, 11 Jun. 2004.
[907] *Feral Tribune*, 11 Jun. 2004.

keeping the dominant narrative intact. Loyalist associations had to prove themselves in the eyes of the public, veterans, and their members. Also, it was an opportunity to increase their demands, as the Government was under pressure from veterans. Nenad Zovak, President of the First Croatian Policeman (*Prvi hrvatski redarstvenik*), an association traditionally loyal to H.D.Z., accused the Government of treating veterans worse than the former one, generally disliked by associations across the board.[908] Although Zovak later discarded these claims, it showed that veteran associations and groups had put the Government out of its comfort zone as tensions snowballed.[909]

Despite all this, including little dissent from veteran associations regarding the new indictment against Norac, mainstream associations were not ready to stage street protests.[910] At the same time, the fragmentation of the veteran movement was galloping, while their views differed radically. Conflicts within and between associations and *ad hoc* veteran groups were numerous, with various personal and political interests and ambitions. Some veteran leaders and local politicians who were the main organisers of veteran protests in 2001-2 were now either part of the establishment or co-opted by H.D.Z. Additionally, many associations did not want to confront the state head-on, as they depended on its funds for survival.[911] Nevertheless, some local associations, renegade branches of loyalist mainstream associations – predominantly H.V.I.D.R. – and *ad hoc* veteran groups found a way to continue their revolt against state cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. without staging formal protests. As Croatia extradited all other suspects to The Hague, these groups decided to make a stand regarding Gotovina.

[908] *Feral Tribune*, 11 Jun. 2004; *Nacional*, 15 Jun. 2004.
[909] Tiskovna konferencija u povodu novinskih natpisa, 28 Jun. 2004, U.D.H.R.M., registrator Ulazna pošta, p. 2.
[910] *Nacional*, 1, 8, 15 Jun. 2004; *Feral Tribune*, 4, 11, 18 Jun. 2004; *Jutarnji list*, 7, 9, 12 Jun. 2004; *Večernji list*, 8 Jun. 2004; *Globus*, 11, 25 Jun. 2004.
[911] *Globus*, 25 Jun. 2004.

Regardless of the dramatically improved relations with the I.C.T.Y., the Gotovina case was one major remaining piece in the puzzle for the Government. General Gotovina, accused of war crimes committed against Serb civilians during and after Storm, had gone into hiding in July 2001, immediately upon receiving news of I.C.T.Y.'s indictment. Back then, speaking with a reporter from his hideout, Gotovina echoed the warnings issued by veteran groups: if he was guilty, the whole Croatian nation was guilty.[912]

By 2004, after being a fugitive for three years, Gotovina had already secured a myth-like status among veterans and the general population. Years on the run from authorities transformed Gotovina into a cult-like persona, gaining most support from disenfranchised elements of the post-Tuđman society.[913] In the view of his followers, Gotovina encapsulated the values that – from a right-wing perspective – led Croats in the War: 'patriotism, a willingness to fight against Serbian aggression, religiosity'. He embodied a hero and a martyr – as the Homeland War functioned like a secular religion – representing the Croatian army, the Homeland War, the Croatian state, and the Croats. This representation of Gotovina was in line with the tradition of a *hajduk*, a 17-19th century romanticised bandit or outlaw glorified in folk songs, representing 'anti-modern, anti-urban and anti-state mentality' from regions in Croatia.[914]

Gotovina did charm the masses and the elites, who saw his potential for mobilisation. Aspiring politicians, such as centrist independent presidential candidate Boris Mikšić, used Gotovina as a symbol of patriotic legitimation in the eyes of the voters.[915] Conservative intellectuals, like the renowned writer Ivan Aralica – a longstanding H.D.Z. member – used

[912] *Jutarnji list*, 7 July 2001.
[913] Members of the 1990s elite – retired and active military and intelligence officers, high-ranking veterans, right-wing politicians – also supported Gotovina as a symbol of the 1990s, when Croatia did not bend to pressure coming from the EU. See: *Nacional*, 13 Jul. 2004.
[914] Pavlaković, 'Croatia, the International Criminal Tribunal'.
[915] *Hrvatski list*, 4 Nov. 2004.

metaphors in his novel to praise Gotovina and condemn Croatia's political leadership for cooperating with the I.C.T.Y.[916] Some intellectuals supported Gotovina as an act of an ordinary man against the system, persecuting an innocent man sacrificed for political purposes.[917]

Considering all these, Gotovina's arrest and extradition to the Hague became one of the country's most controversial political issues. Due to this, Sanader's government carefully approached the issue since its first days in office. While assuring extradition for Čermak, Markač, and Bosnian Croat officials was sensitive, indictment for Gotovina was even more complicated.[918] One of the factors that further complicated the Gotovina case was that the fugitive general had a strong network of helpers – friends, fellow combatants, veteran leaders, active and retired officers, intelligence officers, entrepreneurs, politicians, and representatives of the Catholic Church.[919] All these individuals and groups had different interests and reasons for participating in the campaign: personal, emotional, patriotic, professional, and political.

For local politicians from smaller parties, the Gotovina case was an opportunity to jump into the empty seat by H.D.Z. – the anti-I.C.T.Y. space. In mid-2004, these circles, different local associations, and ad hoc veteran groups launched a nationwide campaign to put up Gotovina's posters and photos in public spaces. During these 'Poster Wars', veterans used Gotovina as a symbol, almost a pop icon, resembling the public use of Ernesto Che Guevara. Like Che, Gotovina became a symbol of anti-establishment or revolution against the *status quo* or system. In openly defying the Government, these associations and groups borrowed a strategy to promote Norac's cause earlier in 2004. The most popular slogan alongside Gotovina's photos was 'Hero, Not a Criminal', which resonated with sentiments in the

[916] *Hrvatski list*, 4, 11 Nov. 2004.
[917] *Hrvatski list*, 9 Dec. 2004.
[918] *Feral Tribune*, 19 Mar. 2004.
[919] *Nacional*, 13 Jul, 24 Aug. 2004.

population that largely saw him as a war hero.[920] These 'Poster Wars' continued well into 2005-06, and the state would invest considerable energy to battle this type of protest to occupy the public space.[921] These posters tried to convey that all did not agree with the Government's policies and that the population was more loyal to him – who encapsulates patriotic values – rather than traitorous authorities. These actions also tried to belittle the Government in the face of visits of I.C.T.Y. and E.U. delegations to Croatia.[922] Organisers thought such expressions of defiance would signal that Sanader did not put the right wing under control and that people disagreed with his turn towards cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. The epicentre of this rebellion was in Dalmatia, predominantly in regions around Zadar – from where Gotovina originated – and Split – whose units he led during the war.[923]

In Zadar, the fugitive general enjoyed massive support and was seen as the liberator of the region from enemy bombardment that lasted for months in 1991.[924] With the help of some close Gotovina's helpers, Zadar veterans and politicians put up a giant billboard at the medieval walls by the entrance to the old town.[925] In defying the central authorities, the Vice Prefect of Zadar County, Stanko Zrilić, threatened to put up billboards with Gotovina from Zagreb to Zadar if police removed the one on city walls.[926] Additional provocation was Gotovina's photo in Zadar city hall, which caused a diplomatic incident when the British ambassador, unaware of it, held a speech beneath the photo.[927] As all this was happening amid the 2004 high tourist season – Croatia's important branch of the economy – the reputational damage to the country was enormous. Also, this campaign was launched at the

[920] Pavlaković, 'Croatia, the International Criminal Tribunal'.
[921] *Jutarnji list*, 7 Aug. 2004.
[922] *Globus*, 11 Jun. 2004; *Jutarnji list*, 17 Jul. 2004.
[923] *Večernji list*, 2 Aug. 2004; *Globus*, 6 Aug. 2004.
[924] *Nacional*, 24 Aug. 2004.
[925] *Nacional*, 13 Jul. 2004; *Jutarnji list*, 29 Jul. 2004; *Večernji list*, 29 Jul. 2004.
[926] *Jutarnji list*, 29 Jul. 2004; *Večernji list*, 29 Jul. 2004; Zrlić was H.S.L.S.'s Vice-President, therefore a part of the governing majority in the Parliament.
[927] *Jutarnji list*, 17 Jul. 2004.

time of the year dedicated to celebrating Operation Storm, thus further galvanising the patriotic sentiment.[928] Thus, at the Storm at Knin fortress celebration, H.B. activists and veterans wore T-shirts dedicated to Gotovina to provoke government officials.[929] U.H.D.D.R.'s Zagreb branch – not supporting the national leadership – wanted to throw 150,000 leaflets with Gotovina's photo over Zagreb but were stopped by city officials.[930] Gotovina had become a symbol, a value of the Homeland War, which veteran associations and groups used to signal their discontent with the Government.

An additional blow for the Government were local H.D.Z. members – some veteran leaders – from the Zadar region who actively supported the installation of Gotovina's posters in public space. H.D.Z.'s Zadar branch argued that the town council put Gotovina's photos and posters as he was previously named an honorary citizen.[931] The media reported similar feelings in H.D.Z. branches across Dalmatia.[932] Here, besides its apparent advantages, the overlapping membership between H.D.Z. and veteran associations was detrimental for the former.

Trying to save Sanader's face in the eyes of the international community, the authorities fought hard to remove Gotovina's posters. However, the authorities did this delicately, as some veteran associations and the population were loyal to Gotovina. Therefore, the authorities took down Gotovina's poster from Zadar's town walls under cover of darkness in the first hours of Christmas Eve 2004. Neither police, government, nor Zadar officials have

[928] *Večernji list*, 2 Aug. 2004; *Globus*, 6 Aug. 2004.
[929] *Jutarnji list*, 6 Aug. 2004; The youth also engaged in promoting Gotovina's cause by putting up billboards, painting graffiti, wearing T-shirts, chanting at sport games, and taking part in protests. See: *Feral Tribune*, 18 Jun. 2004; *Večernji list*, 4 Sep. 2004; *Večernji list*, 10 Jan. 2005; *Večernji list*, 29 Mar. 2005.
[930] *Jutarnji list*, 6 Aug. 2004.
[931] *Jutarnji list*, 31 Jul. 2004; *Globus*, 6 Aug. 2004; *Nacional*, 24 Aug. 2004; Proposing Gotovina for honorary citizen of towns, despite the existing arrest warrant, was popular at the time. Local U.H.B.D.D.R. in Sinj asked that the town promotes him as its honorary citizen. See: *Jutarnji list*, 22 Jul. 2004.
[932] *Hrvatski list*, 30 Sep. 2004.

ever admitted to participating in this operation.[933] City authorities removed Gotovina's photo in a town hall due to the alleged renovation of the building. In contrast, the authorities removed even a poster in a local café due to Veterans Minister Jadranka Kosor's visit on her campaign trip in the 2005 presidential elections.[934]

As the Government was pressured by reports of Gotovina's likely whereabouts in the country, in October 2004, the Croatian political leadership decided to call the fugitive general to give himself in. While Prime Minister Sanader stated that Croatia could not be a 'hostage of one man'.[935] Sanader stressed that the government saw Gotovina as innocent but that he must prove his innocence before the I.C.T.Y.[936] President Mesić called upon Gotovina's patriotism, calling him to turn himself in for the sake of the jeopardy in which Croatia found itself.[937]

The change of paradigm of patriotism and defence of the dignity of the Homeland War did not convince many veteran groups and leaders. They saw Croatia's cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. as a continuation of centre-left government policies. These groups saw the prosecution and trial of Croatian officers as putting all veterans, the Homeland War and Croatia on trial. Therefore, a group of veterans from the Dubrovnik-Neretva County characterised Sanader's statement that Gotovina should resolve his legal issues in the Hague as 'amoral' and 'inadmissible' as the I.C.T.Y. is the problem of the whole Croatia. In the letter supposedly signed by hundreds of veterans from the County, they asked how long before they are all put on trial according to commander responsibility (like Gotovina), which would bring to revising Croatia's history.[938] However, this veteran criticism remained at the

[933] *Večernji list*, 27 Dec. 2004; *Jutarnji list*, 28 Dec. 2004.
[934] *Hrvatski list*, 30 Dec. 2004.
[935] *Jutarnji list*, 13 Oct. 2004.
[936] *Jutarnji list*, 19 Oct. 2004; *Nacional*, 26 Oct. 2004; *Jutarnji list*, 3 Dec. 2004.
[937] *Jutarnji list*, 13 Oct. 2004.
[938] *Hrvatski list*, 9 Dec. 2004.

margins, primarily in the fringe far-right media that used this to criticise Sanader's U-turn. The government managed to conclude the year without veteran protests, unlike the centre-left one that struggled with this for the whole term in power.[939]

As the state intensified the hunt for the fugitive general in 2005, veteran associations and groups, aided by Gotovina's helpers, responded equally. By March, these groups put up posters in specific locations in Croatia, provoking the regime in the eyes of the international community. Places depended on local support and veteran groups that put them up at specific venues. Their frequency intensified as the 17 March deadline for starting the E.U. accession talks approached, trying to persuade the international community that Croatia would not comply with the I.C.T.Y. and that the people would not give up on Gotovina. Although initially concentrated in Dalmatia, in March, Gotovina posters appeared across Croatia.[940] Local anonymous supporters joined by making graffiti and banners dedicated to supporting Gotovina.[941]

As the police and communal services removed these posters and graffiti, veteran associations and groups again assumed their role as defenders. While previously they were defending the dignity of the Homeland War, now they were defending Gotovina's posters from being removed. Therefore, in the coastal town of Kaštela, near Split, local H.V.I.D.R. – in partnership with local businessmen – put up a billboard with Gotovina. Wowing not to allow the authorities to take down the poster, H.V.I.D.R. Kaštela – and some locals – organised a round-the-clock watch over a person they saw as a hero. H.V.I.D.R. Kaštela called for a referendum on cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. – repeating the demand from the 2001 *Riva*

[939] *Jutarnji list*, 24 Dec. 2004.
[940] *Jutarnji list*, 7, 23 Jan, 7, 17-19 Mar. 2005; *Večernji list*, 7 Jan, 21 Feb, 7, 13, 17-20 Mar. 2005; *Hrvatski list*, 27 Jan. 2005.
[941] *Jutarnji list*, 8 Jan, 5 Feb, 3, 12, 14 Mar. 2005; *Hrvatski list*, 14 Apr. 2005; Some these graffiti were combining support for Gotovina with Ustaša symbols. See: *Jutarnji list*, 12, 14 Mar. 2005.

Protest – and condemned the government for not opposing the indictment against Gotovina, breaching the Declaration of the Homeland War.[942] H.V.I.D.R. Kaštela President Željko Strize explained that while the government was not protecting national interests specified in the Declaration of the Homeland War, his organisation was doing their job in promoting and protecting the values of that War. For Strize, Gotovina was the 'value of the Homeland War'; therefore, Croatia should not extradite him to the Hague, the international community's instrument to 'equalise the victim and aggressor'.[943]

The case of Gotovina's billboard in Kaštela showed a few continuities and discontinuities. The rhetoric used by local H.V.I.D.R. completely matched the one used during the 2000-2 protest period dominated by the Headquarters and H.V.I.D.R. Once more, the dignity and values of the Homeland War were threatened. At the same time, by using billboards, veterans transformed Gotovina into one of these values.[944] Like in the 2000-2 protests, many political options offered open or secret support to the protesting veterans. However, now H.D.Z. was the source of peril for the values of the Homeland War. Although criticised by protesting veterans, the critique was different, not as harsh, and with more emotional disappointment as many of these groups supported H.D.Z. – some of them party members - in their fight over the Homeland War memory with the centre-left government. Another difference is that protesters now insisted on distancing themselves from H.D.Z., condemning the former Headquarters for aligning the group with political parties.[945]

[942] *Jutarnji list*, 8 Jan. 2005; Večernji list, 7, 10 Jan. 2005.
[943] *Hrvatski list*, 13 Jan. 2005.
[944] Ibid.
[945] Ibid.

2004-5: splits in H.V.I.D.R. over Gotovina

An additional discontinuity was that the major split happened within veteran associations, especially in H.V.I.D.R. Despite the highly hierarchical structure of H.V.I.D.R. and the autocratic style of its leaders, Đakić's control and pacification of the local branches were only partial. Many branches contested H.V.I.D.R.'s national leadership for ideological or pragmatic reasons alike. Even during the new Law on Veterans drafting process, ten local H.V.I.D.R. branches from Zagreb condemned Đakić for ridiculing their amendments.[946] During the height of the 'Poster Wars' in February-March 2005, it was obvious that local Dalmatian branches were strong and brave enough to go against their national leadership – despite all the political risks this carried. H.V.I.D.R. Kaštela bragged how the H.D.Z. and other parties unsuccessfully tried to pressure and pacify or use manipulations to discredit them.[947] Numerous local branches had their interests and local and regional loyalties that transcended H.V.I.D.R.'s interest on the national level. Local chapters of veteran associations, mainly in the Dalmatian region, often ignored the instructions of their central national organisations and defied the government. These branches often saw associations' national leadership or mainstream associations as corrupt or politically instrumentalised. These renegade veteran groups opposed the new course of mainstream associations and rejected the political establishment.[948]

'The straw that broke the camel's back' occurred at the H.V.I.D.R. convention 'The truth about the Homeland War', organised on 25 February in Zadar by local H.V.I.D.R. and

[946] Odluka predsjedništva Z.U.H.V.I.D.R.-a Grada Zagreba od 26. 10. 2004. godine na temu prijedloga Zakona o pravima branitelja iz Domovinskog rata i članova njihovih obitelji, 27 Oct. 2004, H.S., fond Hrvatski sabor, podfond Hrvatski sabor, 5. saziv (2003-7), serija Odbor za ratne veterane, podserija Sjednice, podpodserija 10. sjednica, podpodserija Materijal sjednice.
[947] *Jutarnji list*, 11 Jan. 2005. *Hrvatski list*, 13 Jan. 2005.
[948] *Feral Tribune*, 23 Apr, 11 Jun. 2004; *Večernji list*, 21, 26 Feb. 2005; Priopćenje Saveza udruga Hrvatskih obrambenih snaga, 22 February 2005, U.H.V.D.R., registrator Nerazvrstano.

U.H.D.D.R. branches, and H.V.I.D.R. branch from Split-Dalmatia County.[949] At the convention, the representatives of the associations officially supported Croatia's cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. Still, they called on the government to stop the persecution of Croatian officers based upon fake testimonies and forged documents. Although supporting Croatia's membership in the E.U., as they 'fought for European values', they protested doing so by victimising innocent people.[950] Besides unprecedented insults for the political leadership – which was invited but did not come – Đakić's statement regarding Gotovina became the main controversy in H.V.I.D.R.[951] While he countered the attendees who insulted the government, Đakić repeated Sanader's mantra that Gotovina should defend his innocence before the I.C.T.Y.[952] Đakić's statement went through H.V.I.D.R. like wildfire, with the Zagreb and Osijek branches and H.V.I.D.R.'s national Central Committee condemning the statement and joining their colleges from Dalmatia. Đakić was now discredited as solely an M.P. of H.D.Z., reflecting the politics of the government.[953]

Although Đakić denied rifts in H.V.I.D.R. after the convention, the divisions were evident.[954] Most other branches condemned or criticised Đakić's statement, and H.V.I.D.R. branches criticised him for aligning with H.D.Z.'s political interests, going against Gotovina and Croatia.[955] National H.V.I.D.R. tried to hide these disagreements from the public by stating that the media misquoted Đakić and that he agreed with the Central Committee, which advocated that Gotovina should talk with the investigators once the I.C.T.Y. Prosecution

[949] *Večernji list*, 22 Feb. 2005.
[950] Hrvatski ratni vojni invalidi Domovinskog rata Zadarske i Splitsko-dalmatinske županije, Udruga hrvatskih dragovoljaca Domovinsko rata Zadarske županije, 28 Feb. 2005, U.D.H.R.M., registrator Ulazna pošta iz 2003.
[951] For more details on the convention, see: *Hrvatski list*, 3 Mar. 2005; Udovičić, *Pad umjesto* uspona, p. 383.
[952] *Večernji list*, 26-7 Feb. 2005; *Jutarnji list*, 27 Feb. 2005.
[953] *Večernji list*, 27 Feb. 2005; Udovičić, *Pad umjesto* uspona, p. 383.
[954] *Večernji list*, 28 Feb. 2005.
[955] *Jutarnji list*, 28 Feb. 2005; *Nacional*, 1 Mar. 2005.

Office withdrew the current indictment.[956] In his later public appearances, Đakić avoided replying if he disagreed with the government's position that Gotovina must stand trial in the Hague.[957]

In the end, a group of disabled veterans started an initiative to establish a new association of disabled veterans, free from ties to H.D.Z.[958] A group around retired brigadier Božo Drmić emphasised that they founded a new association because H.V.I.D.R. decided to support the government's policy of extraditing Gotovina to the Hague. Drmić explained how H.D.Z. controlled H.V.I.D.R., with all the presidents coming from the party, politically using the association on three occasions: the 1996 protest on St Marco Square, the 2001 Riva protest and now (2005). He promised an association free of political ties that would advocate revising veteran disability status – a process abandoned by H.V.I.D.R.[959] This group founded the association under the name Association of Military Disabled and Volunteers of the Homeland War (*Udruga vojnih invalida i dragovoljaca Domovinskog rata*, V.I.D.D.R.), promising to fight for a better life for all veterans.[960]

Some H.V.I.D.R. branches, especially those in Zagreb, Kaštela and Osijek, would oppose H.D.Z.'s war crimes prosecution. These branches continued their opposition to the national H.V.I.D.R. during the following years, accusing Đakić and the national leadership of corruption and betrayal of veteran interests. These disputes would also have legal and violent episodes and linger for years.[961] Despite the breakaway and internal quarrels between

[956] *Jutarnji list*, 1 Mar. 2005; *Večernji list*, 1 Mar. 2005.
[957] *Jutarnji list*, 2 Mar. 2005.
[958] *Nacional*, 1 Mar. 2005; *Večernji list*, 2 Mar. 2005.
[959] *Nacional*, 8 Mar. 2005.
[960] *Jutarnji list*, 18 Mar. 2005; *Večernji list*, 18 Mar. 2005.
[961] *Globus*, 16 May 2008; *Hrvatski list*, 28 Sep. 2006, 22 Mar. 2007, 8 Jul. 2010; *Jutarnji list*, 17 Mar, 18, Sep, 1 Oct, 11, 15 Nov. 2006, 4 Feb. 2007, 25 Feb. 2009; *Nacional*, 10, 31 Oct. 2006, 24 Feb. 2009; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 5, 7 Feb, 30 Mar. 2007, 19 Apr. 2008, 21 Jan, 25, 27 Feb, 10, 11 Jun, 31 Jul, 27 Aug, 6 Oct, 4 Nov. 2009, 5 Feb, 25 Mar. 2010; *Večernji list*, 17 Mar, 19, 21 Sep, 1, 27 Oct, 20 Dec. 2006, 26 Mar. 2007, 27 Feb. 2009.

different leaders, all this did not break H.V.I.D.R. While some town and county branches still challenged Đakić's leadership, the national H.V.I.D.R. remained more or less unified. Đakić officially reaffirmed his presidency as H.V.I.D.R.'s members re-elected him as president in late October 2005.[962] However, it was evident that Đakić could not control the association completely, and some local branches continued with the 'Poster Wars' and their defiance towards the government.[963]

The February-March disturbance in H.V.I.D.R. spilt over into other associations. While emphasising Gotovina's innocence, mainstream associations mostly backed up Đakić and Sanader's new mantra – directly or indirectly. However, mainstream associations also wanted to remain loyal to Gotovina and the traditional patriotic position, anchored in hostility or at least scepticism towards the I.C.T.Y.[964]

Under the umbrella of the Republic Coordination of Associations from the Homeland War, U.H.D.D.R. explained how veterans fought for democracy and the rule of law. In this sense, U.H.D.D.R. emphasised that Croatia must respect its laws on cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. At the same time, authorities must reject and dispute that the generals and the Croatian people are guilty of crimes. U.H.D.D.R. stressed that the Government had the legitimacy to win in free democratic elections, which had to be respected. Despite all the shortcomings, U.H.D.D.R. supported Croatia's E.U. path against 'remaining within the framework of Balkan values'.[965] Mainstream associations on the national level defended their view of cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. from a moral and legalistic perspective. For them, the Homeland War was about the national liberation or defence from Serbian aggression and a

[962] *Jutarnji list*, 29 Oct. 2005; *Večernji list*, 29 Oct. 2005.
[963] *Hrvatski list*, 28 Apr. 2005; *Jutarnji list*, 3 Aug. 2005; Udovičić, *Pad umjesto* uspona, p. 383.
[964] Mainstream, big associations, such as H.V.I.D.R., U.H.D.D.R. and U.H.V.D.R., received around a third of the public funds for their projects in 2005. See: *Jutarnji list*, 9 Mar. 2005.
[965] Odgovor na priopćenje predsjednika S.U.D.H.O.S.-a, 28 Feb. 2005, U.H.V.D.R.; Balkans and everything related to it are traditionally used in a pejorative way, contrasted to belonging to Europe which is seen as Croatia's natural place.

fight for a democratic state with a functional rule of law.[966] Such a legalistic view, allegedly based on the rule of law and the idea that veterans fought for democratic values and Europe during the Homeland War, persists today.

Probably under the influence of the disturbance caused by Đakić's statement, U.H.D.D.R. and U.H.V.D.R. relativised the previous legalistic position by calling the Government to initiate the amendment of the Constitutional Law on the Cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. They urged the Government to free itself from the E.U.'s pressure to cooperate. The two associations condemned media representations of Gotovina, allegedly portraying him as a criminal. Finally, U.H.D.D.R. and U.H.V.D.R. stressed that they respected every decision that Gotovina made on behalf of the I.C.T.Y.'s indictment against him.[967] U.H.B.D.D.R. was in line with other mainstream associations, supporting Gotovina's decision to remain on the run and avoiding radicalisation and protests against the government.[968] A few days later, the Republic Coordination – including U.H.D.D.R. and U.H.V.D.R. – repeated most of these demands, especially calling for an amendment to the Constitutional Law. Also, they stressed again that they would not label the government as unsuccessful if Croatia did not start the E.U. accession talks on 17 March. In this way, the associations urged the government not to bend to the E.U. pressures and cooperate with the I.C.T.Y., as they supported the Government and offered to shield it if E.U. talks did not start in March.[969]

It was clear that smaller, non-mainstream associations and *ad hoc* veteran groups were more critical of the government then. Once a star of the 2000-2 protest period, Čondić also criticised Đakić's statement, saying that he and H.D.Z. were continuing with the policies of the former government. Unlike the new veteran critics who ran from political activation –

[966] Odgovor na priopćenje.
[967] Priopćenje za javnost, 1 Mar. 2005, U.H.V.D.R., registrator Nerazvrstano.
[968] *Jutarnji list*, 18 Mar. 2005.
[969] Priopćenje za javnost, 4 Mar. 2005, U.H.V.D.R., registrator Nerazvrstano.

like H.V.I.D.R.'s Strize or the new association V.I.D.D.R. – Čondić called for a foundation of a veterans' political party. Like the 2000-02 period, Čondić again played with militaristic ideas by proposing that this party should have a military wing.[970] Although Croatia did not start accession talks on 17 March, the 'Poster Wars' did not end.[971]

While the dust had settled in May, the new I.C.T.Y.'s widened indictments against Čermak and Markač again disturbed the political arena. The prosecution's notion of the joint criminal enterprise – including late President Tuđman – would become central to the criticism of the I.C.T.Y. in Croatia. Although disturbed by this news, Sanader tried to bring down the tensions by claiming that the more absurd the indictment was, the easier it would be to counter it legally.[972] With the indictment coming just days before the local elections, Sanader wanted to soothe voters by claiming it was a part of the plan. For Sanader, it was only a challenge on the road to the E.U. while promising that Croatia would help the defendants by assuming the 'friend of the court' role.[973] State officials were clear that they would not allow the categorisation of operations Flash and Storm as part of a joint criminal enterprise but a legitimate operation of a sovereign country. However, Sanader insisted on continuing the cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. as it was Croatia's international obligation. For Sanader, Croatia's compliance with the I.C.T.Y. was a sign of the rule of law, as no individual should be above the law. Sanader presented the cooperation as a prerequisite for establishing the 'historical truth', the final stage of Croatia's statehood in the long process of declaring the country's independence in 1991 and winning the war in 1995.[974]

[970] *Jutarnji list*, 28 Feb. 2005.
[971] On Croatia not starting the EU accession talks, see: *Jutarnji list*, 18-9 Mar. 2005; On the continuation of the Poster Wars, see: *Jutarnji list*, 29, 30 Mar, 28 Apr, 23 Jun, 3 Aug, 13 Oct. 2005; *Večernji list*, 29 Mar, 8 Apr, 10, 13 Oct. 2005; *Hrvatski list*, 28 Apr, 9 Jun. 2005.
[972] *Jutarnji list*, 11, 14 May 2005.
[973] *Hrvatski list*, 12 May 2005.
[974] *Jutarnji list*, 15, 21 May 2005.

Veteran associations were unpleasantly surprised by the indictment, and the Republic Coordination insisted on an urgent meeting with Sanader. However, immediately after the meeting, U.H.V.D.R.'s Dečak told the media that they barely talked about the indictment. According to him, as the Republic Coordination had absolute trust that the Government knew what it was doing, they discussed other issues. In reality, veteran leaders complained, threatening to turn against the Government and initiate protests nationwide. Sanader convinced them there would be no new indictments, asking them not to disclose their disagreements before Sanader addressed the Parliament in six days.[975] The Republic Coordination immediately denied threatening protests, adding that they would express their opinion after the elections so 'no party could use this for campaign purposes'.[976] It was evident that the government and veteran associations had struck a deal. As damage control, the government managed to pacify loyalist associations before elections so political opponents would not profit from this.

Unlike during the 2000-2 protest period, now mainstream associations believed that nothing could be resolved through protests, as the current government was doing everything to present the War as 'just, defensive and liberating'. Mainstream associations often tried to both criticise the government and support it fully.[977] This opportunistic and diplomatic approach of mainstream associations was noticeable in their refusal to decide if Gotovina should or should not turn himself in. Thus, the mainstream Republic Coordination of Associations from the Homeland War did not directly condemn the Government's activities to extradite Gotovina but peacefully called for legal changes to the Constitutional Law on Cooperation with the I.C.T.Y.[978] In public, the Government and mainstream associations

[975] *Jutarnji list*, 13 May 2005; *Večernji list*, 13 May 2005.
[976] *Jutarnji list*, 14 May 2005; *Večernji list*, 14 May 2005.
[977] *Večernji list*, 28 February 2005, 5.
[978] Priopćenje za javnost, 1 March 2005.

downplayed the existing internal rifts, claiming that veterans support the new course of its leadership. Both the Government and associations hid their cooperation in preventing protests from the mainstream media, denying all such speculation.[979]

2005 – Gotovina's arrest

The peaceful period was dramatically disturbed on 8 December 2005, when I.C.T.Y. Chief Prosecutor Carla Del Ponte broke the news that Spanish police, working closely with Croatian intelligence agencies, arrested Gotovina in Tenerife.[980] While repeating that no one is above the law, Sanader stressed that everyone is innocent until proven otherwise. Again, Sanader and the whole political leadership tried to convey the message of Gotovina's innocence that had to be defended before the I.C.T.Y.[981] While his former combatants and retired officers were either sad or disappointed, some veterans and other citizens expressed their anger over Gotovina's arrest in a more destructive manner.

Claiming to have gathered spontaneously, H.V.I.D.R. and U.H.D.D.R. Zagreb officials came to the capital's central square.[982] H.V.I.D.R. Zagreb President Ivan Pandža, who expressed his disappointment over Gotovina's arrest, ironically commented that Sanader 'proved his integrity' with his position at the 2001 Split Riva protest. The galvanised crowd shouted Gotovina's name and ethnic slurs while singing Ustaša songs. The protesters, mostly youth and football ultras, moved to St. Mark's Square, breaking a few windows on the government building and entering a short scuffle with the police. Across Croatia, people showed their

[979] *Večernji list*, 13-4 May 2005; N.D.H. confirmed media speculations that Sanader was secretly trying to pacify veteran associations. See: *Večernji list*, 17 May 2005.
[980] *Jutarnji list*, 9 Dec. 2005; *Večernji list*, 9 Dec. 2005.
[981] *Jutarnji list*, 9 Dec. 2005; *Večernji list*, 9 Dec. 2005.
[982] Some protesters told the media that they received S.M.S. messages calling them to the central Ban Josip Jelačić Square. See: *Jutarnji list*, 9 Dec. 2005.

discontent with Gotovina's arrest. Although without massive violence, protesters put up roadblocks, torched cars and trash containers, and broke windows on state institutions and party headquarters. Throughout Croatia, numerous posters of Gotovina and graffiti either supporting his cause or insulting the Government spread across the public space.[983]

Almost immediately upon the news of Gotovina's arrest, H.V.I.D.R. and U.H.D.D.R. announced a protest on 11 December on Split Riva, a reminiscence of the 2001 protest.[984] However, unlike in 2001, H.V.I.D.R. was now split about organising the protest. While H.V.I.D.R. Kaštela President Strize announced a demonstration even if police banned it, national H.V.I.D.R. led by Đakić tried to ease the tensions by repeating Sanader's mantra on Gotovina's innocence that would be defended – along with the truth about the Homeland War – in the Hague.[985] Đakić condemned protesters who set road blockades – comparing them to 1990 Serb insurgency events known as the Log Revolution – and broken windows on the government building.[986] Đakić's use of the Log Revolution, aimed at discrediting veterans opposing the government, backfired, as some members of H.V.I.D.R.'s Central Committee on the national level distanced themselves from him.[987]

Despite the lack of support from the organisation on the national level, Strize and H.V.I.D.R. leaders from Split announced a peaceful protest where they would expose H.D.Z.'s and Sanader's hypocrisy due to their change of heart regarding Croatia's cooperation with the I.C.T.Y.[988] This demonstrated frictions within H.V.I.D.R., with a national organisation trying to de-escalate the situation and local branches – especially ones in Dalmatia – remaining

[983] *Jutarnji list*, 9-11 Dec. 2005; *Večernji list*, 9-11 Dec. 2005; Most of the public acts of destruction or violence came from high school pupils, youth and football ultras.
[984] *Jutarnji list*, 9-11 Dec. 2005; *Večernji list*, 9-11 Dec. 2005.
[985] *Jutarnji list*, 9-11 Dec. 2005; *Večernji list*, 9-11 Dec. 2005.
[986] *Jutarnji list*, 10 Dec. 2005.
[987] *Večernji list*, 10 Dec. 2005
[988] *Ibid.*

loyal to the position from the early 2000s, according to which Croatian officers were innocent as they defended their homeland and should not stand trial.

In contrast to H.V.I.D.R. branches in Split and Kaštela, national H.V.I.D.R. announced a peaceful gathering of support for Gotovina, not protests – a word they deliberately avoided.[989] Other loyalist mainstream associations were also careful about supporting the announced protest. U.H.V.D.R. avoided more direct comment on the situation by claiming that the association would reveal its position after the Republic Coordination's meeting scheduled for 12 December – conveniently set for after the announced protest. U.H.V.D.R.'s President Dečak shortly stated that his association 'never acted radically', thus indirectly disapproving of the protest and following the association's traditional route of institutional advocacy.[990]

Sanader asked for people's trust, as the Government knew how to defend 'the truth about the Homeland War'. Therefore, Sanader did not seem worried over the announced protest in Split, claiming that local H.V.I.D.R. would organise a peaceful gathering of support for Gotovina and the Government.[991] Besides the possibility of the protest turning violent, the Government was confident that no coherent political alternative to its politics could be offered at the event – as H.D.Z. did during the 2001 Split Riva protest. The Government wanted to prevent any scenario that would lead to an unravelling of a state of emergency that could jeopardise the E.U. accession process.

Although there was media speculation about the Split protest turning into a *coup d'état*, it soon became clear that the event would be peaceful and in no way challenging for the government.[992] Already smaller veteran rallies before the announced larger one in Split were

[989] *Jutarnji list*, 10 Dec. 2005; *Večernji list*, 10 Dec. 2005.
[990] *Jutarnji list*, 9 Dec. 2005.
[991] *Jutarnji list*, 10 Dec. 2005.
[992] Ibid.

transformed into gatherings of support for Gotovina. Ante Martinac, President of Zadar's Coordination of Associations from the Homeland War, stated it was not a political gathering. He rejected the violence as it could not help Gotovina nor his family – thus repeating Sanader's words.[993] Coordinations of Associations from the Homeland War from both Osijek-Baranja and Vukovar-Syrmia Counties supported the government in its efforts to help Gotovina. They opted against a protest that may have hurt the general's cause.[994] Additionally, some associations decided not to join the protest in Split, thus diminishing the chances of the rally reaching the figures of the one from 2001. Associations from Lika-Senj County, a hotbed of veteran revolt in 2000, decided not to join the Split protest while claiming that they gave their support to Gotovina in a dignified manner.[995]

Finally, a day before the scheduled protest, organisers depoliticised the event, as no significant party supported it, turning it into a gathering of support for Gotovina. The most significant mainstream veteran associations – H.V.I.D.R., U.H.V.D.R., U.H.D.D.R., U.H.B.D.D.R. – at the national level did not support the event. At the same time, retired generals, once the leaders of the 2001 Split Riva protest, completely deescalated the rhetoric.[996] Organisers depoliticised the event by framing it radically differently from 2001. Although politicians were allowed to join the protest, they could not speak.[997]

In the end, only some 40,000 gathered on Split Riva – considerably less than in 2001 – booing the Government, accused of grand treason by Strize and Čondić. Despite initial announcements, the Split mayor and the Split-Dalmatia County prefect, both H.D.Z. members were among the speakers, serving as primary targets of protesters' verbal insults.[998]

[993] *Jutarnji list*, 11 Dec. 2005.
[994] Večernji list, 11 Dec. 2005.
[995] Večernji list, 10 Dec. 2005.
[996] *Jutarnji list*, 11 Dec. 2005.
[997] Večernji list, 11 Dec. 2005.
[998] *Jutarnji list*, 12 Dec. 2005; *Večernji list*, 12 Dec. 2005.

The event looked like a less charged and dramatic rip-off of the 2001 Riva protest without a heated atmosphere. There was no mention of toppling the government or using violence, while retired generals partially pacified the crowd, framing their event as a support for Gotovina. It looked as if the protest organisation was deliberately pacified from within, primarily by retired generals gathered in a recently formed association, Croatian Generals' Assembly (*Hrvatski generalski zbor*, H.G.Z.).[999] Organisers had evident disagreements among themselves regarding the anti-governmental rhetoric at the gathering. Allegedly, after Strize's off-script rash criticism of the Government, retired generals did not allow H.O.S. leader Velimir Kvesić to talk, fearing his potential harsh, politically motivated criticism.[1000]

Media speculated that H.G.Z., led by Gotovina's close friend, retired general Ante Roso, made a deal with the government before the protest. Roso, who was in contact with Gotovina during his years on the run, managed to secure the Government's complete financial and logistical help for Gotovina's defence. Additionally, the government dropped the investigation against persons who helped Gotovina during his years on the run. In exchange, Roso secured a peaceful protest in Split that would not escalate nor create political momentum for the right wing.[1001] In a later interview, Roso did not deny that there was a deal between the government and organisers, boasting how they deliberately organised the event without incidents. He explained how the 2005 protest evolved from the one in 2001, a positive step forward, proving that they could have results without incidents.[1002] Even if there was no direct deal between Roso and the government, it was obvious that the organisers were divided among themselves on whether they should oppose the government head-on.

[999] *Jutarnji list*, 12 Dec. 2005; *Večernji list*, 12 Dec. 2005.
[1000] *Jutarnji list*, 13 Dec. 2005; *Globus*, 16 Dec. 2005.
[1001] *Feral Tribune*, 16 Dec. 2005; *Globus*, 16 Dec. 2005.
[1002] *Jutarnji list*, 13 Dec. 2005.

Republic Coordination met a day after the protest, demanding that the government do whatever it could to counter the indictment against Gotovina, Čermak and Markač, which tried to criminalise the Homeland War and its political and military leadership. The Coordination supported the government's efforts to help Gotovina's defence. Still, it warned to petition for a referendum to change the Constitutional Law on Cooperating with the I.C.T.Y. and Croatia's E.U. accession.[1003]

In a way, Gotovina's arrest and extradition to the Hague marked the end of the massive political anti-I.C.T.Y. movement, spearheaded by veteran associations and logistically supported by H.D.Z. Despite occasional outbursts in later years, veteran associations would not cause a political crisis over the issue of cooperation with the I.C.T.Y.[1004]

2004-7: S.D.P.'s attempt at appropriating veterans

After losing the 2003 parliamentary elections, S.D.P. looked at changing its image and voter base – including veterans. S.D.P. started working on attracting veteran leaders who enjoyed respect within the community in a desperate attempt to show itself as a party that supports veterans.[1005]

S.D.P.'s Zagreb Mayor Milan Bandić gathered strong veteran support by incorporating three veteran leaders and former military intelligence agents into his ranks: Ljubičić and Laco – who played a role in Norac's surrender in 2001 – and Miodrag Demo, disabled veteran with ties to far-right groups. While only Laco was an S.D.P. member, all three were tied to Bandić personally and incorporated in either the city administration or the city enterprise for

[1003] Unnamed (Correspondence from the Republic Coordination of Associations from the Homeland War to Prime Minister Ivo Sanader), 12 Dec. 2005, U.H.V.D.R., registrator Republička koordinacija udruga iz Domovinskog rata.
[1004] *Feral Tribune*, 16 Dec. 2005.
[1005] *Jutarnji list*, 25 Oct. 2006.

communal services, Zagreb Holding.[1006] In June 2004, the trio played a role in Bandić's attempt to instrumentalise the new indictment against Norac – to whom all of them were tied. They joined marginal associations, H.O.S. veterans and H.S.P. members in defying the Government with posters with Norac's photo.[1007]

However, as Bandić drifted from the party politically, S.D.P.'s leadership around Račan desired veterans who could help them formulate complementary policies. Therefore, in October 2006, S.D.P. formed its Council for Defenders and Homeland War to stop divisions among veterans and authorities manipulating them. S.D.P. wanted to attract many retired officers and veteran leaders, trying to compete with H.D.Z. over them. Račan, upon suggestion from Zoran Milanović – who would become party President in 2007 – offered retired brigadier Ante Kotromanović to head the newly formed Council.[1008] Kotromanović was a well-known veteran leader with widespread support in the Sinj region, where he also served as an acting Duke of Sinj Alka. Kotromanović, Gotovina's and Norac's close friend and wartime subordinate, was also a part of the veteran movement that had openly confronted Račan's government in 2000-1.[1009]

His political transformation, in combination with Milanović's support, was crucial for Račan's nomination of Kotromanović for S.D.P.'s Council.[1010] Finally, with Račan's support,

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[1006] *Nacional*, 1 Jun. 2004; *Feral Tribune*, 4 Jun. 2004; Brkulj, 'Miro Laco';
[1007] *Nacional*, 1, 8, 15 Jun. 2004; *Feral Tribune*, 4, 11, 18 Jun. 2004; *Jutarnji list*, 7, 9, 12 Jun. 2004; *Večernji list*, 8 Jun. 2004, *Globus*, 11, 25 Jun. 2004.
[1008] *Jutarnji list*, 18, 26 Oct. 2006; *Večernji list*, 18 Oct. 2006; *Globus*, 27 Oct. 2006; Marina Karlović Sabolić, *Zoran Milanović: Mladić koji je obećavao* (Zagreb, 2015), p. 64; Robert Bajruši, *Zoran Milanović: politička biografija* (Zagreb, 2011), pp 71-3.
[1009] He was known for his speech on 2001 Alka, when he greeted and supported Gotovina and Norac and called the Croatian people to stand by veterans and confront 'the criminalisation of the Homeland War'. After that speech, President Mesić, as the supreme commander of the armed forces, retired him from the armed forces. See: M. Č., 'Promjena retorike Kotromanovića: 2001. prozivao vlast zbog veterana i srčano pozdravljao Mirka Norca', *Index*, 14 Aug. 2015, https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/Promjena-retorike-Kotromanovica-2001-prozivao-vlast-zbog-veterana-i-srcano-pozdravljao-Mirka-Norca/836211.aspx (Accessed 28 Jun. 2022).
[1010] *Večernji list*, 20 Oct. 2006; Karlović Sabolić, *Zoran* Milanović, pp 63-4; For Kotromanović's political transformation, see: *Jutarnji list*, 18 Oct. 2006; *Hrvatski list*, 21 Dec. 2006; For Milanović's

S.D.P.'s Main Committee unanimously named Kotromanović the head of the Council in October 2006.[1011] At first, Kotromanović did not want to join S.D.P., claiming that he wanted to end divisions between 'the left and right' among veterans.[1012] Although Kotromanović did join S.D.P. in 2007, he remained loyal to a familiar veterans' trope of an undivided veteran body.[1013] For him and others, veteran identity functioned as an umbrella identity, going over any other political or ideological divisions, social or ethnic background.

While Kotromanović led the S.D.P.'s Council for Defenders, Demo and Laco created the Forum of Associations from the Homeland War of the City of Zagreb (*Forum udruga iz Domovinskog rata grada Zagreba*). The Forum, a coordination of fifty-seven veteran associations, confronted the Republic's Coordination leaders over how they ran the Defenders' Fund – a state-supported fund managing stocks and bonds owned by registered veterans. Besides demands regarding the Defenders' Fund, the Forum advocated the full depoliticization of veterans, especially targeting H.D.Z.'s grip over H.V.I.D.R. Besides picking up on veterans disillusioned with H.D.Z., the Forum gathered veterans through other means and connections, as around 4,500 veterans were employees of the city of Zagreb administration and Zagreb Holding. As city officials, Laco, Demo and Ljubičić 'Šveps' built their stature among veterans due to housing programmes Zagreb offered that were more efficient than the Government's.

Saying he wanted to end all left-right divisions, Kotromanović attracted veterans to join local Councils for Defenders across Croatia ahead of the 2007 parliamentary elections in the fall. In his campaign, supported by Milanović, Kotromanović concentrated on anti-establishment

support of Kotromanović, see: *Globus*, 27 Oct. 2006; Bajruši, *Zoran Milanović*, p. 157; Karlović Sabolić, *Zoran Milanović*, pp 62-3.
[1011] *Večernji list*, 22 Oct. 2006.
[1012] *Jutarnji list*, 25 Oct. 2006; *Globus*, 27 Oct. 2006.
[1013] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 25 Jul. 2007.

veteran groups across Croatia, including renegades within H.V.I.D.R. Besides speaking about the socio-economic problems at the Council's local meetings, veteran representatives promoted Kotromanović's idea of a transparent online veteran register.[1014] Kotromanović wanted to use populist ideas and exploit the trope of an undivided veteran body to gather political support for himself and S.D.P.

The spreading of Kotromanović's Council quickly turned into S.D.P.'s 2007 election campaign, ascribed to Milanović's and S.D.P.'s right-wing turn. Many claimed that, before the 2007 elections, Milanović turned towards right-wing votes with his newly found focus on veterans, support of Gotovina's cause, respect for late President Tuđman, and a more tolerant relation toward the Ustaša legacy. An important figure in Milanović's political transformation was Kotromanović, who had a good standing among veterans. Kotromanović's combat experience was an asset for Milanović, as he could criticise H.D.Z.'s officials and other veteran leaders without fearing accusations of a lack of patriotic feelings. Some right-wing veterans, either disenfranchised or disillusioned with H.D.Z. and its new moderate path, gravitated towards Kotromanović, something Milanović wanted to use to attract new voters. Kotromanović was also Gotovina's close friend, seen as a martyr-like figure, persecuted by both left and right-wing governments.[1015]

According to Milanović's wishes, Kotromanović was put on S.D.P.'s list for Parliament and called the veterans to vote for the party. The central part of Kotromanović's campaign was advocacy for an open veterans' register while claiming that the government criminalised the Homeland War with the inflated number of veterans. The lower, accurate number of veterans

[1014] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 30-1 Mar, 13 May, 13 Jun, 25 Aug. 2007; *Jutarnji list*, 28 Mar, 13 Apr, 17 Jun. 2007; *Nacional*, 1 May 2007; Kotromanović boasted that he founded 400 local Council branches that organised around fifty events. See: *Hrvatski list*, 22 Nov. 2007.
[1015] *Nacional*, 31 Jul. 2007; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 25-6 Jul, 10-1 Aug, 18 Nov. 2007; Bajruši, *Zoran Milanović*, pp 93-101, 157; Like Kotromanović, Milanović publicly defended Gotovina, claiming there is no evidence to support I.C.T.Y.'s indictment. See: *Nacional*, 31 Jul. 2007; *Jutarnji list*, 3 Aug. 2007.

would lead to a fairer distribution of shares of the Defenders' Fund, which was criticised by many.[1016] In the end, Kotromanović won a seat in Parliament and soon became the President of the Committee for War Veterans.[1017] S.D.P. continued attracting prominent veterans, showing that the party cared for former soldiers. Thus, in 2008, veteran Predrag 'Fred' Matić, who had fought in Vukovar in 1991 and spent nine months in prison camps in Serbia, also joined the S.D.P.'s Council for Defenders.[1018] Matić soon became S.D.P.'s frontline veteran figure, becoming an advisor for Croatian President Ivo Josipović in 2010.

2009-10 – the time of uncertainties

In the 2009-11 period, Croatian society and politics changed radically. After years of slow but persistent economic growth, the Croatian economy started to feel the effects of the global recession in late 2008. The economic growth based on foreign borrowing and the construction industry ended in late 2008 after the New York stock market crash. Sanader ignored the failing economy until November 2008, leading to an 8.8 per cent fall in G.D.P. in the first quarter of 2009, accompanied by massive foreign debt and growing unemployment.[1019]

On top of the economic problems, Croatia also entered a political crisis. As Slovenia blocked Croatia's E.U. talks in late 2008 – due to an unresolved maritime border issue – in the spring of 2009, the Croatian government reached its lowest popularity rating since it had taken power in December 2003. Pressured by the stagnation of E.U. talks and the failing economy and state budget, on 1 July 2009, Sanader resigned as Prime Minister and President of the

[1016] *Večernji list*, 6 Nov. 2007; *Jutarnji list*, 19 Nov. 2007; *Hrvatski list*, 22 Nov. 2007.
[1017] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 20 Feb. 2008.
[1018] *Večernji list*, 17 Oct. 2008.
[1019] Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1990. – 2020.*, pp 361-4.

H.D.Z., giving almost no explanation for the resignation. In a matter of days, War Veterans Minister and Vice-Prime Minister Kosor took over, receiving the mandate to form a new government from President Mesić. Kosor received the support of H.D.Z. members on an urgent party convention, while the Parliament supported her new government.[1020]

Despite immediate success in unblocking Croatia's E.U. talks, Kosor's Government soon became further burdened by a massive popularity loss due to numerous corruption charges of H.D.Z. and government officials. The state battle against corruption climaxed with Sanader's arrest in Austria in December 2010, accused of corruption and embezzlement.[1021] Kosor was also burdened by a lack of legitimacy among the voters as she became Prime Minister and President of H.D.Z. without elections.

Despite all these obstacles, Kosor immediately began working on tackling the budget deficit by cutting state expenses; one of these was veteran pensions. Although reluctantly, leaders of loyalist associations accepted the possibility of pension cuts but stressed that the Government should only do it as a last resort.[1022] Veteran leaders emphasised their readiness to contribute and show solidarity with Croatian citizens in tackling the financial crisis but insisted they were not the first victims of austerity measures. Some, like H.V.I.D.R.'s Đakić, proposed limiting those cuts while excluding lower-income veterans.[1023] However, leaders of marginal veteran associations argued that mainstream associations, receiving almost all the money from the state budget, were not speaking for all the veterans. These leaders, like Rade Lasić, President of the Association of Veterans of the 4th Brigade from Split, called the Government to lower the announced pension cuts and take the money from the most prominent

[1020] Ibid, pp 364-6.
[1021] Ibid, pp 371-3.
[1022] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 7 Jul. 2009, 10 Mar. 2010.
[1023] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 15 Jul. 2009; Some disabled rebelled against any potential pension cuts because they feared the money would not go to the ones in need but would end up embezzled. They wanted for the rich to take a part of the financial burden as well. See: *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 17 Jul. 2009.

associations: H.V.I.D.R., U.H.V.D.R., U.H.D.D.R., U.H.B.D.D.R.[1024] According to him, these associations were bought off through the state budget so they could agree on government policies – like pension cuts.[1025] Although mainstream loyalist associations proclaimed the unity of veterans on this issue, there was much discord in their ranks. Renegade H.V.I.D.R. branches, like the one from Zadar, accused Đakić and national H.V.I.D.R. of irrational and untransparent spending, while now all veterans had to contribute to saving the state budget.[1026]

Therefore, the government carefully approached potential cuts, trying not to break a years-long symphony between the government and veteran associations. In the end, mainstream associations led by H.V.I.D.R. gave a green light for a three to ten per cent pension cut for the following year. H.V.I.D.R.'s Đakić boasted that veterans who were 'ready to sacrifice themselves for Croatia in 1991' would take a part of the burden in battling the recession.[1027] Therefore, like in 2004-05, Đakić was again an essential veteran figure of the government, setting the tone for other associations. As the former Veterans Minister, Kosor had numerous professional and personal ties to different mainstream associations and their leaders. While H.V.I.D.R. supported Kosor since her days as Minister, naming her a life-long honorary president, at a strictly personal level, Đakić and Josip Periša, the President of H.V.I.D.R.'s Central Committee, were her close friends and most loyal allies in H.D.Z.[1028] Kosor was also

[1024] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 26 Jul. 2009.
[1025] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 1 Aug. 2009.
[1026] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 31 Jul. 2009; Some less prominent associations, like the Association of the Croatian Defenders 1990-1996 of the Republic of Croatia (*Udruga hrvatskih branitelja 1990-1996 Republike Hrvatske*, U.H.B. 1990-96) was dissatisfied with the pension cuts as well. See: Unnamed (Correspondence of the Presidency of the U.H.B. 1990-96 to the President of the Republic of Croatia Ivo Josipović, War Veterans' Minister Predrag Matić and Prime Minister Jadranka Kosor), 25 Jun. 2010, U.P.R.H., org. jed. 71-02-23 Posebni savjetnik za branitelje, kl. oz. 052-02/10-09/177, ur. br. 363-10-031.
[1027] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 21 Jul. 2009; *Večernji list*, 30 Jul. 2009.
[1028] Jadranka Kosor, *Premijerka: Zapisnici one koja nije htjela biti zapisničarka* (Zagreb, 2020), pp 153-4, 262-4.

the godmother to the daughter of Valentino Rajković, the Secretary of the Republic Coordination.[1029]

The Government strengthened its ties to loyalist associations' axis through ideological means. In 2010, H.D.Z. abandoned Sanader's centrist path, and the Government amplified the rhetoric of ethnonationalism. Both H.D.Z. and the Government turned more to cherish the legacy of Tuđman – after Sanader's six-years-long de-Tuđmanisation – and the Homeland War.[1030] As the most prominent worshipers of the Homeland War myth, veterans were a logical target audience for the Government's new rhetoric and policies. This was why the Government tried to please the veterans with different concessions.

One of these concessions was the further institutionalisation of the dominant narrative of the war, precisely set out in the Declaration on the Homeland War. Thus, as the Parliament was amending the Constitution in 2010 (to join the E.U.), the Government abruptly proposed that the preamble introduced veterans as crucial actors in Croatia's history. The proposal of the Republic Coordination came along with some other amendments after months of H.D.Z.-opposition negotiation on proposed constitutional changes, as a two-thirds majority was needed.[1031] Uncustomary for constitutional amendments, H.D.Z. did not present the proposal at the parliamentary Committee on Constitution, Standing Orders and Political System before going to a plenary session.[1032] The Government proposed to alter the preamble by introducing

[1029] *Nacional*, 1 Mar. 2011.
[1030] *Večernji list*, 17-8 Apr, 6 Aug. 2010, 15 May, 24 Jun., 22-3 Sep, 7 Oct. 2011; *Jutarnji list*, 16-8 Apr, 5 Jun, 6, 14 Aug. 2010, 2 Feb, 28 Apr, 15-7 May, 6-7, 25 Aug, 22, 23 Sep, 3, 6-7, 9 Oct, 18, 28 Nov. 2011; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 18 Dec. 2010, 22-4, 30 Sep, 5, 7, 11, 23 Oct, 22 Nov, 1 Dec. 2011; *Nacional*, 20 Apr. 2010, 26 Apr. 2011; *Globus*, 2 Dec. 2011; Tomac, *Memoari*, pp 347-50.
[1031] For Republic Coordination's proposal, see: Izmjene i dopune Ustava Republike Hrvatske, 1 Jun. 2010, U.H.V.D.R., registrator Republička koordinacija udruga iz Domovinskog rata.
[1032] Marina Barukčić, ''Pozdravi mi Pahora, molim te!'', Tportal.hr, 16 Jun. 2010, https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/pozdravi-mi-pahora-molim-te-20100616 (25 Jul. 2022); Hina, 'Zaslužuju li branitelji posebno mjesto u Ustavu?', Dnevno.hr, 16 Jun. 2010, https://www.dnevno.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/zasluzuju-li-branitelji-posebno-mjesto-u-ustavu-5858/ (25 Jul. 2022).

a line on ‘the victory of Croatian defenders in a just, legitimate and liberating Homeland War (1991 – 1995)’. The line would replace the notion that stated: ‘the victory of the Croatian people in the Homeland War 1991-5’. Additionally, the Government proposed the amendment of Article 52 by adding special state care for veterans, widows, and their children.[1033] Introducing these amendments would petrify veterans’ symbolic importance, as it would single them out as those who contributed the most to building the contemporary Croatian state.

While the notion of the character of the war was not problematic to the M.P.s – taken from the parliamentary Declaration – the idea to replace the ‘Croatian people’ with ‘defenders’ was unacceptable to the opposition. H.N.S. M.P. Goran Beus Richemberg called the proposal ‘a constitutional kitsch’, saying that the Constitution would further divide the citizens, as the nation had defended Croatia. S.D.P.’s President Milanović focussed on criticising how the Government presented these amendments, received a day before by a veteran association and brought to the plenary session without prior discussion on the relevant committee. He argued that the Government did this to provoke the opposition’s adverse reactions so it could politically benefit from it. Kosor replied that veterans are indeed Croatian citizens but that all citizens did not defend Croatia, as only some had the courage and wisdom to do so.[1034] In the end, the Government and opposition found a middle ground and included both ‘Croatian citizens’ and ‘Croatian defenders’ as part of the mentioned line in the preamble.

[1033] Vlada Republike Hrvatske, ‘Prijedlog promjene Ustava Republike Hrvatske – amandmani Vlade Republike Hrvatske’, Vlada Republike Hrvatske, 15 Jun. 2010, https://vlada.gov.hr/UserDocsImages//2016/Sjednice/Arhiva//18061_01.pdf (25 Jul. 2022).

[1034] For more see the video of the debate on proposed government's amendments: Hrvatski sabor, ‘Prijedlog promjene Ustava Republike Hrvatske - predlagatelj Odbor za Ustav, Poslovnik i politički sustav’, Hrvatski sabor, undated, https://www.sabor.hr/prijedlog-promjene-ustava-republike-hrvatske-predlagatelj-odbor-za-ustav-poslovnik-i-politicki?t=37534&tid=201593 (Accessed 9 Apr. 2022); Vlada Republike Hrvatske, ‘Predsjednica Vlade: ustavne promjene za završetak pregovora’, Vlada Republike Hrvatske, 16 Jun. 2010, https://vlada.gov.hr/vijesti/predsjednica-vlade-ustavne-promjene-za-zavrsetak-pregovora/9452 (9 Apr. 2022); Barukčić, ‘'Pozdravi mi Pahora’, Hina, ‘Zaslužuju li branitelji’.

Although it appealed to the veterans without entering a deadlock with the opposition over crucial constitutional changes, 2010 was not great for the Government. Despite saving the state budget from collapsing through re-budgeting, the Government was unable–or unwilling – to deal with the results and roots of the recession. While a big part of Europe was slowly recovering from the recession in 2010, the economic crisis in Croatia deepened, with falling G.D.P. and growing foreign debt and unemployment. Despite evident progress in E.U. talks, economic depression and corruption scandal climaxing with Sanader's arrest in December 2010 turned many against H.D.Z. and the government.[1035] These circumstances resonated with the veteran community as well. Thus, in December 2010, even the traditionally loyalist Republic Coordination showed the first signs of dissatisfaction, reportedly coming bottom-up.[1036]

2011: Purda's arrest fuses with anti-austerity and corruption protests

However, although a contributing factor, the recession did not trigger a new wave of veteran dissatisfaction. Like a few times before, the 'straw that broke the camel's back' was the arrest of a Croatian veteran. On 5 January 2011, Bosnian border police arrested Vukovar veteran Tihomir Purda as he entered the country from Croatia. The police acted upon an arrest warrant from Serbia and arrested Purda under suspicion of committing war crimes in Vukovar in 1991, allegedly killing three Serbian P.O.W.s.[1037] The Serbian Prosecution Office allegedly launched this and other warrants against Vukovar veterans who gave their

[1035] Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1990. – 2020.*, pp 366-76.
[1036] Prijedlog Ministarstva gospodarstva za provedbu postupnog smanjenja 'povlaštenih mirovina'.
[1037] 24 sata, 'Vukovarski branitelj koji je bio u logoru uhićen zbog zločina', 24 sata, 6 Jan. 2011, https://www.24sata.hr/news/vukovarski-branitelji-koji-je-bio-u-logoru-uhicen-zbog-zlocina-205035 (25 Jul. 2022); *Večernji list*, 7 Jan. 2011.

confessions under severe physical torture in Serbian prison camps.[1038] The indictment against a Vukovar veteran disturbed many because the city had a special place as the 'martyr city' in the moral hierarchy of Croatian society and among veterans.[1039] Accordingly, the public treated veterans who took part in defending Vukovar as heroes, while individuals who ended up in Serbian prison camps – for up to nine months – also had an aura of martyrs. The former camp inmates felt re-victimised with the newest inquiries into crimes they allegedly committed, while perpetrators of crimes against them mostly enjoyed impunity.[1040] The very idea that Serbia had lists of Vukovar veterans who would be arrested upon its Interpol arrest warrants galvanised associations. Veteran leaders were also especially angry with the Government, as it seemed that the Justice Ministry knew about these warrants and did not inform these individuals.[1041]

The Purda case and that of another Croatian veteran, Veljko Marić, arrested on the Serbia-Bulgaria border in 2010, became the first cases related to the Serbian law enabling the prosecution of crimes committed in Croatia or Bosnia and Herzegovina.[1042] As D.O.R.H. later decided to stop criminal proceedings against three Vukovar veterans, claiming that there was no war crime during their military action in November 1991, Purda remained in Bosnian remand prison due to Serbia's request.[1043] Purda's imprisonment prolonged the crisis, keeping the 'Purda case' in the media and veteran focus and causing shockwaves in the region that embarked on state-sponsored reconciliation. Thus, the former commander of Vukovar's defence, Borković, felt provoked by the fact that the arrest came after the visit of

[1038] *Večernji list*, 8 Jan. 2011; Besides Purda, two other Vukovar defenders were wanted for the same crime: Petar Janjić 'Tromblon' and Danko Maslov. See: *Jutarnji list*, 13 Jan. 2011.
[1039] Kosor, *Premijerka*, p. 224.
[1040] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 28 Jan. 2011.
[1041] *Večernji list*, 10 Jan. 2011; Janjić received unofficial confirmation about Serbia's arrest warrant from his friends in police in 2007. See: *Jutarnji list*, 15 Jan. 2011.
[1042] *Hrvatski list*, 20 Jan. 2011; This law would trouble Croatia-Serbia relations in years to come.
[1043] *Večernji list*, 21 Jan. 2011; *Jutarnji list*, 22-3 Jan. 2011.

Serbian President Boris Tadić to Vukovar in November 2010.[1044] Invited at Josipović's initiative, Tadić's visit and apology at the site of a mass grave in Ovčara near Vukovar were supposed to contribute to reconciliation. In their eyes, Purda's arrest made the Josipović-Tadić reconciliatory initiative insincere.[1045]

With Purda's arrest coming upon Serbia's warrant, veteran associations turned to the Government for protection. Again, these reactions split into two groups: associations seeing the Government as its partner and those seeing it as a part of the problem. Therefore, calling upon the Constitution, Republic Coordination asked the Government to protect Croatian veterans from 'unfounded persecutions'.[1046] Such wording followed U.H.V.D.R.'s and Dečak's legalistic and institutional advocacy policy, avoiding protests or street activism.

As witnessed before, even loyalist veteran associations on the local level were more direct in their communication, having a firmer tone towards Croatian authorities. Hence, Kutina's Coordination of Associations from the Homeland War reminded Croatian authorities that veterans created Croatia with 'unselfish efforts', embedding their lives on the country's foundations. Kutina's Coordination demanded that the Government protect veterans' dignity without any 'political, legal, quasi-democratic or 'petty-political'' justifications for doing otherwise. It demanded that state leadership end all persecution of veterans upon indictments drafted by Serbia's Military Prosecution and complete abolition of crimes potentially

[1044] In October 2010, another association complained about Tadić's visit to Vukovar. See: Boris Tadić, obavijest, 17 Oct. 2010, U.P.R.H., org. jed. 71-02-23 Posebni savjetnik za branitelje, kl. oz. 053-01/10-01/322, ur. br. 363-10-01.
[1045] *Jutarnji list*, 10 Jan. 2011, Unnamed (Correspondence from the Republic Coordination of Associations from the Homeland War President Đuro Dečak to Prime Minister Jadranka Kosor), 11 Jan. 2011, Government of the Republic of Croatia, Office of the Prime Minister (*Vlada Republike Hrvatske, Ured predsjednika Vlade*, V.R.H., U.P.V.) org. jed. 50302-09 Pismohrana predsjednika Vlade, kl. oz. 561-01/11-01/01, ur. br. 363-11-1; Priopćenje Koordinacija Udruga proisteklih iz Domovinskog rata Sisačko-moslavačke županije u svezi zaštite branitelja od nerazumnih i neutemeljenih optužnica Republike Srbije, 18 Jan. 2011, V.R.H., U.P.V., org. jed. 50302-09 Pismohrana predsjednika Vlade, kl. oz. 561-01/11-01/01, ur. br. 363-11-5.
[1046] Unnamed, 11 Jan. 2011.

committed by Croatian forces.[1047] Similarly, Sisak-Moslavina County's Coordination of Associations from the Homeland War stressed how all veterans could find themselves in Purda's situation, partially because of Croatia's lack of care. They demanded that the authorities provide veterans full legal and institutional help and promote the Law on Veterans as constitutional.[1048]

However, although Kutina's Coordination mentioned the possibility of direct action if the authorities 'do not act timely and rightfully', they still did not call for protests directly, nor did they see Croatian authorities as their opponent.[1049] Like in the 2000-2 protest period, non-mainstream associations and *ad hoc* veteran initiatives called for direct protests, bypassing the regular government-association axis.

Therefore, the Initiative Committee of Defenders organised a protest in Zagreb's central square on 15 January, marking the 19th anniversary of Croatia's international recognition. Under the slogan 'stop the persecution of Croatian defenders', the protest gathered veterans, and the general population reminded Croatian politicians that they had their positions and benefits due to veterans' sacrifices during the war. In a heated atmosphere, 1,000 protesters used Croatian right-wing tropes by shouting 'Vukovar', 'Franjo Tuđman' and Ustaša chants. Protesters carried signs that accused the authorities of protecting Serb war criminals while persecuting Croatian veterans. Here, Petar Janjić (*nom de guerre* Tromblon), greeted as a wartime hero, directly called Croatian authorities a 'gang that turned defenders into hunted animals' and warned they would not tolerate this anymore. The protesters accused the H.D.Z. of treason after news broke that the party was directing its members not to join the protest.

[1047] Unnamed (Correspondence from the presidents of member-associations of the Coordination of Associations from the Homeland War Kutina to Croatian President Ivo Josipović, Croatian Parliament Chair Luka Bebić and Croatian Prime Minister Jadranka Kosor), 15 Jan. 2011, V.R.H., U.P.V., org. jed. 50302-09 Pismohrana predsjednika Vlade, kl. oz. 561-01/11-01/01, ur. br. 363-11-4.
[1048] Priopćenje Koordinacija Udruga proisteklih iz Domovinskog rata Sisačko-moslavačke županije.
[1049] Unnamed, 15 Jan. 2011.

On a parallel rally in Split, organised by anti-E.U. The association 'I Love Croatia' featured local veteran leaders as main speakers who voiced messages similar to those in Zagreb.[1050] Although small protests attracted only marginal far-right political figures and veteran leaders, they were a prelude to a new period of veteran unrest.[1051]

Despite Kosor's attempt to soothe veterans by meeting with known Vukovar commanders, including Borković, frustrations among associations were growing.[1052] Even Đakić urged the Government to cut diplomatic relations with Serbia before it dropped the charges against Purda. Although Đakić placed all the blame on Serbian and Bosnian prosecution, he noted that H.V.I.D.R. would demand Justice Minister Dražen Bošnjaković's resignation if Purda was extradited to Serbia.[1053] Đakić played a role for the Government by calling H.V.I.D.R. members to join a gathering of support for Purda in Vukovar, organised by the local Coordination of Associations from the Homeland War, with Borković as one of the main speakers.[1054] A combination of H.V.I.D.R. members loyal to Đakić and Borković, who met with Kosor, was supposed to ensure that protesters do not target the Government as much.

The plan backfired despite Đakić's efforts and Kosor's unsuccessful meeting with Borković.[1055] On 29 January 1991, in Vukovar, some 2,000 protesters, in a similar ambience to earlier protests in Zagreb and Split, led by Borković, used harsh language against the Government, Justice Ministry and politicians in general, accusing them of theft and betrayal.

[1050] *Jutarnji list*, 16 Jan. 2011; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 16 Jan. 2011; *Večernji list*, 16 Jan. 2011; *Hrvatski list*, 20 Jan. 2011; Deran derannada, 'Prosvjed branitelja, govor Tromblona', YouTube, 17 Jan. 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vwQLAqD99fw&ab_channel=deranderannada (1 Dec. 2021); The protest in Zagreb and Janjić's speeches had noticeable religious elements. Janjić started his speech with a religious greeting, while the protest ended in St. Marc's Church. See: *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 16 Jan. 2011; *Večernji list*, 16 Jan. 2011; Smaller protests were organised in Vukovar, Kutina and Dubrovnik at the same day. See: *Hrvatski list*, 20 Jan. 2011.
[1051] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 22 Jan. 2011.
[1052] *Jutarnji list*, 28 Jan. 2011; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 28 Jan. 2011; *Večernji list*, 28 Jan. 2011.
[1053] *Jutarnji list*, 28 Jan. 2011; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 28 Jan. 2011.
[1054] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 28 Jan. 2011.
[1055] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 3 Feb. 2011.

Although Bošnjaković, Interior Minister Tomislav Karamarko and Veterans Minister Tomislav Ivić showed up at the protest, they were booed and insulted, something they probably did not expect.[1056] Borković radicalised his rhetoric even more, condemning the Prime Minister as utterly helpless in resolving the situation with Serbian arrest warrants against Croatian veterans.[1057] Borković and protesting veterans took advantage of H.D.Z.'s thin majority in the Parliament and fragile coalition Government with S.D.S.S. Therefore, Borković urged the Government to bar from office all members of the Serbian minority who had taken part in the 1990s-armed rebellion against Croatia.[1058]

Besides Borković's sudden radicalisation, other retired officers and politicians tied to different veteran groups suddenly came to the fore after being marginalised for years.[1059] Among *ad hoc* groups, the most prominent was the Defenders' Action 'Stop the Persecution of Croatian Defenders' (*Braniteljska akcija 'Stop progonu hrvatskih branitelja'*), born out of the 15 January protest on Zagreb's central square.[1060] Like most veteran *ad hoc* groups, the Action was a group with fluid, ever-changing and non-hierarchical groups comprising active or former members of different – sometimes mainstream – associations. Also, its media presence and organisation leaned on the infrastructure provided by existing mainstream

[1056] *Jutarnji list*, 30 Jan. 2011; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 30 Jan. 2011; *Večernji list*, 30 Jan. 2011; Apparently, the loudest were members of H.V.I.D.R. Osijek, a branch not loyal to Đakić and H.D.Z. See: *Jutarnji list*, 3 Feb. 2011.
[1057] Borković's moderate rhetoric on Kosor, immediately after the protest. See: Krmeljava, Branitelji na prosvjedu u Vukovaru, YouTube, 29 Jan. 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mvpZALf9gV8&ab_channel=Krmeljava (1 Dec. 2021); For Borković's radicalised rhetoric, see: *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 3 Feb. 2011
[1058] Unnamed (Correspondence from the 204th Vukovar Brigade commander Branko Borković to Croatian Prime Minister Jadranka Kosor), 15 Feb. 2011, V.R.H., U.P.V., org. jed. 50302-09 Pismohrana predsjednika Vlade, kl. oz. 561-01/11-01/01, ur. br. 361-11-11.
[1059] *Večernji list*, 13 Feb. 2011; *Jutarnji list*, 16 Feb. 2011.
[1060] The Flier of the Defenders' Action used photos of incarcerated veterans and Purda in a similar way Gotovina's image was used since he ran from authorities in 2001. See: Unnamed (Fliers of Defenders' Action), undated, V.R.H., U.P.V., org. jed. 50302-09 Pismohrana predsjednika Vlade, kl. oz. 561-01/11-01/01, ur. br. Missing.

associations that did not support Kosor. Thus, Defenders' Action operated out of the office of H.V.I.D.R. Črnomerec (Zagreb neighbourhood), a branch that did not align with Đakić.[1061]

Although right-wing oriented, Defenders' Action boasted its apolitical orientation, condemning appropriation by right-wing parties.[1062] Despite this, numerous marginal right-wing politicians and public personas joined Defenders' Action.[1063] The Defenders' Action advocated various radical goals, widely accepted by right-wing parties, groups, and veteran associations. These included ending criminal proceedings against veterans, judicial protection of the Homeland War, abolishing the Law on General Amnesty, and lustration of former communist officials.[1064] Even in other moderate associations, veterans voiced similar radical ideas considering the Law on General Amnesty and measures to control the return of Serb refugees.[1065] Besides, already grounded anti-Serb sentiments in the veteran movement, associations and groups used this renewed interest in abolishing the Law on General Amnesty to cause rifts between H.D.Z. and S.D.S.S. within the Government. The initiative also saw mainstream loyalist associations as part of the problem, accusing them of acting as Kosor's 'servants', looking only for their particular interests, disregarding general veteran interests.

[1061] Obavijest sredstvima javnog priopćavanja, 23 Feb. 2011, V.R.H., U.P.V., org. jed. 50302-09 Pismohrana predsjednika Vlade, kl. oz. 561-01/11-01/01, ur. br. 361-11-26; *Večernji list*, 24 Feb. 2011; Later the Defenders Action was referred to as Initiative 'Stop the Persecution of Croatian Defenders'. See: *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 4 Mar. 2011.
[1062] Unnamed (Press release of the Defenders' Action corresponding to the press release published in media on 22 February 2011), undated, V.R.H., U.P.V., org. jed. 50302-09 Pismohrana predsjednika Vlade, kl. oz. 561-01/11-01/01, ur. br. Missing; Hina/Tportal.hr, 'Leovac iskoristio skup u Grubišnom Polju za HSP', Tportal.hr, 22 Feb. 2011, https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/leovac-iskoristio-skup-u-grubisnom-polju-za-hsp-20110222 (25 Jul. 2022), *Večernji list*, 24 Feb. 2011, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 26 Feb. 2011.
[1063] *Večernji list*, 15 Jan, 7, 13, 22, 24, 27 Feb, 1 Mar. 2011; Unnamed (Press release of the Defenders' Action); Hina/Tportal.hr, 'Leovac iskoristio'; *Jutarnji list*, 23, 25-7 Feb. 2011; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 24, 26-8 Feb. 2011; *Nacional*, 1 Mar. 2011.
[1064] *Večernji list*, 24 Feb. 2011; *Jutarnji list*, 1 Mar. 2011.
[1065] Unnamed (Conclusions from the annual assembly of the Association of Defenders of the Homeland War I.N.A.-Naftaplin), 4 Mar. 2011, , U.P.R.H., org. jed. 71-02-07 Posebni savjetnik predsjednika Republike Hrvatske za branitelje, kl. oz. 560-01/11-01/04, ur. br. 363-11-01.

According to them, the state deliberately triggered fragmentation of the veteran community in a 'divide and conquer' manner.[1066]

The face of Defenders' Action and the whole protest wave was Janjić, President of a marginal Vukovar-based Association of Warriors from the Croatian Defensive War (*Udruga ratnika Hrvatskog obrambenog rata*). The public saw Janjić as a war hero of the 'martyr city' who survived Serbian prison camps and is now persecuted by the same state that imprisoned him. Janjić, with a far-right background, framed his struggle as fighting against traitors in the political leadership. He accused the post-Tuđman political leadership of betraying veterans and having secret deals with Serbia. In short, Janjić was utterly disappointed with present-day Croatia, amplifying the 'is this what we fought for' veteran trope.[1067] Thus, he swore the highest Croatian officials would not be allowed to 'step foot' in Vukovar if Purda was extradited.[1068]

Twenty years after the siege, this defence of the town from traitorous Croatian authorities echoed the betrayal of some veterans. Therefore, at the protest in Vukovar, Borković stressed that the 'Operation Vukovar' and 'battle for Croatia' were not over.[1069] Borković blamed all the governments since the fall of Vukovar as the ones responsible for Purda's arrest.[1070] Janjić shared his distaste for Croatian politicians, criticising even Tuđman for betraying Vukovar in 1991 by not providing military aid to the city.[1071] Thus, Borković and Janjić tried

[1066] *Hrvatski list*, 20 Jan. 2011;*Slobodna Dalmacija*, 13 Feb. 2011; Priopćenje za javnost, 22 Feb. 2011, V.R.H., U.P.V., org. jed. 50302-09 Pismohrana predsjednika Vlade, kl. oz. 561-01/11-01/01, ur. br. 361-11-19; Unnamed (Protocol of Defenders' Action protest in Grubišno Polje on 20 Feb. 2011), undated, V.R.H., U.P.V., org. jed. 50302-09 Pismohrana predsjednika Vlade, kl. oz. 561-01/11-01/01, ur. br. Missing; *Večernji list*, 24 Feb. 2011.
[1067] *Hrvatski list*, 20 Jan. 2011.
[1068] *Jutarnji list*, 29 Jan. 2011; SiB hr, 'STV 28.1.2011. Najava prosvjeda branitelja - www.sib.hr', YouTube, 28 Jan. 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uzRQ3wOL4fk&ab_channel=SiBhr (25 Jul. 2022).
[1069] *Jutarnji list*, 30 Jan. 2011; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 30 Jan. 2011.
[1070] *Večernji list*, 16 Feb. 2011.
[1071] *Hrvatski list*, 20 Jan. 2011.

to continue where they had left off in 1991, continuing their war for Vukovar and Croatia. The perception that the war was not over was common among veterans, even for decades.[1072]

This perception was present among veteran leaders protesting the Government, who saw this war as 'perfidious', aimed at belittling the values upon which Croatia was created.[1073] According to veteran associations protesting in Zadar, this 'enemy's attack' on veterans and the Homeland War was an attack on Croatia.[1074] Serbia's attack was an actual invasion – or aggression – and a symbolic blow. As Serbia – and all Croatian enemies – infringed upon the Homeland War narrative, veteran associations called upon the 2000 parliamentary Declaration on Homeland War, which aimed to preserve the dominant narrative. Therefore, associations called on the authorities to use the Declaration to fight Serbia's new aggression and protect veterans like Marić and Purda.[1075] Again, like in the 2000-2 protest period, the dignity of the Homeland War was in jeopardy.[1076]

Although nearly fifty days had passed since his arrest, an external factor created a 'perfect storm'. After Sanader's arrest in December 2010, continued recession, growing unemployment and foreign debt and overall loss of support for the H.D.Z.-led Government due to numerous ongoing corruption investigations against acting and former officials climaxed in the winter of 2011. Defenders' Action recognised these feelings in the general

[1072] Ivor Sokolić observes this facet of the Homeland War narrative among different focus groups in Croatia, including veterans. See: Sokolić, *International courts*, pp 69-72.
[1073] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 13 Feb. 2011.
[1074] Unnamed (Correspondence from presidents of member associations of the Union of Defenders' Associations of Zadar County to the Croatian President, Parliament Chair and Government), udated, V.R.H., U.P.V., org. jed. 50302-09 Pismohrana predsjednika Vlade, kl. oz. 561-01/11-01/01, ur. br. 361-11-10.
[1075] Unnamed (Correspondence from the Associations of Zagreb Defenders of Vukovar President Damir Jašarević to the President of the Committee for War Veterans Ante Kotromanović), 2 Feb. 2011, H.S., fond Hrvatski sabor, podfond Hrvatski sabor, 6. saziv (2008-11), serija Odbor za ratne veterane, podserija Sjednice, podpodserija 24. sjednica, podpodserija Materijal sjednice; Unnamed (Correspondence from the Union of Defenders' Associations of Zadar County); Priopćenje za javnost, 14 Feb. 2011, V.R.H., U.P.V., org. jed. 50302-09 Pismohrana predsjednika Vlade, kl. oz. 561-01/11-01/01, ur. br. 361-11-16.
[1076] Priopćenje za javnost, 14 Feb. 2011; *Večernji list*, 24 Feb. 2011.

population and tried to appeal to them by calling workers, farmers, students, youth, and others to join veterans in protests for creating a 'rich, happy and satisfied' homeland.[1077] Defenders' Action claimed it represented the 'forgotten and demoralised Croatian people' made by different disenfranchised groups in society typical for post-socialist transition societies and that the initiative wielded the people's anger.[1078]

Appealing to the losers of the Croatian post-socialist transition, it appealed to a broader number of people, trying to form a popular front. In this context and with this rhetoric, the Defenders' Action, the U.H.B. 1990-96 and the Union of Croatian Peasants (*Sindikat hrvatskih seljaka*) announced a protest on Zagreb's central square on 26 February. Other groups, including labour union leaders, students, and Facebook protesters, announced joining.[1079]

As organisers announced 50,000 attendees to their protest, with different social groups joining in, government officials, loyalist associations and veteran leaders tried to tone down the heated atmosphere. Therefore, Kosor secured the support of Dedaković, one of Vukovar's heroes, who became the Prime Minister's loudspeaker, taming the veterans. He praised Kosor's efforts in helping the veterans and blamed Sanader for the Purda case. Dedaković criticised the protest of support for Purda in Vukovar in January, noting how it turned into an event of insulting Government officials. He was firmly against street actions as they may lead to violence and result in – in the light of the ongoing Arab Spring – 'a new Cairo'.[1080]

[1077] Unnamed (Press release of the Defenders' Action), 18 Feb. 2011, V.R.H., U.P.V., org. jed. 50302-09 Pismohrana predsjednika Vlade, kl. oz. 561-01/11-01/01, ur. br. Missing.
[1078] *Večernji list*, 24 Feb. 2011.
[1079] *Večernji list*, 22, 24 Feb. 2011; *Jutarnji list*, 23 Feb. 2011; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 24 Feb. 2011; Smaller protests organised through Facebook started in late February. See: *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 24 Feb. 2011; *Jutarnji list*, 25 Feb. 2011.
[1080] *Jutarnji list*, 15 Feb. 2011; *Večernji list*, 15, 20 Feb. 2011.

Some other associations had similar feelings regarding potential street violence that could break out.[1081] Therefore, on a protest in the town of Grubišno Polje, some speakers from the Defenders' Action allegedly flirted with threats of violence against the government. Officials, loyalist associations, and media exploited this to discredit the upcoming protest in Zagreb.[1082] On another more minor rally in Beli Manastir, one local veteran leader flirted with the use of arms if Purda were to be extradited to Serbia.[1083] Besides these indirect threats of violence, Kosor felt personally attacked by some of the speakers at the protest. As some speakers called out Kosor for preferential treatment of some veteran groups – loyalist associations – she entered a media spat with protesters, stressing that she made their substantial pensions possible.[1084]

The U.H.B. 1990-96 discarded accusations of starting a 'Cairo' on Zagreb's streets, claiming they used protests because they were forced to do so as Kosor had turned against them. The association explained how Kosor surrounded herself with loyalist associations, which did not speak for most veterans, let alone a broader social platform of 'Croatian workers, farmers, fishermen, students'.[1085] Organisers of the protests were especially offended by Kosor's notion of pensions as if it was her money and not something financed through the pension system.[1086] The whole thing probably brought Kosor additional bad publicity among veterans

[1081] Priopćenje za javnost, 24 Feb. 2011, Vlada Republike Hrvatske, Ured predsjednika Vlade, org. jed. 50302-09 Pismohrana predsjednika Vlade.
[1082] Obavijest za medije, 21 Feb. 2011, V.R.H., U.P.V., org. jed. 50302-09 Pismohrana predsjednika Vlade, kl. oz. 561-01/11-01/01, ur. br. Missing; *Večernji list*, 22, 24-5 Feb. 2011; *Jutarnji list*, 22-3, 25-6 Feb. 2011; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 26 Feb. 2011; Defenders' Action distanced itself from statements made by their member, who was also a member of H.S.P. See: Unnamed (Press release of the Defenders' Action), undated, V.R.H., U.P.V., org. jed. 50302-09 Pismohrana predsjednika Vlade, kl. oz. 561-01/11-01/01, ur. br. Missing; Hina/Tportal.hr, 'Leovac iskoristio skup'.
[1083] SiB hr, '21.02.2011. Prosvjed branitelja - www.sib.hr', YouTube, 22 Feb. 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6nl7CrEJHVc&ab_channel=SiBhr (23 Jun. 2021).
[1084] *Jutarnji list*, 22 Feb. 2011.
[1085] Priopćenje za javnost, 22 Feb. 2011; In other media statements, members of the Defenders' Action rejected notions of using violence against the government. See: *Večernji list*, 24 Feb. 2011.
[1086] *Večernji list*, 24 Feb. 2011.

and the general public, seeing the Prime Minister's more aggressive attitude and condescending tone.

Working on the further fragmentation of the veteran unity, Đakić organised a big meeting of veteran leaders in a police academy in Zagreb on the same day as the announced protest on the central square. Claiming that the scheduled date was only a coincidence, some veteran leaders and associations supported him and announced their arrival at a rival event.[1087] Two days before the announced protest, Kosor met with representatives of seventeen loyalist associations – the same that would meet with Đakić on the day of the protest to show that the government still enjoyed veterans' support. At the meeting, U.H.B.D.D.R.'s President Zvonko Milas and Josip Klemm, President of the Association of Special Police from the Homeland War of the Republic of Croatia (*Udruga specijalne policije iz Domovinskog rata Republike Hrvatske*, U.S.P.D.R.R.H.), stated that street protests would not resolve anything. Milas and Klemm were mediators between the two camps, with their statements having a performative role. While they did not condemn the protest, they wanted to separate themselves from the protesters, claiming they had different methods of achieving the same goal.[1088]

Stressing the need to stay united, numerous mainstream and non-mainstream associations declared their unconditional support for the Government and Kosor personally. In their letters to Kosor, in a servile tone, these associations stated they would not join the protest as they opted for institutional and legal solutions to problems rather than those made 'in the streets'.[1089] Some of these associations, like the Association of Sick Defenders of the

[1087] *Jutarnji list*, 23-4 Feb. 2011; *Večernji list*, 24 Feb. 2011.
[1088] *Večernji list*, 25 Feb. 2011; Klemm would become one of the most influential veteran leaders during the 2014-6 protest period.
[1089] Priopćenje za javnost (Koordinacija udruga proisteklih iz Domovinskog rata grada Gospića i Ličko-senjske županije), 23 Feb. 2011, V.R.H., U.P.V., org. jed. 50302-09 Pismohrana predsjednika Vlade, kl. oz. 561-01/11-01/01, ur. br. 361-11-22; *Jutarnji list*, 24 Feb. 2011; *Večernji list*, 24 Feb. 2011; Priopćenje za javnost, 25 Feb. 2011, V.R.H., U.P.V., org. jed. 50302-09 Pismohrana

Homeland War (*Udruga oboljelih branitelja Domovinskog rata*, U.O.B.D.R.), directly asked Kosor to award its loyalty by promoting the association's president within H.D.Z.'s Split-Dalmatia County organisation.[1090] U.H.V.D.R. also opted to resolve the Purda case through the rule of law and institutional channels but did not condemn the protest and allowed its members to join in an individual capacity.[1091] The only exemption among loyalist associations was the association Croatian War Veterans (*Hrvatski ratni veterani*), which supported Kosor but called her to join the protest on Zagreb's central square. The association argued that this would 'strengthen the unity of Croatian Government and people' and 'prevent polarisation of the Croatian national entity'.[1092]

Some of these associations decided not to support the protest after the issues from their gathering in Grubišno Polje six days earlier. These primarily local associations claimed they joined the protest to support Purda's cause. Still, they were unpleasantly surprised by the political instrumentalisation of the event, while they did not support inappropriate statements and protest signs present at the event. They were appalled by flirting with using violence to topple the Government.[1093] Therefore, even associations that were usually critical of the Government, like the Association of Zagreb's Defenders of Vukovar (*Udruga zagrebačkih branitelja Vukovara*, U.Z.B.V.), saw the protest as a 'political instrumentalisation of veterans' by fringe parties. U.Z.B.V. noted that it supported democratic struggle but not a

predsjednika Vlade, kl. oz. 561-01/11-01/01, ur. br. 361-11-30; Pismo potpore, 25 Feb. 2011, V.R.H., U.P.V., org. jed. 50302-09 Pismohrana predsjednika Vlade, kl. oz. 561-01/11-01/01, ur. br. 361-11-31.

[1090] Unnamed (Correspondence from the U.O.B.D.R. Secretary Petar Vulić to Prime Minister Jadranka Kosor), 21 Feb. 2011, V.R.H., U.P.V., org. jed. 50302-09 Pismohrana predsjednika Vlade, kl. oz. 561-01/11-01/01, ur. br. 361-11-23.

[1091] Priopćenje za javnost u svezi aktualnih događaja i najavljenih prosvjeda branitelja, 25 Feb. 2011, U.H.V.D.R., registrator Nerazvrstano.

[1092] Unnamed (Correspondence from the Assembly of Associations of Croatian War Veterans President Zvonko Sesar to Croatian Prime Minister Jadranka Kosor), 22 Feb. 2011, V.R.H., U.P.V., org. jed. 50302-09 Pismohrana predsjednika Vlade, kl. oz. 561-01/11-01/01, ur. br. 361-11-21.

[1093] Obavijest za medije, 21 Feb. 2011; Priopćenje za javnost, 24 Feb. 2011, V.R.H., U.P.V., org. jed. 50302-09 Pismohrana predsjednika Vlade, kl. oz. 561-01/11-01/01, ur. br. 361-11-29; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 26 Feb. 2011.

'call to arms and destruction of society'.[1094] Associations like the Police Association of Defenders of the Police Administration Dubrovnik 91 (*Policijska udruga branitelja Policijske uprave Dubrovnik 91'*, P.U.B.P.U.D. 91) found protests' political instrumentalisation as unhelpful as participating in Đakić's abhorrently scheduled meeting. Like Defenders' Action, P.U.B.P.U.D. 91 saw some of the leaders from the loyalist associations as the Government's satellites' and 'mercenaries'.[1095] Pragmatically, while these associations did not fully support the Government, they helped it by not coming to the protest. All this reflected the fragmentation of the veteran movement and different views on important issues.

Organisers did not worry over such divisions as they fitted their narratively constructed struggle. They claimed that only top veteran leadership – often accused of acting as politicians – would join Đakić's meeting, while real veterans would attend the protest. Some veteran leaders, like N.D.H.'s President Hruškar, admitted she would participate in the meeting while her members would attend the protest. As before, renegade H.V.I.D.R. branches, such as the one from Zadar, full-heartedly supported the protest.[1096] Associations gathering military camp inmates endorsed the protest, with their members tied to the siege of Vukovar or H.S.P., the party accused of politically instrumentalising the rally.[1097]

On 26 February, some 15,000 people, veterans, pensioners, workers, farmers, football ultras and Facebook protesters (mostly younger) gathered in Zagreb's central square – considerably less than announced. Like the public sphere, an anti-establishment sentiment dominated the protest, as veteran speakers, right-wing public personas and protesters called for Kosor's

[1094] Priopćenje za javnost (U.Z.B.V.), 23 Feb. 2011, V.R.H., U.P.V., org. jed. 50302-09 Pismohrana predsjednika Vlade, kl. oz. 561-01/11-01/01, ur. br. 361-11-20.
[1095] Priopćenje za javnost, 24 Feb. 2011.
[1096]Priopćenje za javnost, 22 Feb. 2011; *Jutarnji list*, 24 Feb. 2011; *Nacional*, 1 Mar. 2011; Similarly, some local branches supported the protest, unlike their republic-wide organisations. See: *Jutarnji list*, 26 Feb. 2011
[1097] *Večernji list*, 24 Feb. 2011; *Jutarnji list*, 26 Feb. 2011; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 26 Feb. 2011.

resignation. In a populist manner, Sačić contrasted the 'marginalised, criminalised, slandered' protesters to 'the few, well-fed' loyalist association leaders accused of treason. Janjić shared his frustration with the fact that a Serb was investigating' him in his country – referring to the fact that a Serbian prosecutor interrogated him in Osijek concerning the Purda case. In the rhetoric and chants used, the protest echoed the chauvinist impulses of protesters. Like protesters othered Pusić as a Serb in the 2001 protests, the protesters called Kosor 'Jaca', a supposedly Serbian short version of her first name 'Jadranka'.[1098]

However, although the veteran part of the protest went peacefully, a few hundred football ultras and Facebook protesters went from the square towards the Upper Town, where the Government and Parliament are located. As they ran into riot police, protesters started throwing bricks and stones and entered a short scuffle that ended in several injured people on both sides. Veterans did not participate in the violence but tried to act as a buffer between the sides once they realised what was happening. Although Borković attempted to settle the violent protesters by saying not to harm the police, he was booed and spat on by people who spearheaded physical altercations with the police.[1099] The violence took all the media attention, although veterans did not conduct it, as the organisers distanced themselves from violent groups.[1100]

Meanwhile, as smaller veteran protests continued across Croatia, the Purda crisis was finally resolved after fifty-seven days. On 3 March, the Serbian prosecution dropped its charges against Purda, and he flew into Croatia on a government plane. Upon landing in Osijek, Purda thanked the Government, Kosor and veterans for their institutional and moral

[1098] *Jutarnji list*, 27 Feb. 2011; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 27 Feb. 2011; *Večernji list*, 27 Feb. 2011; *Hrvatski list*, 3 Mar. 2011; Crogrom34, 'VIDEO Prosvjed hrvatskih branitelja na Trgu bana Jela i a br', YouTube, 27 Feb. 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dUeZiHY-jAk&ab_channel=Crogrom34 (1 Jul. 2021).
[1099] *Jutarnji list*, 27-8 Feb. 2011; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 27-8 Feb. 2011; *Večernji list*, 27-8 Feb. 2011.
[1100] Priopćenje za javnost, 26 Feb. 2011, V.R.H., U.P.V., org. jed. 50302-09 Pismohrana predsjednika Vlade, kl. oz. 561-01/11-01/01, ur. br. Missing.

support.[1101] Leaders of the veteran protests saw this as a massive victory on their behalf, as they had pressured the Government into acting and 'once more defended Vukovar'.[1102]

Despite the minimal impact of the veteran protests in Zagreb and Split and resolving the Purda case, veteran unrest did not die out completely. Some veteran leaders, like Sačić, continued the protests to stop all future persecution against Croatian veterans.[1103] Besides the issue of Serbia's indictments, Sačić wanted to use the protests to promote his political agenda. During these protests, he spent much energy slandering the Head of D.O.R.H. Mladen Bajić, closely related to Sačić's legal struggles with the investigation for war crimes committed after 1995 Operation Storm. Additionally, riding on the anti-E.U. wave, he used the protests and media spotlight to announce the formation of a right-wing political party – officially registered as Action for Better Croatia (*Akcija za bolju Hrvatsku*) in May – wanting the support of a wide range of social groups.[1104] The forming of a political party somewhat confirmed previous claims that there was political instrumentalisation of the protests.

Throughout March, veteran associations and groups protested alongside the general population across Croatia – mostly in Zagreb. Facebook protesters, including far-right and far-left groups, opposed austerity measures, relentless recession, the H.D.Z.'s corruption and E.U. accession. Amid the last months of E.U. talks, protesters wanted to submit the highly unpopular government to call for snap elections before planned ones in the fall of 2011. As many commentators noticed, these protests lacked coherent messages, with protesters often not agreeing on numerous aspects of what they advocated. Veteran groups that started the demonstrations in support of Purda's cause integrated into the anti-E.U. segment of

[1101] *Jutarnji list*, 4 Mar. 2011; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 4 Mar. 2011; *Večernji list*, 4, 11 Mar. 2011.
[1102] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 4 Mar. 2011.
[1103] Ibid; Out of fear of prosecution for its members, some non-mainstream associations supported Sačić. See: *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 4 Mar. 2011.
[1104] *Jutarnji list*, 28 Feb, 4-5 Mar. 2011; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 28 Feb, 4 Mar, 2 Apr. 2011; *Večernji list*, 28 Feb. 2011; Nacional, 1 Mar. 2011; *Hrvatski list*, 3, 10 Mar. 2011; *Globus*, 4 Mar, 15 Apr. 2011.

protests.[1105] Parallelly, veteran protesters split into smaller competing groups seeking similar goals. Bickering veteran leaders accused each other of political instrumentalisation or betrayal of genuine veteran interests and values.[1106]

2011 – Gotovina's peril and tarnished dreams over the constitutional law

As general protests died out by late March, veteran groups wanted to create a new momentum over the upcoming I.C.T.Y.'s verdict against Gotovina, Čermak and Markač scheduled for 15 April. Veteran leaders like Sačić, Strize and nearly forgotten Trusić – former U.H.D.D.R. and N.D.H. President – announced a potential conviction for the three officers. They somewhat competed in organising events following the live broadcast of reading the I.C.T.Y.'s Trial Chamber verdict that would turn into protests in the case of a sentencing verdict.[1107]

The case of the upcoming I.C.T.Y.'s verdict against Gotovina and others showed some similarities with Purda's case. Like in the case of Purda, the verdict for the three generals was only a vessel for getting the political message to a broader audience. Therefore, Gotovina's lawyer, Luka Mišetić, claimed that the general did not support any protests on his behalf, fearing the politicisation of his case.[1108] Similarly, like in Purda's case, the Government wanted to mitigate the potential veteran outburst in the case of a convicting verdict. The same eighteen veteran associations that supported Kosor had called in late March for an extraordinary session of the Parliament where the Declaration on the Homeland War, allegedly not respected, would be discussed. Otherwise, associations threatened massive

[1105] *Jutarnji list*, 1-9, 11-2, 14-5, 17, 25 Mar. 2011; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 2, 4, 18, 26 Mar. 2011; *Hrvatski list*, 3, 10, 17 Mar. 2011; *Globus*, 4, 11 Mar. 2011; *Večernji list*, 9, 15, 19-20 Mar. 2011.
[1106] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 2, 4 Mar. 2011; *Večernji list*, 2 Mar. 2011; *Hrvatski list*, 10 Mar. 2011.
[1107] Slobodna Dalmacija, 26 Mar, 2 Apr. 2011; Jutarnji list, 27, 30 Mar. 2011; *Hrvatski list*, 7 Apr. 2011; *Večernji list*, 14 Apr. 2011.
[1108] Slobodna Dalmacija, 2, 14 Apr. 2011; *Hrvatski list*, 7 Apr. 2011; *Globus*, 15 Apr. 2011.

protests that could 'destabilise' Croatia.[1109] At this meeting, Kosor and the associations' representatives agreed that the Law on Veterans should become constitutional. Such a law would entail constitutional protection of veterans, while only two-thirds of the parliament could change the Law. At the same meeting, these associations agreed on organising a peaceful parade and sermon in Zagreb a day before the verdict to cool down the potentially hostile atmosphere, once again demonstrating the prominent place of the Catholic Church in the veteran movement.[1110] Like in Purda's case, loyalist associations stood by their position of not supporting protests as they could politically instrumentalise the trial and again lead to violence.[1111]

Immediately after judges of I.C.T.Y.'s Trial Chamber read out the verdict sentencing Gotovina to twenty-four and Markač to sixteen years in prison – while acquitting Čermak – many disagreed.[1112] The atmosphere fuelled by mainstream media and politicians promising Gotovina's acquittal contributed to this feeling of utter injustice.[1113] A few thousand gathered for public broadcasting of reading the verdict, and some 10,000 gathered on a protest a day after at Zagreb's central square. Despite their accusations of the Government and a torn E.U. flag, nothing dramatic had unravelled.[1114] In Zadar, the region where Gotovina's strongest support was, local veteran associations demanded that the Government reveal plans for securing generals' acquittal and publicly expressed their thoughts on the whole issue. Similar

[1109] Unnamed (Correspondence from the associations from the Homeland War on the state level to Parliament Chair Luka Bebić), 25 Mar. 2011, U.P.R.H., org. jed. 71-02-07 Posebni savjetnik predsjednika Republike Hrvatske za branitelje, kl. oz. 560-01/11-01/07, ur. br. 363-11-02.
[1110] *Jutarnji list*, 13 Apr. 2011; *Večernji list*, 13, 15 Apr. 2011; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 16 Apr. 2011.
[1111] *Večernji list*, 14-5 Apr. 2011; *Globus*, 15 Apr. 2011; *Jutarnji list*, 15 Apr. 2011.
[1112] *Jutarnji list*, 16 Apr. 2011; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 16 Apr. 2011; *Večernji list*, 16 Apr. 2011.
[1113] *Večernji list*, 10, 13-5 Apr. 2011; *Jutarnji list*, 13-5 Apr. 2011; A day before the verdict, *Slobodna Dalmacija* published a thirty page supplementary that praised the three officers without mentioning war crimes committed against Serb civilians during and after Operation Storm. See: *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 14 Apr. 2011.
[1114] *Jutarnji list*, 16-7 Apr. 2011; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 16 Apr. 2011; *Večernji list*, 16-7 Apr. 2011; The only act of destruction came in the region of Pakoštane – Gotovina's hometown – where locals torched car tires and took down a few trees as roadblocks. See: *Jutarnji list*, 17 Apr. 2011; *Večernji list*, 17 Apr. 2011.

to earlier responses when Croatian officers were prosecuted or tried, they demanded the revision of the Law on General Amnesty.[1115]

In mitigating potential veteran unrest – although there was almost none – the Government turned again to loyalist associations. Therefore, the Government formed a special committee tasked with helping Gotovina's and Markač's defence teams. Kosor included loyalist associations' representatives in the committee to stress veterans' importance.[1116] The Government also looked at turning the veterans' attention away from its responsibility regarding the controversial sentence toward political opponents. Therefore, allegedly in agreement with Kosor, loyalist veteran associations went after former President Mesić, who cooperated with the I.C.T.Y., giving the Tribunal presidential transcripts that constituted evidence against Gotovina and Markač. Đakić advocated that Mesić lose all privileges as a former president because he was a 'traitor' and demanded responsibility for giving the transcripts.[1117] Acting upon this, the Government investigated how the transcripts got to the Hague.[1118] Finally, Kosor advocated transforming the Law on Veterans into a constitutional one, something she promised a few days before the verdict. Such an act would draw the government and veteran associations closer together, guaranteeing their support in the long run.[1119] Again, the state tried to buy veterans' trust and ease criticism over cooperation with

[1115] Unnamed (Correspondence from veteran associations from Zadar to President of the Republic, Prime Minister and Parliament Chair), 19 Apr. 2011, U.P.R.H., org. jed. 71-02-07 Posebni savjetnik predsjednika Republike Hrvatske za branitelje, kl. oz. 560-01/11-01/12, ur. br. 363-11-01.
[1116] *Jutarnji list*, 18 Apr. 2011
[1117] *Večernji list*, 20 Apr. 2011; A few associations filled a criminal complaint against Mesić for betraying national interests by testifying in the prosecution's interest in the *Gotovina et al* case and giving out confidential documents to I.C.T.Y. Prosecution. See: Unnamed (Correspondence from veteran associations from Zadar to President of the Republic, Prime Minister and Parliament Chair); *Večernji list*, 29 Apr. 2011.
[1118] Dnevnik.hr/tportal.hr, 'Vlada istražuje kako su 'brijunski transkripti' došli u Haag', Tportal.hr, 26 Apr. 2011, https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/vlada-istrazuje-kako-su-brijunski-transkripti-dosli-u-haag-20110426/print (27 Jul. 2022).
[1119] *Jutarnji list*, 23, 28 Apr. 2011; *Nacional*, 26 Apr. 2011.

the I.C.T.Y. by enhancing veterans' symbolic position in society and improving the legislative.

As S.D.P.'s President Milanović opposed turning the Law into a constitutional one, Đakić condemned his lack of understanding for veterans and blamed his party for depriving veterans of their rights during the 2000-3 period. The constitutional law would prevent sudden changes in veteran legislation, claiming that these acts cost the state hundreds of millions of euros in compensation for discriminated veterans.[1120]

Acting upon the initiative of H.V.I.D.R. and associations of families of killed, imprisoned, and missing veterans, the parliamentary Committee for War Veterans discussed the issue of transforming the Law on Veterans into a constitutional one. In the discussion, without opposition M.P.s, H.D.Z.'s arguments for transforming the law into a constitutional one prevailed. Borković, present at the session as an outside member without a right to vote, claimed that such a law would 'cement' veteran rights for those who do not deserve them and cause problems for future generations that would have to deal with privileged groups. In his opinion, veterans had to share 'the good and bad', not fearing the change of government. On a more practical level, Borković was realistic that S.D.P. and other centre-left parties would not support such an idea. Other Committee members (H.D.Z. M.P.s and Dedaković) claimed this was the only means to increase their protection level, regardless of which party was in power. Finally, with six votes 'for' and one 'abstention'(Kotromanović, who mailed in his ballot), the Committee decided to support the initiative and proposed the amendment of the Constitution.[1121] In July 2011, the Committee – again boycotted by opposition (S.D.P.)

[1120] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 23 Apr. 2011; *Nacional*, 26 Apr. 2011.
[1121] Zapisnik 28. sjednice Odbora za ratne veterane Hrvatskog sabora, 4 May 2011, H.S., fond Hrvatski sabor, podfond Hrvatski sabor, 6. saziv (2008-11), serija Odbor za ratne veterane, podserija Sjednice, podpodserija 28. sjednica, podpodserija Zapisnik; *Jutarnji list*, 5 May 2011; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 5 May 2011.

members – supported the draft proposal for changing the Constitution, claiming it resulted from 'depoliticisation', as veterans would not have to rely upon current political options in power.[1122]

As the draft proposal came to the vote in the Parliament only four months before the general elections, the opposition accused H.D.Z. of using the veterans and the proposal for the electoral campaign. H.D.Z.'s Đakić was especially active in verbal exchanges, accusing opposition MPs of unpatriotic behaviour.[1123] As the opposition argued that the constitutional law would bring unequal treatment among citizens, Đakić practically admitted this. In his fiery speech, Đakić emphasised that all citizens could not be equal in Croatia and could not have the same rights because veterans shed blood in defending the homeland, and there were no benefits to compensate for that. With this speech, Đakić made a quintessential speech encapsulating all the veteran tropes built on their strong sense of entitlement. When voting on the proposal, H.D.Z. and loyalist veteran associations did all they could to exert pressure on the opposition. While veteran representatives were present at the gallery of the Parliament's plenary hall to oversee the vote, H.D.Z. insisted that M.P.s vote individually – rarely a practice – so that everyone could see their decision in a public T.V. broadcast of the session. As two-thirds of the Parliament was needed to change the Constitution, H.D.Z.'s proposal did not go through. At the same time, the opposition and Government coalition partner S.D.S.S. did not support the proposal. Đakić and association representatives were displeased with the vote, claiming that the opposition acted the same as in 2000.[1124] In this way, H.D.Z. again managed to portray S.D.P. as an unpatriotic party that did not care about the veterans.

[1122] Zapisnik 30. sjednice Odbora za ratne veterane Hrvatskog sabora, 6 Jul. 2011, H.S., fond Hrvatski sabor, podfond Hrvatski sabor, 6. saziv (2008-11), serija Odbor za ratne veterane, podserija Sjednice, podpodserija 30. sjednica, podpodserija Zapisnik.
[1123] Slobodna Dalmacija, 7 Jul. 2011.
[1124] Maja Šurina, ''Ne možemo biti svi isti i imati ista prava!'', Tportal.hr, 6 Jul. 2011, https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/ne-mozemo-biti-svi-isti-i-imati-ista-prava-20110706 (27 Aug. 2022); *Večernji list*, 9 Jul. 2011.

In the last months in power, in a desperate attempt to catch the right-wing and veteran votes, the Government doubled down on revoking the memory of the Homeland War. Although this continued the negative perception of S.D.P. among most veteran associations, it did not help H.D.Z. avoid a bad electoral defeat.[1125] In the campaign, Đakić served the purpose of H.D.Z.'s maverick candidate, who could voice radical ethno-nationalist rhetoric that H.D.Z. now openly used to attack the opposition. Thus, Đakić picked out the names of leaders of the opposition parties and implied that as their first names sounded Serbian, they were planning to form a Serbian Government. When faced with strong criticism, even from individuals in H.D.Z., Đakić refused to apologise.[1126] Only days later, Kosor mildly criticised Đakić's statement in passing while focusing on comments from the opposition that she found more problematic.[1127] This episode showed how Kosor calculated that by radicalising the ethnonationalist rhetoric and using veteran leaders to attack the opposition, H.D.Z. could try to sway right-wing votes.

Conclusion

With EU pressures for full cooperation with the I.C.T.Y., Sanader's Government had to turn veteran sentiments towards the Tribunal around. After it spearheaded the anti-I.C.T.Y. veteran revolt during the 2000-02 protest period, claiming that Croatian officers 'didn't commit crimes and therefore shouldn't go to the Hague', H.D.Z. was now in power and needed to turn things around. To pacify veteran associations, the Government needed to change the discourse on Croatia's cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. without countering the

[1125] Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1990 – 2020*, p. 377; However, some veteran associations accused the Government of using the wartime memory for electoral purposes. See: Jašarević: obljetnica 204. brigade iskorištena za predizborne svrhe, 28 Sep. 2011, U.P.R.H., org. jed. 71-02-07 Posebni savjetnik predsjednika Republike Hrvatske za branitelje, kl. oz. 053-02/11-03/161, ur. br. 363-11-02.
[1126] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 6 Oct. 2011; *Jutarnji list*, 7 Oct. 2011; *Večernji list*, 7 Oct. 2011.
[1127] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 11 Oct. 2011.

dominant narrative about the Homeland War, cherished for over a decade and formalised and precisely set out in the 2000 parliamentary Declaration of the Homeland War.

For this reason, Sanader's Government promised full support for the defendants before the I.C.T.Y. while not considering their innocence or the character of the war, which convinced all the new suspects: Čermak, Markač and six Bosnian Croat officials. Sanader promoted the new paradigm in which Croatian officers 'didn't commit crimes but had to prove it in the Hague'. According to this interpretation, their innocence was evident, and the truth would prevail before the Tribunal. In revamping Croatian nationalism while not defying the Homeland War myth, Sanader argued that full cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. is a prerequisite for defending the truth about the conflict and its heroes, veterans. Sanader's new patriotism encapsulated the idea that by standing trial before the I.C.T.Y., Croatian 'defenders' would defend themselves and the (truth about the) Homeland War and Croatia one last time.

Mainstream associations, especially H.V.I.D.R., accepted this new path while stressing the defendants' innocence. H.V.I.D.R., tied to H.D.Z. through its President Đakić and association leadership in general, defended the Government's policies of full cooperation with the I.C.T.Y., including tracking down the fugitive general Gotovina. H.V.I.D.R. and other associations supporting Croatia's new take on the I.C.T.Y. cooperation claimed they stood loyal to their position during the 2000-3 period. These associations argued that the new government would help the defendants prove their innocence before the court and not sell them out like the former centre-left government. What worked in their favour was that all new I.C.T.Y. defendants – Čermak, Markač and six Bosnian Croat officials – willingly turned themselves in without any state pressures. Besides the discursive change, the Government also applied other incentives – better welfare, more pensions and money from the state budget for associations.

However, many veteran associations and groups did not accept this narrative shift, especially regarding tracking down Gotovina, who did not want to turn himself in. Loyal to their old ways, many non-mainstream associations refused the new pro-I.C.T.Y. path. Additionally, many more prominent mainstream associations' branches went separate ways from their national headquarters. Thus, minor veteran associations, groups, and interested individuals helped local H.V.I.D.R. branches – mostly from Dalmatia – oppose their national leadership and the Government. These veterans believed in being true to themselves and opposed the hunt for Gotovina. Their struggle was characterised mainly by covering the country with posters of Gotovina. These Poster Wars between associations and authorities lasted throughout 2004-05, with police and local authorities sensitively tackling the issue so as not to provoke harsher reactions.

Considering this veteran disobedience, this period demonstrated the results of a decade of veteran fragmentation and proved that political control of the associations was impossible. Although their dissent was limited, it was present, especially among the right-wing, who were disappointed with Sanader's centrist politics. In this period, the division between loyalist and non-loyalist veteran associations became increasingly evident – an ever-changing process. Other parties and politicians, like H.S.P., S.D.P. and Zagreb Mayor Bandić, took advantage of these cleavages in the veteran movement, trying to appropriate the veterans for their political goals. However, when intelligence agencies finally located Gotovina, leading to his arrest and extradition to the Hague in December 2005, the Government and loyalist associations prevented a widespread atmosphere of protests, limiting the political instrumentalisation that H.D.Z. had demonstrated during the 2000-02 period.

While peaceful for a few years, the veteran community was once more disturbed in 2011 in the context of numerous corruption scandals, a deep recession and an unpopular Government led by Kosor. Thus, contrary to a widespread belief of the undisputed client-patron

relationship between veterans and the H.D.Z., many veteran associations and groups took advantage of the party's weaknesses due to the recession and corruption scandals. Although Kosor's Government managed to preserve the support of loyalist associations, even convincing them to accept austerity measures, the case with the arrest of Vukovar veteran Purda brought to the fore all the frustrations that probably boiled for a while, surpassing strictly veteran issues. Non-loyalist, non-mainstream, local veteran associations and ad hoc groups have started protests against the Government. The proof that Purda's arrest was only a trigger for the revolt came after veterans continued their protests despite the successful resolution of the problem.

Additionally, it was a testament to how some veterans' personal or group ambitions worked separately from publicly promoted goals. The secret ambition of some leaders drove the protests after the authorities met their initially proclaimed demands. The fragmentation of protest groups, bickering leaders, the lack of clear messages, political instrumentalisation and integration into a broader protest movement contributed to lessening veteran visibility during this period. Even when veteran groups were present at protests, they were seen as regular citizens. Parallelly, for the first time in twenty years, these protests integrated veterans into broader population segments, surpassing class and political orientation, as many veterans marched alongside far-right and far-left groups – although they were leaning towards the right-wing.

Chapter 5

Homeland War as part of culture wars (2013-4)

Introduction

Three distinctive elements marked this phase of grounding the dominant narrative about the Homeland War and mobilising the veteran movement in the 2013-4 period.

The first element was the final verdict of Croatian generals Gotovina and Markač before the I.C.T.Y. in November 2012. The I.C.T.Y.'s Trial Chamber shocked the Croatian public in April 2011 by sentencing Gotovina and Markač to twenty-four and eighteen years in prison, respectively. Besides convicting the generals, the Trial Chamber's verdict challenged the dominant narrative, outlining the war as a defensive conflict.[1128] While not disturbing the self-image of being the victor, it did disrupt the self-victimisation perception of Croatia, whose citizens fought the Greater Serbian aggression and won.[1129] I.C.T.Y.'s verdict offered a counter-narrative in the form of a more nuanced account of events from the 1990s war, according to which Croatian political and military leadership formed a joint criminal enterprise that planned and executed a plan to deport the Serb population from Croatia violently.[1130] The country's ontological security seemed to rely upon the final verdict, as many in Croatia viewed the 1995 Operation Storm as the pinnacle of the fight for independence. Therefore, the judgment sentencing the two generals would 'criminalise' the Storm, which meant the 'criminalisation' of Croatia.[1131] Veteran associations were also

[1128] Ivor Sokolić, *International courts*, p. 45.
[1129] Pavlaković, 'Croatia, the International Criminal Tribunal', p. 1725.
[1130] Roee Ariav, 'Hardly the Tadić of targeting: missed opportunities in the I.C.T.Y.'s Gotovina judgments' in *Israel Law Review*, xlviii (2015), no. 3, pp 329-55, at pp 334-6.
[1131] Jelena Subotic, 'Remembrance, public narratives, and obstacles to justice in the Western Balkans' in *Studies in Social Justice*, vii (2013), no. 2, pp 265-83, at p. 273.

intimately interested in the trial's outcome, hoping their fellow combatants would be acquitted, removing the anathema from the Homeland War and their war merits.

Finally, on 16 November, the I.C.T.Y.'s Appeal Chamber acquitted Gotovina and Markač, rejecting all the counts from the indictment and overturning the Trial Chamber's verdict.[1132] Exacerbated by media that portrayed the generals as heroes, a euphoria swept the nation.[1133] In his speech in a very emotional atmosphere in front of some 100,000 people in Zagreb's central square, Gotovina declared the final verdict 'a legal Storm'. However, despite expectations that Gotovina would use fiery rhetoric and echo the ethnonationalism of those around him, the acquitted general was rather constructive and peaceful in his rhetoric. In a country desperately captured by history – seen as something completely defying the present and future – Gotovina looked forward. After being in the media spotlight for a decade, separated from his family and close friends, Gotovina wanted peace and closure. Thus, he did not want to enter new mnemonic battles with his former fellow combatants. After all, he considered the battle to be over. Therefore, at a welcoming ceremony in Zagreb's central square, Gotovina said that the verdict marked an end of the Homeland War, which now belonged to history. He called to everyone to look towards the future.[1134]

After the final verdict for Gotovina and Markač, the I.C.T.Y. and, consequently, efforts to impose the rule of law ceased to be the central issue for mobilising veteran associations and groups into public actions against the state.[1135] Before the generals' final verdict, much of the public saw the Tribunal as 'a political court' that aimed to equalise the victim (Croatia) and perpetrator (Serbia) with its unjust verdict. However, with the generals' acquittal, this

[1132] Appeals Judgement in Prosecutor vs. Ante Gotovina and Mladen Markač, 16 Nov. 2012, International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia.
[1133] Koska and Matan, 'Croatian citizenship regime', p. 139.
[1134] *Jutarnji list*, 17 Nov. 2012; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 17 Nov. 2012; *Večernji list*, 17, 18 Nov. 2012.
[1135] Boduszyński and Pavlaković, 'Cultures of victory', pp 805, 808.

perception was almost immediately changed, and many used the new, favourable verdict to reinforce the dominant narrative about the war.[1136] As the only and final verdict against Croatian officers for war crimes committed on Croatian soil, many symbolically saw this verdict as the 'final battle for the dignity of the Homeland War'.[1137] It resonated with the symbolic defence of the dignity of the Homeland War from the early 2000s and Sanader's new paradigm on defending it in the Hague. With all this in mind, political elites, like Gotovina, labelled the event 'the end of the Homeland War', which could not be subject to 'short-term political manipulation'.[1138]

While Croatia's cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. was a mighty leverage for the country's E.U. aspirations, in 2013, the issue held no political importance anymore, as Croatia signed the Treaty of Accession in December 2011 and was about to join the Union on 1 July 2013 officially.[1139] It was precisely the imminent E.U. membership at the core of a new conflict emerging in Croatia, representing the second factor setting the scene for new veteran mobilisation. As the E.U. membership was for years a point of consensus for all relevant political options and societal players, as this goal was *de facto* met in 2012, different actors suddenly had a spectrum of issues upon which they could disagree.[1140] Therefore, from the second half of 2012 and especially in 2013, Croatia experienced a wave of conservativism in politics and society, accompanied by a surge in right-wing civic initiatives and activities. There were a few factors at play that contributed to this conservative wave. One was the rise

[1136] Koska and Matan, 'Croatian citizenship regime', pp 131, 132, 137, 139.
[1137] Ibid, p. 137.
[1138] Boduszyński and Pavlaković, 'Cultures of victory', p. 808.
[1139] Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1990. – 2020.*, p. 373.
[1140] Višeslav Raos, 'The *curious case* of Croatia', *Green European Journal*, 6 Aug. 2016, https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/the-curious-case-of-croatia/ (26 Sep. 2022); Even Gotovina stated from the prison in the Hague that he would vote for joining the E.U. on the 2012 referendum. See: *Jutarnji list*, 22 Jan. 2012.

of the 'global right' in the aftermath of the 2008-09 global economic crisis, with different types of populist right and national conservativism appearing worldwide.[1141]

This anti-liberal wave and surge in national conservativism existed at the intersection between politics, civil society and mainstream culture in central Europe – Visegrad countries, Austria, and Croatia – from roughly 2010 onwards. In these countries, national conservatives shifted the debate from policies to identity and values, considered the very fabric and foundations of these societies. These clashes between conservatives and liberals and the left wing surpassed traditional political struggles. They took the form of culture wars, an ideological conflict started by conservative political parties, movements, and civil society organisations. These groups fought protracted cultural wars over the politics of memory, politics of identity and politics of morality.[1142] Initiators of these culture wars primarily targeted reproductive, L.G.B.T., and national minority rights.[1143] Besides mainstream political parties and movements, an essential actor in waging cultural wars is the civil society that promotes 'conservative social values, religious values, strong national identities, exclusionary ethnic identities, traditional or customary identities and institutional forms, illiberal political ideology, or a curtailment of liberal personal rights'.[1144]

Therefore, as the 'consensus over the immediate national goal was left broken', an open culture war, a stand-off between liberal and conservative forces in society, started in Croatia

[1141] Mihai Varga and Aron Buzogány, 'The two faces of the 'global right': revolutionary conservatives and national-conservatives' in *Critical Sociology*, xlviii (2022), no. 6, pp 1089–107.
[1142] Pavel Barša, Zora Hesová, Ondřej Slačálek, 'Introduction: how post-communism ends. Central European culture wars in the 2010s' in Pavel Barša, Zora Hesová and Ondřej Slačálek (eds), *Central European Culture Wars: Beyond Post-Communism and Populism* (Prague, 2021), pp 7-27, at pp 8-11, 18-20.
[1143] Youngs, 'Overview', Amir Hodžić and Nataša Bijelić, 'Neo-conservative threats to sexual and reproductive health & rights in the European Union', C.E.S.I., 2014, http://stari.cesi.hr/attach/_n/neo-conservative_threats_to_srhr_in_eu.pdf (Accessed 26 Sep. 2022), Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte (eds), *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against Equality* (London and New York, 2017).
[1144] Richard Youngs, 'Overview: conservative civil society on the rise' in Richard Youngs (ed), *The mobilisation of conservative civil society* (Washington, 2018), pp 7-12, at p. 8.

in 2013, just ahead of the E.U. accession.[1145] As part of a conservative civil society, veteran associations were not immune to this new trend and took an active role, contributing to the success of other conservative initiatives.[1146] Veteran associations and groups took part in one of these campaigns in the 2013-4 period, targeting the Serb minority while claiming to protect the rights of victimised Croats – an argument often applied in culture wars that target minorities. This evident partial democratic backsliding since 2013, with conservative civic society focussing on identity politics – L.G.B.T., women's and national minority rights, W.W.II. remembrance – was either helped or condoned by the dominant party in Croatia's political right, H.D.Z.[1147] The electoral cleavage between H.D.Z. and centre-left parties was one of the most significant contributing factors to the success of some of these conservative initiatives.[1148]

Therefore, H.D.Z. was the third element contributing to veteran mobilisation in this period. Although H.D.Z. had already undergone a particular shift towards the right during the last months under party president Kosor, the shift became radical with Tomislav Karamarko coming to power in May 2012. Even during the campaign for party president, former Interior Minister and chief of intelligence and counter-intelligence agencies, Karamarko used a virulent anti-communist and anti-Yugoslav rhetoric, calling for lustration and accusing the government of being against the people.[1149] Introducing back the radical rhetoric that was only sporadic in the H.D.Z. after 2002, Karamarko transported the party back to the 1990s, emphasising President Tuđman's importance. Although Gotovina, until then one of the biggest war heroes, placed the Homeland War in 'history' after being acquitted by the

[1145] Čepo, 'Structural weaknesses', p. 143.
[1146] Josip Glaurdić and Vuk Vuković, 'Proxy politics, economic protest, or traditionalist backlash: Croatia's referendum on the constitutional definition of marriage' in *Europe-Asia Studies*, lxviii (2016), no. 5, pp 803-25, at pp 807, 814, 819.
[1147] Čepo, 'Structural weaknesses', pp 144-6.
[1148] Glaurdić and Vuković, 'Proxy politics'.
[1149] Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1990. – 2020*, pp 388-9.

I.C.T.Y., it was essential to win the war over the interpretation of the war – the elimination of other 'truths' about the war.[1150] This unearthing of the Homeland War memory and the 1990s' was accompanied by reframing Tuđman from a radically right-wing angle. The announced introduction of the so-called Tuđmanism – Tuđman's teaching – fulfilled the needs of the new, fundamentally nationalist Karamarko's agenda.[1151] Moreover, the fact that the centre-left government just came to power amid the recession proved to be a good testing ground for H.D.Z.'s and Karamarko's new course, trying to recreate the conservative revolt from the early 2000s when veteran and other groups opposed the government led by S.D.P.

Census results trigger veterans' culture war

Encouraged by the positively resolved decade-long battle with the I.C.T.Y., the leadership of some veteran associations felt exonerated from perceived guilt. It felt that their 'five minutes of fame' had come – a chance to influence politics on a higher level.[1152] The radically altered political and social climate influenced veteran associations and groups, fuelled by right-wing and conservative rhetoric from H.D.Z. and other important actors. During this period, the right-wing, helped by veteran associations and *ad hoc* groups, revived the perception that the Homeland War somehow continued. Veterans echoed an elitist narrative from the H.D.Z. that announced a new war over an interpretation of the Homeland War.[1153] The veteran associations and *ad hoc* groups picked the city of Vukovar, a 'heroic', 'victim city', an ultimate symbol of Croatia's victimhood from the war as the battlefield for their 'culture war'.[1154] The Vukovar tragedy represents Croatia's cultural trauma – the collective feeling

[1150] Jović, *Rat i mit*, pp 174-5.
[1151] Ibid, pp 193, 331.
[1152] Karlović Sabolić, *Zoran Milanović*, p. 359.
[1153] Sokolić, *International courts and mass atrocity*, pp 69-72.
[1154] On Vukovar as the site that symbolises Croatia's victimhood in the war, see: Tamara Banjeglav, 'Conflicting memories, competing narratives and contested histories in Croatia's post-war

that a 'horrendous event' left deep marks on group consciousness, thus shaping the community's memory and 'changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways'.[1155] The legacy of warfare still dominated Vukovar on individual and collective levels, while the city's economic situation was complicated.[1156]

In 2012, Vukovar came into public focus when the results of the 2011 census were released. With the results showing that Serbs accounted for 34,87 per cent of Vukovar's population, in January 2013, the centre-left government prepared to grant the Serb community rights guaranteed by the Constitutional Law on Rights of National Minorities. The Law envisaged that administrative units – counties, cities, towns, or municipalities – had to implement the language and alphabet of national minorities representing more than a third of the population. In the case of Vukovar, it meant introducing Serbian language and Cyrillic script on signs marking public and state institutions, road signs and street names, besides the Croatian language and Latin script.[1157] The announced introduction of the Cyrillic script on signs frustrated many ordinary people and local veterans in Vukovar, as during the 1990s, the Cyrillic script became exclusively tied to the Serbian language and nationalism.[1158] For many veteran and right-wing groups, the Cyrillic script symbolised (an old and new) 'aggression' against Croatia, the Croatian nation, Vukovar, and veterans.[1159]

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commemorative practices' in *Politička misao*, xlix (2012), no. 5, pp 7-31, at pp 12-9; On how different groups of society view Vukovar as the 'heroic, victim city', see: Sokolić, *International courts and mass atrocity,* pp 67-9.

[1155] For more on cultural trauma, see: Jeffrey C. Alexander, 'Toward a theory of cultural trauma' in Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser and Piotr Sztompka (eds), *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley, 2004), pp 1-30, at p. 1.

[1156] Ljiljana Šarić and Tatjana Radanović Felberg, ''Cyrillic does not kill': symbols, identity, and memory in Croatian public discourse' in *Družboslovne razprave*, xxxiii (2017), no. 85, pp 51 – 71, at p. 53-4.

[1157] *Večernji list*, 11 Jan. 2013; Hesová, 'The moment after', p. 289; Differences between standardised Croatian and Serbian language are insignificant and translation is usually not necessary.

[1158] Sokolić, *International courts and mass atrocity,* pp 17-8; Šarić and Radanović Felberg, ''Cyrillic does not kill'', p. 52.

[1159] Šarić and Radanović Felberg, ''Cyrillic does not kill', p. 62.

The announced policy immediately caused a reaction of over twenty Vukovar veteran associations, who established an *ad hoc* group called the Headquarters for the Defence of Croatian Vukovar (*Stožer za obranu hrvatskog Vukovara*). The Headquarters demanded a 50-year-long moratorium on introducing the Cyrillic script in Vukovar as it would destabilise inter-ethnic relations in the city. The group announced that it would take all possible legal actions to stop the planned introduction of the Cyrillic script.[1160] The Headquarters' President, Tomislav Josić, claimed that the local Serb population is smaller than officially recorded. He stressed how minority rights could not be achieved based on genocide and ethnic cleansing of the domestic population.[1161] Although the city administration announced the possibility of excluding some localities from the introduction of the bilingual signs – such as the location of the Ovčara mass grave, where Serb paramilitaries killed over a hundred Croats in 1991 – the Headquarters announced a massive protest on 2 February, where they called veterans, citizens, and football fans that shared their opinion. The Headquarters claimed they were not 'fighting against Serbs' but against an unfair law. Symptomatic for this period of veteran activation, the Headquarters' position coincided with that of H.D.Z., which demanded that Vukovar be constitutionally categorised as a 'place of special importance for Croatia's past and future' and therefore exempted from the introduction of bilingualism.[1162]

Although the Headquarters was leading the anti-Cyrillic revolution – with H.D.Z.'s logistical help – many others joined in the symbolical defence of Vukovar from the government-imposed script – public figures from the wartime Vukovar, mainstream media and other intellectuals. Even those who identified as legalists thought Vukovar was a special place that could serve as an exception.[1163] Other local veteran groups also took the initiative in battling

[1160] *Večernji list*, 12 Jan. 2013; *Jutarnji list*, 30 Jan. 2013.
[1161] *Hrvatski list*, 21 Feb. 2013.
[1162] *Večernji list*, 15 Jan. 2013.
[1163] *Večernji list*, 16, 18 Jan, 7 Mar. 2013; *Jutarnji list*, 3 Feb. 2013.

the introduction of the Cyrillic script, such as the Association of Warriors of the Croatian Defensive War, led by Janjić 'Tromblon', the star of the 2011 protests against the government.[1164] The association also organised a protest, 'Vukovar will never be Вуковар' (Vukovar in Cyrillic), in the city two weeks before the one announced by the Headquarters. At the protest, 1,000 people used populist rhetoric and accused the political elites – including H.D.Z. – for harbouring Serbs and implementing the Law in the city they obliterated. Protesters gave the Government fifteen days to drop the planned implementation of the Law and Parliament to introduce a 20-year-long moratorium on introducing the Cyrillic script in Vukovar. At the same time, they called the police to investigate the actual whereabouts of Serbs who claimed residence in the city. For them, even if Vukovar's population was a hundred per cent Serb, the Cyrillic should not have been introduced after they levelled the city in 1991.[1165]

As the Government refused to back down on implementing the Constitutional Law, the Headquarters decided to stage a protest in Vukovar labelled 'No to Cyrillic in Vukovar'.[1166] Around 20,000 protesters gathered in Vukovar, holding signs such as 'Vukovar will never be Вуковар' while stressing the trope of veterans who are betrayed by politicians, losing in peace what they won in the war.[1167] In a heated atmosphere, Headquarters' President Josić claimed that the Government was opening war wounds, as they were trying to force the co-existence with the aggressor – the Serbs. Josić demanded that the Government stop the Law's implementation immediately until the Constitutional Court does a constitutional review, while the state should not implement the Law in Vukovar in general. The Headquarters

[1164] *Večernji list*, 16 Jan. 2013.
[1165] One of the veteran leaders Željko Krekić said on the protest that even Indian, Chinese, and Japanese could be introduced, but Serbian and Cyrillic cannot. See: *Jutarnji list*, 20 Jan. 2013.
[1166] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 24 Jan. 2013; *Jutarnji list*, 30 Jan. 2013.
[1167] 'Vukovar will never be Вуковар' slogan is 'an intertextual relation' to a 1991 poster well-known in the Croatian public space, 'Osijek will never be Ocek'. See: Šarić and Radanović Felberg, ''Cyrillic does not kill'', p. 62.

repeated some of the demands from two weeks prior, like police checking into local Serbs' residency in Vukovar.[1168]

The protest had a clear anti-Serbian tone, with Josić emphasising how there would be no Serbs in the region if Croatian forces liberated it in a Storm-like operation.[1169] The Headquarters directly linked Serbs to war crimes from the beginning of their campaign and during the protest. The trope of Serb war criminals walking among their wartime victims was a powerful instrument for ethnonational mobilisation.[1170] In the Headquarters' eyes, as Serbs never dealt with the past, atoned for their crimes or told the truth about the hidden mass graves with missing Croats, they were not entitled to minority rights.[1171] Besides the anti-Serbian rhetoric, protesters threatened the regime indirectly in Vukovar, announcing their arrival at St. Mark's Square, where the government and parliament are based, if the authorities do not stop implementing the Constitutional Law. The Headquarters accused the Government of conducting yet 'another ethnic cleansing' against Croats by introducing the bilingual signs.[1172] Using Prime Minister Milanović's words that Vukovar dwellers lack 'a bit of courage' to accept the introduction of bilingual signs, Josić responded that the Government should not test their 'patience and bravery'. Josić directly warned the Government that it would be responsible for trampling the level of security in multi-ethnic Vukovar.[1173] Ultimately, the protest raised inter-ethnic tensions as people returning home from the rally fought with a local Serb in Borovo Selo on the outskirts of Vukovar.[1174] Thus, protesters'

[1168] *Jutarnji list*, 3 Feb. 2013; *Večernji list*, 3 Feb. 2013.
[1169] *Jutarnji list*, 4 Feb. 2013
[1170] *Jutarnji list*, 3 Feb. 2013; *Večernji list*, 3 Feb. 2013; *Hrvatski list*, 21 Feb. 2013; Sokolić, 'My neighbour', pp 799-801.
[1171] Sokolić, 'My neighbour'; *Jutarnji list*, 3 Feb. 2013; *Večernji list*, 3 Feb. 2013; *Hrvatski list*, 21 Feb. 2013.
[1172] According to the view of the Headquarters, the introduction of the Cyrillic script works in the favour of changing the demographic situation of Vukovar, legally implementing 'ethnic cleansing'. See: *Večernji list*, 16 Feb. 2013; In general, many saw the Cyrillic as a provocation and threat to the Croatian national identity. See: Šarić and Radanović Felberg, ''Cyrillic does not kill'', p. 52.
[1173] *Jutarnji list*, 3, 4 Feb. 2013; *Večernji list*, 3 Feb. 2013.
[1174] *Jutarnji list*, 3, 4 Feb. 2013; *Večernji list*, 3, 4 Feb. 2013.

fears of jeopardising the general safety situation in Vukovar worked as a self-fulfilling prophecy, as they were the primary source of inter-ethnic tensions in the city.

These indirect threats and hate speech towards the local Serb population quickly built a hostile atmosphere in Vukovar and across Croatia. Additionally, the rhetoric used by protesters evoked the extremely belligerent rhetoric veterans last used during the 2000-2 protest period. Like in the early 2000s, *ad hoc* veteran groups used right-wing rhetoric and flirted with using violence against an S.D.P.-led government, accusing it of 'ethnic cleansing' or 'betrayal'. Similar to the early 2000s, these groups had an alliance, or at least similar goals, as the H.D.Z., serving the party's short-term political goals.[1175] This protest came ahead of the local elections scheduled for May as the S.D.P. Mayor of Vukovar, Željko Sabo, was seeking re-election. The Headquarters exploited this by asking Sabo to avoid introducing bilingual signs or resign.[1176] Although Sabo labelled the protest 'H.D.Z.'s elections campaign rally', he nevertheless pressured his party to drop the whole plan for introducing the bilingual signs before the local elections.[1177] The pressure the Headquarters applied was successful in forwarding their campaign.[1178]

Veterans open a national front for Vukovar

After the protest in Vukovar, the Headquarters continued with a well-known strategy of Croatian veteran groups, mixing indirect threats with pacific statements and promoting dialogue.[1179] Thus, at the meeting with President Josipović, members of the Headquarters

[1175] Karlović Sabolić, *Zoran Milanović*, p. 239.
[1176] *Jutarnji list*, 3 Feb. 2013; *Večernji list*, 3 Feb. 2013.
[1177] *Jutarnji list*, 3, 4 Feb. 2013; *Večernji list*, 3, 5 Feb. 2013.
[1178] *Večernji list*, 16 Feb. 2013.
[1179] Some columnists noticed this swift change in the rhetoric of the Headquarters. See: *Jutarnji list*, 2 Mar. 2013.

warned that 100,000 people would gather at their announced protest in Zagreb in April, where 'everything could happen' – implying spontaneous violence.[1180] On the other hand, in consequent media appearances, the Headquarters leaders rejected any notion of using violence, vowing to use only legal, democratic, and peaceful methods to advocate their cause.[1181] However, a few days later, Headquarters stated it would remove bilingual signs when they appeared and use force if the state installed them in Vukovar.[1182]

The Headquarters tried to engage the public emotionally. Thus, the Headquarters put forward a 74-year-old Vukovar veteran, Marijan Živković, whose two sons died in fighting in and around Vukovar. The Headquarters presented him as someone who would have 'the honour' to remove the first bilingual plaque the authorities would install. Živković explained how he would remove the signs as an act of desperation, as he was ready to kneel and beg authorities not to introduce the signs because of his sons.[1183] Despite promoting a person who would remove the signs, the Headquarters insisted it had no control over those who would remove them independently.[1184] In this way, Headquarters wanted to present themselves as only the voice of the people, an organic grassroots movement against the injustices of the central state.

With all the veteran pressure unravelling, the Government backed down, announcing the postponement of Constitutional Law implementation until after the elections. Veterans Minister Predrag Matić, a Vukovar veteran himself, even showed sympathy for the demands of the Headquarters.[1185] However, the Headquarters was not giving up while the media amplified the momentum created through ongoing public radicalisation and debate around war symbolism. Thus, while visiting Finland in March 2013, Milanović mentioned that

[1180] *Večernji list*, 9 Feb. 2013.
[1181] *Večernji list*, 16 Feb. 2013.
[1182] *Jutarnji list*, 21, 27 Feb. 2013.
[1183] *Večernji list*, 1, 3 Mar. 2013.
[1184] *Hrvatski list*, 21 Feb. 2013.
[1185] *Večernji list*, 6 Mar. 2013; *Hrvatski list*, 21 Mar. 2013.

Finland 'did not ever have a civil war' like Croatia. However, Milanović emphasised in the same speech that Croatia was a victim of foreign aggression. However, the notion of 'civil war', even in passing, was enough to provoke different veteran groups and leaders.[1186] The concept of a civil war seriously disturbed the dominant narrative of the war written in the parliamentary Declaration of the Homeland War, making it an easy target for veteran associations. Veterans used Milanović's 'civil war' comment to discredit him for years.

The Headquarters used all these tensions built up in public and announced a massive protest in Zagreb for 7 April, where they would unite numerous veteran associations under its umbrella.[1187] Representatives of some 300 veterans met in a hotel in Zagreb to discuss creating an umbrella association. This non-party platform would unite all the veteran associations in helping the Headquarters' struggle against introducing bilingual signs in Vukovar and react in the future on similar issues. Alongside the Headquarters' leaders, the President of U.S.P.D.R.R.H. Klemm and Ilija Vučemilović Šimunović, President of the Assembly of Associations of Croatian Guard Brigades' Veterans (*Zbor udruga veterana hrvatskih gardijskih postrojbi*, Z.U.V.H.G.P.), took the prominent role at the gathering, where they agreed on the details regarding the protest.[1188] The meeting showed that the Headquarters were widening the veteran front against the government, gathering many associations under one umbrella. Josić bragged how their network grew to fifteen local Headquarters across Croatia, thus resembling the 2000-1 period when veterans organised similar headquarters nationwide.[1189] The traditionally most prominent associations – H.V.I.D.R., U.H.D.D.R., U.H.V.D.R. – remained somewhat in the backseat, while Klemm

[1186] *Večernji list*, 18, 19, 23 Mar. 2013.
[1187] *Večernji list*, 13 Mar. 2013; *Hrvatski list*, 21 Mar. 2013.
[1188] *Večernji list*, 23, 24 Mar. 2013; The event was also visited by some right-wing figures, like radical Croatian émigré Zvonko Bušić responsible for hijacking a plane in the US in the 1970s, which ended in the death of a policeman. See: *Večernji list*, 24 Mar. 2013.
[1189] *Hrvatski list*, 28 Mar. 2013.

and Vučemilović Šimunović, joining veterans from Zagreb and Vukovar, came to the forefront, merging the critical mass for the major protest period in 2013-5.[1190]

In alliance with other veteran associations, Headquarters did not lack logistical means for organising a very elaborate protest – probably coming from H.D.Z. as well – including the performance of nation-wide famous singer and veteran Marko Perković Thompson, popular right-wing T.V. host Velimir Bujanec as the main speaker and organised transport participants by buses and the 'Train of Peace'.[1191] Besides the Headquarters leaders, the main organiser was U.S.P.D.R.R.H. President Klemm, also an owner of a major security company, with experience in organising massive events, like the welcoming reception of generals Gotovina and Markač in 2012.[1192] The President of the Union of Associations of H.V.I.D.R. Zagreb (*Zajednica udruga H.V.I.D.R.-a Zagreb*), Bandić's associate Ljubičić 'Šveps', as one of the most influential veteran leaders in the city helped Klemm organise the event.[1193] Therefore, Bandić appropriated the event for his electoral campaign, with local elections scheduled for May.

On 7 April, around 40,000 people – although sources differed – from around Croatia gathered at the 'No to Cyrillic in Vukovar' protest on Zagreb's central square. Here, the protesters, led by Josić, announced uniting 300 associations under one umbrella and demanded that the

[1190] Although H.V.I.D.R.'s Đakić was present at the gathering, he was not received well due to his membership in the H.D.Z., as this party took part in passing the Statute of Vukovar in 2010, which enabled the introduction of the bilingual signs. See: *Večernji list*, 24 Mar. 2013; Although U.H.V.D.R. did support the Headquarters' cause, the association president Đuro Dečak disagreed in battling the Cyrillic as it was one of 'Croatia's scripts'. See: Zapisnik sa sastanka Središnjeg odbora U.D.V.D.R. R.H. održan 28. veljače 2013. godine u 11:30 sati u Zagrebu, Galovićeva 12, 4 Mar. 2013, U.H.V.D.R., registrator Središnji odbor.

[1191] 'Train of Peace' was a direct reference to the train with which President Tuđman visited Vukovar in 1997 during the peaceful reintegration, holding one of his famous reconciliatory speeches in the city. See: *Večernji list*, 5, 6 Apr. 2013; *Jutarnji list*, 7 Apr. 2013; Slobodna Dalmacija, 9 Apr. 2013; On allegations of ties between the Headquarters and H.D.Z., see: *Jutarnji list*, 9 Apr. 2013; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 9 Apr. 2013; *Večernji list*, 9 Apr. 2013.

[1192] *Jutarnji list*, 17 Nov. 2012; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 17 Nov. 2012; *Večernji list*, 17 Nov. 2012.

[1193] Poziv: Dan branitelja Grada Zagreba, 21 May 2013, U.P.R.H., org. jed. 71-02-07 Posebni savjetnik predsjednika Republike Hrvatske za branitelje, kl. oz. 053-02/13-04/491, ur. br. 361-13-01.

prerogatives from the Constitutional Law not apply in Vukovar. Josić made a parallel between Vukovar and the former Nazi death camp Auschwitz. He explained that the state should not introduce Cyrillic script in Vukovar like the German national anthem was not played in Auschwitz because of Nazi crimes. Therefore, the Headquarters gave the Government until 18 November – the day of the Fall of Vukovar – to initiate a law proposal defining Vukovar as a 'place of special [homeland] piety', preventing the direct implementation of the Constitutional Law. Although the protest had a populist overtone, portraying politicians as traitors - even the H.D.Z. – it was relatively peaceful as organisers paid particular attention to potential incidents. Even before the protest, the organisers and participants almost self-censored themselves, aiming to tackle media and politicians' claims that they were a 'mob', 'black shirts' or 'hooligans' planning a *coup d'état*. The Headquarters declared that they are ending with organising protests, retreating to Vukovar, and waiting for the introduction of bilingual signs, emphasising the need to prevent this even by force – the only open call to violence on the protest.[1194] Veteran associations and groups used Croatia's victimhood trauma to downplay the need to respect laws regulating national minority rights.

Nevertheless, the protest was not a major success, as it did not further widen the Headquarters' social or political support. At the same time, many prominent veteran leaders and retired officers – such as recently acquitted generals Gotovina and Markač – did not come to the protest.[1195] In line with its populist image, the Headquarters tried to distance itself from politics and political parties. Thus, Josić claimed that the Headquarters was not helping H.D.Z. to come back to power and even condemned its role in creating the possibility of introducing bilingual signs in Vukovar's Statute in 2009.[1196]

[1194] *Večernji list*, 6, 8 Apr. 2013; *Jutarnji list*, 8 Apr. 2013; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 9 Apr. 2013.
[1195] *Večernji list*, 8 Apr. 2013; *Jutarnji list*, 8, 9 Apr. 2013; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 9 Apr. 2013.
[1196] *Večernji list*, 18 Apr. 2013.

However, just before the local elections in May, two prominent leaders of the Headquarters left the group as it decided to support H.D.Z. and the far-right Croatian Party of Rights Dr Ante Starčević (*Hrvatska stranka prava dr. Ante Starčević*, H.S.P.A.S.). In the eyes of these two members, the Headquarters abandoned their promoted apolitical orientation, which was free of party politics.[1197] Vukovar veteran Zdravko Komšić, who parted ways with the Headquarters, later pointed to its ties to H.D.Z., claiming they were doing the 'dirty work' for the party as they battled its political opponents.[1198] The Headquarters' denial of political links continued even after openly supporting H.D.Z. in the local elections.[1199] According to some insiders, the H.D.Z. 'grip' over the Headquarters was not necessarily there initially. Still, it was more of a result of veterans' search for allies battling the Government – unlike in the early 2000s, when ad hoc veteran groups naturally gravitated towards the party.[1200]

The only short-term breakthrough for the Headquarters was that the parliamentary Committee for War Veterans gave them a chance to present their initiative for declaring Vukovar a 'place of special [homeland] piety'. At the Committee meeting, the representatives of the Headquarters presented their initiative, which included suspending article twelve of the Constitutional Law and proscribing the public use of the language of national minorities. Headquarters' representatives claimed that they did not target the Serb minority but thought the wishes of Vukovar dwellers should be respected, considering the city's sacrifice during the war. Although M.P.s from governing parties expressed their doubts about the Headquarters' apolitical position, claiming they were H.D.Z.'s 'secret partner', the

[1197] *Jutarnji list*, 9 May 2013; *Večernji list*, 9, 11 May 2013.
[1198] The Headquarters demanded that Kosor was stripped of the honorary award given by the city of Vukovar as she did not support its cause in the Parliament. Komšić saw this as a sign of Headquarters' ties to H.D.Z. that tried to smear Kosor. See: T.V., 'Nek se Jadranki Kosor oduzme status počasne građanke Vukovara', Dnevnik.hr, 30 Sep. 2013, https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/stozer-za-obranu-hrvatskog-vukovara-trazi-oduzimanje-statusa-pocasne-gradzanke-jadranki-Kosor---305115.html (12 Oct. 2022); *Jutarnji list*, 12 Oct. 2013; *Globus*, 15 Nov. 2013.
[1199] *Večernji list*, 14 May 2013.
[1200] Karlović Sabolić, *Zoran Milanović*, pp 238-40.

Committee suggested that Vukovar City Council discusses the initiative and reports on its position.[1201]

However, along with the deteriorating societal climate, the relationship between veteran associations, groups, and Government became tense. In Knin, while marking Operation Storm in August, the crowd heckled Milanović during his speech, issuing insults.[1202] Although political and veteran leaders across the board condemned the heckling, some veteran leaders gave some justifications by claiming that Milanović did not care about veteran issues and that he showed a lack of understanding for their opinion on introducing bilingual signs.[1203] Parallel with their quarrel with Milanović, veteran leaders started criticising Minister Matić, who would soon become the most despised official among many veteran associations.[1204] As the Government announced the installation of the first bilingual signs in Vukovar at the beginning of September, the Headquarters stayed calm, claiming that their initiative was still in parliamentary procedure and that the Vukovar Remembrance Day – 18 November – was near.[1205] However, it quickly became a 'very hot' fall.

[1201] Zapisnik 10. sjednice Odbora za ratne veterane Hrvatskog Sabora, 12 Jun. 2013, H.S., fond Hrvatski sabor, podfond Hrvatski sabor, 7. saziv (2011-5), serija Odbor za ratne veterane, podserija Sjednice, podpodserija 10. sjednica, podpodserija Zapisnik.
[1202] *Jutarnji list*, 6 Aug. 2013; *Večernji list*, 6 Aug. 2013.
[1203] *Jutarnji list*, 7 Aug. 2013; *Večernji list*, 7 Aug. 2013.
[1204] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 31 Jul, 13 Aug, 5 Sep. 2013; *Jutarnji list*, 9 Aug, 5 Sep. 2013; *Večernji list*, 14 Aug. 2013; *Hrvatski list*, 15, 22 Aug. 2013; Some veteran associations complained about Matić as soon as he resumed office. See: Primjedba na način izbora članova u Savjetodavno tijelo pri Ministarstvu branitelja, 25 Jan. 2012, U.P.R.H., org. jed. 71-03 Vojni kabinet predsjednika Republike Hrvatske, kl. oz. 050-01/12-01/06, ur. br. 363-12-01; Priopćenje, mediji svi!, 26 Nov. 2012, org. jed. 71-02-07 Posebni savjetnik predsjednika Republike Hrvatske za branitelje, kl. oz. 053-01/12-01/166, ur. br. 363-12-01.
[1205] *Večernji list*, 31 Aug. 2013.

Igniting the anti-Serb flame

The situation heated up in September, as the Ministry of State Administration decided to put up the first bilingual signs at public offices in Vukovar. Quickly upon installation, some 200 Headquarters members gathered and managed to demolish bilingual granite plaques with hammers, despite the presence of the police, noticeably lenient and careful not to escalate things. As announced during the campaign, veterans held Živković on their shoulders as he broke the plaque – a photo widely republished by the media in the region. Wanting to emphasise that the destruction of plaques was not purely performative, the Headquarters warned that their members would demolish all the plaques that the Ministry would install in Vukovar, especially once the riot police left the city. As four police officers and two protesters were slightly injured, some veterans were arrested and held up at the same police station where the plaque was demolished. Because of this, the Headquarters' members blocked the station for a while to pressure the police to release the arrested veterans. The situation created a sense of emergency, as 200 riot police officers were sent to Vukovar to appease the protesters, restore order, and protect the remaining bilingual signs.[1206]

The anti-Cyrillic campaign did not pass without shockwaves in Croatian society, widening the ideological cleavage between opposing groups. The climate quickly transformed into an anti-Serb one, 'othering' the whole community, even in regions where the post-war reconciliation and coexistence were successful. Therefore, upon demolishing the first bilingual signs, unknown perpetrators made graffiti with Ustaša-era anti-Serb slurs on the local Orthodox church in Dubrovnik.[1207] In Split, a young man broke the windows of the office of the Council of the Serbian National Minority and threw a firecracker inside.[1208] A

[1206] *Večernji list*, 3, 4, 11 Sep. 2013.
[1207] *Jutarnji list*, 4, 5 Sep. 2013; *Večernji list*, 4, 8 Sep. 2013.
[1208] *Jutarnji list*, 6 Sep. 2013; *Večernji list*, 8 Sep. 2013.

minor league football match in the multi-ethnic municipality of Krnjak, near Karlovac, was interrupted because fans waved a flag with a Cyrillic inscription.[1209] A week later, Cyrillic plaques in Krnjak were removed during the night, although they had stood there for six years.[1210] In October, Cyrillic signs on public and religious buildings were demolished or removed in the municipalities and towns of Udbina, Vojnić and Biskupija. As proof of sudden radicalisation, some of these plaques had been installed years ago and were not contentious for the locals.[1211] Radicalisation and anti-Serb sentiment even broke out in regions that barely experienced direct warfare or destruction and where there were no inter-ethnic tensions, such as Varaždin.[1212]

Karamarko, who fostered all contentious activities and supported different conservative groups, called the Government to abandon its policy and show some understanding and respect for the 'sanctity' of Vukovar. Milanović dismissed such calls, stressing that the law must be implemented and called protesters to 'accept that the war had ended' and that victors must be generous towards the defeated. Milanović said introducing bilingual signs in Vukovar would be Croatia's biggest 'triumph'. At the same time, Matić tried to soothe his fellow Vukovar veterans by appealing to their patriotism, calling them not to raise their hands at the Croatian police. Interior Minister Ranko Ostojić was less benign in his statement and threatened that the police would use force to secure the installation of Cyrillic plaques.[1213] President Josipović called for a meeting of all sides – the Government, H.D.Z., Serbian community, and Headquarters – but all ignored or rejected his initiative.[1214] Politically, the incidents from Vukovar benefited the whole political scene, and Milanović did not have to

[1209] *Jutarnji list*, 11 Sep. 2013.
[1210] *Jutarnji list*, 19 Sep. 2013; *Večernji list*, 19 Sep. 2013.
[1211] *Jutarnji list*, 12-4 Oct. 2013.
[1212] *Jutarnji list*, 28 Nov. 2013.
[1213] *Večernji list*, 3, 4, 19 Sep. 2013; *Jutarnji list*, 19 Sep. 2013.
[1214] *Jutarnji list*, 11 Sep. 2013; *Večernji list*, 11 Sep. 2013.

deal with the failing economy. In contrast, Karamarko had a new front of 'culture wars' open and an opportunity to enter another conflict with Milanović.

In replying to Milanović's statement, Josić emphasised that 'the war is still ongoing' for them. In their interpretation, the whole incident was the Government's fault, while protesters did not attack the police, which was unfairly arresting protesters. However, the Headquarters claimed it was still ready to talk and resolve all the issues peacefully. It demanded that the Government introduce a moratorium on the Constitutional Law and make an extraordinary body of legal experts, government officials, Headquarters representatives, veterans, the local community, and Serb representatives to solve the problem.[1215] A day later, on a meeting with representatives of ninety-five veteran associations, the Headquarters announced that the protests would continue. It reaffirmed that Cyrillic had no place in Vukovar, which needed to be made a 'place of special [homeland] piety'. This united veteran front announced breaking all cooperation with the Government, promising an unhospitable welcome of the authorities' representatives and a boycott of all state protocols at the Vukovar Remembrance Day in November.[1216]

Despite Headquarters' increasingly belligerent rhetoric, the Government still wanted to please the rebellious veterans. Like Sanader, Milanović framed the current issue as a matter of having a functional rule of law.[1217] However, the Government showed the will to diffuse the situation, calling the Headquarters to the negotiating table.[1218] At first, the Headquarters' President Josić rejected Milanović's call to talk in Zagreb, saying he did not receive an

[1215] *Večernji list*, 4, 5 Sep. 2013; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 5 Sep. 2013; Some veteran associations, like the Association of Veterans of the 4th Guard Brigade accused both the Government and opposition for manipulating veterans and dwellers of Vukovar by constructing these conflicts that were not improving the quality of life or interests of regular citizens. See: *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 5 Sep. 2013.
[1216] *Večernji list*, 6, 7 Sep. 2013.
[1217] *Jutarnji list*, 6 Sep. 2013; *Večernji list*, 6 Sep. 2013
[1218] *Jutarnji list*, 11 Sep. 2013

official invitation. Instead, he called Milanović to a veteran meeting in Vukovar.[1219] Such macho 'power games' were to be expected, as veteran leaders often deliberately wanted to assert dominance over politicians by setting the format in which they met. Thus, the Headquarters rejected a few proposed meetings with Government officials.[1220] Finally, upon receiving an official invitation from Milanović, the Headquarters decided to meet up with him and other Government officials.[1221]

The two sides met in Vukovar, in a very unpleasant atmosphere, where veterans gathered in front of the building in which they booed Minister Matić upon entering. The two sides did not agree on almost anything, agreeing only to meet up again. Despite this, as a gesture of goodwill, Milanović promised to pull out the police from Vukovar streets.[1222] Although the Government showed the readiness to put the bilingual signs only on state institutions, the Headquarters announced that it would drop all further talks if Milanović insisted on implementing the Constitutional Law.[1223] As the Government did not want to drop the implementation of the Law, the Headquarters announced the possibility of obstructing the state ceremony for the Vukovar Remembrance Day.[1224]

In the meantime, the Headquarters tried to grab public and media attention with performance activities in Vukovar. While these actions aimed at gathering support, their members could not escape their extremist image. One such moment was when they publicly read the name of local Serbs who allegedly illegally claimed their residence in Vukovar while they lived in Serbia – an attempt to reject the census results.[1225] The trope of Serbs illegally registered in Croatian cities and municipalities became common, as Croat nationalists claimed this was an

[1219] *Jutarnji list*, 11 Oct. 2013
[1220] *Jutarnji list*, 15 Oct. 2013.
[1221] *Jutarnji list*, 16 Oct. 2013.
[1222] *Jutarnji list*, 18 Oct. 2013.
[1223] *Jutarnji list*, 20, 22 Oct. 2013.
[1224] *Jutarnji list*, 29, 30 Oct. 2013.
[1225] *Jutarnji list*, 15 Sep. 2013; *Večernji list*, 15 Sep. 2013.

orchestrated operation to trigger rights guaranteed by the Constitutional Law.[1226] Such rhetoric and activities of singling out Serbs created a particular atmosphere of tension and insecurity among Serb communities across Croatia. Despite the anti-Serb climate, Headquarters members often emphasised that they did not hate the Serbs and that Serb politicians created the whole problem.[1227]

Along with these activities, the Headquarters members and unknown perpetrators continued removing and damaging plaques in Vukovar, sometimes in plain sight of the police.[1228] In one such action, a police officer seriously injured a veteran trying to remove a bilingual sign.[1229] The veteran with a fractured skull was in the hospital for weeks, while the Headquarters used the incident to demand Interior Minister Ostojić's resignation and protest police brutality against veterans.[1230] Despite the evident mobilisation of the Headquarters and local Croat population in keeping protests alive for weeks, they were not alone.[1231] According to Stevo Culej, U.S.P.D.R.R.H. Vice-President, the complete introduction of the bilingual signs served as a 'signalling torch' for the veterans, a unifying event for the fragmented veteran movement, whose numerous associations on the national level became passive, cheated and manipulated by the politicians.[1232] Therefore, veteran leaders from Zagreb soon joined the Headquarters, giving it additional legitimacy and searching for their place in the

[1226] *Jutarnji list*, 12 Oct. 2013; *Hrvatski list*, 21 Aug. 2014.
[1227] *Jutarnji list*, 15 Oct. 2013.
[1228] *Večernji list*, 24 Sep. 2013; *Jutarnji list*, 9, 24 Oct. 2013; *Hrvatski tjednik*, 24 Oct. 2013, 9 Jan. 2014.
[1229] *Jutarnji list*, 14 Nov. 2013; *Hrvatski tjednik*, 14, 21 Nov. 2013; Večernji list, 15 Nov. 2013.
[1230] *Hrvatski tjednik*, 6 Feb. 2014; PSD, 'Vukovarski Stožer zapalio svijeću ispred policije za umrlog branitelja Pajčića', Slobodna Dalmacija, 21 Nov. 2015, https://slobodnadalmacija.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/vukovarski-stozer-zapalio-svijecu-ispred-policije-za-umrlog-branitelja-pajcica-293749 (10 Oct. 2022); Pajčić died in 2015 from pneumonia, while the Headquarters found the policeman ultimately guilty for his death. See: Hina, 'Čelnik Stožera za obranu hrvatskog Vukovara smatra da su Milanović i Ostojić krivi za smrt branitelja Darka Pajčića', Telegram, 23 Nov. 2015, https://www.telegram.hr/politika-kriminal/celnik-stozera-za-obranu-hrvatskog-vukovara-smatra-da-su-milanovic-i-ostojic-krivi-za-smrt-branitelja-darka-pajcica/ (10 Oct. 2022).
[1231] *Hrvatski tjednik*, 19 Sep. 2013.
[1232] *Hrvatski tjednik*, 17 Oct. 2013.

newly created political arena. Outside veteran leaders wanted to gain respect from politicians and boost their media visibility, thus empowering themselves and their associations.[1233]

One of those who boosted their media visibility and credit among veterans was Klemm, who, as a retired policeman, helped his fellow veterans receive a quick release from police custody. At the same time, Klemm presented himself as the 'voice of reason', seemingly trying to de-escalate the conflict. While he condemned the violence and said it was 'not a pretty sight' to see plaques with the Croatian coat of arms destroyed, he also condemned the Government for the lack of dialogue and violent implementation of the Constitutional Law, provoking violence that would not happen otherwise.[1234] Klemm was in charge of the Coordination-Operative Team of the anti-Cyrillic campaign, consisting of forty-four veteran association representatives who would organise coordinated protests in all counties across Croatia.[1235] As days passed, he became the most prominent veteran leader, repeatedly taking the position of an alleged pacifier of the protests, often downplaying veterans' violent episodes as if the destructive behaviour was out of their control. At the same time, his use of indirect intimidation became notorious in these veteran operations.[1236]

Aside from protests, the Headquarters pressured the local political elites to deal with the issue. Thus, the local H.D.Z. and H.S.P.A.S. filed a motion to change the disputed Statute of Vukovar, declaring the city a 'place of special [homeland] piety', derogating the Constitutional Law.[1237] The President of H.D.Z. Vukovar, Ivan Penava, was especially active

[1233] *Jutarnji list*, 12, 29 Oct. 2013; Željko Garmaz, 'Hrvatski branitelji u Vukovaru s ulica maknuli ćirilićne ploče', 24sataT.V., 7 Oct. 2013, https://www.24sata.hr/news/hrvatski-branitelji-u-vukovaru-s-ulica-maknuli-cirilicne-ploce-335642 (13 Oct. 2022); *Hrvatski list*, 17 Oct. 2013.
[1234] *Večernji list*, 8 Sep. 2013.
[1235] *Jutarnji list*, 7 Sep. 2013; *Večernji list*, 8 Sep. 2013.
[1236] Late in the evening of the first day of protest in Vukovar, Klemm and few other retired special policemen drove to the house of the state attorney in the town of Županja and pressured him to come to the police station in Vukovar immediately, so that their fellow combatant Culej could be interrogated and let out. See: *Večernji list*, 8 Sep. 2013.
[1237] *Večernji list*, 28 Sep. 2013.

in providing a political platform on which the Headquarters could promote its campaign.[1238] The H.D.Z.-H.S.P.A.S. majority in the city assembly managed to change Vukovar's Statute, suspending the Constitutional Law.[1239] However, the Government quickly squashed all of their political initiatives. State Administration Minister Arsen Bauk put the newly passed Vukovar's Statute out of use, as it breached the Constitutional Law.[1240] In the Parliament, veteran leaders and opposition M.P.s were not as successful in advocating the Headquarters campaign, as the governing majority rejected discussing the issue on the Committee for War Veterans.[1241]

Culture wars' tool: pushing for the anti-Cyrillic referendum

However, the Headquarters had another democratic, legal mechanism as its backup plan: a referendum. As the anti-Cyrillic campaign climaxed with the destruction of the first bilingual signs in September, Headquarters' members started speculating about organising a petition for triggering a referendum to secure the status of Vukovar as a 'place of special [homeland] piety'.[1242] As it became clear that the Government would not back down from introducing the Cyrillic in Vukovar, the Headquarters leaders began openly flirting with the prospect of organising such a petition.[1243] To a degree, organising a petition to trigger a referendum was a

[1238] Tportal.hr/Novosti, *'Dvostruki život H.D.Z.-ovca Ivana Penave*' ('The double life of H.D.Z.'s Ivan Penava'), Tportal.hr, 6 Sep. 2013, https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/dvostruki-zivot-H.D.Z.-ovca-ivana-penave-20130906 (11 Oct. 2022); Davorka Blažević, '*Portret tjedna/Ivan Penava (H.D.Z.) gradonačelnik Vukovara: Budete li dobri, dobit ćete ćirilicu…*' ('Portrait of the week/Ivan Penava (H.D.Z.) Mayor of Vukovar: if you behave nice, you'll get the Cyrillic script…'), Neovisni novinarski portal Tris, 22 Aug. 2015, http://tris.com.hr/2015/08/portret-tjedna-ivan-penava-H.D.Z.-gradonacelnik-vukovara-budete-li-dobri-dobit-cete-cirilicu/ (11 Oct. 2022).
[1239] *Hrvatski list*, 7 Nov. 2013.
[1240] *Jutarnji list*, 22 Nov. 2013.
[1241] Zapisnik 13. sjednice Odbora za ratne veteran Hrvatskog sabora, 14 Nov. 2013, H.S., fond Hrvatski sabor, podfond Hrvatski sabor, 7. saziv (2011-5), serija Odbor za ratne veterane, podserija Sjednice, podpodserija 13. sjednica, podpodserija Zapisnik; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 15 Nov. 2013.
[1242] *Večernji list*, 11 Sep. 2013; *Hrvatski list*, 19 Sep. 2013.
[1243] *Jutarnji list*, 22, 29 Oct. 2013.

natural development of Headquarters' anti-Cyrillic campaign. After street actions, low-intensity violence, indirect threats and political negotiations all failed, the legal way, in the form of a referendum, was one of the last options to push for changes that could block the implementation of the Constitutional Law. It also seemed like a more feasible strategy, as the 2010 constitutional amendment removed the threshold of the fifty per cent turnout for the referendum to be binding.[1244] The only threshold the Headquarters needed to fulfil was some 370,000 signatures – ten per cent of the total electorate – for triggering the referendum, to be collected in fifteen days.[1245]

However, the Headquarters' idea to petition to trigger a referendum was not only a logical step forward in promoting their cause, but The Headquarters mimicked the much more successful conservative movement, In the Name of the Family, which was preparing for the referendum on the constitutional definition of marriage, scheduled for 1 December 2013.[1246] Democratic tools – petitions and referendums – became a popular tool of the Croatian conservative civil society at the time. Although these movements aimed at lowering or limiting the rights of minorities – sexual, gender or national – they claimed otherwise, rejecting the accusation of intolerance, discrimination, or bigotry.[1247] Thus, the Headquarters was part of Croatia's *Zeitgeist*.

Four days before the Vukovar Remembrance Day, the Headquarters announced that its referendum question would centre around altering the Constitutional Law on Rights of National Minorities that would limit the equal use of national minorities' language and the script to only those cities and municipalities where national minorities accounted over half of

[1244] Hesová, 'The moment after', p. 287.
[1245] Ibid, p. 292.
[1246] Antonija Petričušić, Mateja Čehulić, Dario Čepo, 'Gaining political power by utilizing opportunity structures: an analysis of the conservative religious-political movement in Croatia' in *Croatian Political Science Review*, liv (2017), no. 4, pp 61-84, at p. 61.
[1247] Ibid, p. 62.

the population – instead of one third. The Headquarters would petition for citizens' votes to hold a referendum on this question.[1248] A day before the Vukovar Remembrance Day, the Headquarters started collecting signatures on 2,000 stands across Croatia, manned by almost 5,000 activists.[1249] The spread of its campaign across Croatia showed that the Headquarters had nationwide logistical support. According to media reports, it was exactly H.D.Z. that provided the logistical support for setting up the Headquarters' referendum campaign. With veteran leader and H.D.Z. M.P. Zvonko Milas served as the middleman. Headquarters leaders met with the party's constitutional experts, who formulated the potential referendum question. H.D.Z. provided local party members and veterans to gather signatures, while the party instructed all branches to support the petitioners and mobilise their voters.[1250] Linked again to H.D.Z., H.V.I.D.R. was important in giving organisational support across Croatia.[1251]

Disrupted myth of national unity: Vukovar and non-Vukovar Croatia

Parallel with the legal battleground, the Headquarters prepared for the symbolic, commemorative victory. Thus, as the Vukovar Remembrance Day was nearing, with its traditional walking ceremony through the city to the memorial cemetery, Headquarters' leaders stressed that there would be a division between 'Vukovar' and 'non-Vukovar' Croatia, as the latter was led by the 'government that is not of the people'.[1252] 'Government that is not of the people' and 'government which governs against the people' were powerful rhetorical tools, seldom used by the H.D.Z. and its President Karamarko – similar to how the

[1248] *Večernji list*, 15 Nov. 2013.
[1249] *Jutarnji list*, 18 Nov. 2013; *Večernji list*, 18 Nov. 2013.
[1250] *Globus*, 22 Nov. 2013.
[1251] Karlović Sabolić, *Zoran Milanović*, p. 243.
[1252] *Večernji list*, 17, 18 Nov. 2013; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 19 Nov. 2013; Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1990. – 2020*, p. 391.

party did it in the early 2000s – and radical individuals within the Catholic Church in Croatia. The right wing used this rhetoric to portray the centre-left Government as ruling against the interest of Croats and downplaying the values created in the 1990s to denationalise the state further.[1253] Thus, the Headquarters argued that such an unnational government, not governing in the people's interest, should be removed using means surpassing traditional democratic tools – elections and referendums. In drawing parallels, the Headquarters compared its struggle to one of the Ukrainian anti-government protesters with the ongoing Revolution of Dignity (Maidan Revolution). For Headquarters, this was a dramatic result of having a 'government that is not of people'.[1254] Later, some Headquarters members would threaten to take down the Government in a 'Ukrainian scenario'.[1255]

Therefore, as widely expected, the Headquarters disrupted the Vukovar Remembrance Day memorial walk. When state officials and foreign diplomats wanted to join the ceremonial walk toward the memorial cemetery, members of the Headquarters, helped by outside groups, blocked their way from entering the walking cohort, having to look as the column passed. Headquarters conducted a highly coordinated operation supported by the local H.D.Z. and other veteran groups. As tens of thousands of participants started coming from all over Croatia and abroad, Headquarters members separated them into 'Vukovar Croatia' and 'non-Vukovar Croatia', which only included state officials and foreign diplomats. From the beginning, Headquarters members were in contact with bus drivers transporting citizens into

[1253] Siniša Pavić, 'Karamarko: Ova nenarodna vlast radi sve da rastoči vrijednosti stvorene 90-tih', Zadarski list, 18 Jun. 2012, https://www.zadarskilist.hr/clanci/18062012/karamarko-ova-nenarodna-vlast-radi-sve-da-rastoci-vrijednosti-sT.V.orene-90-tih (17 Oct. 2022); Nikola Bajto, 'Pesnice desnice', Novosti, 16 Sep. 2013, https://arhiva.portalnovosti.com/2013/09/pesnice-desnice/ (17 Oct. 2022).
[1254] Stožer za obranu hrvatskog Vukovara, 'Stožer za obranu hrvatskog Vukovara: Priopćenje sa tiskovne konferencije', Braniteljski portal, 27 Jan. 2014, https://portal.braniteljski-forum.com/blog/novosti/stozer-za-obranu-hrvatskog-vukovara-priopcenje-sa-tiskovne-konferencije (17 Oct. 2022).
[1255] *Hrvatski list*, 21 Aug. 2014.

the city, directing them to specific locations. Headquarters' members instructed thousands of citizens to follow their directions, acting as parallel organisers of the whole ceremony in a way that many ordinary citizens were not aware of the diversion. As Headquarters members participated in passive resistance, state officials did not want to use their security or police to clear the way, feeling that violence might break out, decided not to join the procession and only laid wreaths at the Ovčara Memorial Site.[1256]

Despite successfully obstructing the state protocol and humiliating the officials, the Headquarters' brilliantly executed operation was a Pyrrhic victory. Vukovar had long served as a unifying factor in Croatia's memory politics, where Croats would pay their respects to the victims regardless of their ideological differences. As one of the most prominent symbols of the Homeland War, Vukovar symbolised Croatia's victimhood in the war.[1257] During the ceremony, both Gotovina and Vukovar legend Borković stressed that there should be no divisions on this day, as Vukovar is the 'sanctity' of the war and should not be the subject of political power games. Their statements coincided with Milanović's statement that Vukovar is not a game for him and that he refuses to 'play'. Josipović thought similarly, saying that protesters showed a lack of piety for the 'victim of Vukovar'.[1258] According to Josipović and politicians across the board, Headquarters used the Vukovar Remembrance Day for day-to-day politics, showing a lack of respect for the victims. Many regular people, intellectuals and experts shared this opinion, adding that it showed a lack of respect for state institutions.[1259]

[1256] *Jutarnji list*, 19, 20 Nov. 2013; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 19, 30 Nov. 2013; *Večernji list*, 19 Nov. 2013; Ivica Kristović and Branimir Bradarić, 'Snimka otkriva tko je blokirao kolonu, Mažar: To nije moj glas!', Večernji.hr, 22 Nov. 2013, https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/snimka-otkriva-tko-je-blokirao-kolonu-mazar-glas-koji-se-cuje-nije-moj-904382 (15 Oct. 2022); Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1990. – 2020*, pp 391-2; Karlović Sabolić, *Zoran Milanović*, p. 242; President Josipović was especially displeased that the Security and Intelligence Agency (Sigurnosno-obavještajna agencija S.O.A.) did not have information on Headquarters' disruption of the Vukovar Remembrance Day protocol. See: Karlović Sabolić, *Zoran Milanović*, p. 242.

[1257] Banjeglav, 'Conflicting memories, competing narratives', pp 12-9.

[1258] *Jutarnji list*, 19 Nov. 2013; *Večernji list*, 19 Nov. 2013.

[1259] *Jutarnji list*, 19, 20 Nov. 2013; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 19 Nov. 2013; *Večernji list*, 19, 20 Nov. 2013.

Some high-ranking H.D.Z. officials, like Vladimir Šeks, criticised the Headquarters' operation.[1260]

Although some veteran leaders and representatives of civilian victims condoned the Headquarters' operation while accusing the government of creating the divisions and not joining the column at its rear, some were very critical of the whole event.[1261] Damir Jašarević, President of the Association of Zagreb's Defenders of Vukovar, bitterly referred to the incident as a 'catastrophe' that 'belittled all the victims of Vukovar'. He said it was an attempt of a 'silent *coup d'état*' in a country divided between a progressive, EU-oriented Croatia and those who want to transform it into a 'fascist and chauvinist state'.[1262] Another Vukovar veteran condemning the Headquarters' act of belittling the city as a symbol was Minister Matić, who had spent nine months in Serbian prison camps. Although Matić supported the general idea of politicians being at the end of the procession, he asked why this was not the case in previous years.[1263]

Using words like 'piety' and 'sanctity' showed how the narration on the Homeland War functioned as a secular religion, with Vukovar as its martyr (city). Although veteran associations and groups contributed the most to building this narrative about the war and Vukovar, this did not serve in their favour when they wanted to humiliate state officials, as it was seen as a dividing factor within the Croatian nation.[1264] The Headquarters leaders realised the plan had somewhat backfired, turning many against them. Lacking an elaborate explanation and justification of the incident, Headquarters chose not to comment due to

[1260] *Jutarnji list*, 19, 23 Nov. 2013.
[1261] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 19, 30 Nov. 2013; *Večernji list*, 20 Nov. 2013.
[1262] *Večernji list*, 20 Nov. 2013; Apparently, some foreign diplomats also saw the incident as an 'attempted coup'. See: Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1990. – 2020*, p. 392.
[1263] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 19 Nov. 2013; *Večernji list*, 19 Nov. 2013.
[1264] Additionally, Tuđman's ideas of pan-Croatian reconciliation were embedded in Croatian society, even among those political options that criticised his rule.

respect for the 'days of piety'.[1265] A few days later, the Headquarters organised a press conference that denied blocking the state officials' passage, claiming they decided to leave the column alone.[1266] The Headquarters accused the 'government that governs against the people' of spreading lies through its 'Serbo[Yugo]slav media'.[1267] As before, the Headquarters tried to pass the blame for the escalation to the Government.

However, even H.D.Z. and H.V.I.D.R. admitted they knew about the two columns and the obstruction of the protocol.[1268] Although he initially supported their operation, Karamarko quickly realised that the unconditional support for Headquarters' actions did not bring political benefits. Therefore, he slightly modified his rhetoric, explaining that the highest officials should have been allowed to move freely during the protocol while still blaming the Government for escalating the situation with the Headquarters.[1269]

The Headquarters tests Croatian democracy

Karamarko also rhetorically distanced himself from the Headquarters' referendum initiative. Although he announced signing the petition to trigger the referendum, Karamarko stated that he could only instruct party members to follow their conscience in deciding if they would support the initiative. Media speculated that his shy support for the Headquarters' initiative

[1265] *Jutarnji list*, 19 Nov. 2013; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 19 Nov. 2013; *Večernji list*, 19 Nov. 2013.
[1266] Nikola Patković, 'Stožer: 'Nitko nije otjeran. Premijer i predsjednik su se uplašili lampiona u Vukovaru pa odustali'', Jutarnji.hr, 21 Nov. 2013, https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/stozer-nitko-nije-otjeran.-premijer-i-predsjednik-su-se-uplasili-lampiona-u-vukovaru-pa-odustali-911994 (16 Oct. 2022).
[1267] I.E.M., 'Vukovarski Stožer poslao bijesno prijeteće pismo', Tportal.hr, 22 Nov. 2013, https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/vukovarski-stozer-poslao-bijesno-prijetece-pismo-20131122 (16 Oct. 2022).
[1268] *Jutarnji list*, 19 Nov. 2013; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 19, 30 Nov. 2013; *Večernji list*, 19 Nov. 2013.
[1269] *Jutarnji list*, 20 Nov. 2013; *Večernji list*, 20 Nov. 2013; A few days later, Karamarko again slightly reworded his position over the scandal by saying that state officials could join the ceremonial column if they wanted. See: Maja Blažević, 'Šef H.D.Z.-a će u nedjelju biti za, a o ćirilici tek trebaju odlučiti', 24sata.hr, 25 Nov. 2013, https://www.24sata.hr/news/a-342663 (16 Oct. 2022).

resulted from fears of drawing the party into far-right waters.[1270] This shift of Karamarko's attitude came at the wrong moment for the Headquarters, as it seemed it would not collect the signatures needed to trigger the referendum. Due to a poorly organised campaign and cold weather – reducing the number of people on the streets – the Headquarters lacked signatures just two days before the end of the campaign.[1271] In Istria, cities and municipalities refused to consent to collect signatures on public grounds, as they did not want to disturb the long-lasting inter-ethnic peaceful coexistence between Croats and Italians in the region.[1272]

However, the Headquarters had other political allies. Bandić secured them a contingent of stands for collecting signatures in Zagreb, which accounts for one-fifth of Croatia's population.[1273] Besides the Headquarters, Bandić was helping the conservative civil society gain public visibility and organising campaigns directed against the Government for months.[1274] Another factor that played an essential role in successfully ending the signature-collecting campaign was its timing. The last day to collect signatures was 1 December 2013, when the marriage referendum occurred nationally. It seems that the Headquarters chose the start of the campaign precisely so that the last day would fall on 1 December, as organisers

[1270] *Jutarnji list*, 29 Nov. 2013; Karamarko signed the Headquarters petition without any media coverage, which was not corresponding to the alleged H.D.Z.'s full support for the campaign. See: *Globus*, 6 Dec. 2013; *Večernji list*, 7 Dec. 2013; Karlović Sabolić, *Zoran Milanović*, p. 244.
[1271] *Jutarnji list*, 30 Nov. 2013; Karlović Sabolić, *Zoran Milanović*, p. 243.
[1272] Patković, 'Stožer 'Nitko nije otjeran'; Hina, 'Stožer: Problemi se mogu riješiti razgovorom', Glas Istre, 23 Nov. 2013, https://glasistrenovine.hr/arhiva-portala/pregled-vijesti/stozer-problemi-se-mogu-rijesiti-razgovorom-430970 (16 Oct. 2022).
[1273] V. Brkulj, 'Bandić o ćirilici: Ja sam već potpisao, ali...', Tportal.hr, 27 Nov. 2013, https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/bandic-o-cirilici-ja-sam-vec-potpisao-ali-20131127/print (16 Oct. 2022); Karlović Sabolić, *Zoran Milanović*, p. 243.
[1274] Bandić was more openly helping In the Name of the Family in organising their referendum campaign. See: Hrvoje Šimičević, 'To je zabranjena donacija po nekoliko propisa u referendumskoj kampanji', Libela.org, 14 Nov. 2013, https://www.libela.org/vijesti/4474-to-je-zabranjena-donacija-po-nekoliko-propisa-u-referendumskoj-kampanji/ (16 Oct. 2013); H-alter, 'Bandić plaća režije 'U ime obitelji'', Libela.org, 11 Feb. 2014, https://www.libela.org/vijesti/4782-bandic-placa-rezije-u-ime-obitelji/ (16 Oct. 2013); Željko Petrušić, 'Afera štandovi: Milan Bandić i još dvoje suoptuženika oslobođeni', Jutarnji list, 19 Oct. 2018, https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/crna-kronika/afera-standovi-milan-bandic-i-jos-dvoje-suoptuzenika-oslobodeni-7959220 (16 Oct. 2022).

believed it would harvest conservative voters heading to the polls for the marriage referendum.[1275]

Another strong ally was the Catholic Church, already massively engaged over the marriage referendum, helping the Headquarters by permitting their activists to collect signatures during the Sunday masses on 1 December.[1276] The Archdiocese of Zagreb issued an official memo to all the churches, chapels, religious centres and other Church-owned venues to allow the Headquarters to collect signatures throughout the campaign.[1277] It demonstrated the new prominent place of the Catholic Church in the veteran movement, with their relationship functioning the same way as the one with the H.D.Z. By putting their stands for collecting signatures near the voting polls, Headquarters gathered over 650,000 signatures – the bulk in Zagreb and Zagreb County, where it had the crucial Bandić's and Church's support.[1278] Headquarters' race for signatures also contributed to the success of the referendum on marriage, gathering conservative votes.[1279] Thus, while there has been strong cooperation between veteran associations and the Church since the 1990s, this relationship brought mutual benefits, aligning the veteran movement even more with conservative forces in Croatian society.

Despite gathering more signatures than it needed, it was apparent that such a referendum would not take place. Milanović was determined not to allow such a referendum, refusing to re-direct the referendum initiative to the Constitutional Court for a constitutional review, claiming it was a blatant 'open discrimination' against national minorities.[1280] President Josipović and other political leaders joined in, claiming that the referendum question was

[1275] *Globus*, 22 Nov. 2013.
[1276] *Jutarnji list*, 3 Dec. 2013.
[1277] *Jutarnji list*, 7 Dec. 2013.
[1278] In recounting collected signatures, State Administration Ministry accounted for 576,000 votes. See: Karlović Sabolić, *Zoran Milanović*, pp 243-4.
[1279] Glaurdić and Vuković, 'Proxy politics', pp 807, 814, 819.
[1280] *Jutarnji list*, 3 Dec. 2013; Karlović Sabolić, *Zoran Milanović*, pp 244-5.

unconstitutional.[1281] Even H.D.Z. politically abandoned them by now, with both Šeks – seen as the legal expert behind the whole referendum initiative – and Karamarko claiming that such a referendum could not take place as it limits national minority rights.[1282] As he claimed before, Karamarko emphasised that the Government breached Constitutional Law by not implementing minority rights concerning the majority – Croats – and thus provoked the referendum initiative.[1283] Karamarko now found the referendum 'absolutely useless', claiming he is not for lowering the rights of national minorities, as it breaches standards Croatia reached upon entering the E.U. – a sign of possible pressure coming from the European People's Party, whose member H.D.Z. was.[1284] Therefore, Karamarko had, at this point, assumed the role of a negotiator and called both the Government and Headquarters to give up on their plans and meet halfway – the Government would not force the introduction of bilingual signs in Vukovar. At the same time, the referendum would not take place.[1285]

It looked like the Headquarters accepted the strong probability that the referendum would not occur, as many saw the referendum question as profoundly unconstitutional. The Headquarters was pleased with the number of citizens who supported their initiative and practically defied the Government's policy on bilingual signs in Vukovar, sending a strong message. It also publicly denounced using only democratic instruments and civic disobedience in battling the Government over the bilingual signs in Vukovar, claiming it would not give up.[1286] Finally, fifteen days after ending the signature-gathering campaign, the

[1281] *Jutarnji list*, 3 Dec. 2013; *Večernji list*, 3, 7 Dec. 2013; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 8 Dec. 2013,
[1282] *Jutarnji list*, 3 Dec. 2013; *Globus*, 6 Dec. 2013; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 7 Dec. 2013; *Večernji list*, 7 Dec. 2013; Such claims from H.D.Z.'s legal experts were heard even before the end of the signature-collecting campaign. See: *Jutarnji list*, 29 Nov. 2013; *Globus*, 6 Dec. 2013.
[1283] *Večernji list*, 7 Dec. 2013.
[1284] *Jutarnji list*, 8 Dec. 2013; Karlović Sabolić, *Zoran Milanović*, pp 244-5.
[1285] *Večernji list*, 7 Dec. 2013.
[1286] *Jutarnji list*, 3, 17 Dec. 2013; *Večernji list*, 3, 7, 8, 17 Dec. 2013.

Headquarters turned over 680,000 signatures – by their account – for holding a referendum to the Parliament.[1287]

Although the authorities initially ignored the petition, after four months, the State Administration Ministry started counting the signatures to establish if the threshold for triggering the referendum – ten per cent of the electoral body – was met.[1288] In August 2014, reacting upon an inquiry for a constitutional review of the petition from the Parliament, the Constitutional Court entirely rejected the Headquarters' referendum question as it was 'unconstitutional', nullifying the Vukovar Statute and giving its city council a year to pass a new one. However, it gave the Government one year to amend the existing Law on the Official Use of National Minorities' Language and Script so that it precisely described sanctions for those local units that do not fulfil the obligations set out by the Law.[1289] The Court also acknowledged the specificity of Vukovar's wartime experience and issued that minority rights are introduced through a dialogue on the local level. Therefore, it allowed the Vukovar City Council to decide if it could exclude introducing bilingual signs in certain parts of the city, isolated only to neighbourhoods where Serbs form a majority. The Court also established that before the amendment to the Law on the Official Use of National Minorities' Language and Script, the Government should not introduce bilingual signs by force.[1290]

Although initially expressing dissatisfaction and announcing to bring the case before the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, the Headquarters could be satisfied in the long run.[1291] The Court stopped the Government's campaign of introducing bilingual signs, which was the primary goal of the Headquarters. Encouraged by this verdict, in September

[1287] *Jutarnji list*, 17 Dec. 2013; *Večernji list*, 17 Dec. 2013
[1288] *Večernji list*, 25 Apr. 2014.
[1289] *Jutarnji list*, 13 Aug. 2014; *Večernji list*, 13 Aug. 2014.
[1290] *Jutarnji list*, 13 Aug. 2014; *Večernji list*, 13, 19 Aug. 2014; Karlović Sabolić, *Zoran Milanović*, p. 245.
[1291] *Večernji list*, 13 Aug. 2014; *Hrvatski tjednik*, 21 Aug. 2014.

2014, Headquarters members took down the remaining bilingual signs, claiming that they were implementing the Court's decision. In cooperation with H.D.Z.'s Penava, the new Mayor of Vukovar – elected on snap elections in June 2014 – removed bilingual plaques and sent them to different ministries in Zagreb. Although the police did interrogate the Headquarters members who pulled down the plaques, they did not try to stop them, like a year before.[1292] Finally, in August 2015, as the last consequence of the Court's decision on the bilingual signs, the Vukovar City Council – where now H.D.Z. and right-wing parties had the majority – amended the city's Statute, removing the article allowing the introduction of bilingual signs.[1293]

Conclusion

In the aftermath of the final I.C.T.Y.'s verdict against generals Gotovina and Markač in November 2012, what many dubbed as the final symbolic battle of the Homeland War, the one over its memory, seemed to have been won. Although the verdict testified to massive crimes committed during and after the 1995 Operation Storm, it did not confirm the counter-narrative about Croatian officials' plan to eliminate the domestic Serb population. Consequently, the debates over Croatia's cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. stopped, as this was no longer a topic in the context of the country's European path, sealed with the signing of the concession agreement in December 2011, a successful national referendum on joining the

[1292] *Večernji list*, 24 Sep. 2014; *Hrvatski tjednik*, 25 Sep. 2014; Karlović Sabolić, *Zoran Milanović*, p. 246.
[1293] Hina, 'Vijeće na burnoj sjednici izmijenilo statut, ukinulo ćirilicu u Vukovaru', Telegram, 17 Aug. 2015, https://www.telegram.hr/politika-kriminal/gradsko-vijece-nakon-burne-sjednice-odlucilo-ukinuti-table-na-cirilici-u-vukovaru/ (18 Oct. 2022).

E.U. in February 2012 and ratifications of the contract in parliaments of all twenty-seven member states before 1 July 2013, when Croatia officially joined the Union.[1294]

Although it may have seemed that the discussion over history and division between different camps in society would be over with achieving Croatia's crucial strategic goals – joining the E.U. and successfully defending the generals – it opened new divides as there was no longer a common goal. In the 2004-11 period, there was no significant parliamentary opposition to Croatia's joining the E.U. Consequently, with some limitations and variations to state cooperation with the I.C.T.Y., nothing brought different camps together anymore. It created a 'crack' filled with conflicts over identity issues, symbols and values, initiated by other conservative groups: parties, N.G.O.s, civic initiatives, Catholic Church and veteran associations. These culture wars were a reaction to the perceived liberalisation of society from these conservative forces, putting these issues on the agenda to prevent specific policy changes or tackle existing ones. Authoritarian ethnonational and exclusionary tendencies now had 'free hands' to pursue their ideas without the constraint of foreign actors.[1295]

Therefore, the anti-Cyrillic campaign was, to an extent, a culture war, in its essence, fought over symbols and values. Cyrillic script represented a symbol of the Serb minority, or in the rhetoric of the Headquarters, 'the aggressor'. Although the Headquarters and their supporters claimed that they opposed the introduction of bilingual signs in Vukovar only because the city had experienced massive pain and destruction in 1991, they effectively started the 'othering' process, transforming the Serb minority into an aggressor. The Headquarters emanated ethnonational sentiments that tried to suppress the identity of the Serb minority in an attempt to achieve total ethnic homogeneity. Therefore, the Headquarters' activities contributed to nationwide inter-ethnic tensions and fanning of anti-Serb sentiment, preventing

[1294] Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1990.* – 2020, pp 373-4.
[1295] Jović, *Rat i mit*, p. 29.

reconciliation and healing of wounds – which it claimed were reopened by those implementing the bilingual signs – on micro and macro levels. Headquarters and other veteran associations and groups often used extremist rhetoric and hate speech. Hate speech against Serbs surged nationwide in late 2013 when the H.D.Z. realised that fanning anti-Serb sentiment helped boost the party's image.[1296] The anti-Cyrillic campaign permanently anchored the veteran movement on the right, becoming a part of a united conservative civil society.

Like many times before, the Headquarters did take part, or at least was used by H.D.Z. and other right-wing parties for their proxy conflict with the Government. The Headquarters often mimicked Karamarko's rhetoric and sided with H.D.Z., even giving them electoral support. Therefore, Karamarko's and H.D.Z.'s role in the anti-Cyrillic campaign was visible. However, as the following Chapter will demonstrate even better, Karamarko often aligned H.D.Z. with demands from different radical groups – anti-L.G.B.T. and veteran groups. His rhetoric sometimes incited various civic campaigns targeting minorities, but at other times, it only mirrored them. Karamarko and H.D.Z. used these culture wars to battle the Government on a battlefield in which they held a moral high ground –the Homeland War memory. As they successfully labelled centre-left parties, through two decades of propaganda and rhetoric, as anti-Croatian, this advantage was crucial among some radicalised voters searching for scapegoats. As it 'takes two to tango', Milanović's Government also had its blame as it did not try to open a fair public debate before announcing the policy, turning everything into an 'us vs them' situation. It also benefited the Government to enter such conflicts to avoid

[1296] Tamara Opacic, 'Selective amnesia: Croatia's Holocaust deniers', Balkan Insight, 24 Nov. 2017, https://balkaninsight.com/2017/11/24/selective-amnesia-croatia-s-holocaust-deniers-11-16-2017/ (18 Oct. 2022).

discussing the failing economy. In this sense, political elites used veterans and their activities as a vehicle for other, primarily political, conflicts.

Chapter 6

The final battle over the Homeland War narrative (2014-5)

Introduction

The new veteran mobilisation came in a similar social and political context as the anti-Cyrillic campaign: the S.D.P.-led Government struggled to tackle the failing economy, protracted culture wars and ongoing backlash of the conservative civil society, directly or indirectly supported by the H.D.Z. and the Catholic Church. In late 2013 and early 2014, to cover the budget deficit, the Government envisioned cutting pensions earned through specific legislation relating to M.P.s. government and military officials, Supreme and Constitutional Court judges and disabled veterans.[1297] Therefore, from 1 January 2014, the new law introduced a ten per cent cut on the highest veteran pensions, excluding fully disabled veterans.[1298] To tackle potential benefits cuts, veteran associations and leaders once again mobilised themselves the most in fighting the regime over symbolism to prove their position in society. The battle over the Homeland War narrative and memory drew them closer to H.D.Z. and Karamarko, who made these mnemonic battles as part of its political programme during the 2013-5 period.

H.D.Z.'s elections campaign and Karamarko's rhetoric leaned heavily on the memory of the Homeland War and ultra-conservativism marred by witch hunts against the 'Communists' and the 'Reds'. His rhetorical fixation on fighting the 'red devils' – rhetoric borrowed from Tuđman – was formulated in Karamarko's interviews, what media dubbed as his 'anti-Communist manifesto'. Although he slightly changed ideas over time – sometimes rhetorically de-escalating his previous statements – Karamarko promoted a societal change of

[1297] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 11, 12 Dec. 2013.
[1298] *Večernji list*, 24 Feb. 2014.

an alleged Communist mindset in Croatia. Thus, he proposed the lustration of old cadres and those 'who never wanted Croatia' – usually focussing on the Government, S.D.P., left-wing and liberal intelligentsia and other political opponents.[1299] Therefore, on 28 April 2014, Karamarko officially started H.D.Z.'s campaign for the European elections in Vukovar, aiming to gather local dissent with the Government over introducing the bilingual signs. There, in the company of the Headquarters, Karamarko announced the 'dismantling' of the 'government that is not of people', the government that was 'Yugonostalgic', on the upcoming elections.[1300]

His proclaimed unnuanced recollection of the Homeland War and Croatia's contemporary history, which Karamarko referred to as 'the truth' to be promoted in history textbooks, was compatible with the ideas of some conservative-leaning veteran leaders.[1301] This ideological and pragmatic axis soon became transparent. Therefore, on 2 May 2014, while commemorating the 1991 Borovo massacre, Karamarko joined the special police veterans – led by Culej and Klemm – in boycotting the state protocol and turning the commemoration into a para-political event, which some veteran leaders saw as distasteful.[1302] On 4 May, Karamarko organised a restorative assembly of the Community of Defenders of H.D.Z. 'Gojko Šušak', gathering party members, veteran leaders, and retired generals amid the elections campaign. There, Karamarko warned that everyone would be able to 'think what they want in their own house' but that in the public sphere, people would have to 'respect values on which the Croatian state was founded': Homeland War, veterans, Tuđman's

[1299] *Večernji list*, 19 Jul. 2014; *Globus*, 22 May 2015.
[1300] *Jutarnji list*, 29 Apr. 2014; Yugonostalgia is a form of nostalgia, or longing, for socialist Yugoslavia in the post-Yugoslav states. See: Maja Maksimović, 'Unattainable past, unsatisfying present - Yugonostalgia: an omen of a better future?' in *Nationalities Papers*, xlv (2017), no. 6, pp 1066-81.
[1301] Jović, *Rat i mit*, p. 174.
[1302] *Jutarnji list*, 3, 4 May 2014.

political doctrine and Šušak's 'great deed'.[1303] All this resonated through the political sphere, media, society, and veterans.

The chapter will present how different conservative-leaning veteran associations and groups, motivated or supported by Karamarko's rhetoric, decided to wage one last battle over the Homeland War narrative, pinning them against the Government. Like before, contentious veteran politics were fought over symbols, concrete concessions, and material benefits. In this period, veterans started the longest sit-in protest in front of the War Veterans Ministry in Zagreb, which became a quintessential example of veteran protest at the intersection of Croatia's contemporary nationalism amid a conservative climate in society, struggle for improving welfare and political proxy conflict re-affirming the client-patron relationship between veteran associations and H.D.Z.

Building the new veteran protest movement

In May 2014, Klemm's and Vučemilović Šimunović's associations organised a national-level convention in the largest concert hall in Zagreb. Despite inviting the whole political establishment, veteran leaders announced the convention as an opportunity to confront the political elites who – despite numerous individual veterans in the Parliament and Government – do not represent them. In ensuring the long-term respect and symbolic position of the wartime legacy in Croatian society, the organisers demanded introducing the Homeland War in the Constitution as the foundation of contemporary Croatia.[1304]

[1303] Zdenko Duka, 'Karamarko: Svi će morati poštivati doktrinu dr. Tuđmana i djelo Šuška', Novi list, 4 May 2014, https://www.novilist.hr/novosti/hrvatska/karamarko-svi-ce-morati-postivati-doktrinu-dr-tudmana-i-djelo-suska/ (26 Oct. 2022).
[1304] *Večernji list*, 13 May 2014.

Ante Deur – the new Z.U.V.H.G.P. President – rhetorically confronted the Government at the convention. In the heated atmosphere of a packed Vatroslav Lisinski Concert Hall, protesters summed up all the veteran and populist themes and tropes that veteran associations used against different governments. The organisers accused the Government and politicians of ruining the state, impoverishing the people, wholesaling the national property, 'stigmatising' veterans and reducing their rights. Deur, as the main speaker, emphasised that the veterans would not tolerate such behaviour anymore, setting up numerous demands: the prosecution of war crimes committed against Croats, abolishing general amnesty for Serb rebels, promotion of Vukovar as a 'place of special [homeland] piety', war reparations from Serbia, further enforcing of the Homeland War into the education system and abolishing of all laws passed by the current government. One of the main speakers at the convention was Đuro Glogoški, a veteran tied to a wheelchair and the President of the Association of 100 % Croatian Disabled War Veterans from the First Tier (*Udruga 100%-tnih hrvatskih ratnih vojnih invalida I. skupine*). In an emotional speech applauded by the gathered veterans, Glogoški accused the government of belittling them, diminishing their rights, and calling them a 'mob' and 'fascists'. Directly calling out Minister Matić and the veteran register he made public, Glogoški accused the Government of introducing 'fake defenders', a fabricated ideological stick to hit veterans with, discrediting and downplaying their war merits.[1305]

At the convention, all the speakers promoted veteran unity against the political elites, evocating thousands killed during the war that had 'Croatia' as their only political option – once again emulating the trope of veteran identity as a sort of umbrella identity transcending all political particularities.[1306] However, behind the promoted unity, the whole event had a

[1305] *Jutarnji list*, 17 May 2014; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 17 May 2014; *Večernji list*, 17 May 2014; *Hrvatski tjednik*, 22 May 2014; URV 2. GBR, 'Izvješće s Prve konvencije hrvatskih branitelja', Udruga ratnih veterana 2. gardijske brigade Gromovi, 17 May 2014, https://www.udruga2gbr-gromovi.hr/izvjesce-s-prve-konvencije-hrvatskih-branitelja/ (22 Oct. 2022).
[1306] *Hrvatski list*, 22 May 2014; URV 2. GBR, 'Izvješće s Prve konvencije hrvatskih branitelja'.

strong anti-government and, more importantly, conservative overtone as the audience warmly greeted some non-veteran right-wing public figures. While demanding that the youth is brought up according to 'traditional values and worldviews of the Croatian people', Deur stressed that veterans would 'defend the value of family as the foundation and pillar of every society'. Upon stating this, Deur greeted Željka Markić, President of In the Name of the Family, who was present in the audience. As a gesture of the axis between conservative groups, Markić received massive applause from gathered veterans.[1307] Croatian professional football player Josip Šimunić also received considerable applause, followed by chants '*Za dom spremni*' ('For Home[land] ready') – Ustaša chant for which the player was suspended for ten matches, missing the 2014 World Cup. Some other right-wing figures, like singer Perković Thompson, received applause, while many conservative-leaning veteran leaders, retired generals, and leaders of the Headquarters gathered. Alongside religious representatives, Karamarko and Bandić were also present at the convention. While the audience did not express any animosity toward those politicians, the very notion of Minister Matić's name, as he was sitting in the first row, attracted massive boos and insults.[1308] Therefore, the carriers of the new veteran contentious period were deeply embedded in conservative circles in Croatia.

This concentration of conservative leaders was a result of multiple factors. Deur, one of the convention's main organisers, was already close to H.D.Z.[1309] The convention was organised

[1307] In 2020, while replying he is against abortion, Deur stated that he had taken parti in many 'pro-life' campaigns organised by In the Name of the Family. See: Renata Rašović, 'Kao otac osmero djece bit ću glas višečlanih obitelji u Saboru', Večernji list, 2 Jul. 2020, https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/kao-otac-osmero-djece-bit-cu-glas-viseclanih-obitelji-u-saboru-1414096 (23 Oct. 2022).
[1308] *Jutarnji list*, 17 May 2014; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 17 May 2014; *Večernji list*, 17 May 2014; *Hrvatski tjednik*, 22 May 2014; URV 2. GBR, 'Izvješće s Prve konvencije hrvatskih branitelja'.
[1309] According to some sources, Deur was a member of the H.D.Z. since 2014. See: Dolenec, 'A Soldier's State?', p. 71; In 2020, Deur was elected to the Parliament as an H.D.Z. member. See: I.Ba./Hina, 'Deur: Trebamo pokazati empatiju za Ukrajinu', Tportal.hr, 20 Oct. 2022, https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/deur-trebamo-pokazati-empatiju-za-ukrajinu-20221020 (23 Oct. 2022).

only nine days before the elections for the European Parliament, and Karamarko came with veteran leader Ivica Tolić as H.D.Z.'s candidate for election, trying to boost his image among the veterans.[1310] For weeks, H.D.Z. promoted Tolić as the candidate of all veteran associations for the European Parliament, despite some mainstream associations and prominent veteran leaders claiming they never supported his candidacy.[1311] Karamarko decided to put Tolić on the list to prevent veteran associations from placing a candidate of their own, who would scatter the votes as he was pursuing defeating the S.D.P. in the European elections. In coordination with H.D.Z.'s Milijan Brkić, Norac's friend and Karamarko's former colleague from police and close associate, the party chose Tolić, the Vice-President of Z.U.V.H.G.P.[1312] Even if the Convention was not a part of H.D.Z.'s unofficial electoral campaign, it did help the party's cause, gathering right-wing supporters and galvanising them.

Besides H.D.Z.'s political use, the convention successfully conveyed the antigovernmental message, emphasising the symbolic reasons for the creeping new veteran uprising. Thus, besides the partial pension cuts and revisions of the disability statuses, Glogoški warned that veterans would not allow the Government's characterisation of the Homeland War as a 'civil war', thus 'equalising the victim and aggressor'.[1313] The decades-long trope of 'equalising the victim and aggressor' was again used to counter the Government, as veteran associations expressed their wish to create more than just veteran politics. At the convention, veterans warned they would not peacefully observe how the Government acts.[1314] In their view, most politicians running the country never wanted an independent Croatia so that the veterans

[1310] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 17 May 2014.
[1311] *Večernji list*, 4 Apr., 14 May 2014; *Jutarnji list*, 4 May 2014; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 16, 17 May 2014.
[1312] Karlović Sabolić, *Zoran Milanović*, p. 366.
[1313] *Hrvatski tjednik*, 22 May 2014.
[1314] *Večernji list*, 31 Jul. 2014.

would oppose these 'traitors' and their 'unnatural political decisions and laws'.[1315] The convention now put forward the new veteran informal leadership built around Klemm, Deur, Vučemilović Šimunović, Ljubičić, Glogoški and their respective associations, who now openly defied the Government, using the same platform as the proponents of the anti-Cyrillic campaign.

The growing tense atmosphere and cultural wars over war symbolism spilt from the anti-Cyrillic campaign into 2014. Veteran and right-wing groups were mobilised over these issues, while H.D.Z. tried to benefit from the anti-governmental climate as much as possible, as the party propelled its member Kolinda Grabar Kitarović – former Minister of Foreign and European Affairs in Sanader's Government – as the main counter-candidate to Josipović in presidential elections set for December 2014.[1316] Once again, topics regarding the war's legacy or questioning the conflict's dominant narrative became the media's focus and could serve as a basis for discrediting individuals or groups.[1317] All these actors were waiting to open a new front with the authorities over wartime symbolism, an opportunity that soon presented itself.

The birth of the 'tent-men'

Speaking at a small conference gathering associations of civilian war victims in Vukovar on 26 September 2014, Bojan Glavašević rhetorically asked why there is such a high number of registered P.T.S.D. cases among Croatian veterans – the winning army – while there are no P.T.S.D. cases among former members of Serb units, who lost the war.[1318] Glavašević's

[1315] *Globus*, 25 Jul., 1 Aug. 2014.
[1316] *Jutarnji list*, 2 Aug. 2014; *Večernji list*, 6 Aug. 2014.
[1317] *Večernji list*, 2, 3 Oct. 2014.
[1318] Karlović Sabolić, *Zoran Milanović*, p. 360, Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1990. – 2020*, p. 392.

comment opened speculations that he referred to all those veterans who had attained a P.T.S.D. diagnosis through corruption.[1319] Although widely known as the son of a famous Croatian reporter, Siniša Glavašević executed by Serb paramilitaries upon the fall of Vukovar in 1991, veterans and conservatives targeted Glavašević for a while, as he did not support the anti-Cyrillic campaign. During the 2013 Vukovar Remembrance Day, Glavašević was also very critical of the Headquarters and other veteran groups that tried to prevent him from paying respects to his killed father. Additional points of contestation were his reconciliatory rhetoric and his prior post at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, where he was a research assistant for Milorad Pupovac, the political leader of the Serb national minority and seen as Croatia's internal enemy by the right-wing.[1320]

On 1 October 2014, as the President of the parliamentary Committee for War Veterans, Đakić asked for Glavašević's formal apology for saying that the state should recognise P.T.S.D. among 'enemy soldiers' or that he resign from the post.[1321] Two days later, Glogoški demanded Glavašević's resignation as he 'equalised the aggressor and the victim' and offended 'not only Croatian defenders but also all that is Croatian'.[1322] Tihomir Trešćec, leading the main national association gathering Croatian veterans treated for P.T.S.D., said that the Minister's Assistant had no respect for the veterans' sacrifice during the war and indeed 'equalised the victim and aggressor'. For him, state help treating P.T.S.D. among Serb soldiers would be equivalent to offering similar support to Nazi soldiers and concentration camp guards after World War II.[1323]

[1319] Ivan Kegelj, 'Branitelj koji je razotkrio Bandića: Priču o lažnim PTSP dijagnozama moraju otvoriti sami branitelji!', Lupiga, 13 Nov. 2014, https://lupiga.com/vijesti/tomislav-jelic-covjek-koji-je-razotkrio-milana-bandica?page=2 (31 Oct. 2022).
[1320] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 16 Apr. 2013.
[1321] Zapisnik 20. sjednice Odbora za ratne veterane Hrvatskoga Sabora, 1 Oct. 2014, H.S., fond Hrvatski sabor, podfond Hrvatski sabor, 7. saziv (2011-5), serija Odbor za ratne veterane, podserija Sjednice, podpodserija 20. sjednica, podpodserija Zapisnik.
[1322] *Večernji list*, 4 Oct. 2014.
[1323] *Večernji list*, 7 Oct. 2014.

However, Minister Matić saw Glavašević as one of his closest associates and did not want to succumb to pressure. Despite repeated requests to remove Glavašević – who avoided the media – Matić rejected this possibility by putting the whole scandal into the context of the presidential elections while claiming that the Assistant referred to Serb civilian war victims, not soldiers.[1324] Matić was not alone in his decision to protect Glavašević, as Milanović supported him, putting the veteran reactions in the same pre-election context.[1325]

Finally, on 20 October 2014, a group of 500 disabled veterans gathered in front of the Veterans Ministry in Zagreb, claiming they felt 'humiliated and forgotten'. A smaller group of veterans, led by Glogoški, went into the Ministry to meet with Matić. At the meeting, veterans complained about Glavašević but also urged for a resolution of their pensions and treatment of veterans in general. According to Glogoški, Matić gave 'only promises and not solutions' at the meeting, claiming no budget could cover all veterans' demands. After allegedly being kicked out from the meeting and threatened by police, the veterans announced that they demanded the resignations of Matić and his close associates because they 'tolerated the disrespect for the dignity' of veterans. Glogoški emphasised that Matić and his associates did nothing for the veterans, dubbing the Ministry as the 'Ministry of Partisans, Chetniks, Ustaša, and gendarmery [reference to gendarmery of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia]' in the words of the growing Croatian right-wing radicalism. Matić was condemned as part of the self-imposed elite ruling Croatia, while veterans were the ones who 'created the Croatian state and not those who robbed it or those that enabled others to rob it'. The protesters vowed to stay there until these resignations, quickly setting up campfires and tents and earning the nickname 'the tent men' (*šatoraši*). Besides Glogoški's association, later in the day,

[1324] *Večernji list*, 7, 18 Oct. 2014.
[1325] Karlović Sabolić, *Zoran Milanović*, p. 361.

associations led by Klemm, Ljubičić, Deur, and Trešćec joined in, reaffirming the new veteran axis mobilised against the Government.[1326]

Protesters' demands: from dignity over constitutional status to pensions

Protesters complained about the 'equalisation of the aggressor and defenders' and loss of dignity, as everyone was 'kicking defenders around'.[1327] Protesters criticised the Government for not recognising the Homeland War and veterans as the foundation of the state.[1328] In their narration, while the Government cut veteran rights and did not respect the Homeland War's dignity, Serb rebels received money from the state budget.[1329] The politicians were working on subjugating Croats, erasing every memory of the war by forcing 'Yugoslav' interpretations that it was a 'civil' conflict.[1330] While they saw themselves as pillars of the Croatian state, veterans complained about being pushed at society's margins.[1331]

Besides the resignation of Matić and his associates, protesters soon issued additional demands that were only loosely or not at all tied with Glavašević's questioning of the dominant narrative of the war or the Ministry's treatment of veterans. Some protest leaders, like Klemm, later confessed that protesters initially did not know what they wanted.[1332] In the din of the first days of the protest, some veterans complained about the announced separation

[1326] Direktno.hr, 'Branitelji jedinsT.V.eni: Premijeru, smijenite ministra Freda Matića!', Direktno, 20 Oct. 2014, https://direktno.hr/direkt/branitelji-jedinsT.V.eni-premijeru-smijenite-ministra-freda-matica-1765/ (29 Oct. 2022); Lana Suša, 'Branitelji su blokirali Savsku ulicu, traže ostavku ministra', 24sata, 20 Oct. 2014, https://www.24sata.hr/news/branitelji-su-blokirali-savsku-ulicu-traze-ostavku-ministra-389752 (29 Oct. 2022); *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 21 Oct. 2014; *Večernji list*, 21 Oct. 2014.
[1327] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 22, 28 Oct. 2014.
[1328] *Večernji list*, 28 Oct. 2014.
[1329] *Nacional*, 17 Mar. 2015.
[1330] Tv Loki, Tribina o prosvjedu branitelja: govor Josip Klemm, YouTube, 13 Jan. 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F3yrXkPp6ac&ab_channel=TvLoki (29 Oct. 2022).
[1331] Plava vinkovacka, 'Aktualno 29.10.2014. Prosvjed branitelja', YouTube, 29 Oct. 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cpGJDPQX0A0&ab_channel=Plavavinkovacka (29 Oct. 2022).
[1332] *Nacional*, 17 Mar. 2015.

of paying out pensions in two parts: one related to veteran rights and the other tied to a person's pay-out for pension security as a working individual. Veterans with little or no working experience feared this would lower their pensions.[1333] Some veteran leaders who were not actively involved in the protest, like U.H.V.D.R.'s President Đuro Dečak, disagreed with the protesters concerning opposition to the pension reform as he saw it as unjust to regular workers who worked before the war.[1334]

The media formulated the announced pension reform as the real reason for the protest, not Glavašević's statement.[1335] Among other things, protesters complained about pensions and disability fees for disabled veterans who fought in H.V.O. units, the army of the Bosnian Croats.[1336] Others claimed that the state did not respect laws, cutting them short of their legally based benefits, especially medical treatment for disabled veterans, while the Ministry claimed they did not have the money for them.[1337] Other problems included provision fees transferred from the Veterans Ministry's competence to the Ministry of Social Policy and Youth, classified as social welfare, which offended veterans.[1338] Interestingly, although fully disabled veterans spearheaded the protest by complaining about the ill-treatment of the state before the protest associations representing veterans with a lower disability or no disability at all complained, they were the ignored group.[1339]

[1333] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 22 Oct. 2014; *Večernji list*, 28 Oct. 2014.
[1334] Zaključci sa sastanka Središnjeg odbora U.D.V.D.R.R.H., 22 Dec. 2014, U.H.V.D.R., registrator Središnji odbor; Association Defenders of Croatia even filed a complaint to the Constitutional Court over the issue. See: Unnamed (Correspondence from the Association Defenders of Croatia to the President of the Constitutional Court Jasna Omejec), 28 Apr. 2014, U.P.R.H., org. jed. 71-02-07 Posebni savjetnik predsjednika Republike Hrvatske za branitelje, kl. oz. 012-01/14-01/06, ur. br. 363-14-01.
[1335] *Večernji list*, 26 Oct. 2014.
[1336] *Nacional*, 17 Mar. 2015.
[1337] *Večernji list*, 22, 26 Oct. 2014.
[1338] *Nacional*, 17 Mar. 2015.
[1339] Otvoreno pismo predsjedniku Republike Hrvatske, predsjedniku Vlade Republike, predsjedniku Sabota Republike Hrvatske i ministru hrvatskih branitelja, 30 Sep. 2013, U.P.R.H., org. jed. 71-02-07 Posebni savjetnik predsjednika Republike Hrvatske za branitelje, kl. oz. 050-02/13-07/89, ur. br. 363-13-01.

In November 2014, associations supporting the protest put forward a document which specified reasons for the protest, triggered by the 'violation of dignity' of the Homeland War and veterans personified by Glavašević's statement and enhanced by Matić's support. In the document, associations put forward all the issues mentioned above while adding several amendments to the Law on Veterans, which lowered veterans' rights and quality of life. The document's tone described veterans as a stigmatised group in society, persecuted by the media and register of veterans, as they were derogatorily called 'political' and 'militant' groups or 'H.D.Z.'s military wing' by politicians from the governing majority. Protesters compared their ill-treatment with groups allegedly protected by the state: Serb rebels, Partisan and J.N.A. veterans, war profiteers and deserters.[1340] The document also bonded other recent veteran initiatives: advocacy for Croatian veteran Veljko Marić, who was serving a prison term in Serbia for war crimes at the time, and implementing bilingual signs in Vukovar. Besides the resignations, protesters wanted a public debate on the Law on Veterans, advocating the 2004 version and passing constitutional law on veterans. On top of technical and legal demands, the association aimed to proscribe how things should be called or categorised. Therefore, they demanded that the Homeland War be referred to as 'liberating and defensive' in all official documents. Furthermore, protesters demanded that Croatia act more actively in its genocide lawsuit against Serbia before the International Court of Justice and tried to seek reparations from Serbia for war damages. According to them, Croatia should ban all associations that do not refer to the Homeland War as 'aggression' but use the term

[1340] Some veteran associations rejected comparisons between them and 'Communist Partisans'. See: Otvoreno pismo predsjedniku RH, 10 Jul. 2012, U.P.R.H., org. jed. 71-02-07 Posebni savjetnik predsjednika Republike Hrvatske za branitelje, kl. oz. 560-01/12-01/18, ur. br. 363-12-01; Other veteran associations, in region where Partisan legacy was strong and present like in Istria, cooperated with Partisan veterans. See: Unnamed (Proclamation of the Alliance of Associations of Anti-Fascist Fighter of Istria County and U.H.V.D.R. of Istria County), 5 Oct. 2000, H.D.A., fond H.R.-H.D.A.-2017.3 Hrvatski sabor, Županijski dom, kutija 161.

'armed conflict' instead, downplaying 'the bestial aggression' and contributing to 'the equalisation of the aggressor and victim'.[1341]

The document showed how veteran associations and groups combined symbolically with material demands, often in the background of battles over symbols. It showed their ambition of modelling the Croatian state and society upon their visions anchored into the culture of victory. With this document, veterans re-affirmed all the typical tropes of Croatia's right wing, expressing strong conservativism, anti-Yugoslav, anti-Communist, and anti-Serb sentiments. Additionally, it showed the continuity of this moment with the anti-Cyrillic campaign. At the same time, some of the years-long demands, such as transforming the Law on Defenders into a constitutional law, were revived.

Created as a counterpart to the Constitutional Law on Rights of National Minorities, the idea of a constitutional law on veterans was years old and occasionally advocated by veteran associations. Such a law would have guaranteed that every new administration had to care about veteran rights and, in the words of protesters, prevent the 'politicisation' of veterans. Also, such a law could only be passed and amended by two-thirds of the Parliament, which would be an additional guarantee that no government could change it without the support of the opposition.[1342] Another association, tied to the organisers of the Savska protest, suggested passing a parliamentary declaration on veteran rights that would serve as the basis for the constitutional law to protect their rights permanently.[1343]

[1341] Zaštita prava hrvatskih branitelja iz Domovinskog rata i članova njihovih obitelji – zahtjev za sazivanje sjednice Odbora za ratne veterane Hrvatskog sabora, 6 Nov. 2014, H.S., fond Hrvatski sabor, podfond Hrvatski sabor, 7. saziv (2011-5), serija Odbor za ratne veterane, podserija Sjednice, podpodserija 22. sjednica, podpodserija Materijal sjednice.

[1342] Slobodna Dalmacija, 28, 29 Oct. 2014; *Večernji list*, 29 Oct. 2014; Zaštita prava hrvatskih branitelja.

[1343] Deklaracija o pravima hrvatskih branitelja iz Domovinskog rata / prijedlog trajne zaštite dostojanstva i prava hrvatskih branitelja i okončanja prosvjeda/, 20 Feb. 2015, U.P.R.H., org. jed. 71-02-07 Posebni savjetnik predsjednika Republike Hrvatske za branitelje, kl. oz. 053-02/15-01/20, ur. br. 363-15-01.

Casualties of the Savska protest

However, it was not the protesters' demands that secured the media's interest in the protest but an unfortunate chain of events, propelling it into a significant political event.[1344] In the late evening of the second day – 21 October 2014 – disabled female veteran Nevenka Topalušić suddenly passed away at the scene.[1345] Immediately upon receiving the news on the morning of 22 October, Đakić called for an emergency session of the parliamentary Committee for War Veterans. In the discussion, the opposition and governing majority exchanged accusations, while Vučemilović Šimunović – as an external committee member – blamed the Ministry and Matić for Topalušić's death.[1346]

Topalušić's death immediately galvanised the protesters and caused outrage among many, while the media created her *post-mortem* image. Upon her death, the media reported her statement that the authorities could only remove her from the protest 'dead' – an assertion that sealed her status as a fallen hero. Protesters spent the following day – 22 October – in silence out of respect for Topalušić, calling citizens to light a candle for her.[1347] On 23 October, the protesters organised a wake for Topalušić, gathering over a thousand people – including other veteran and opposition political leaders – and blocking the traffic of the busy Savska Road. In the ceremony, with a prominent religious, patriotic, and militaristic character, Deur made the parallel between 1991 and their protest, as they lost their 'strongest, the holiest people' in the time of 'callous government, callous people'. Deur emphasised that they should not forget Topalušić, who gave her life, what was 'the holiest that God gave us',

[1344] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 22 Oct. 2014; *Večernji list*, 22 Oct. 2014.
[1345] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 23 Oct. 2014; *Večernji list*, 23 Oct. 2014.
[1346] Zapisnik 21. sjednice Odbora za ratne veterane Hrvatskog sabora, 22 Oct. 2014, H.S., fond Hrvatski sabor, podfond Hrvatski sabor, 7. saziv (2011-5), serija Odbor za ratne veterane, podserija Sjednice, podpodserija 21. sjednica, podpodserija Zapisnik; *Večernji list*, 23 Oct. 2014.
[1347] *Večernji list*, 23 Oct. 2014.

as she could serve as a 'pedestal' for the Croatian state.[1348] The wake showed how embedded veteran associations into Catholicism, as its symbolism occupied the central place in protesters' activities.

As cherishing the Homeland War functioned as a secular religion, protesters deified Topalušić, turning her into a saint and symbol of the protest while villainising the Government. While the protest was ongoing and Matić was the outgoing Minister in December 2015, the Zagreb city administration renamed the plateau before the Ministry into the 'Nevenka Topalušić Square', with an accompanying monument dedicated to her.[1349] The naming of the square represented yet another symbolic victory for the protesters and embarrassment for their adversaries, as the Ministry now had as an official address the 'Nevenka Topalušić Square'.

Only six days after Topalušić's death, veteran Damir Čakanić, with a diagnosed P.T.S.D., came to the camp, poured petrol over himself, and set himself on fire. Other protesters quickly came to his aid, putting out the fire and helping him before the ambulance arrived. Although he was treated for third-degree burns, Čakanić's life was not in danger.[1350] After recovering from burns, Čakanić explained how he was provoked by watching the T.V. and

[1348] Hina, 'Održana komemoracija Nevenki Topalušić', Laudato T.V., 23 Oct. 2014, https://laudato.hr/Novosti/Hrvatska/Odrzana-komemoracija-Nevenki-Topalusic.aspx (28 Oct. 2022); Ma. B., 'Ispred MinistarsT.V.a održana komemoracija hrvatskoj braniteljici', Dnevnik.hr, 23 Oct. 2014, https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/ispred-ministarsT.V.a-odrzana-komemoracija-nevenki-topalusic---357770.html (29 Oct. 2014); Damir Markuš, 'Nevenka Topalušić – komemoracija ratnice', YouTube, 24 Oct. 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SzluOyjTHy8&ab_channel=DamirMarku%C5%A1 (29 Oct. 2014).

[1349] Renata Rašović, 'Savska 66 ima 'novu adresu': Trg heroine Nevenke Topalušić', Večernji list, 30 Dec. 2014, https://www.vecernji.hr/zagreb/savska-66-ima-novu-adresu-trg-heroine-nevenke-topalusic-1048472 (1 Feb. 2023).

[1350] Sven Milekic, 'Croatian Ex-Soldier Attempts Suicide at Veterans' Protest', Balkan Insight, 28 Oct. 2014, https://balkaninsight.com/2014/10/28/war-veterans-protest-turns-into-tragedy/ (30 Oct. 2022); Renata Rašović, ''Više ne pomišljam na suicid, ali boli me nebriga za veterane'', Večernji list, 18 Mar. 2015, https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/branitelj-koji-se-zapalio-u-savskoj-vise-ne-pomisljam-na-suicid-ali-boli-me-nebriga-za-veterane-995580 (30 Oct. 2014).

seeing Minister Matić state that the Government did not diminish veteran rights while it cut his provision fee by some thirty per cent. Additionally, the Government's decision to move the provision fees into the competence of the Ministry of Social Politics and Youth hurt his pride and dignity.[1351] Like with Topalušić's death, protest leaders used the incident to blame the Ministry again, claiming that people were taking their lives provoked by the Government's lies.[1352] Both incidents further radicalised protesters' rhetoric, who claimed that they could only be removed by an ambulance or undertaker while rhetorically flirting with the idea of succumbing to violence.[1353] Although Čakanić's did not have tragic consequences, it kept the media presence and underlined the desperation of the protesters, who played on that card.

Both incidents worked towards building the protesters' self-victimisation narrative. Thus, in January 2015, Klemm said they would not leave the disabled veterans behind and allow another Bleiburg – post-war reprisals of anti-fascist Partisans against fascist Ustaša and accompanying civilians – or Vukovar hospital, where after the fall of the city's defence, Serb

[1351] Čakanić used the word '*socijala*', a derogative slang for population receiving social welfare, unbecoming for a proud veteran. See: Rašović, ''Više ne pomišljam na suicid'.
[1352] Renata Rašović, 'Zapovjednik branitelja koji se zapalio: Pogodilo ga je što su mu smanjili opskrbninu', Večernji list, 28 Oct. 2014, https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/zapovjednik-branitelja-koji-se-zapalio-pogodilo-ga-je-sto-su-mu-smanjili-opskrbninu-969906 (30 Oct. 2022); Milekic, 'Croatian Ex-Soldier Attempts Suicide at Veterans' Protest'.
[1353] Miroslav Filipović, 'Sjećate se 'šatora' i plinskih boca na ulici? / Od prvog dana bilo je napeto, a onda - smrt braniteljice, samospaljivanje i zapaljive izjave...', Net.hr, 20 Oct. 2019, https://net.hr/danas/hrvatska/sjecate-se-satora-i-plinskih-boca-na-ulici-od-prvog-dana-bilo-je-napeto-a-onda-smrt-braniteljice-samospaljivanje-i-zapaljive-izjave-ad1d6daa-b1c4-11eb-b304-0242ac130065 (30 Oct. 2022).

paramilitaries executed wounded patients at Ovčara.[1354] In his eyes, veterans were still persecuted – now by Croatian authorities.[1355]

Along with the media attention came the interest of political elites. From the beginning, H.D.Z.'s presidency fully supported the protesters and their demands, while the party's delegation visited the camp in Savska on the evening of the second day.[1356] H.D.Z. used the protest for its political battles against S.D.P., enhanced by the upcoming presidential elections.[1357] Thus, Karamarko echoed the protesters' claims that the Government was guilty of Topalušić's death.

President Josipović wanted to ease the tensions and mediate between the two sides, similar to what he suggested during the anti-Cyrillic campaign. On the fifth day of the Savska protest, Josipović came to the protesters' tent after Klemm declined that their delegation come to the President's office. Accompanied by Matić, Josipović's meeting with the protesters was relatively unsuccessful, as protesters claimed that he was not interested in resolving their problems – formulated in numerous demands and ultimatums – and shouted 'resignation' for the Minister present in the tent.[1358]

For S.D.P. and the Government, the position was clear – they would not succumb to the pressure of the protesters. Matić defended Glavašević from accusations that he 'equalised the

[1354] *Jutarnji list*, 29 Jan. 2015; For more on Bleiburg, see: Martina Grahek Ravančić, 'The historiography of Bleiburg and the death marches since Croatian independence' in *Politička misao*, lv (2018), no. 2, pp 133-44; For more on the kilings of patients from Vukovar hospital, see: Vuk Tesija, 'Harsh treatment: how Croatia's Vukovar Hospital survived under siege', Balkan Insight, 18 Nov. 2022, https://balkaninsight.com/2022/11/18/harsh-treatment-how-croatias-vukovar-hospital-survived-under-siege/ (23 Dec. 2022).
[1355] *Jutarnji list*, 22 Mar. 2015.
[1356] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 22 Oct. 2014.
[1357] Zapisnik 21. sjednice Odbora za ratne veterane Hrvatskog sabora, 22 Oct. 2014.
[1358] *Večernji list*, 25 Oct. 2014; Karlović Sabolić, *Zoran Milanović*, p. 362; In the tent, protesters pursued a wide range of topics, calling Josipović and Matić to join them in fighting against introducing the Cyrillic in Vukovar. For a heated atmosphere during their visit to the tent, see: UHB RH, 'Snimka nenajavljenog posjeta predsjednika Ive Josipovića braniteljima u šator', YouTube, 25 Oct. 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T8R7cq8FMKY&ab_channel=UHBRH (23 Dec. 2022).

victim with the aggressor' while discarding claims that veterans want him gone by claiming that this is only a fraction of the veteran population. From the beginning, Matić, Milanović and other officials claimed that H.D.Z. organised the protest while manipulating veteran associations for election – presidential elections in December 2014 – and political purposes.[1359]

Protester ties to H.D.Z. and Zagreb Mayor

Not only politicians from the governing majority and their supporters pointed to alleged ties between protesters and H.D.Z. Disabled veteran Tomislav Jelić, former H.D.Z. member and fighter against corruption, who was in no way ideologically or politically close to the governing centre-left parties, claimed that the H.D.Z. stood behind the protest. He asked ironically why the veterans did not protest when Sanader and Kosor insisted that veterans sell seven per cent of stocks of the state-owned energy company I.N.A. to the Hungarian M.O.L. – a 'deprivation' of Croatia's sovereignty.[1360] Although criticising Glavašević's statement, U.H.V.D.R. internally did not support protesters' ways of resolving issues in 'the street' while ignoring institutions and the democratic will of the people who elected that Government. The association's leaders feared the protest would be 'counterproductive', creating an 'animosity' of the public towards veterans. Some U.H.V.D.R. leaders saw this as a politically motivated protest without clear reasoning and goals, deciding that their members could join only in their personal capacity.[1361]

[1359] *Večernji list*, 22-5, 28 Oct. 2014; Zapisnik 21. sjednice Odbora za ratne veterane Hrvatskog sabora, 22 Oct. 2014; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 28 Oct. 2014; Karlović Sabolić, *Zoran Milanović*, p. 362.
[1360] Kegelj, 'Branitelj koji je razotkrio Bandića'.
[1361] Zaključci sa sastanka Središnjeg odbora U.D.V.D.R. R.H.

The issue of the actual protest organiser and secret political supporters came up almost immediately.[1362] Upon starting the protest on 20 October, protesters claimed it was a spontaneous and *ad hoc* protest born out of Glavašević's statement and how Matić received associations' representatives on the same day. However, on 8 October, Glogoški announced they would protest against the Government at Saint Mark's Square, although he did not reveal the date.[1363] The logistics of the protest seemed connected with the convenient timing of the protest. Thus, many tied the start of the protest with the arrest of Zagreb Mayor Bandić a day earlier.[1364]

According to this interpretation, shared by Minister Matić, organisers used the protest to divert media attention from Bandić's arrest and because the associations involved feared that ample funds provided by the city of Zagreb would end with the Mayor's imprisonment. This diversion was facilitated through this veteran network tied to Bandić and, by extension, to his closest political partner, H.D.Z. The person who was closely tied Bandić with the Savska protest was his associate Ljubičić 'Šveps'.[1365] In 2008, Ljubičić founded the Union of Associations of Defenders of Zagreb Holding (*Zajednica udruga branitelja Zagreb Holdinga*) – a public company where he served as the Assistant to the Director – gathering veteran workers in the company. The association publicly supported Bandić in the election for mayor in 2009.[1366]

[1362] Zapisnik 21. sjednice Odbora za ratne veterane Hrvatskog sabora, 22 Oct. 2014; *Večernji list*, 23 Oct. 2014.
[1363] Osječka T.V., 'Bujica 08.10.2014.'.
[1364] Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1990. – 2020*, p. 393; On Bandić's arrest, see: Sven Milekic, 'Zagreb mayor arrested for suspected corruption', Balkan Insight, 20 Oct. 2014, https://balkaninsight.com/2014/10/20/zagreb-mayor-arrested-for-suspected-corruption/ (31 Oct. 2022).
[1365] Bajto, 'Šest milijardi razloga za prosvjed', Novosti, 31 Oct. 2014, https://www.portalnovosti.com/sest-milijardi-razloga-za-prosvjed (27 Oct. 2022), *Globus*, 27 Mar. 2015.
[1366] Jutarnji.hr, 'Branitelji Z.G. Holdinga službeno podržali Bandićevu kandidaturu', Jutarnji list, 14 Sep. 2009, https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/branitelji-zg-holdinga-sluzbeno-podrzali-bandicevu-kandidaturu-2841407 (31 Oct. 2022); Lupiga.com, 'Ratnici upregnuti u kola političkih

Ljubičić was actively engaged in the first days of the Savska protest, allegedly sending dramatic S.M.S. messages to numerous veterans, calling them to join the protest.[1367] At times, his engagement went out of control, as a security camera in the Ministry caught him throwing a piece of a card box on Glavašević when a group of protesters surrounded the Assistant Minister in a tense situation on the second day of the protest.[1368] Some veteran leaders claimed Ljubičić acted as if he was emotionally invested in radicalising the event quickly.[1369] At the same time, veteran associations where Ljubičić held high positions did not publicly condemn Glavašević's statement before Bandić's arrest, as many other associations did. Additionally, his sudden strong critique of the Minister and Government was at odds with his public praises regarding the state's treatment of veterans.[1370] His claim of being concerned for disabled veterans was also contrary to his advocacy work during the year, where he fought for more extensive rights of non-disabled veterans, allegedly disenfranchised at the expense of the disabled ones.[1371]

Although the protest was never adequately registered with the police, thus *de facto* illegal, the city authorities – still under Bandić's control – promptly issued all the needed permits for

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štetočina', Lupiga, 1 Feb. 2011, https://static.lupiga.com/vijesti/udruge-branitelja-kao-partizanski-subnor-ratnici-upregnuti-u-kola-politickih-stetocina (31 Oct. 2022); The association was later renamed to Union of Associations of Defenders of the City of Zagreb and Zagreb Holding.

[1367] Ladislav Tomičić, 'Klemm i Šveps prosvjedima žele srušiti ministra branitelja Predraga Matića', Novi list, 21 Oct. 2014, https://www.novilist.hr/novosti/hrvatska/klemm-i-sveps-prosvjedima-zele-srusiti-ministra-branitelja-predraga-matica/?meta_refresh=true (31 Oct. 2022).

[1368] Index.hr, 'Počinje suđenje šatorašu koji je pred kamerama napao Glavaševića pa lagao da nije', Index.hr, 18 Sep. 2017, https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/video-pocinje-sudjenje-satorasu-koji-je-pred-kamerama-napao-glavasevica-pa-lagao-da-nije/995190.aspx (31 Oct. 2022).

[1369] Redakcija, 'Ante Tandara, novi šef H.V.I.D.R.e Zagreb: Ministarstvo branitelja je leglo zla!', Hazud, 30 Dec. 2014, http://www.hazud.hr/intervju-ante-tandara-novi-sef-H.V.I.D.R.e-zagreb-ministarstvo-branitelja-je-leglo-zla/ (31 Oct. 2022).

[1370] Rudic, 'Veterani zle kobi'; Untitled (Report from a working meeting of the delegation of the Alliance of Associations of Defenders Workers of the Republic Croatia and War Veterans Minister Predrag Matić on 8 July 2014), Association of Defenders and Disabled Veterans from the Homeland War of Croatian Railroads branch office Osijek, undated (2014), https://www.ubidrhzos.com/prijemsavezakodministra.php (31 Oct. 2022).

[1371] Ured predsjednika Sabora, 'Leko primio predstavnike Saveza udruga branitelja radnika RH', Hrvatski sabor, 11 Jun. 2014, https://www.sabor.hr/en/node/2226 (31 Oct. 2022).

protesters to set up camp and make fires – something usually not allowed in the city centre – as well as medical containers.[1372] In contrast, when veterans had tried to organise a similar sit-in protest in front of the Ministry in 2011 – while H.D.Z. was in power – the city administration rejected a similar appeal for setting a camp on public grounds.[1373] Some associations also depended on city-owned offices, given to associations at prices lower than market ones. Thus, the Zagreb administration gave Klemm's U.S.P.D.R.R.H., one of the protest's main organisers, a prominent venue in the city centre, previously occupied by a bank.[1374] Protesters' ties to Bandić were also visible because they signed a petition on his behalf to stop 'political persecutions' against him – meaning criminal charges for corruption and embezzlement of public funds.[1375] Accusations of 'political persecutions' mirrored veterans' self-victimisation narrative, especially exploited by Klemm, who tried to show the process for embezzlement against him as the state's persecution against him.[1376] Such cases showed how veterans used activism to tackle the personal transgressions of their leaders.

Despite Bandić's support, Ljubičić ceased his participation in the protest. In November 2014, Đakić removed Ljubičić as the President of the Union of Associations of H.V.I.D.R. of Zagreb and suspended the whole branch before it organised a new assembly. Ljubičić was banned from entering the association's office, guarded by security guards from Klemm's security company.[1377] While Ljubičić portrayed himself as a victim of Đakić's authoritarian rule in H.V.I.D.R., Đakić claimed that it was a consequence of the Zagreb branch's statute being incompatible with the national one and that the association had made the decision a

[1372] Filipović, 'Sjećate se 'šatora' i plinskih boca na ulici?'; Branimir Vorša, ''Ako ljudima u šatoru Grabar Kitarović nije dovoljan autoritet, onda ne znam tko jest'', Dnevnik.hr, 16 Mar. 2015, https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/video-ostojic-ako-ljudima-u-satoru-kolinda-grabar-kitarovic-nije-dovoljan-autoritet-onda-ne-znam-tko-jest---376592.html (5 Dec. 2022).
[1373] Karlović Sabolić, *Zoran Milanović*, p. 365.
[1374] *Nacional*, 17 Mar. 2015.
[1375] *Jutarnji list*, 22 Mar. 2015.
[1376] *Nacional*, 17 Mar. 2015; *Jutarnji list*, 22 Mar. 2015.
[1377] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 19 Nov. 2014.

month prior.[1378] Later, it turned out that the new leadership of the Union of Associations of H.V.I.D.R. of Zagreb was tied more closely to H.D.Z. – accused Ljubičić of using the money in an untransparent way.[1379] From that point on, Ljubičić disappeared from veteran leadership in general, while others – predominantly Klemm and Glogoški – were perceived and treated by the media as the protest leaders and public personas consulted on various issues concerning the veterans and the 1990s war.

H.D.Z.'s place in providing political and infrastructural support – as the Croatian Red Cross, led by a party official, provided the protesters with the tent – was more visible after Ljubičić's removal. H.D.Z.'s Brkić became the main person for the party's communication with the protesters, frequently visiting the Savska camp alongside other H.D.Z. veteran leaders, such as Đakić.[1380] As President of H.V.I.D.R., Đakić and the association pressured other associations to provide members that would keep the camp occupied. This influenced H.V.I.D.R. and helped with the logistics, mainly hidden from the public, while Deur's, Glogoški's and Klemm's associations acted as the organisers. H.V.I.D.R.'s role irritated many leaders in the U.H.V.D.R., who refused to involve their associations in the protest and did not express their dissatisfaction publicly but discussed them internally.[1381]

[1378] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 19, 27 Nov. 2014; Renata Rašović, 'Josip Đakić: Još prije mjesec dana smijenili smo Švepsa', Večernji list, 19 Nov. 2014, https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/josip-dakic-jos-prije-mjesec-dana-smijenili-smo-svepsa-974252 (31 Oct. 2022).
[1379] Redakcija, 'Ante Tandara, novi šef H.V.I.D.R.e Zagreb'.
[1380] *Nacional*, 28 Apr. 2015; Hina, 'Markt: Crveni križ nije donirao šator u Savskoj prosvjednicima nego osobama ugroženog zdravlja', Novi list, 9 Oct. 2015, https://www.novilist.hr/novosti/hrvatska/markt-crveni-kriz-nije-donirao-sator-u-savskoj-prosvjednicima-nego-osobama-ugrozenog-zdravlja/ (5 Dec. 2022); Vedran Brkulj, 'Godišnjica šatora u Savskoj: od plinskih boca preko janjetine do predizbornog raspada', Tportal.hr, 20 Oct. 2015, https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/godisnjica-satora-u-savskoj-od-plinskih-boca-preko-janjetine-do-predizbornog-raspada-20151016 (5 Dec. 2022); Robert Bajruši, 'Sjećate se 'šatoraša' u Savskoj? Evo tko je bio pravi organizator pobune...', Zadarski.hr, 21 Oct. 2018, https://zadarski.slobodnadalmacija.hr/zadar/forum/sjecate-se-satorasa-u-savskoj-evo-tko-je-bio-pravi-organizator-pobune-571118 (5 Dec. 2022).
[1381] Zaključci sa sastanka Središnjeg odbora U.D.V.D.R. R.H.

Other things also pointed to H.D.Z.'s and Grabar-Kitarović's ties with the protesters. One was Grabar-Kitarović's decision to name Deur, her advisor for veterans in February 2015.[1382] Another was that Klemm donated towards her campaign while his company provided security services for both Grabar-Kitarović's campaign rallies and H.D.Z. conventions. Finally, Klemm was present on a few H.D.Z. events in a personal capacity.[1383]

Protesters' right-wing populist repertoire

However, from the beginning, protesters denied being supported or acting as proxies for H.D.Z., Bandić or anyone else.[1384] Like during the anti-Cyrillic campaign, the Savska protest was built on right-wing populism, conveying the story of politicians that 'try to take advantage of Croatian defenders'.[1385] One veteran leader said the Savska protest was against all political oligarchies from 2000 onwards, including Sanader's H.D.Z.[1386] In Glogoški's words, neither the Government nor the opposition gave concrete answers to their demands.[1387] While protest leaders often populistically portrayed politicians badly, they stressed that the Government acted especially belligerently against veterans. They accused the Government of not being sensitive to the veteran issue and not showing them the respect they deserved.[1388] For protest leaders, the state should treat veteran issues as an important issue on the political agenda, and the fact that Milanović or Leko did not immediately

[1382] *Jutarnji list*, 24 Feb. 2015.
[1383] Jutarnji.hr, 'Kolinda objavila imena donatora: Horvatinčić dao 25 tisuća kuna, Klemm 10, a Mamića nigdje', Jutarnji list, 23 Dec. 2014, https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/kolinda-objavila-imena-donatora-horvatincic-dao-25-tisuca-kuna-klemm-10-a-mamica-nigdje-594928 (11 Dec. 2022); *Nacional*, 17 Mar. 2015.
[1384] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 23, 28 Oct. 2014; *Večernji list*, 28 Oct. 2014; *Nacional*, 17 Mar., 19 May 28 Apr. 2015.
[1385] Osječka T.V., 'Bujica 25.07.2014. Gosti: Ante Deur i Đuro Glogoški', YouTube, 25 Jul. 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bUv2Mr6pWY4&ab_channel=OsjeckaTV.
[1386] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 23 Oct. 2014.
[1387] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 28 Oct. 2014.
[1388] Zapisnik 21. sjednice Odbora za ratne veterane Hrvatskog sabora, 22 Oct. 2014.

respond to their demands was a sign of disrespect.[1389] After Topalušić's death, protesters refused to visit state institutions, seeing politicians as those responsible for visiting them.[1390] This lack of institutional dialogue – present in all previous veteran protest cycles – was internally criticised in some mainstream associations, such as U.H.V.D.R.[1391]

The lack of institutional dialogue was part of protesters' repertoire, opting for a displacement strategy or replacement of political institutions.[1392] In their words, although they fought for a state with functioning institutions, these institutions ignored them, and this is why they needed to replace them.[1393] While visiting the Parliament during the plenary discussion on implementing the Law on Veterans, Savska protesters requested to address the M.P.s from the gallery reserved for the public – something that was never allowed. After Leko rejected their plea, they left the Parliament, claiming it was proof that it was not the 'institution of all Croatian citizens'.[1394] Therefore, the protesters wished to replace the parliament and government as central locations of political deliberation with their tent. On the level of expanding the repertoire of collective actions by promoting the tent as the centre of political representation and deliberation, Savska protesters wanted to point to the need they claimed was missing: legitimate representers of veterans' interests. Protesters thought their merits in "creating" the country – losing parts of their bodies and health – oblige officials to come to their tent, where they would discuss veteran – and other – policies. Catholic Church

[1389] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 22 Oct. 2014.
[1390] *Večernji list*, 25, 26, 28 Oct. 2014
[1391] Zaključci sa sastanka Središnjeg odbora U.D.V.D.R. R.H.
[1392] Repertoires are a set of collective actions on disposal to organisers of contentious politics. For more on repertoires of collective actions, see: Charles Tilly, *From mobilization to revolution* (New York, 1978), pp 151-66, 170, Charles Tilly, *Contentious performances* (New York, 2008), p. 15.
[1393] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 28 Oct. 2014.
[1394] Večernji list, 30 Jan. 2015.

representatives, opposition politicians or those who sought political power also visited the tent, receiving symbolic approval in the eyes of protesters.[1395]

During the campaign for the presidential elections in December 2014, some candidates visited the protesters' camp as they wanted to appeal to the veterans as well.[1396] H.D.Z.'s candidate Kolinda Grabar Kitarović, who went on to win in the second round of the presidential elections in January 2015, partially built her campaign on her relationship with Savska protests, visiting them on multiple occasions, including the New Year's Eve, the night when she won the elections and her first day in office.[1397] All this empowered the protesters, giving them credibility and constant media presence, a relevant factor in Croatia's everyday politics. However, this strategy was only partially successful, as in the end, state officials refused to come to their camp for round tables. The officials declined to normalise their demands and transform them into the centre of political decision-making.[1398]

The second strategy was moving the protest around while enhancing the disruptiveness of the protest and making it harder to ignore. For months, protesters staged walking protests, going

[1395] Al Jazeera i agencije, 'Hrvatski branitelji ne odustaju od protesta', Al Jazeera, 23 Oct. 2014, https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2014/10/23/hrvatski-branitelji-ne-odustaju-od-protesta (11 Dec. 2022); *Večernji list*, 12 Feb., 8 Apr. 2015.
[1396] Arhiva, 'Režirani show u Savskoj: Josip Klemm postrojio Ivana Vilibora Sinčića pred šatorom branitelja', Jutarnji list, 23 Dec. 2014, https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/rezirani-show-u-savskoj-josip-klemm-postrojio-ivana-vilibora-sincica-pred-satorom-branitelja-594976 (11 Dec. 2022).
[1397] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 28 Oct. 2014; *Večernji list*, 28 Oct. 2014; Danijela Dolenec, 'A Soldier's State? Veterans and the Welfare Regime in Croatia' in *Anali*, xiv (2014), no. 1, pp 55-76, at p. 71; Immediately upon assuming office, many associations that actively supported the protest congratulated Grabar-Kitarović on her victory, saying how they contributed to it, in hope she would bring back the patriotic pride and better days for veterans. See: Deklaracija o pravima hrvatskih branitelja; Čestitka povodom izbora za prvu predsjednicu RH!, 19 Feb. 2015, U.P.R.H., org. jed. 71-02-07 Posebni savjetnik predsjednika Republike Hrvatske za branitelje, kl. oz. 053-01/15-01/12, ur. br. 363-15-01; Termin za razgovor, 20 Feb. 2015, U.P.R.H., org. jed. 71-02-07 Posebni savjetnik predsjednika Republike Hrvatske za branitelje, kl. oz. 053-02/15-01/11, ur. br. 363-15-01; Obavijest o dodjeli priznanja, 11 Jun. 2015, U.P.R.H., org. jed. 71-02-07 Posebni savjetnik predsjednika Republike Hrvatske za branitelje, kl. oz. 053-02/15-01/404, ur. br. 363-15-01; Zamolba za pokroviteljstvo 3. Festivala domoljubne poezije „Pjesmom protiv zaborava", 24 Jun. 2015, U.P.R.H., org. jed. 71-02-07 Posebni savjetnik predsjednika Republike Hrvatske za branitelje, kl. oz. 053-02/15-03/366, ur. br. 363-15-01.
[1398] *Večernji list*, 29 Oct. 2014.

around Zagreb's centre, blocking the traffic and disrupting everyday life. Thus, in December 2014, 3,000 protesters marched from their Savska camp to Zagreb's main square, dressed in black shirts with white Christian crosses, conveying the message of veterans' suicides over the years.[1399] Such parades were not only a method of disruption but also a medium for conveying the ideological traits of the movement. Organised on the 15th anniversary of Tuđman's death and dressed in shirts displaying Christian (Catholic) symbols, the protesters emanated their strong conservativism and nationalism.[1400]

Besides the elementary disruptiveness and performative aspects of such activities, these marches issued indirect threats. Therefore, in their protest walks in March, Savska protesters came in front of Milanović's home in the centre of Zagreb, calling him to come out.[1401] Thus, when saying that protesters might come to St. Mark's Square, as politicians were not coming to their camp, Glogoški stressed that some would have to leave – indirectly saying the Government would have to resign.[1402] A few days earlier, another protest leader, Vučemilović Šimunović, said at the session of the Committee for War Veterans that he hoped they would not have a 'bloody Christmas' after they had had a 'Bloody Easter' – when

[1399] *Jutarnji list*, 11 Dec. 2014; *Večernji list*, 11 Dec. 2014; The discussion over veteran suicides is a long and controversial one. Protesters and some researchers claimed that the number of suicides among veterans is higher and rising contrary to the general population. However, part of the media claimed the number of suicides among veterans is lower than in the general population, while a research for 2008-17 period confirmed the same. For the research somewhat supporting veteran claims, see: Zoran Komar and Elvira Koić, *Samoubojstvo hrvatskih branitelja u Zagrebu i Hrvatskoj* (Zagreb, 2015); For research and media claiming that suicides among veterans are not higher than in the general population, see: Nikola Bajto, 'Trženje suicida', Novosti, 19 Dec. 2014, https://www.portalnovosti.com/trzenje-suicida (2 Nov. 2023); Enis Zebić, 'Hrvatski ratni veterani manje od prosjeka skloni suicidu', Radio Slobodna Europa, 5 Feb. 2019, https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/hrvatski-ratni-veterani-suicid-ispod-prosjeka/29753017.html (2 Nov. 2023).

[1400] Tomislav Klauški, 'Crni križari, mračni Karamarko i prijetnje 'Krvavim Božićem'', 24sata, 11 Dec. 2014, https://www.24sata.hr/kolumne/crni-krizari-mracni-karamarko-i-prijetnje-krvavim-bozicem-397900 (12 Dec. 2022).

[1401] Index Video, 'Druga epizoda: 'Stop teroru šatordžija'', YouTube, 15 Mar. 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VTZYEYGRkik&ab_channel=IndexVideo (12 Dec. 2022).

[1402] Klauški, 'Crni križari, mračni Karamarko'; *Jutarnji list*, 11 Dec. 2014; *Večernji list*, 11 Dec. 2014.

Croatian special police clashed with Serb rebels in March 1991, ending with the first fatalities of the war.[1403]

There were also direct threats and intimidation against officials and reporters. Besides the altercation with Glavašević and a broken window on the Ministry's building, protesters threatened and insulted Matić daily as he came to work.[1404] In January 2015, after Matić revealed that Glogoški did not sleep in the tent in Savska but rather in a state-owned house on disposal for disabled veterans coming for medical treatment in Zagreb, he received multiple threats over the phone and e-mail.[1405] Protest leaders also intimidated reporters who allegedly reported negatively about the protest. For one, the protesters used a reporter's photo from her private Facebook profile to discredit her. It turned out that the reporter never reported about the protest but rather about Klemm's business ventures with Zagreb's basketball club Cibona – showing how the leaders instrumentalised the protest for personal gains.[1406]

Their politicised disruption of everyday civic life and authorities' tolerance for their never properly regulated protest and issued threats probably additionally antagonised the general population against their cause.[1407] Many in the public became fed up with growing activities in civil society while the economy was still recovering from the recession. Different

[1403] The possibility of violence breaking out at the protest was described as something that was out of protesters' hands and could unfortunately materialise. See: *Jutarnji list*, 6 Dec. 2014; Klauški, 'Crni križari, mračni Karamarko'.
[1404] Sanja Despot, 'Od branitelja i ministra Medveda, suprotno onome što tvrdi, nismo do sada čuli osudu plinskih boca na Savskoj!', Faktograf, 24 Oct. 2020, https://faktograf.hr/2020/10/24/od-branitelja-i-ministra-medveda-suprotno-onome-sto-tvrdi-nismo-do-sada-culi-osudu-plinskih-boca-na-savskoj/ (05 Dec. 2022); *Jutarnji list*, 15 Nov. 2014, 22 Jan. 2015.
[1405] *Jutarnji list*, 15 Nov. 2014, 30 Mar. 2015.
[1406] Direktno.hr, 'Video: Isprika branitelja iz Savske 66 novinarki Indexa Dei Redžić', Direktno, 1 Apr. 2015, https://direktno.hr/direkt/video-isprika-branitelja-iz-savske-66-novinarki-indexa-dei-redzic-11765/ (31 Oct. 2022); In general, protest leaders were sceptic towards some media outlets. See: Index Video, 'Pokušaj snimanja reportaže u šatoru', YouTube, 28 Mar. 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yl0ZQwib3xc&ab_channel=IndexVideo (31 Oct. 2022).
[1407] Boris Postnikov, 'Fejsbučne kritike', Novosti, 26 Dec. 2014, https://www.portalnovosti.com/fejsbucne-kritike (12 Dec. 2022); Karlović Sabolić, *Zoran Milanović*, p. 369.

unofficial groups gathering on social media and civil society groups started a series of small and unsuccessful counter-protests.[1408] Zoran Erceg, a veteran and wartime reporter led one of these protests. He and a small group of other veterans wanted to defy the perception that Savska protesters represent the whole veteran body.[1409] Even among political forces that supported Savska protesters, the dissent with the entire situation became visible. H.D.Z.'s Deputy President Drago Prgomet openly defied party leadership in supporting the protest, claiming that Karamarko's rhetoric and support of certain groups led to the radicalisation of daily politics and society. Prgomet, a veteran himself, called the Savska protesters to end the protest as the politicians were using them. As a result of his disagreement with Karamarko, Prgomet finally left H.D.Z. in February 2015.[1410] Some protest leaders, like Vučemilović Šimunović, also parted ways with the group in Savska without explaining.[1411]

However, the disruptiveness of their activities and the loaded nationalist rhetoric in the public sphere sometimes worked in the protesters' favour. Their effort to reintroduce and strengthen the position of the Homeland War's dominant narrative in society resonated with specific figures prone to Croatian ethnonationalism. Therefore, the President of Zagreb County Court and a veteran, Ivan Turudić, proposed something particular veteran groups advocated for years – full legal institutionalisation of the dominant narrative. As a suggestion for a public debate, Turudić proposed amending the Criminal Code to criminalise those who deliberately tried to portray the Homeland War as a civil war and Operation Storm as an ethnic cleansing.

[1408] *Jutarnji list*, 22, 23 Feb., 15 Mar. 2015; *Večernji list*, 3, 15 Mar. 2015; *Hrvatski tjednik*, 19 Mar. 2015; Index Video, "Stop teroru šatordžija", YouTube, 21 Feb. 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huYJphB9Y3c&ab_channel=IndexVideo (12 Dec. 2022); Index Video, 'Druga epizoda'; Pixel Shomy, 'Branitelji protiv ANtiprosvjednika Trg bana Jelacica 14 03 02015', YouTube, 14 Mar. 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ao-SLvifhfA&ab_channel=PixelShomy (12 Dec. 2022).
[1409] *Jutarnji list*, 26, 28 Feb., 9 Mar. 2015; *Večernji list*, 26, 28 Feb. 2015
[1410] *Večernji list*, 3, Feb., 3 Mar. 2015; *Jutarnji list*, 4 Feb. 2015; *Nacional*, 10 Feb., 3 Mar. 2015; Hrvatski tjednik, 5 Mar. 2015.
[1411] *Večernji list*, 3, Feb. 2015.

He claimed it would resemble similar laws sanctioning Holocaust denial in Germany.[1412] Although some critics saw such proposals resembling verbal delicts in socialist Yugoslavia, some veterans welcomed such proposals.[1413]

The political elites, even those supposedly confronted with Savska protesters, picked up the ethnonationalism coming from the bottom. Therefore, the passing of the Law on Rights of the Victims of Sexual Violence from the Homeland War, which the Parliament passed parallel with the height of protest activities, showed how protesters' rhetoric crept into politics. In the Law, M.P.s introduced an article that banned the possibility for anyone who had served in or helped Serb rebel units to receive reparations for sexual violence. Such a stipulation excluded cases in which Croatian military police officers sexually assaulted many Serb P.O.W.s.[1414]

Besides ethno-nationalism, militaristic ideas also worked their way up, being adopted by the political elites. While the Savska protest was at its height in 2015, Milanović's Government decided to pursue a military parade in Zagreb for the 20th anniversary of Storm, opting for a more militaristic instead of a reconciliatory way of marking historical events.[1415] In August 2015, the Savska protest, H.D.Z.'s rhetoric and the Government's militaristic celebration of Storm contributed to a celebration in Knin marred by anti-Serb and Ustaša slurs, symbols and rhetoric.[1416]

[1412] *Jutarnji list*, 20 Mar. 2015; *Večernji list*, 21 Mar. 2015.
[1413] *Jutarnji list*, 20 Mar. 2015; *Globus*, 27 Mar. 2015.
[1414] Nikola Bajto, 'Žrtve šatoraškog nasilja', Novosti, 6 Jun. 2015, https://www.portalnovosti.com/zrtve-satoraskog-nasilja (10 Jan. 2023); Even after the protest ended, political elites used ethno-nationalism to fight their political opponents. Thus, In the summer of 2016, during the campaign for snap parliamentary elections Milanović met with the former Savska protest leaders, who secretly taped him, showing how the former Prime Minister casually exchanged ethnonational slurs about Plenković. See: Milekić, 'A protest, coup d'état', p. 241.
[1415] Milekić, 'A protest, coup d'état', p. 241.
[1416] Sven Milekić, 'Od Bleiburga do Knina', Novosti, 10 Aug. 2015, https://www.portalnovosti.com/od-bleiburga-do-knina (10 Jan. 2023).

Protesters turn to ultimatums

Finally, officials ignored their activities and demands, so the protesters turned to ultimatums.[1417] On 2 May, Savska protesters organised a concert on Zagreb's central square, which more than 10,000 people visited. With singer Perković Thompson to galvanise the audience and with prominent figures from right-wing and veteran circles, Savska protesters turned this event into a protest. At the concert, Klemm and Glogoški rejected Milanović's offer to start the negotiations from a day before, as he insisted Matić would remain Minister. While using loaded rhetoric by claiming that the government 'stabbed' the protesters in the back, Glogoški gave Milanović five days to start an open public dialogue so that the Government – that was 'not of the people' – could not use 'lies and deceits' against the protesters. If Milanović failed to open a dialogue, Glogoški indirectly threatened that protesters would move to St. Mark's Square. Finally, Glogoški gave Milanović by 30 May, which he called Croatia's Statehood Day, to either 'secure the future of the Croatian people' or resign.[1418]

Statehood Day was nationally observed as a non-working holiday from 30 May until 2001, as it marked the date from 1990 when the first multi-party Parliament was constituted, along with voting in the first H.D.Z. Government and Tuđman as the President of the Presidency. Even before officially taking power on 30 May, H.D.Z. announced the 30 May as the Statehood Day, as they knew they would form the government in a matter of days. Therefore, early on, H.D.Z. started working on building a culture of victory around itself and framing the party as a 'state-forming' one.[1419] Protesters, loyal to Tuđman's and H.D.Z.'s ideas of

[1417] *Jutarnji list*, 29 Apr. 2015.
[1418] *Večernji list*, 3 May 2015; Index Video, 'Dernek šatoraša na Trgu', YouTube, 3 May 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C5uObZhi7sQ&ab_channel=IndexVideo (23 Dec. 2022).
[1419] *Večernji list*, 13, 17, 19-21, 23, 25, 27, 29-31 May 1990.

wartime merits, had 30 May in their hearts, rejecting the 25 June, introduced by the centre-left Government in 2002.[1420]

On a symbolic level, Savska protesters showed similarities with disabled veterans mobilised in 1996. In 1996, disabled veterans gave the government a hundred days from Statehood Day, the former holiday, which was the due date. In 1996, veterans also threatened to move to St. Mark's Square and voice their concerns. In the case of the Savska protesters, these announcements were far more belligerent than in 1996. In Klemm's words, if the Government 'wanted a war', it would have one.[1421]

As Savska protesters were now calling for Milanović's resignation, it favoured interpretations that they aimed at toppling the whole Government, along with President Josipović – who had lost the presidential elections in January 2015.[1422] Almost from the beginning of the protest, many thought protesters aimed to topple or help remove the political elite in the hands of S.D.P. and its coalition partners.[1423] The perception was strengthened by a huge banner saying, '1991, they both fell, 2015 they both will fall', which was put up in the camp in Savska in January 2015, just ahead of the second round of the presidential elections. The first part of the message on the banner referenced a widely known quote by a Croatian soldier when he took down two J.N.A. fighter planes near Šibenik in 1991. Thus, again, like in 2001, veterans used this wartime event to battle the centre-left Government. The second part seemed to convey the message that the protesters would take down or help Josipović and

[1420] Mario Jareb, *Hrvatski nacionalni simboli* (Zagreb, 2010), p. 393.
[1421] Dora Koretić, 'Milanoviću rok za izjašnjavanje do četvrtka. Klemm: 'Ako žele rat, imat će ga!'', Jutarnji list, 4 May 2015, https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/milanovicu-rok-za-izjasnjavanje-do-cetvrtka-klemm-ako-zele-rat-imat-ce-ga-382189 (23 Dec. 2022); Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1990. – 2020.*, p. 395.
[1422] *Večernji list*, 7 May 2015; RTL, 'Josip Klemm: 'Zamislite kad se postroje ratne postrojbe',
[1423] *Večernji list*, 7 May 2015; Josipović was a member of S.D.P. before winning the presidential elections in 2010, when he 'froze' his party membership, as customary for an elected president. See: M.K.S./Hina, 'Josipović se oprostio od S.D.P.-a', Danas.hr, 16 Jan. 2010, https://danas.hr/josipovic-se-oprostio-od-S.D.P.-a-abd6365e-b9eb-11ec-a59e-0242ac13000e (23 Dec. 2022).

Milanović lose power in 2015, as besides presidential, parliamentary elections were also due later that year.[1424] The fact that Klemm and Glogoški were not very convincing in offering an alternative reading of the banner further exacerbated these interpretations.[1425]

In their rhetoric, Savska protesters often pursued populistic tropes of corrupt political elites working against the people and especially against veterans.[1426] The 'political elites' included H.D.Z., which the protesters criticised at the margins of the protest.[1427] However, protesters' fixation with removing S.D.P. from power was visible from the beginning of the protest, as other banners displayed in their camp conveyed. One, reading '1991: against Yugoslavia, 2014: against Yugoslavs', encapsulated the protesters' perception of the Government. In the right-wing rhetoric in Croatia, the term 'Yugoslav' is used to describe those who are not 'true Croats', the 'anti-Croats', usually centre-left politicians or public personas.[1428] By displaying such powerful symbols in their camp, protesters appealed to that cohort of the veteran body that believed the war had not ended and they had to fight the 'Yugoslavs' that held power in Croatia.[1429] These remnants of Yugoslavia conspired with amnestied Serbs, often high-ranking S.D.P. members, that effectively ran anti-Croat and anti-veteran policies.[1430] Messages like this also strengthened Croatia's culture of victory, according to which veterans were the victors who bravely fought against a stronger enemy. If they had won against the

[1424] Tportal.hr/Politikaplus.hr, 'Na transparent 'Oba su pala' stigao odgovor iz Šibenika', Tportal, 9 Jan. 2015, https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/na-transparent-oba-su-pala-stigao-odgovor-iz-sibenika-20150109 (23 Dec. 2022); Dora Komnenović, 'The 1990s: a decade that never ended?' in *Der Donauraum*, liv (2014), no. 1-2, pp 51-61, at p. 53.
[1425] Net.hr, 'Klemm otvorio dušu: 'Josipović je pao, Milanović ne mora!'', Net.hr, 20 Mar. 2015, https://net.hr/danas/hrvatska/klemm-otvorio-dusu-josipovic-je-pao-milanovic-ne-mora-9e12c3d4-b1c2-11eb-99de-0242ac130015 (23 Dec. 2022).
[1426] *Nacional*, 19 May 2015.
[1427] Karlović Sabolić, *Zoran Milanović*, p. 365.
[1428] Komnenović, 'The 1990s', pp 53, 55.
[1429] Karlović Sabolić, *Zoran Milanović*, p. 363, 364; Komnenović, 'The 1990s', pp 53.
[1430] Čestitka povodom izbora.

mighty J.N.A. and Serb rebels, they would indeed have won against 'Yugoslavs' impersonated in Croatia's current Government.

Another banner displayed in the camp showed Tuđman's photo in a military uniform alongside a quote from his widely-known speech from 1996 in which he called the opposition – mostly centre-left – parties and media 'Yugo-Communist leftovers' that joined forces with 'the black devil' in working against Croatian freedom and independence.[1431] Even when Savska protesters criticised H.D.Z. and Karamarko, they singled out the 'Communist' Government as their nemesis.[1432] These right-wing tropes against S.D.P. as a somewhat 'anti-Croat' party were present in protesters' rhetoric. Thus, in setting the scene on why they protested the Government, Klemm emphasised how S.D.P. 'did not support Croatia' in 1991 by allegedly boycotting Parliament's decision to break away from Yugoslavia.[1433] This discursive link between the present time and 1991 served to dismiss S.D.P. as an 'anti-Croatian' party, thus echoing the rhetoric used by Karamarko in battling H.D.Z.'s primary political opponent.[1434]

The last battle for the Homeland War

Thus, once again, like in 1996, the situation over the veteran issue boiled as 30 May came near. Although they avoided revealing their action plan, the protesters gathered in St. Mark's Square on 28 May 2015.[1435] As Savska protesters tried to re-frame themselves as fighters for

[1431] Komnenović, 'The 1990s', pp 53, 56.
[1432] *Večernji list*, 13 May 2015.
[1433] *Nacional*, 17 Mar. 2015.
[1434] Boris Pavelić, 'Povijesna krivotvorina: S.D.P. nije izašao iz sabornice kad se glasalo o samostalnosti', Novi list, 25 Jan. 2015, https://www.novilist.hr/novosti/hrvatska/povijesna-krivotvorina-S.D.P.-nije-izasao-iz-sabornice-kad-se-glasalo-o-samostalnosti/?meta_refresh=true (23 Dec. 2022).
[1435] *Jutarnji list*, 26 May 2015.

a better life for all of Croatia's citizens, they came to St. Mark's Square to support workers of the Institute of Immunology, who protested against the potential closing of the Institute.[1436] At St. Mark's Square, Savska protesters once again demanded to talk to Milanović, who ignored their demands of sacking Minister Matić.[1437] As the Prime Minister was out of Croatia, Interior Minister Ostojić responded that they must disperse by ten o'clock, according to the legal regulation concerning protests at St. Mark's Square.[1438] Claiming it was not a protest, veterans refused to leave, entered a minor scuffle with the police, and retreated into the St. Mark's church on the Square. There, they found sanctuary, as the legal status of religious buildings protected them according to Croatia's concord with the Holy See. At the church doors, the protesters defied the police and sang patriotic songs. Although there were no severe injuries or destroyed property, protesters provoked and hit the police occasionally while police officers tried to drag a few of them out of the church. Gathered in the church and surrounded by riot police outside, protesters spent a night there, while veterans who stayed in the camp blocked Savska Road using gas tanks, which many saw as an indirect threat. Protesters acted as a skirmish against the riot police, as a 'war that is not over yet' but has 'only started', as one protester framed it.[1439] The next day, the skirmish continued as veterans

[1436] Direktno.hr, 'Anica Kovač branitelje na Markovom trgu časti pečenom janjetinom', Direktno, 28 May 2015, https://direktno.hr/direkt/anica-kovac-branitelje-na-markovom-trgu-casti-pecenom-janjetinom-15962/ (23 Dec. 2022); 24sata, 'Prosvjed, Markov Trg, 28.05.2015', YouTube, 28 May 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ztMPjHk7VFk&ab_channel=24sata (23 Dec. 2022).
[1437] 24sata, 'Đuro Glogoški na prosvjedu, Markov trg', Youtube, 28 May 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_N1yddabLo&ab_channel=24sata (23 Dec. 2022).
[1438] Večernji.hr, 'Branitelji na Markovu trgu jeli janjetinu koju im je poslala Anica Kovač', Večernji list, 28 May 2015, https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/branitelji-na-markovu-trgu-jeli-janjetinu-koju-im-je-poslala-anica-kovac-1007893 (23 Dec. 2022).
[1439] *Jutarnji list*, 29 May 2015; *Večernji list*, 29 May 2015; Merita Arslani, 'Galerija: policajca više njih hvatalo za vrat, skidali mu kacigu s glave...', Express, 29 May 2015, https://express.24sata.hr/top-news/galerija-policajca-vise-njih-H.V.atalo-za-vrat-skidali-mu-kacigu-s-glave-1229 (23 Dec. 2022); Index Video, 'Drama na Markovom trgu: Obračun šatoraša i policije', YouTube, 29 May 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dS-2Q3_Lc-8&ab_channel=IndexVideo (23 Dec. 2022); Hina multimedija, 'Branitelji u crkvi Sv. Marka okruženi, YouTube, 29 May 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2gwyX--kJEY&ab_channel=HINAmultimedija (23 Dec. 2022); *Nacional*, 2 Jun. 2015; Merita Arslani, 'MUP-ove snimke šatoraša: 'Rat još nije gotov!', Express, 10 Jun. 2015, https://express.24sata.hr/top-news/mup-ove-snimke-satorasa-rat-jos-nije-gotov-1387 (23 Dec. 2022).

entered another scuffle with the police in the street leading to the Square, breaking the police barricade and joining others in the church.[1440] Choosing the church as a sanctuary was not an accident, as it demonstrated the strong axis and cooperation between the Catholic Church and the veteran movement, major conservative forces in Croatian society.

Although protest leaders complained about police brutality, the riot police were lenient in taming the protesters, allowing them to break the barricades.[1441] While the police had direct orders not to use excessive force, they tried to apprehend a few protesters at the church entrance. For the protest leaders, this was proof of police brutality, which tried to 'abduct' veterans. At the same time, some media and priests criticised the police's entrance into the church, a direct breach of the Vatican's sovereignty.[1442]

The police were presented as 'an aggressor' force, equal to Serbs in 1991, doing the bidding of politicians and 'war deserters' who had not been together with veterans in 1991 and were now preventing unity. Protesters presented the church as their holy sanctuary where the police should not intervene. Veterans turned to further self-victimisation, stressing how the police blocked the delivery of medicines to the disabled protesters – something that the police later denied – as authorities should have respected their sacrifice and democratic right to

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[1440] Al Jazeera Balkans, 'Veterani na Markovom trgu', YouTube, 29 May 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XaEyK6iy2vw&ab_channel=AlJazeeraBalkans (23 Dec. 2022); Ostv031, 'Bujica - branitelji probijaju milicijsku barikadu - 29.05.2015', YouTube, 29 May 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7C_1jdEOJNA&ab_channel=osT.V.031 (23 Dec. 2022); *Jutarnji list*, 30 May 2015; *Večernji list*, 30 May 2015; Arslani, 'MUP-ove snimke šatoraša'.

[1441] Ostv031, 'Bujica - branitelji probijaju milicijsku barikadu'; Arslani, 'Galerija'; Arslani, 'MUP-ove snimke šatoraša'; Index.hr, 'Ravnateljstvo policije: Šatoraši lažu, proglasili su četnikom policajca koji je 1991. imao 3 godine', Index, 12 May 2016, https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/Ravnateljstvo-policije-Satorasi-lazu-proglasili-su-cetnikom-policajca-koji-je-1991-imao-3-godine/824554.aspx (23 Dec. 2022).

[1442] *Večernji list*, 29 May 2015; Tajana Vlašić and Jelena Tešija, 'Dogovor je postignut: branitelji odlaze s Markova trga natrag u šator u Savskoj, policija ih navodno neće prijaviti', Telegram, 29 May 2015, https://www.telegram.hr/politika-kriminal/branitelji-noc-proveli-u-crkvi-ispred-ih-ceka-interventna-policija/ (23 Dec. 2022); *Hrvatski tjednik*, 11 Jun. 2015; *Nacional*, 30 Jun. 2015; Sto posto za Hrvatsku, 'Crkva svetog Marka 28./29. svibnja 2015. - neviđeno nasilje Vlade Zorana Milanovića', YouTube, 4 Dec. 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i96aJrhx57Y&ab_channel=StopostozaHrvatsku (23 Dec. 2022).

protest. Echoing the words of their deceased comrade Topalušić, Glogoški dramatically stated that 'only dead' could the police take him out of the church.[1443]

At the same time, protesters threatened and insulted the police, verbally condemning them for 'raising a hand' on veterans. Some protesters physically confronted the riot police – hitting them on the helmets or trying to poke their eyes – and threw a burning flair on them. The photo that circled the media showed protesters in the church holding a police officer by the neck.[1444] The far-right media immediately tried to put the police officer's character in question by saying he had fought for rebel Serbs. According to one of them, Interior Minister Ostojić deliberately deployed riot police officers from Serb-populated parts of Slavonia, who would be especially motivated in brutally suppressing the veteran protest.[1445] It turned out that the police officer was three years old in 1991 and was the son of a disabled veteran, while Serb forces had killed his family members during the war.[1446] In their reports, far-right media referred to the police as '*milicija*' (militia), as it was called during the Yugoslav times, thus using nationalistically loaded language to label them as anti-Croatian.[1447] These media outlets affirmatively reported on protesters' activities, offering them extensive media coverage.

[1443] Vlašić and Tešija, 'Dogovor je postignut'; Index.hr, 'Ravnateljstvo policije'.
[1444], Index Video, 'Drama na Markovom trgu'; Arslani, 'Galerija'; Arslani, 'MUP-ove snimke šatoraša'; Index.hr, 'Ravnateljstvo policije'; Arhiva, 'Ispovijest policajca kojeg su davili branitelji iz Savske: 'Suborci mog oca su me hvatali za vrat i gurali mi prste u oči'', Jutarnji list, 11 Jun. 2015, https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/ispovijest-policajca-kojeg-su-davili-branitelji-iz-savske%E2%80%98suborci-mog-oca-su-me-H.V.atali-za-vrat-i-gurali-mi-prste-u-oci%E2%80%99-394348 (23 Dec. 2022).
[1445] Sloboda.hr/Hrnews, 'Jedan od policajaca koji su napali branitelje zapravo je 'zvezdaš' koji je za vrijeme Bljeska bio u četnicima?!', Sloboda.hr, 30 May 2015, https://www.sloboda.hr/policajac-koji-je-u-crkvi-napao-branitelje-zapravo-je-zvezdas-koji-je-za-vrijeme-bljeska-bio-u-cetnicima/ (23 Dec. 2022); Glogoški claimed that these media interpretations have nothing to do with protesters. See: Direktno.hr, 'Prvi donosimo odgovor Glogoškog policiji o akciji na Markovom trgu', Direktno, 9 Jun. 2015, https://direktno.hr/direkt/prvi-donosimo-odgovor-glogoskog-policiji-o-akciji-na-markovom-trgu-16861/ (23 Dec. 2022).
[1446] Arhiva, 'Ispovijest policajca kojeg su davili branitelji iz Savske'; Index.hr, 'Ravnateljstvo policije'.
[1447] Ostv031, 'Bujica - branitelji probijaju milicijsku barikadu'; *Hrvatski tjednik*, 4 Jun. 2015.

Although most of this veteran disruption probably could not seriously jeopardise Croatia's democracy or topple the Government, it worried many. At that point, the protest was widely seen as inappropriate.[1448] Glogoški's call – trying to show the protest as a popular revolt – to the riot police to disobey their orders and join them in fighting the political establishment was a tipping point for some.[1449] All these veteran activities, especially gas tanks in the street, which were seen as protesters' direct threat with violence, breaking the Law on Public Assemblies, brought uneasiness among many, as part of the public was fed up with the disruptiveness of the protest.[1450] While some public figures, like Karamarko, identified by some as the person behind the protest, tried to argue that laws should not apply to veterans, such voices soon became rare and often ridiculed by many.[1451] Moving the protest to St. Mark's Square cost veterans some support, especially from H.D.Z., as the party severed its presence at protesters' events since April 2015. With the protest moving to St. Mark's Square, the party offered only symbolic political support. At the same time, they allegedly blocked the arrival of buses of veterans from Lika and Dalmacija, which threatened further escalation.[1452] Even President Grabar-Kitarović, whose advisor Deur – one of the former protest leaders – was present at a certain point at the Square, started taking a neutral position, calling for reason and dialogue.[1453]

Pressured by the situation, protesters sought to save their faces and not look defeated. After they first rejected Minister Matić's proposal to leave the Church and end the protest, as they were fed up 'with his lies and deceits,' Milanović had to appear and appeal to the protesters. In his televised speech, Milanović placed political responsibility on Karamarko and H.D.Z.,

[1448] Karlović Sabolić, *Zoran Milanović*, pp 366-9.
[1449] Al Jazeera Balkans, 'Veterani na Markovom trgu'; *Nacional*, 2 Jun. 2015.
[1450] *Nacional*, 2 Jun. 2015; Karlović Sabolić, *Zoran Milanović*, p. 368.
[1451] *Jutarnji list*, 29 May 2015; *Večernji list*, 30 May 2015; Jović, *Rat i mit*, pp 30, 334.
[1452] *Globus*, 5 Jun. 2015; Karlović Sabolić, *Zoran Milanović*, pp 368-9.
[1453] *Jutarnji list*, 30 May 2015; *Večernji list*, 30 May 2015.

which wanted to take power in the country through such operations. Furthermore, Milanović said he was proud of Matić, emphasising that no one should issue ultimatums to politicians and that protesters had to be aware that they had to obey laws – such as the one on public assembly. However, Milanović said he would meet the protest leaders in three days, after the weekend. Protesters, who declared Milanović's call for a meeting a victory, left the church and the area around it and returned to their camp while marching and singing patriotic songs.[1454]

No middle ground

The meeting between protesters on one side and Milanović and Ministers Matić and Kotromanović on the other was broadcast live on T.V. and the Internet. Klemm and Glogoški came in ceremonial military uniforms with all their wartime medals exposed, emanating the militaristic culture that protesters cherished. Milanović opened the meeting by emphasising that his Government cared about the veterans and did not diminish their rights. He asked how the Government could help them within the limits of the fiscal constraints related to coming out of the recession.[1455] Throughout the meeting, Milanović showed respect for the protesters, treating them with reverence – unlike in many other public discussions where he usually expressed stubbornness.[1456]

[1454] Vlašić and Tešija, 'Dogovor je postignut'; Al Jazeera Balkans, 'Veterani na Markovom trgu'; Index Video, 'Drugi dan krize na Markovom trgu: Povlačenje šatoraša', YouTube, 30 May 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aFJ8CNBPjFQ&t=1s&ab_channel=IndexVideo (23 Dec. 2022); Hina multipmedija, Branitelji se vraćaju u šator u Savskoj, YouTube, 30 May 2015, *Jutarnji list*, 30 May 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_NuOTHbr5U&ab_channel=HINAmultimedija (23 Dec. 2022); *Večernji list*, 30 May 2015.
[1455] N.D.H.Z.D.S., 'Prijenos sastanka predstavnika branitelja i Vlade RH', YouTube, 1 Jun. 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2hN8gdx2Na0&ab_channel=N.D.H.ZDS (23 Dec. 2022).
[1456] *Večernji list*, 6 Jun. 2015.

Klemm, the first to speak from the protester ranks at the meeting, tried to pursue a conciliatory tone, thanking the Government for their rights and claiming they were not there to pursue 'any material rights' but respect and dialogue. He apologised for bringing the protest in front of Milanović's apartment and for the gas tanks in the street the night before. To counter media criticism that veterans had preferential treatment, Klemm even called the Government to receive protesting workers from numerous companies and open a dialogue with them. However, in a passive-aggressive way, Klemm blamed the Government and especially Matić for the whole protest while downplaying other contested issues – like the legality of the never properly registered protest. In his words, Matić and the Government had ignored their cries for dialogue and improving the legislation, rejecting the veteran hand in building a better society. He explained that the Government was responsible for using the police against veterans, while it was also their responsibility for allowing counter-protesters and 'strange groups of people' to disturb them in their home – the tent in Savska.[1457]

Glogoški openly used a much more critical and populist tone, using the presence of T.V. cameras to show photos of the wounds of disabled veterans to gain the sympathy of the public. Glogoški went through individual cases in which the administration had lowered veterans' disability or cut financial aid and cases in which state institutions broke laws by reducing veteran rights on a personal level, all followed by poor treatment of veterans by the medical staff. Glogoški used many of these cases to show that Matić was lying when saying that the Government did not reduce veteran rights. He continuously mentioned instances in which the state did not consult veteran associations on law changes, especially the ones considering the pension system. Furthermore, protesters' representatives warned about inconsistencies or inadequate solutions that made veterans' lives harder.[1458] Despite mostly

[1457] N.D.H.Z.D.S., 'Prijenos sastanka predstavnika branitelja'.
[1458] Ibid; After the meeting, protesters claimed that the issue of pensions for H.V.O. disabled veterans were among the main reasons of the protest. See: *Nacional*, 9 Jun. 2015.

describing individual cases, protesters clearly showed that the state did not treat many veterans properly.

Despite the cordial tone, the meeting revealed a lot of concealed aggression, frustration, and anger on both sides. Thus, the protesters' representatives eagerly wanted to make a point in discussion with the officials, knowing their fellow combatants followed the meeting on T.V. from the tent. Antagonised by protesters' representatives and their jabs at him, Matić tried to reply to all the criticism against him during the meeting. However, as he started to lose his temper, he bragged about the alleged improvement in veteran welfare. In verbal exchanges with protesters, Matić tried to show what he saw as the great work of his Ministry, adding that he could quickly solve all mentioned veteran complaints. At times, Matić used many ironic and sarcastic remarks while downplaying the protesters' complaints and pointing out alleged inconsistencies in their demands and criticism. Faced with pressure and direct criticism of the protesters, Matić at times looked overwhelmed and personally offended, making slightly demeaning remarks in passing, antagonising the protesters who used these comments against him. Glogoški criticised Matić's move to publicly disclose his pension and financial supplements he was receiving, as it implied that he was privileged.[1459] The meeting again showed how much Matić, as a veteran, was disappointed about how protesters treated him for months while his fellow combatants from Vukovar did not defend him.[1460] However, protesters also seemed nervous, often interrupting Milanović and ministers, exerting pressure on them by either directly or indirectly condemning or criticising them. Protesters insisted

[1459] N.D.H.Z.D.S., 'Prijenos sastanka predstavnika branitelja'.
[1460] *Globus*, 27 Mar. 2015; *Večernji list*, 8 Jun. 2015; Sven Milekic, 'Defending Croatia's Vukovar: 'real war is no movie'', Balkan Insight, 16 Nov. 2017, https://balkaninsight.com/2017/11/16/predrag-matic-defending-vukovar-war-was-no-movie-11-15-2017/ (23 Dec. 2022).

that Milanović admit that the Government cut some of the veterans' rights, while he avoided doing so.[1461]

Despite expectations and their previous media comments, at the meeting, protesters did not mention their main demands so far: Matić's resignation and a constitutional law on veterans.[1462] While protesters claimed they would not discuss these demands at the first meeting, Milanović condoned the protesters for not insisting on passing constitutional law as other social groups – pensioners or youth – could insist on passing similar laws that would seriously threaten future policy changes.[1463] Aside from Milanović's opposition to the idea, Matić told protesters that such a law is unnecessary, as the Constitution mentioned the Homeland War and veterans.[1464]

While protesters did not insist on demanding the passing of a constitutional law – veterans' long-lasting and omnipresent dream of solidifying the dominant war narrative – this did not mean that protesters gave up on symbolic issues. The protesters insisted that they were treated with respect and did not want to become just another social group receiving welfare, as they did not want any of their benefits and financial supplements to be transferred to the Ministry of Social Policy and Youth.[1465] They insisted that Milanović and ministers state that protesters were not 'barbarians', 'militants' or 'terrorists', as their colleague from S.D.P. had called them. In Klemm's words, no one can call veterans that way due to their war merits,

[1461] N.D.H.Z.D.S., 'Prijenos sastanka predstavnika branitelja'.
[1462] *Večernji list*, 2 Jun. 2015.
[1463] Ibid; N.D.H.Z.D.S., 'Prijenos sastanka predstavnika branitelja'.
[1464] N.D.H.Z.D.S., 'Prijenos sastanka predstavnika branitelja'.
[1465] Protesters probably did not want their financial aid to be transferred to the Ministry of Social Policy and Youth for a few reasons. One was probably their fear that they would become just another social welfare category, meaning it would be harder for them to advocate things. Also, associations had a much bigger influence on veteran ministers and Veterans' Ministry officials who were often veterans themselves, while channels of communication between associations and the Ministry were almost decades-long. Finally, they did not want multiple institutions to handle their rights and benefits as it previously made life for veterans hard, having to navigate through multiple institutions.

regardless of what they did afterwards.[1466] In their interpretation, the Homeland War served as a catalyst for any potential veteran transgressions – as wartime heroes, veterans could not be seen as peacetime villains. Although operating with known tropes and often used remarks about diminishing the Homeland War's legacy, the protesters wished to postulate the War again as a nation-building and foundational event. Thus, the protesters complained that history textbooks do not write much about the Homeland War and that educators avoid saying 'who was the aggressor' even in school programmes.[1467]

For them, the issue of the 'victim and aggressor' once again became an issue of grave importance, endangering Croatia's ontological security, as the two should never be equalised. This was the case of Glavašević's statement on P.T.S.D. from September 2014, the alleged spark for the protest, which protesters again mentioned as proof that he meant that Croatian veterans are 'faking' their illness.[1468] Thus, at the meeting, protesters cited terms used for the Homeland War in the draft of Croatia's strategic document for using E.U. funds, an issue they had raised early on during the protest.[1469] Although the paper did mention the term 'Homeland War, ' it also used terms such as 'domestic war,' which is a synonym for 'civil war. ' At the meeting, they argued that it did not explicitly mention 'Serbian aggression' in all instances and stated that the war was 'destructive' and resulted in minefields.[1470] In the protesters' view, the Homeland War was Croatia's only foundation, and as such, it could not

[1466] N.D.H.Z.D.S., 'Prijenos sastanka predstavnika branitelja'.
[1467] Ibid.
[1468] Ibid.
[1469] Riba67, 'Razlozi nezadovoljstva invalida i branitelja', Udruga veterana 3. gardijske brigade 'Kune', 1 Nov. 2014, https://uvtgb-kune.hr/razlozi-nezadovoljsT.V.a-invalida-i-branitelja/ (27 Dec. 2022).
[1470] Ibid; Braniteljski, 'U Hrvatskoj je bio Domovinski, a ne građanski rat', Braniteljski.hr, 14 Apr. 2015, https://braniteljski.hr/u-hrvatskoj-je-bio-domovinski-a-ne-gradanski-rat/ (27 Dec. 2022); N.D.H.Z.D.S., 'Prijenos sastanka predstavnika branitelja'; Karlović Sabolić, *Zoran Milanović*, pp 364-5; At the meeting of U.H.V.D.R.'s Central Committee in December 2014, President Dečak explained that it was reasonable that the E.U. institutions do not recognise names like 'Homeland War' and that Croatia had to except facts like that and navigate around them. Otherwise, he thought, there is no point in joining any international associations or unions. See: Zaključci sa sastanka Središnjeg odbora U.D.V.D.R. R.H.

include destruction, which the aggressor caused.[1471] Meticulously citing the document, protesters insisted that such interpretations were directly anti-Croatian and that the document should precisely define the aggressor.

At the meeting, the protesters found a tool for this in the decades-long veterans' idea of the 'register of aggressors'. In previous decades, right-wing and veteran groups labelled Serbs as 'aggressors' to stop the return of Serb refugees and limit the political influence of their political representatives in Croatia. In 2015, protesters advocated the 'register of aggressors' to allegedly stop Serb rebels and war criminals from attaining certain benefits. Rhetorically, this was tied to the legal framework, as protesters claimed there was no other way to prevent Serb rebels from benefiting from the recently passed law that regulated the rights of victims of sexual violence and the discussed law proposal on rights for civilian war victims.[1472] In their minds, if Serb rebels benefited from the state budget, this would be a materialisation of the equalisation of the 'victim and aggressor', as they would be equal to veterans.

While such a claim probably sounded valid for the audience watching the meeting nationwide, Milanović explained that Croatian President Tuđman had introduced a general amnesty for all Serb rebels who had not committed war crimes or crimes against humanity. He explained how Tuđman had done this as an act of mercy towards the defeated and to spare state institutions from putting tens of thousands on trial and prison. In that sense, Milanović emphasised that Croatian veterans won the war and that such insecurity about war memory was unnecessary. Although protesters blurred the clear distinction between the rights of the Serb minority and rebels, Matić explained that while Serb rebels would not enjoy benefits, their children might if they suffered as civilians during the war.[1473]

[1471] Braniteljski, 'U Hrvatskoj je bio Domovinski'.
[1472] N.D.H.Z.D.S., 'Prijenos sastanka predstavnika branitelja'.
[1473] Ibid; *Večernji list*, 2 Jun. 2015.

Protesters' fixation with symbolic battles went beyond the discursive interpretations of the war or who was the aggressor. Although they presented themselves as representatives of the veteran body, they promoted a particular set of conservative values and positions. When discussing the state's work on drafting a law for civilian war victims, protesters clearly showed their dissatisfaction with the Ministry's cooperation with N.G.O.s that worked on dealing with the past.[1474] It echoed their earlier rhetoric as Savska protesters marked one of these associations – Documenta – as an entity working against Croatia and veterans, trying to equalise the 'victim and the aggressor', a relic of Yugoslavia – due to its perceived left-wing leaning. The photo montage of Documenta's Director Vesna Teršelič and President Josipović was casually displayed on a visible place in the tent in Savska with the inscription '100 per cent against Croatia'.[1475] Grabar-Kitarović, who visited the Savska camp on multiple occasions, used Documenta as a scarecrow tactic in her presidential debate with Josipović ahead of the second round of presidential elections in January 2015, accusing him of cooperating with Documenta, which, according to her, advocated that the Homeland War was a 'civil war' and not 'an aggression'. Her accusation reflected protesters' rhetoric and the general climate in public discussions on Croatia's contemporary history, primarily used by Karamarko.[1476]

At the meeting, representatives of the protesters chronologically placed the beginning of their dispute with Matić in November 2012, as Croatian generals Gotovina and Markač were

[1474] N.D.H.Z.D.S., 'Prijenos sastanka predstavnika branitelja'.
[1475] Branimir Pofuk, 'Pravi izborni stožer H.D.Z.-a je pod šatorom u kojem vise tjeralice za lošim Hrvatima', Večernji list, 4 Jan. 2015, https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/pravi-izborni-stozer-H.D.Z.-a-je-pod-satorom-u-kojem-vise-tjeralice-za-losim-hrvatima-982363 (27 Dec. 2022); Renata Rašović, ''Branitelji trebaju ustrajati u zahtjevima, a Documenta je spremna posredovati'', Večernji list, 20 Jan. 2015, https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/branitelji-trebaju-ustrajati-u-zahtjevima-a-documenta-je-spremna-posredovati-984992 (27 Dec. 2022).
[1476] Sven Milekic, 'Croatia presidential candidates talk tough on Serbia', Balkan Insight, 9 Jan. 2015, https://balkaninsight.com/2015/01/09/presidential-candidates-announce-tough-stance-towards-serbia/ (27 Dec. 2022).

awaiting the final verdict before the I.C.T.Y. At the meeting, Klemm criticised Matić – and indirectly also Kotromanović – for not taking part in a sermon with veterans a night before the final verdict. Klemm claimed that Matić told him he would not pray for a war criminal – something Matić denied at the meeting, adding he would immediately resign if proven otherwise. At such accusations, Kotromanović replied that the Government did a lot for the generals, while he would pray whenever and wherever he saw fit.[1477] Like in the protest on St. Mark's Square, the church and prayer carried strong symbolism, a non-disputed value everyone should strive for. Those who would abandon these values were not with them and were not patriots but, instead, people who questioned the unity of the Croatian people.[1478]

Officials concluded that most of the protesters' concerns – except the register of aggressors – could be resolved, which was not a valid reason for such a protest. Despite all these tensions, the meeting ended in a civilised tone as Milanović tried to tone down the tensions. He proposed having another, more technical meeting with larger delegations present. Although Klemm insisted that the Prime Minister stated that the protesters were not 'barbarians', Milanović said they should shake hands and move on.[1479] For Milanović, protesters needed to admit that the Government was of the people – a rhetorical insult for the governing coalition,

[1477] N.D.H.Z.D.S., 'Prijenos sastanka predstavnika branitelja'; Tomislav Klauški, 'Vojne odore u Vladi, abolirani Srbi i isprika nenarodnoj vlasti', 24sata, 1 Jun. 2015, https://www.24sata.hr/kolumne/vojne-odore-u-vladi-abolirani-srbi-i-isprika-nenarodnoj-vlasti-421893 (27 Dec. 2022).
[1478] Jović, *Rat i mit*, pp 310-6.
[1479] N.D.H.Z.D.S., 'Prijenos sastanka predstavnika branitelja'; Karlović Sabolić, *Zoran Milanović*, p. 369; Before and during the protest, protest leaders referred to the centre-left Government as one that is not by the people – a sort of non-patriotic, non-Croatian government working against the interest of the homeland. See: Narod.hr, 'Josip Klemm pušten na slobodu, neovisan je od ljudi koji vode vlast', Narod.hr, 17 Apr. 2014, https://narod.hr/hrvatska/josip-klemm-pusten-na-slobodu-neovisan-je-od-ljudi-koji-vode-vlast (27 Dec. 2022); Davorka Blažević, ''Skup zajedništva' sto posto za Hrvatsku – Zajedno do pobjede: Čije, protiv koga?!', Tris, 3 May 2015, https://tris.com.hr/2015/05/skup-zajednistva-sto-posto-za-hrvatsku-zajedno-do-pobjede-cije-protiv-koga/ (27 Dec. 2022).

often used by H.D.Z., Karamarko and protesters themselves.[1480] Both sides agreed to a new meeting with a larger veteran delegation in a week.[1481]

The two meetings pacified the protest and ended months-long tension and the potential threat of violence. However, these meetings resolved nothing, as protesters stayed in the tent and claimed that the Government had not fulfilled their demands.[1482] Although the protest continued until April 2016, over the summer months, the tent in Savska was usually empty due to the extreme heat.[1483] Savska protesters lost their credibility in wider echelons of society as their popularity was falling even without the protest at St. Mark's Square.[1484] Protesters were no longer under the media spotlight or a major political factor.[1485] Their activities were rare and often widely criticised, as they aligned themselves with the far-right that gravitated around Karamarko's H.D.Z. while not officially being a part of it.[1486]

[1480] Klauški, 'Vojne odore u Vladi'.
[1481] *Nacional*, 2 Jun. 2015, *Večernji list*, 2 Jun. 2015.
[1482] Dubravka Blaško, 'Glogoški izričit: Šator ostaje! Matić se ispričao braniteljima, ali očekuje i njihovu ispriku njegovoj obitelji', Telegram, 8 Jun. 2015, https://www.telegram.hr/politika-kriminal/poceo-drugi-sastanak-predstavnika-vlade-i-branitelja-iz-savske-ali-ovaj-put-bez-medija-iza-zaT.V.orenih-vrata/ (27 Dec. 2022); Marko Špoljar, 'Glogoški: Šator ostaje! Matić: Od prosvjednika očekujem ispriku svojoj obitelji!', Večernji list, 8 Jun. 2015, https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/pocinje-drugi-sastanak-predstavnika-vlade-i-branitelja-milanovic-se-ispred-satora-u-savskoj-rukovao-s-braniteljima-1009380 (27 Dec. 2022); *Večernji list*, 9 Jun. 2015.
[1483] Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1990.* – 2020, p. 396.
[1484] Grgurinović, 'Prosvjedi hrvatskih veterana', pp 18-21.
[1485] Tomislav Klauški, 'Šatoraši srušili jednog, pa sad bježe da ne sruše onog krivog', 24sata, 21 Aug. 2015, https://www.24sata.hr/kolumne/satorasi-srusili-jednog-pa-sad-bjeze-da-ne-sruse-onog-krivog-433732 (27 Dec. 2022).
[1486] Sven Milekic, 'Croats chant anti-Serb slogans at nationalist concert', Balkan Insight, 6 Aug. 2015, https://balkaninsight.com/2015/08/06/croats-chant-anti-serb-slogans-at-nationalist-concert-08-06-2015/ (27 Dec. 2022); *Nacional*, 18 Aug. 2015; M.D./Vanja Majetić, 'Prosvjednici vikali 'Za dom spremni' te vrijeđali Mirjanu Rakić i Gorana Radmana', Tportal, 26 Jan. 2016, https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/prosvjednici-vikali-za-dom-spremni-te-vrijedali-mirjanu-rakic-i-gorana-radmana-20160126 (27 Dec. 2022).

Protest's afterlife

Since late summer of 2015, as elections were nearing, media speculated that protest leaders would join either a block of far-right parties or an H.D.Z.-led coalition, as these parties openly invited protesters as candidates, while veteran leaders showed some interest in joining their ranks.[1487] Protesters were actively involved in the campaign, trying to help the opposition to remove the centre-left coalition from power. Thus, two days before the elections, Glogoški called the people to go out and vote for the 'Croatian future' while explaining that citizens knew whom to choose in the 1990 parliamentary elections – when H.D.Z. won the elections – and they would know again. To be completely clear about which party not to vote for, he added that the 'source of evil' lay in the ideology that had its headquarters on Ibler's Square – the address of S.D.P.'s headquarters. Furthermore, he used Karamarko's and H.D.Z.'s rhetoric of identifying the S.D.P. as an anti-Croatian party from 1991, when they, according to this interpretation, had 'walked out' when the Parliament decided on Croatian independence.[1488]

In the end, protesters got what they wanted, as S.D.P. lost power, with the H.D.Z.-led Patriotic Coalition (*Domoljubna koalicija*) teaming up with the Bridge of the Independent Lists (*Most nezavisnih lista*), while promoting non-party Tihomir Orešković as a candidate for Prime Minister.[1489] Even more so, one of their fellow protesters, publicly unknown veteran Mijo Crnoja, was named Veterans Minister in January 2016, only to step down six

[1487] *Jutarnji list*, 7, 12 Sep., 16 Oct. 2015; *Nacional*, 6 Oct. 2015.
[1488] Luka Filipović, 'Glogoški pozvao na izbore: Na Iblerovom trgu je sjedište zla', Tportal, 6 Nov. 2015, https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/glogoski-pozvao-na-izbore-na-iblerovom-trgu-je-sjediste-zla-20151106 (29 Dec. 2022); For more on the simplification and manipulation of S.D.P.'s leaving the Parliament in 1991 during the vote on Croatia's independence, see: Pavelić, 'Povijesna krivotvorina'.
[1489] Sven Milekic, 'Pharma company boss named Croatian PM', Balkan Insight, 24 Dec. 2015, https://balkaninsight.com/2015/12/24/ex-pharmaceutical-company-director-new-croatian-pm-designate-12-24-2015/ (29 Dec. 2022).

days later, pressured by numerous scandals from his past revealed by the media.[1490] It took the right-wing coalition almost two months when, in late March 2016, the Parliament finally confirmed Tomo Medved – another protester – as the new Veterans Minister.[1491] When the governing coalition presented him to the parliamentary Committee for War Veterans, opposition M.P.s criticised Medved's active role in the Savska protest, especially his registered presence at St. Mark's Square. Despite the criticism, Medved did not hide his agenda, which fully aligned with that of the protesters.[1492]

After only one meeting between Medved and the protesters, the protest officially ended on 26 April 2016, after 555 days. While announcing the end of the protest, Glogoški explained how they protested so veterans 'have a place in society, and the Homeland War its [place] in history'.[1493] In his words, under Matić, the Ministry worked towards declaring the 'defensive Homeland War into a civil [one]'. He explained that such a treatment of the Homeland War was to be expected from a party – S.D.P. – that did not 'want a Croatian state', using H.D.Z. and right-wing rhetoric. He explained how, unlike the Ministry, which focused on 'those that

[1490] Sven Milekic, 'Protests force out Croatian Veterans' Minister', Balkan Insight, 29 Jan. 2016, https://balkaninsight.com/2016/01/29/croatian-war-veterans-minister-resigned-after-numerous-allegations-01-29-2016/ (29 Dec. 2022); According to some interpretations, Crnoja was not to the liking of protesters' leaders, who did not show up at the event of him assuming office – unlike other leaders and associations that showed up. See: Orhidea Gaura Hodak, 'Prije pet godina otkrivene tajne: ministar branitelja Mijo Crnoja bio je pritvoren u Remetincu zbog nasilja', Nacional, 7 Apr. 2021, https://www.nacional.hr/prije-pet-godina-otkrivene-tajne-ministar-branitelja-mijo-crnoja-bio-je-pritvoren-u-remetincu-zbog-nasilja/ (29 Dec. 2022); When media started to reveal Crnoja's scandals, protest leaders said they would not support him if media speculations are proven right. See: Nacional, 'Konferencija za medije – Josip Klemm: 'ako se dokaže da je Crnoja prekršio zakon on će otići sa te funkcije', Nacional, 28 Jan. 2016, https://www.nacional.hr/uzivo-konferencija-za-medije-josip-klemm-ako-se-dokaze-da-je-crnoja-prekrsio-zakon-on-ce-otici-sa-te-funkcije-ako-je-kriv-branitelji-ce-traziti-njegovu-ostavku/ (29 Dec. 2022).

[1491] Marko Špoljar and Renata Rašović, 'Sabor potvrdio: Tomo Medved je novi ministar branitelja!', Večernji list, 21 Mar. 2016, https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/tomo-medved-je-novi-ministar-branitelja-1070056 (29 Dec. 2022).

[1492] Tea Romić, 'Tomo Medved otkrio prve poteze ako ga Sabor potvrdi za ministra branitelja', Večernji list, 17 Mar. 2016, https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/tihomir-oreskovic-predstavio-tomu-medveda-za-ministra-branitelja-cast-mi-je-predstaviti-generala-1069069 (29 Dec. 2022).

[1493] Sven Milekic, 'Croatian war veterans end 18-month-long protest', Balkan Insight, 26 Apr. 2016, https://balkaninsight.com/2016/04/26/croatian-war-veterans-end-1-5-year-long-protest-04-26-2016/ (29 Dec. 2022).

participated in the armed aggression on Croatia', the protesters' tents became 'an institution' where 'hundreds of thousands' of veterans – who won the war and 'created a state' – came to discuss their problems. In the future, Glogoški announced, the Ministry would again become a place where veterans could come and talk while they would take part in passing a new Law on Veterans that would resolve all their problems.[1494]

Although Glogoški announced the possibility of passing a constitutional law on veterans, he did not make any promises about the feasibility of that prospect, as he was probably aware of how fragile H.D.Z.'s majority in the Parliament was.[1495] Such a law was later never passed nor proposed by either H.D.Z. or any other parliamentary party, as it would have required considerable support from the opposition, as constitutional laws need the support of two-thirds of the Parliament. While he did not push for a constitutional law, Medved helped draft significant amendments to the Law on Veterans in 2017 and again in 2021, which widened the welfare: introducing the possibility of registering new disabled veterans. Among other things, the new Law sought to tackle the policies of the previous centre-left government directly, like closing the publicly open register of veterans.[1496]

The much-discussed disability status for H.V.O. disabled veterans remained a problem for Croatia, which Milanović's Government allegedly wanted to prevent. In 2013, the Government decided to continue paying out pensions to these veterans but cut their disability

[1494] Hina, 'Veliki sastanak u MinistarsT.V.u branitelja: Šator u Savskoj ostaje i dalje...', Večernji list, 18 Apr. 2016, https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/veliki-sastanak-u-ministarsT.V.u-branitelja-sator-u-savskoj-ostaje-i-dalje...-2888228 (29 Dec. 2022); Jutarnji.hr, 'Đuro Glogoški objavio kraj prosvjeda: 'Šator je postao institucija, odnijet ćemo ga u muzej u Vukovaru'', Jutarnji list, 26 Apr. 2016, https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/duro-glogoski-objavio-kraj-prosvjeda-sator-je-postao-institucija-odnijet-cemo-ga-u-muzej-u-vukovaru-4049166 (29 Dec. 2022).
[1495] Jutarnji.hr, 'Đuro Glogoški objavio kraj prosvjeda'.
[1496] Jutarnji.hr, ''Nema novih branitelja ni ratnih invalida, samo ispravljamo nepravdu. Oni nemaju privilegije, nego prava'', Jutarnji list, 13 Jan. 2022, https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/nema-novih-branitelja-ni-ratnih-invalida-samo-ispravljamo-nepravdu-oni-nemaju-privilegije-nego-prava-15144952 (29 Dec. 2022); Ivanka Toma, 'Stiže novi Zakon o braniteljima, doznali smo što se sve točno mijenja', Jutarnji list, 2 Feb. 2022, https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/stize-novi-zakon-o-braniteljima-doznali-smo-sto-se-sve-tocno-mijenja-15047360 (29 Dec. 2022).

status so they would not have to pay all the disability fees and benefits. The Government claimed it cut their disability status as they questioned the legality of their documentation, all issued by the same officer for some 10,000 veterans, with many stating the exact date and place where they were allegedly permanently injured or maimed. As some 150 of these veterans sued Croatia, paying these fees and benefits would include paying interest rates and other court and legal expenses, representing massive financial obligations for the state.[1497] In January 2023, the Constitutional Court overturned one of the cases at the High Administrative Court in Zagreb and decided that the state must compensate the veterans due to the 2017 Law on Veterans. The verdict will likely open the door for all other H.V.O. veterans who lost their cases at the High Administrative Court (*Visoki upravni sud*).[1498]

In the end, the new Government and Veterans Minister satisfied most of the protesters' demands concerning rights and welfare. At the same time, the associations claimed to have been included in drafting laws much more. However, most demands many saw as unrealistic did not materialise, like the constitutional law or the register of aggressors.

Conclusion

The Savska protest started over wartime symbolism, what veterans and the right-wing referred to as 'the equalisation of the aggressor and the victim'. Started by Glavašević's statement in passing, the protest soon revealed some of the same traits of the anti-Cyrillic campaign: populism; radical ethnonationalism often cloaked in patriotism; fierce anti-Serb, anti-Yugoslav and anti-communist worldview and rhetoric, militarism; devout

[1497] N.D.H.Z.D.S., 'Prijenos sastanka predstavnika branitelja', *Nacional*, 9 Jun. 2015.
[1498] Slavica Lukić, 'Ustavni sud: Pripadnici H.V.O-a imaju pravo na invalidninu! Hrvatskoj prijete milijunske odštete', Jutarnji list, 22 Jan. 2023, https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/ustavni-sud-pripadnici-H.V.o-a-imaju-pravo-na-invalidninu-hrvatskoj-prijete-milijunske-odstete-15298034 (23 Jan. 2023).

Catholicism.[1499] While Serbs were mostly the target concerning the Government's alleged plan to give benefits to former rebels, the issue of Yugoslavs served as a scarecrow, an arch enemy of Croats that takes many shapes.[1500] Although Savska protesters claimed to have represented a much larger section of society – sometimes claiming to have represented all the disenfranchised groups – they emanated solely conservative values. Nevertheless, Savska protesters voiced some real, authentic concerns of Croatian veterans, often faced with corruption, dysfunctional bureaucracy and the rule of law, inconsistencies and numerous legal acts and state bodies they had to navigate to achieve their rights. The struggles of some (or many) protesters were real, as they depended on social benefits slowly taken away by the Government that tried to systematise and potentially lower the welfare cost in the context of a lengthy recession. However, many protest leaders were not members of an underprivileged group but rather members of an elite, enjoying above-average pensions or owning large private enterprises, investing money in professional sports.

Since the beginning of the protest, it was never clear what the priorities of the protesters were, as at times, it seemed that some demands and actions were a vehicle for something else. Therefore, it was unclear if ideological demands – like banning N.G.O.s that did not accept the dominant narrative on the Homeland War or the idea of a register of aggressors – were more important than resolving specific veteran problems and policies protesters advocated. Continuously changing and new demands from Savska protesters could have resulted from the 'composite mobilisation' of various strands of motivation and incentives pulled together' between different veteran associations. Some may have advocated more practical issues, while others preferred ideological ones.[1501] Like in some previous periods, Savska protesters used the reaffirmation of the dominant narrative to inflate their (veteran) value and demand

[1499] The religious element was much more present in the Savska protest.
[1500] Jović, *Rat i mit*, pp 231-2.
[1501] Dolenec and Širinić, 'Mobilising against change', p. 246.

specific policy changes that would follow that inflation. Their defence of the dominant narrative included silencing alternative narratives – like potential P.T.S.D. cases among Croatian Serbs – in a way that sanctified 'cultural victim trauma and silenced cultural perpetrator trauma'.[1502]

The Savska protest leaned on the anti-Cyrillic campaign, as these two contentious episodes chronologically followed each other, involving some of the same leaders (Klemm). Like in the anti-Cyrillic campaign, the rhetoric used by these movements more or less correlated with the one used by H.D.Z. under Karamarko, using anti-Serb, anti-Yugoslav, and anti-Communist sentiments to impose an even more conservative and ethnonational version of Croatia's past. The protesters and Karamarko showed authoritarian traits and ambition for curtailing the right to free speech, trying to police alternative interpretations of Croatia's recent past while promoting specific values and ideas as common truths or Croatia's foundations. Both viewed Milanović's Government as 'traitors', as the one that 'is not of the [Croatian] people', that 'never wanted an independent Croatia', and therefore thought and worked on bringing it down. The two sides often publicly supported each other, and there were numerous ties between them.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume that both the Headquarters and Savska protesters were mere H.D.Z.'s 'puppets on a string'. The correlation between the two sides' goals potentially resulted from the congruent nature of their political beliefs.[1503] As both H.D.Z. and most veteran associations built their identity on Tuđman's narrative of the war, it is not a surprise that they use the same rhetoric in battling their ideological and political opponents.[1504] Sometimes, H.D.Z. did control some of the figures in both protest movements,

[1502] Milekić, 'A protest, coup d'état', pp 238-9.
[1503] Bagić, Kardov, and Škacan, 'Mobilizacijska struktura', p. 217.
[1504] Jović, Rat i mit, pp 197-9; Milekić, 'A protest, coup d'état', p. 240.

similar to smaller right-wing parties and groups often gravitating towards the party. Thus, on certain occasions, protest leaders tried to secure certain benefits for themselves, prompting their political career, like Deur, who became Grabar-Kitarović's advisor in 2015 and entered the Parliament as a member of the H.D.Z. in 2020.[1505]

Despite this, some facts point to the fact that H.D.Z. probably co-opted some of the goals and policies set out by protesters. Liberal and left-wing media often portrayed Karamarko as a mastermind who organised all these seemingly grass-roots conservative movements in his plan to deepen ideological rifts in Croatian society, mobilising the right-wing constituency and toppling the Government. Although that probably was true in some cases, these conservative groups also outlined H.D.Z.'s political direction.[1506] While Tuđman's – and to a degree Sanader's – H.D.Z. set the direction of the Catholic Church and various right-wing groups, dominating the political scene; Karamarko worked the other way around, putting the far-right in charge of the party programme.

In contrast to Tuđman and Sanader, Karamarko was a weak H.D.Z. president and leader in general. As before, veteran associations and groups took advantage of H.D.Z. weaknesses to take the helm, radically shifting the well-documented client-patron relationship. Both anti-Cyrillic and Savska protesters saw an opportunity, seeing that Karamarko's H.D.Z. needed more open fronts in cultural wars. Veteran associations and groups saw that H.D.Z. was searching for radical initiatives to support and undermine the Government, so they met the demand. However, it is highly likely that the H.D.Z. strategy and perceived closeness to these

[1505] Vedran Vrabec, 'Tko je sve ušao u Sabor? Evo imena 151 novog zastupnika', Telegram, 6 Jul. 2020, https://www.telegram.hr/politika-kriminal/tko-je-sve-usao-u-sabor-evo-imena-151-novog-zastupnika/ (10 Jan. 2023).
[1506] Milekić, 'A protest, coup d'état', p. 241.

movements – especially Savska protesters – did not bring many votes and cost the party a lot in the more moderate constituency.[1507]

Finally, both protest movements had long-lasting effects, as they helped solidify the dominant narrative in the public space and political scene. Despite sporadic outbursts of different counter-narratives, these two protest movements helped pressure the political establishment to fully accept the Homeland War's dominant narrative. Also, in the long term, the anti-Cyrillic campaign and the Savska protest further curtailed certain reconciliatory efforts and contributed to a lasting division in the public arena. During these years, anti-Serb rhetoric and politically incorrect speech were normalised in Croatia's public space, entering mainstream media. Cases of ethnically motivated violence, intolerance, intimidation and hate speech targeting Serbs were almost continuously rising for years after the protest.[1508]

[1507] Milekić, 'A protest, coup d'état', p. 241.
[1508] Jović, Rat i mit, pp 235-9; Tihomir Ponoš and Nikola Vukobratović, *Bulletin #22: Historijski revizionizam, govor mržnje i nasilje prema Srbima u 2021.* (Zagreb, 2022), p. 12.

Conclusion

Constructing and reinforcing the dominant narrative

By achieving its full independence and international recognition during the 1990s war, contemporary Croatian politics and national identity were built around that conflict. Referred to as the Homeland War, the very name of the conflict triggers an emotional engagement constructed to bring Croatian society together semantically. Widely considered the central historical event, the Homeland War functions as Croatia's foundational myth. As such, it offers a straightforward interpretation of an otherwise complex historical event that gave birth to an independent country. However, this sanitised and one-dimensional narrative, erasing and downplaying all the nuances, was not naturally born from the destructive legacy of the war that left over 20,000 dead only in Croatia – with thousands more in the neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina. This dominant narrative was created and promoted through official and unofficial channels, both top-down and bottom-up. While the main mythmaker of this interpretation was Tuđman and the H.D.Z., Croatian veterans were important mnemonic agents (warriors) for building, petrifying, and keeping the narrative alive.

Veteran associations and *ad hoc* groups – founded for specific temporary purposes – have since 1992 continuously worked on building the narrative alongside the political elite – mostly Tuđman and H.D.Z., but others as well. Positioning themselves as 'defenders' – another emotionally loaded term – veteran associations established the high moral ground early on. Aligned with Croatian foreign policy since 1991, focussed on presenting the war as an international aggression of Serbia and Montenegro (Yugoslavia), veteran associations promoted the simplistic view of the conflict, rejecting all notions of a civil conflict. Associations insisted on the interpretation – furthered by Croatian authorities as well – that the Croatian nation defended itself from the Yugoslav (Serbian and Montenegrin) aggressor

while Croats were victims of Serbs. The focus on aggression was crucial as it furthered their role as ‘defenders’, distinguishing them from many veterans of contemporary armed conflicts fought overseas. Therefore, veteran associations and groups insisted on the war's defensive character and their position as ‘defenders’ of the Croatian homeland and nation. According to this interpretation, led by Tuđman, Croatian veterans came out of the war victorious, fighting off the stronger enemy and fulfilling the 900-year-long dream of an independent state. Veterans’ symbolic strength came from the notion that they ‘created Croatia’, an independent and sovereign state. As creators – alongside Tuđman and the ‘state-creating’ H.D.Z. – veterans have symbolic ownership over Croatia and its course in the future.

Following the narrative of a defensive war, Croatian veteran associations fiercely rejected the notion of Croatia’s aggression in Bosnia and Herzegovina, often characterised by oblivion and ignoring to talk about the conflict. Finally, veteran associations and groups battled those offering counter-narratives that questioned that dichotomy further to cement the perpetrator-victim dichotomy between Serbs and Croats. One of these counter-narratives was the one put forward by the I.C.T.Y. and part of the civil society in the early 2000s, which revealed facts and suspicions about crimes committed by Croatian forces against Serb and Bosniak civilians in the Bosnian War. As the prosecution of these crimes was curtailed by Croatia’s 1990s regime, opening the discussion about, let alone their prosecution before both domestic and international courts, presented a severe blow to Croatia’s ontological security in the eyes of the right-wing and veteran associations. By offering the trope of ‘equalising the aggressor and victim’, veteran associations mobilised against such discussions and policy changes.

Veteran associations and groups did this by transforming the Homeland War, or its memory, into a value, mimicking other values in society: democracy, the rule of law, freedom of speech, and human rights in general. Thus, veteran associations mobilised around protecting this war memory, following the dominant narrative. Once again, taking their place as

defenders – as they are officially and commonly referred to – veterans defended the 'dignity' of the war, opposing the creeping criminalisation of the conflict, allegedly indicated by the prosecution of Croatian war crime suspects. Veteran associations and groups ascribed dignity to the war and turned it into a value equal to the values of democratic societies: the freedom of speech, the rule of law and personal freedoms. At the same time, some persons accused of war crimes – Norac, Gotovina and Bobetko – became symbols to be used and defended alongside the war memory. As they became symbols of the war, veteran associations and groups saw the potential persecution of these three officers as the persecution of them all and the Homeland War itself.

For veteran associations and groups, these individuals – which could also be used for some lower-level officers on the local level – were part of the Homeland War as a value. As liberal democracy relies on free elections and the rule of law, the values of the Homeland War are its wartime leaders and commanders. They, too, were transformed into a value and, as such, were taken out of public discussion and untouchable. Hence the slogan 'We are all Mirko Norac', as veterans and part of the public claimed they are all him. Many used Gotovina as a pop-cultural icon on graffiti and T-shirts. In Bobetko's case, veterans and right-wingers turned his house into a fortress and a shrine, where political elites had to come in search of the general's approval, a blessing for their next course of action.

Veterans as memory entrepreneurs and veto players

Veteran associations and groups took control over the narrative of the Homeland War during the early 2000s. While before they helped create and reproduce it on the margins of public debates, in the early 2000s, veterans became the ones who reinforced the narrative and defended it from counter-narratives coming from the I.C.T.Y., part of media and civil society.

Veteran associations and groups became the leading memory entrepreneurs consulted by political elites when formulating memory politics regarding the 1990s war. Through consistent advocacy and pressure, veteran associations and groups managed to alleviate the war's dominant (or hegemonic) narrative into an official one, encapsulated in the Declaration on the Homeland War passed by the Parliament in October 2000. The Declaration represented the materialisation of discursive demands made by veterans, showing how memory could be officially implemented and have real-life ramifications. The Declaration exhibited borderline entrenchment of the legislative into the judicial branch, trampling the independence of the judiciary and the rule of law.

Although the Declaration does not officially have the character of a law, as there are no formal sanctions if someone does not abide by it, the document can still be used to silence and police different counter-narratives trying to oppose the official one. Offering a sanitised narrative about the war, the Declaration would serve as a perfect, although legally non-binding, document for policing the discussion on the legacy of the Homeland War. In recent cases after 2015, authorities and veteran associations criticised journalists, T.V. hosts and even films for breaching the Declaration.[1509] In some cases, veteran associations called for turning the Declaration into a law to sanction its breaching.[1510] Even H.N.S., who once

[1509] Željko Dragašević, 'Priopćenje Z.U.V. H.G.P. zbog kršenje Ustava R.H. i Deklaracije o Domovinskom ratu', Zbor udruga veterana hrvatskih gardijskih postrojbi, 22 Nov. 2017, https://www.zuvhgp.hr/index.php/novosti/73-priopcenje-zuv-hgp-zbog-krsenje-ustava-rh-i-deklaracije-o-domovinskom-ratu (31 Mar. 2023); Hrvoje Šimičević, 'Neistina o Domovinskom ratu', Novosti, 18 Feb. 2018, https://www.portalnovosti.com/neistina-o-domovinskom-ratu (31 Mar. 2023); Gordan Duhaček, 'Medved ljut zbog kršenja Deklaracije o Domovinskom ratu. Može li vas za to kazniti?', Index, 3 Nov. 2021, https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/sto-uopce-pise-u-deklaraciji-o-domovinskom-ratu-na-koju-se-poziva-tomo-medved/2315509.aspx (31 Mar. 2023).
[1510] Hina, 'Veterani: Načela Deklaracije o Domovinskom ratu pretvoriti u zakonske odredbe', Jutarnji list, 11 May 2020, https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/veterani-nacela-deklaracije-o-domovinskom-ratu-pretvoriti-u-zakonske-odredbe-10297048 (31 Mar. 2023).

expressed the most significant opposition to the Declaration, incorporated it into the school curriculum.[1511]

The most significant success of veterans' campaigning in the 2000-2 period was that the centre-left Government and officials picked up their rhetoric, thus reproducing the dominant narrative. Veteran associations successfully imposed their discourse and tropes on the Homeland War on the political elite. Therefore, Government officials started using syntagms like 'criminalisation' or 'dignity' of the Homeland War, promoting them as values equal to the ones proclaimed as highest in liberal democracies: individual freedoms, the rule of law, and independent judiciary. Protecting the 'dignity' of the Homeland War by following the official narrative became equally, if not more, important than the prosecution of war crimes, as Bobetko's case especially demonstrated. This contributed to grounding the dominant narrative and silencing counter-narratives at the official level. Thus, the transformation of the dominant narrative into an official one was completed besides the Declaration, while other counter-narratives were toned down and pushed to the margins. This would forever change the attitude of the Croatian public towards crimes committed by Croatian forces, whereby these counter-narratives survived in pockets of the population, promoted by some intellectuals, academics, media and civil society, but not the broader echelons of society.

During the 2013-5 period, veteran associations and groups again tried to re-establish themselves as the main memory entrepreneurs. Their success was partial, as the authorities still insisted on specific policies. However, the Government did not oppose the Headquarters and Savska protesters over the main facets of the dominant narrative. On both occasions, veteran associations and groups pressured the authorities to consider their demands and try to prove their patriotism by re-producing the dominant narrative. Veteran associations still

[1511] Šimičević, 'Neistina o Domovinskom ratu'.

outlined the main narrative, within which officials tried to integrate other aspects that supposedly did not endanger the hegemonic narrative while promoting values more akin to the E.U. membership – such as minority rights and the rule of law.

Throughout decades, veteran associations and groups managed to assert themselves as one of the leading veto players regarding different war-related policy changes. In the 2000-2 period, veteran associations and groups managed to secure deals for war crimes suspects (Norac and Bobetko), pressure the Government to allow suspects to be free (Gotovina) and bring the cooperation between Croatia and the I.C.T.Y. to a very low level. During the 2013-4 anti-Cyrillic campaign, veteran activities managed to postpone the implementation of bilingual signs and convince the Constitutional Court to take a more lenient approach to fulfilling constitutional rights for national minorities. Savska protesters managed to defer the implementation of pension legislation and persisted in occupying the public space in front of the War Veterans Ministry without appropriate permits, showing that laws did not apply equally to other citizens. These episodes showed how their discursive shaping of narratives had real-life, political consequences, as they managed to block or disrupt policy changes. Veteran associations and groups established themselves as veto players that the state had to consult when changing policies. Although they sometimes dropped some demands, they often got something in return, usually manifested in enhanced welfare or law amendments.

(Re)-negotiating the dominant war narrative

Through decades, veteran associations kept to the dominant narrative as a script that had to be followed and respected by all in Croatian society. Associations kept the narrative alive for years by constantly reproducing it in different situations and contexts – from the immediate post-war period when memories were fresh and ever-present to almost twenty years after the

conflict when this memory became part of a cultural war. As mnemonic warriors defending the memory of the war, veterans were ready to wage these mnemonic battles with numerous actors, institutional and non-institutional, domestic and foreign. As constantly emphasised, veteran associations and groups claimed that the dominant narrative represented a factual representation of the war, the foundations on which contemporary Croatia was created and could not be negotiated.

While the main facets of the narrative remain untouched, veteran associations were ready to negotiate certain discursive changes in exchange for material gains and state support. Thus, while H.D.Z. was in power in 2004-11, many mainstream veteran associations were ready to abandon their previous anti-I.C.T.Y. position. Therefore, many veteran associations – but not all – accepted Sanader's paradigm shift that secured lesser resistance to Gotovina's arrest and extradition. Sanader's shift from rejecting I.C.T.Y.'s jurisdiction altogether as Croatian officers were perceived as innocent to extraditing generals to The Hague to prove their innocence was a radical move. However, the paradigm shift was conveniently embedded into the narrative of defending the 'dignity of the Homeland War', as the generals' trial would represent the last defence of the war in The Hague, supported by the state. Thus, with Gotovina's arrest in 2005, Sanader's Government almost completely pacified the mainstream associations, controlling the narrative. While veteran associations and groups expressed dissatisfaction with Gotovina's arrest and extradition, they did not build a political platform around it – like in the early 2000s. Even when the I.C.T.Y. sentenced generals Gotovina and Markač to lengthy prison sentences in 2011, the Government persuaded mainstream associations not to protest, claiming it would hurt the generals' cause in the appeal process. Additionally, in the same period, many mainstream associations supported the Government's cuts to their benefits, again connecting this with patriotic sentiments of helping and sacrificing for their country.

This reaction starkly contrasted with the veteran response in the early 2000s and 2014, when centre-left governments tried to introduce welfare cuts to alleviate the budget deficit and recession. Then, veteran associations and groups attempted to frame these cuts as proof of the Government's 'criminalisation of the Homeland War' and general lack of care for veterans. The episode showed how veteran associations often used the promotion of the dominant narrative to pursue other agendas. Depending on the situation, veteran associations tried to advocate better welfare or personal interests by fighting over the narrative. This is one of the reasons why certain facets could be negotiated, specific demands dropped, and some critiques toned down.

Re-addressing the client-patron relationship

Scholars established the existence of a client-patron relationship between veteran associations and H.D.Z.[1512] These ties go back to the early days of veteran associations (1992-5), while the war was still ongoing and H.D.Z. held all political power in the country. H.D.Z. took advantage of the bond it created with veterans since the beginning of the war and even slightly before. H.D.Z., leading the country in the summer of 1990, when Croatian Serbs helped by Yugoslav secret services put their secessionist plans into motion, armed its party members and started an extensive construction of its loyalist police force. Therefore, during the first stages of the war, H.D.Z. relied on loyal, party – or at least party-tied – cadres. Before massive numbers of people started to volunteer and before the general mobilisation in November 1991, party members formed units, and many took commanding posts.

[1512] Dolenec, 'A soldier's state'; Dolenec and Širinić, 'Veterans as a pivotal political actor'; Jović, *Rat i mit*.

Therefore, veterans founded their first associations in 1992-3 with direct and indirect regime support, which saw benefits in controlling the massive number of demobilised soldiers and police officers. Tuđman's regime immediately built ties to veteran associations, which supported state and party (H.D.Z.) politics while directly or indirectly confronting the regime's opponents – opposition parties, party dissidents, independent media, the Serb minority or the international community. H.D.Z.'s regime – as distinctions between state institutions and party were sometimes blurred – had a role in different turbulent episodes in these associations: fragmentation and leadership changes. H.D.Z. – or groups within the party – tried to keep control over associations. Different strains in H.D.Z. supported different associations that tried to make the most of political sponsorship while often directing veterans to give their electoral support to the party.

Veteran associations built an incredibly close relationship with Tuđman and Defence Minister Šušak, who could count on them for electoral, political and symbolic support. Veteran associations saw Tuđman as a Messiah-like figure who led them to a historic victory. The transgressions of the regime, in veterans' eyes, were not to be tied to him but to corrupt and unpatriotic politicians and bureaucrats who, together with many of Croatia's enemies, conspired against Croatia's freedom. H.V.I.D.R., one of the most recognisable and influential associations, built a very special bond with Šušak, who often invested his political legitimacy in advocating for the rights of disabled veterans. The contentious period of 1996 revealed these ties, when the symbiosis and cooperation between Šušak and H.V.I.D.R. were visible, as the association's struggle for the rights of disabled veterans became a part of inter-party and inter-governmental power struggle. In a conflict between two visions and models of post-war Croatia offered by techno-managers and Šušak's conservative faction, H.V.I.D.R. – and other associations – naturally took the side of the latter group, which provided continuity in pay-outs towards different vulnerable war-affected groups – disabled and other veterans,

widows and families of killed soldiers. As Šušak and his group had a decisive influence on Tuđman, the Government decided to fulfil most of the demands of protesting veterans.

However, despite the regime's praise of veterans and their sacrifice for an independent state, during the 1990s, veteran associations were still not pivotal political actors. Although the state consulted them, and their support for the regime was expected, H.D.Z. and Tuđman could not be challenged regarding running the country. Veteran criticism and challenge of this dynamic took place in 1996 when one part of the regime conflicted with the other, and in the late 1990s, the regime was falling apart. Therefore, Šušak's and Tuđman's passings in 1998-9 only temporarily alleviated the lurking veteran dissatisfaction, using these deaths to achieve national unity.

Veteran associations became pivotal political actors only in the early 2000s, when the H.D.Z.-veterans axis was the strongest, with only limited veteran contentious behaviour. This axis was somewhat proven during the 2000-2 period. As H.D.Z. lost power, veteran associations and groups provided the party with its symbolic power and untarnished image, helping it remain a relevant political force. There was a certain degree of cooperation between H.D.Z. and many associations and *ad hoc* groups. H.D.Z. helped provide logistical and political help and mobilise party members and the general population, transforming the veteran revolt into a popular uprising. Although H.D.Z. was sometimes careful not to be directly associated with veteran activities, presenting them as spontaneous acts against the unpopular Government, these ties and links were sometimes too numerous to be disregarded. Like in 1996, veteran associations and groups took part in less prominent but still existing internal power struggles in H.D.Z. taking place in the background between Sanader and Pašalić, trying to fill up the power vacuum created after Tuđman's death. The major difference was that this internal power struggle in the early 2000s was not so directly manifested in veteran activities as in 1996 when protesting disabled veterans promoted Šušak

and his clique, who provided logistical and political support in the conflict against the techno-managers.

As described by other scholars, this veteran dependence on H.D.Z. and ties to the state – controlled by the same party most of the time – is the by-product of their marginal position.[1513] By taking part in this relationship, veteran associations offered political and electoral support. In contrast, H.D.Z., when in power, provided substantial welfare for veterans, giving them a symbolically important place as well. Through the years, some of these associations transformed into typical clientelist organisations for political purposes. This relationship makes veterans even more dependent on H.D.Z. and the state, anchoring them at the margins of society and keeping them alert. Even Klemm, one of the most prominent veteran leaders of the 2010s, admitted that while S.D.P.'s governments unified veterans, H.D.Z.'s fragmented them. Although this is an overstatement to a degree, veteran associations and groups easily mobilise against centre-left governments.

In contrast, veterans tend to fragment during the H.D.Z.'s governments, with mainstream associations supporting the authorities – especially during the 2004-11 period – while only local and marginal associations oppose them. In Klemm's words, H.D.Z. manipulates veterans, using them in proxy wars against S.D.P. As soon as H.D.Z. assumes power, veterans lose their power and are unable to unify to advocate their cause.[1514] While veterans praised unity as one of the most sacred values, they used many opportunities to – especially under H.D.Z. – divide among themselves. Therefore, veterans became victims of H.D.Z.'s policies while receiving better welfare. One of the reasons for such a dynamic is that even if

[1513] Sokolić, 'Heroes at the margins', pp 156-7; Koska and Matan, 'Croatian citizenship regime', p. 145.
[1514] Renata Rašović, 'Pet godina od postavljanja šatora: gdje su i što danas misle akteri braniteljskog prosvjeda', Večernji list, 12 Oct. 2019, https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/klemm-sdp-ove-vlade-ujedinjuju-branitelje-a-hdz-ove-ih-razjedinjuju-1351763 (1 Apr. 2023).

veterans saw more negative consequences of such cooperation, some of their associations' leaders and members personally profited from this relationship with H.D.Z. – either by fulfilling their interests or by implementing policies they supported. Tied to characteristics of Croatia's transition, the bureaucracy often disrupted veterans' access to benefits due to the state's problems with corruption and clientelism in allocating public services.

However, this thesis further probed the client-patron relationship between veteran associations and H.D.Z. In this relationship, associations gravitated towards H.D.Z. depending on the party's power or perceived power. Therefore, when veteran associations felt that H.D.Z. was weak or was looking for political and other allies to improve their position and image, they took advantage of these situations. At the same time, it is true that H.D.Z. mostly kept veteran associations under control, but that control was never complete. Also, when they felt H.D.Z. was weak or even falling apart – like in 2011 – veteran associations were quick to take advantage of it. Such behaviour was typical for non-mainstream associations that probably estimated they risked less by confronting the party in power – as they were not receiving hefty funds from the state budget – or felt more loyal to their member base. Thus, in 2011, many veteran associations and groups protested the Government's handling of the Purda crisis. These protests morphed into Facebook protests triggered by prolonged recession and corruption scandals, showing that Purda's case was only a vehicle for carrying veteran disappointment with the overall situation in Croatia.

Protests in 2011 showed that the veteran movement became so fragmented that it was hard for H.D.Z. to control all associations and *ad hoc* groups. While H.D.Z. managed to control mainstream associations, some non-mainstream and local associations were picking up the general resentment towards the Government. These associations often had less to lose by opposing the Government, as they did not receive extensive state funding, and their leaders were not H.D.Z. members or they had some local loyalties they prioritised. Although Dolenec

and Širinić proved that veterans tend to enter protest cycles while centre-left parties are in power while H.D.Z. is in opposition, this relationship tends to be slightly more complicated.[1515] Therefore, even when Sanader imposed the paradigm shift on Croatia's cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. in 2004-5, many local branches of mainstream associations and some non-mainstream ones opposed him. Although these local or non-mainstream associations did not express their dissatisfaction through protests, they managed to cause Croatia and the Government reputational damage by initiating Poster wars. These renegade associations and groups had some influence despite larger memberships and the media presence of more prominent, mainstream associations. General overviews of veteran activities tend to focus on national organisations of mainstream associations or massive movements but sometimes do not look at the complexity of veteran activism in smaller communities.

Additional ties between H.D.Z. and veteran associations are simply a result of the party's influence on political life in Croatia. Especially during Tuđman's rule, H.D.Z. actively worked on erasing the boundaries between the Croatian state and the party, subjugating all aspects of public life to the party.[1516] H.D.Z. and Tuđman aimed to control the judiciary, media, sports clubs, popular culture, cultural institutions, unions and civil society. During wartime, when some of these veterans could be re-deployed and employed in the Defence Ministry, and due to the electoral potential of the massive veteran population, it made sense for the regime to establish, nourish, and strengthen these ties. In some associations, H.D.Z.'s presence was direct, while in others, it changed gradually through the informal creeping of the party in the organisation, often tied to changes in associations' leadership.

[1515] Dolenec and Širinić, 'Veterans as a pivotal political actor'.
[1516] This is why it is sometimes hard to distinct between H.D.Z. (a party) and regime or state.

A few other things complicate any attempt to distinguish between veteran agency and associations' proxy roles for H.D.Z. One of them was H.D.Z.'s case of simulating spontaneous bottom-up civic initiatives. Similar to the way Milošević's regime in Serbia during the late 1980s supported or even instigated allegedly spontaneous, apolitical and bottom-up protests, known as the anti-bureaucratic revolution, H.D.Z. had a network of different associations, civic initiatives and even marginal parties that would mobilise around various issues. At the same time, the party would claim to have nothing to do with them. Such was the situation with certain veteran activities: the 1996 protest and veteran activities during the early 2000s.

There is another factor why a simple elite and non-elite dichotomy could not explain association members' agency within H.D.Z. Veteran associations' leaderships and regular members were often H.D.Z. members as well. Therefore, it is hard to say if specific policies, initiatives or planning for protests are bottom-up or top-down. For example, it is hard to distinguish whether actions taken by H.V.I.D.R. were bottom-up or top-down, as Đakić was (and still is) both association President and H.D.Z. M.P. and member of the party presidency. Sometimes, specific actions taken by associations result from joined interests between H.D.Z. and veterans. The activities of such associations often took place at the junctions of party and association interest, while leaders may have switched loyalties during the process. Also, these veteran leaders sometimes used associations to pursue party interests or *vice versa*.

Even during the most contentious periods – 2000-2 and 2013-5 – when the client-patron relationship was clearly at hand, the relationship between H.D.Z. and veteran associations was slightly more complicated, shifting the subordination relationship between them. In both periods, H.D.Z. was coming back from heavy electoral losses marred by corruption scandals. In this context, even in 2000-2, H.D.Z., although controlling some associations, often followed the lead of veteran associations and groups. Although the structure of these

associations was intertwined with H.D.Z., it is hard to pinpoint where policies were formulated centres, as party officials picked up the rhetoric and narratives from below. To a degree, H.D.Z. appropriated the veteran movement, often using it for party purposes. At the same time, there was a genuine veteran agency in the early 2000s, and sometimes, this appropriation was either welcomed or taken for granted – due to mainstream associations' links to H.D.Z. since the early 1990s. Even during this most intense, contentious period of the early 2000s, some associations did not want to participate in these activities. Although usually marginal and local, this resistance opposed both the methods and rhetoric used by veteran associations and their ties to H.D.Z.[1517] Additionally, some mainstream associations like U.H.V.D.R. and U.H.D.D.R. only initially supported the veteran rebellion but soon toned down their rhetoric and activities, becoming more of a silent partner to the government. Therefore, the uprising was not as massive and general within the veteran community as sometimes presented.

In the 2013-5 period, although there were evident ties between H.D.Z. and veteran associations and groups initiating contentious activities, the client-patron relationship was somewhat different. Although H.D.Z. was trying to subjugate the Government through various civic initiatives at the time, the party followed the lead of veteran associations and groups. As described in chapters 5 and 6, unlike during the 1990s under Tuđman and even the 2000s under Sanader when H.D.Z. was controlling the right-wing parties and groups, in 2013-5, it was the other way around. Unlike before, when H.D.Z. was setting the agenda for the right wing, now such right-wing groups were setting the political program for the party led by Karamarko. Thus, veteran associations and groups from the period – Headquarters and

[1517] In 2000, U.D.H.R.M. rejected taking part in a discussion with veteran associations around the new Law on Veterans organised by the H.D.Z. See: Unnamed (Correspondence from H.D.Z. Vice-President Drago Krpina to U.D.H.R.M. President Sveto Letica), 31 Aug. 2000, U.D.H.R.M., registrator Prijem dopisa 1997-1998. g., 1999., 2000.

Savska protesters – took Karamarko's ultra-conservative rhetoric and further radicalised it. H.D.Z., on the path of reintroducing ethnonationalism since 2010-1 when Kosor led the party, followed the radicalised veteran groups, amending the party programme according to veteran demands and rhetoric. Although H.D.Z.'s leadership probably had a role in formulating some veteran demands, they were mainly in the backseat, offering political support. This is partially a result of H.D.Z.'s tarnished image after numerous corruption scandals and Sanader's arrest. Whereas H.D.Z. had lost much of its credibility, being often labelled a corrupt party, veteran associations and groups had their image more-less intact.

Additionally, Karamarko was a weak party leader who lacked the political imagination to formulate genuine party politics. Karamarko did not create politics but followed and tried to appropriate politics from below. Focussed only on confronting the Government – and Prime Minister Milanović in particular – Karamarko was willing to support anything coming from the conservative civil society, including veteran initiatives. Supporting such civic initiatives also benefited H.D.Z., as the party claimed it only supported authentic sentiments from the bottom.

Veterans as conservative actors in Croatian society

Since the beginning, veteran associations have been loyal to the foundations of Croatia's contemporary nationalism built on the legacy of the 1990s war. As this thesis demonstrated, veteran associations and groups often stressed their apolitical position and the existence of an umbrella veteran identity. This supposed umbrella identity united all veterans as they valued Croatia, for whom they all fought, above all. Croatia's national independence and statehood are the most cherished values for veteran associations and groups. Veteran associations often claimed politics could not divide them, as they would unite when Croatia was threatened.

Despite this, earlier studies showed that veterans leaned more to the right, connected to their wartime experience. The thesis showed their ties to H.D.Z., reflecting their belief that it is the 'state-forming' party. Leaning into H.D.Z.'s claims, centre-left parties are 'not of [Croatian] people', as they were accused of never wanting an independent Croatia.

Veteran associations built their ideology on anti-Communist, anti-Yugoslav and anti-Serb sentiments, adhering to Catholic beliefs as well. Specific, sometimes marginal, and occasionally mainstream associations and groups have been prone to Ustaša nostalgia since the 1990s. Such behaviour was also a result of Croatia's ambivalent relationship towards that legacy. Nevertheless, veteran associations and groups became more radical through the years, as visible in their rhetoric and demands. Each time centre-left parties came to power, or during certain major events – recession and H.D.Z.'s loss of credibility – veteran associations and groups would further radicalise, becoming more conservative, aligning with far-right and ultra-conservative groups. This first took place in 2000-2, when different radical veteran groups emanated radical ethnonationalism and chauvinism, with prominent use of Ustaša iconography. Similar ultra-conservative rhetoric, with certain radicalised leaders like Janjić 'Tromblon', came to the fore in 2011 during protests over Purda's arrest.

Finally, during the 2013-5 period, many veteran associations and groups participated in culture wars between conservatives and authorities. During the anti-Cyrillic campaign, the Headquarters for the Defence of Croatian Vukovar used anti-Serb rhetoric and actively worked on limiting the rights of the Serb national minority. The anti-Cyrillic campaign protracted the growing anti-Serb climate in Croatian society, first initiated during the last days of Kosor's Government and radicalised by Karamarko. In their campaigning, the Headquarters used the methods used by conservative groups advocating against same-sex marriage. Furthermore, they made alliances with these groups and the Catholic Church, which was engaged in a protracted culture war that radicalised the climate in society and

mostly hurt different minorities. This alliance with conservative groups continued during the 2014-5 Savska protest, when its leaders used similar anti-Serb and anti-Yugoslav rhetoric, giving a prominent role to religious symbolism. As the protest went further, its leaders waged campaigns against peace activists and reporters while radicalising their demands. Thus, they demanded abolishment of the Law on General Amnesty (a reoccurring radical veteran demand) and a register of aggressors – demands that aimed at further radicalising the climate and targeting those perceived as internal enemies to the state. These demands demonstrated that veteran associations and groups aimed to introduce long-lasting societal changes.

All this showed how different groups could further radicalise the war memory and use it as part of cultural wars waged against various minorities, as well as other groups and individuals that promote counter-narratives about the 1990s conflict. The war memory thus became more tightly tied to the Catholic religion and ethnonationalism, often succumbing to chauvinism. Such activities drastically and permanently changed the perceived veteran identity tied to conservative values. Thus, in the 2000s and 2010s, it was almost inconceivable that veteran associations would support Pride parades or initiatives for introducing sexual education in schools.[1518]

Veterans' lasting effects on Croatia

With their periodical protest campaigns and presence in the public sphere, veteran associations and groups established themselves as one of the most important actors in

[1518] Otvoreno pismo ministru branitelja Predragu Matiću – Fredu, 16 May 2012, U.P.R.H., org. jed. 71-02-07 Posebni savjetnik predsjednika Republike Hrvatske za branitelje, kl. oz. 560-01/12-01/16, ur. br. 363-12-01; I. R., 'Zadarski branitelji zgroženi uvođenjem spolnog odgoja', 057 info, 17 Jan. 2013, https://www.057info.hr/vijesti/2013-01-17/zadarski-branitelji-zgrozeni-uvodenjem-spolnog-odgoja#!???-17-01-2013-15-41-03 (1 Apr. 2023); D. M., 'Evo protiv čega se sve danas izjasnio Zvonimir Šeparović', Dnevnik.hr, 24 Jan. 2013, https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/evo-protiv-cega-se-sve-danas-izjasnio-zvonimir-separovic---271902.html (1 Apr. 2023).

Croatian politics and society. Veteran associations and groups were vital for the organisational grounding of Croatia's contemporary nationalism. Their activities and rhetoric shaped and kept alive the dominant narrative that grounded itself and became a popular belief, contested only by some. Veteran associations and groups helped the political elites establish control over discourse, marginalising the counter-narratives. Their ambition often exceeded fighting for veteran rights and benefits, as they aimed at shaping post-war Croatia according to their visions. Since the early days, unsatisfied with the grim post-engagement reality, exacerbated by turbulent economic transition, widespread corruption and clientelism, veterans often repeated the trope 'is this what we fought for?'. This became the discursive weapon to confront everything from pension or welfare cuts to cooperation with the I.C.T.Y. or introducing Cyrillic signs in Vukovar.

Their periodic protest cycles and ambition to shape Croatia's politics and society by many, but not all, associations have caused a backlash in liberal and left-wing circles. The 2000-1 and 2014-5 veteran protests forced counter-protests organised by civil society, ad hoc initiatives and even veterans. These adverse reactions sometimes additionally radicalised the already divided society, making sweeping and demeaning assumptions about protesters and veterans.[1519] Some see veterans as constant disruptors, H.D.Z.'s proxies that enjoy privileges, while they often complain and postpone Croatia's complete transition into a peaceful society.

Although these claims are somewhat overstated, veteran associations and groups did act as the actors of Croatia's ethnonationalism, anchored into anti-Serb, anti-Yugoslav, and anti-Communist sentiments. Rhetoric and discursive framing of many veteran associations and groups – not all – kept these sentiments alive. Even when such rhetoric remained mostly dormant and held at the margins of the veteran movement, it could be easily deployed in

[1519] *Globus*, 3 Apr. 2015.

certain contested situations, triggering shockwaves across society. Many veteran associations' activities contributed to keeping the war alive, as living radicalised memories of wartime events used to silence counter-narratives. Such militarised memory that praises wartime events obstructs the reconciliation within Croatia and the region.

Along the line of postponed reconciliation, the rhetoric of some veteran associations and groups contributed to spreading hate speech towards national minorities – especially during the anti-Cyrillic campaign – and all those opposed to the dominant view of the war in society. By applying radicalised rhetoric, veteran associations helped, mostly, H.D.Z. strengthen the grip of Croatia's politics and society as the country's dominant party. While trying to capture the Croatian state, H.D.Z. could often rely on support from many veteran associations and groups. By reproducing and constantly radicalising the war memory and legacy, veteran associations and groups helped H.D.Z. and conservative forces fight their political opponents and all whom they saw as 'enemies' of the state or those 'who never wanted an independent Croatia'. This witch-hunt spread for decades, constantly re-produced through tropes grounded in right-wing circles.

Activities of veteran associations and groups often obstructed public debates about the war legacy, negatively reacting to different initiatives coming from civil society, intellectual circles, media or even opposing veteran groups. Discussions over the contested issues from the 1990s war often end in very divisive debates, with veteran associations and groups demanding the policing of such debates, targeting individuals.[1520] In veterans' view, facets of the war narrative and even some historical figures – Tuđman and Šušak – are 'sacred' and could not be discussed. Although they could not always prevent debates over the 'sanctities'

[1520] As veterans' uproar against Glavašević comment over P.T.S.D. showed in Chapter 6.

of the 1990s war, they limited them and possibly discouraged many from entering such discussions.

All this did not contribute to freeing up Croatian society by enhancing freedom of expression, which different regimes suppressed through most of the country's twentieth century. Thus, veteran associations and groups played a role in helping political elites across the spectrum tamper with the values of liberal democracy. Besides human rights and individual freedoms – rights of national minorities, freedom of thought, speech and media – veteran activities obstructed the rule of law, especially demonstrated during the 2000-2 period. It all contributed to weakening Croatian democracy, fighting autocratic legacies throughout its short existence as a fully independent state.

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