



RECOM  
Reconciliation Network

# DECADE OF REMEMBRANCE

Memory Politics and  
Commemorative Practices  
in the Post-Yugoslav Countries



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# I. Decade of Remembrance

## I. Decenija sećanja

Regional Report by Helena Ivanov

Edited by Nataša Kandić

### 1. Introduction

Almost thirty years have passed since Yugoslavia violently fell apart, but if one lives in any of the states in the post-Yugoslav space, one will not get the impression that the wars ended a long time ago. In fact, many of the discourses promoted during the 1990s and the early 2000s continue to be promoted in mainstream discourses to date, the conversations and investigations about the missing persons remain unresolved, and many individuals or political parties that ruled the countries back in the 1990s continue to hold positions of power to this day.

To illustrate, a Croatian writer and member of Matica Hrvatska, gave an interview in which she used the term 'bugs' to describe the Serbs. Serbian tabloids, on the other hand, often use the term Ustaše when referring to Croatian citizens. Although these instances might not reflect the prevailing general viewpoint, they underscore the ongoing absence of complete normalisation in discourses within Serbia and Croatia. Hateful and dehumanising narratives persist in diverse pockets of society, indicating an enduring challenge to achieving widespread societal harmony.

At the same time, Bosnia and Herzegovina continues to struggle to function as a proper country, with Bosnian Serbs constantly obstructing the ability of the Presidency to operate effectively, and with Milorad Dodik constantly calling for the secession of Republika Srpska. Finally, relations between Kosovo and Serbia have continued to deteriorate, with the normalisation talks being best described as a one step forward two steps backwards process. The last few months have seen a series of talks between the high officials of Belgrade and Priština which proved mainly futile, since almost none of the agreed sections have been implemented, and multiple escalations of tensions have further complicated what is already a difficult situation.

Thus, not only are we far from an actual reconciliation process between the peoples of the former Yugoslavia, but some countries also remain very far from securing proper, stable, and long-term solutions to key political questions. In this report, we present the argument that part of the problem is the politics of remembrance and how the events that transpired during the Yugoslav Wars are framed and commemorated. In particular, in most of these countries there is a constant attempt to marginalise the victims and the sufferings of the outgroup.<sup>1</sup> To achieve that aim, two key features are notable across countries and cases – *denialism* and *whataboutism* – with many countries either denying that certain crimes have taken place or that their troops were involved in committing such crimes, or else, justifying their troops' actions and crimes by pointing to the crimes committed by the opposing side.

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, the distinction between outgroup and ingroup should be understood as described in the following paper: [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/46530/1/\\_\\_\\_libfile\\_REPOSITORY\\_Content\\_McDoom%2C%20O\\_The%20psychology%20of%20threat%20in%20intergroup%20conflict\\_The%20psychology%20of%20threat%20in%20intergroup%20conflict%20%28Isero%29.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/46530/1/___libfile_REPOSITORY_Content_McDoom%2C%20O_The%20psychology%20of%20threat%20in%20intergroup%20conflict_The%20psychology%20of%20threat%20in%20intergroup%20conflict%20%28Isero%29.pdf)



In addition, there are two discourses which can be noted in most of the cases: *valorisation*<sup>2</sup> of the violence committed by the in-group's troops, as well as an enhanced *victimisation*<sup>3</sup> of the in-group's victims with little regard for the out-group's victims. These features and discourses combined produce a very one-sided picture of the conflicts and the events that transpired during the 1990s. Such portrayal of the wars, in turn, further frustrates the reconciliation process and long-term normalisation of relations. The only exception to these forms of commemorations are non-governmental organisations, and in some countries, local governments, who often call for a more unified and accurate approach to commemorations – thereby demanding recognition of all the victims, irrespective of their ethnicity, and requesting accountability on behalf of their governments.

To build the argument, this report produces a detailed analysis of the commemorative practices in the former Yugoslavia during the last decade – starting in 2012 and ending in 2023. The report consists of seven chapters. In Chapter One, we provide details on the methodology used to produce the report, a short summary of the impact and aftermath of the violent breakup of the former Yugoslavia, and the overall argument that explicates the politics of remembrance across the region. The remaining six chapters look into specific countries: Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. Each chapter includes a theoretical analysis of the politics of remembrance of the country in question, the methodology used to determine which events will be subject to analysis, as well as the methods used to analyse the transcripts of relevant speeches during commemorations, and a detailed analysis of up to five pre-selected events whose commemorations have been analysed over the last ten years.

## 1.1. Methodology

The researchers writing the reports for individual countries have all followed the same methodological guidelines. They selected up to five key events pertaining to the Yugoslav Wars that are commemorated to date (although in some cases, there were only four events, due to a general lack of commemorative practices in the country in question). The selection of events was based on the importance of the event – both during the war or the armed conflict (for example, in the number of casualties, or the impact that event had on the course of the war/armed conflict), but also on the aftermath of the conflict (i.e. whether and to what extent those events were used in shaping the discourses about the war, the armed conflict, victims, and nationalism).

From there, they analysed how the commemorations have been held over the last ten years, specifically from 2012 to 2023. They devoted specific attention to the key narratives promoted during the commemorations, the presence or absence of official government representatives, the presence or lack of NGO and civil society organisations, and of course, any important changes in discourses and narratives about a specific event over the last decade. On top of producing analytically and empirically dense chapters, the researchers have also collected a vast number of transcripts or video recordings of speeches held during the commemorations over the last 10 years, amounting to an empirically rich archival material that can be used for research purposes in the future.

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2 <http://etheses.lse.ac.uk/4409/>

3 <http://etheses.lse.ac.uk/4409/>



Regarding the selection of events, going into excessive methodology of events selection is unnecessary here, as the researchers provide such insights in their respective chapters. So, I will only list the events that were subject to analysis in this report:

- **Serbia:** Srebrenica Genocide, Operation Storm, Štrpci Abductions, the Beginning of the NATO Bombing of Yugoslavia, and the Battle of Košare
- **Croatia:** Operation Storm, Operation Medak Pocket, Battle of Vukovar, Killing of Family Zec, Operation Flash
- **Bosnia and Herzegovina:** Srebrenica Genocide, Kazani Pit Massacre, Markale Massacre, Ahmići Massacre, and White Armband Day
- **Montenegro:** Deportation of Bosniak Refugees, The Siege of Dubrovnik, Kaludjerski Laz Massacre, The Bukovica Abductions and Murders, and The Morinj Prisoners of War Camp
- **North Macedonia:** Unofficial Start of the Armed Conflict, Start of Clashes in Karadak – Lipkovo Region, Karpalak Massacre, Signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement
- **Kosovo:** Reçak Massacre, The Attack on Prekaz, Krusha Massacres, Battle of Koshare, and Dubrava Prison Bombings and Executions



## 2. The Yugoslav Wars

To date, most experts agree that the story of ethnic hatreds seething below the surface and being the key cause of the breakup of Yugoslavia is an inaccurate one. And along the same lines, Gow (2003: 33) notes: “[t]he diversity in Yugoslavia as a whole was especially notable in Bosnia, where Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Muslim populations coexisted, until the country was enveloped by political tension, and eventually, armed hostilities in 1990s.” This peaceful coexistence in the public sphere also extended into people’s personal lives – as evidenced by the high number of ethnically mixed marriages between Croats, Muslims, and Serbs.

Despite this seeming desire for peaceful coexistence, soon after Tito’s death in 1980 the country found itself enveloped in economic and political crises, which culminated with many republics’ witnessing a rise of extreme nationalistic parties whose popularity was officially confirmed in 1990, when most of the republics held their first multiparty elections. In almost all cases, nationalistic and pro-secessionist parties won, all of whom to a varying degree began prioritising national identity and its republic’s interests over those of the Federation. The ideology of “Brotherhood and Unity”, strongly promoted by Tito and the Communist Party, was coming to its end. And by mid-1991, the violent breakup of Yugoslavia had begun.

Over the next 10 years, wars raged across the former Federation, with estimates suggesting that as many as 130,000 people lost their lives between 1991 and 2001.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the forced displacement of millions of people was widespread. In the case of Bosnia, for instance, it is estimated that approximately two million individuals, accounting for nearly half the country’s population at the time, were forced to flee their homes as war raged between 1992 and 1995.<sup>5</sup> The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), established in 1993, indicted 161 individuals for serious violations of international humanitarian law committed in the territory of the former Yugoslavia, of which 93 were sentenced, 18 were acquitted, 13 were referred to national jurisdiction, and 37 died, or had their indictment withdrawn.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout the entire span of the Yugoslav Wars, one consistent factor was the prevalence of the hateful propaganda across all sides, albeit to varying degrees, marking the conflict from its onset to its bitter conclusion. Much of that propaganda was dehumanising – attempting to portray the out-group as subhuman creatures unworthy of the human rights accorded to humans by the virtue of their humanity. In addition, much of that propaganda drew on narratives and discourses evoking memories of World War II – and equating, for example, all Croats with Ustaše. By drawing such comparisons, the Serbian regime was trying to justify the violence committed by its troops against Croatian civilians. But, after the wars came to their end, many hoped that peace would bring prosperity – and that once the arms have been laid aside, the peoples of the former Yugoslavia would be able to coexist and cooperate peacefully. Unfortunately, as this report shows, truth and reconciliation are far from being achieved in this region – with many still evoking the same arguments they did back in the 1990s. What is more, the very commemorations – which are supposed to be moments of remembering the victims – are places in which propaganda tends to be reiterated, only further distancing the peoples of the region, and making their lives more difficult.

4 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/mapa-zrtava-ratova-sfrj/29667630.html>

5 <https://www.icty.org/en/about/what-former-yugoslavia/conflicts>

6 <https://www.icty.org/en/cases/key-figures-cases>





### 3. Politics of Remembrance in the former Yugoslavia

As the individual reports from each of the countries show, the politics of remembrance across the former Yugoslavia is usually characterised by one-sidedness, the victimisation<sup>7</sup> and valorisation<sup>8</sup> of the in-group, and/or excessive denialism of the crimes – thereby resembling the propaganda used in the 1990s to justify the violence committed at the time. Furthermore, these commemorations are frequently employed to propagate nationalistic narratives and foster animosity between nations and ethnic groups, which diverges from the intended purpose of the commemorations, which is to respectfully remember and honour the victims.

Notably, in Serbia, such denialism is illustrated by the regime's constant denial that genocide ever took place in Srebrenica, and a lack of any official state commemoration of the victims of the Srebrenica genocide. In fact, the only groups really commemorating the genocide in Srebrenica are local non-governmental organisations. As for the official state representatives, they continue to deny that genocide ever took place, often challenging the number of official victims and/or framing Srebrenica as a crime but refusing to use the term genocide when discussing the events of July 1995.

These narratives of the victimisation and valorisation of the in-group are particularly obvious in the commemorations of Operation Storm and the beginning of the NATO 1999 Bombing of Yugoslavia. In both cases, the underlying causes – i.e. the violence committed against Croats, and against ethnic Albanians in Kosovo – are never mentioned, and instead Serbs are portrayed again as victims of injustice and violence, and unfairly treated by the representatives of the international community and regional countries. And, as the Serbia report shows, the commemorations of Operation Storm are emotionally loaded, and indeed set up to appeal to legitimate grievances – but not without involving substantial instrumentalisation of the victims. As for the NATO Bombing in 1999, these commemorations are always loaded with accusations that NATO engaged in an aggression which involved thousands of Serb civilian victims. However, the broader context and the backdrop against which the NATO intervention took place is always excluded from these commemorations.

The picture is not much different in neighbouring Croatia, in which Operation Storm (an internationally recognised episode of ethnic cleansing) is celebrated as a Victory Day, and where similar denialism of the crimes committed by the in-group persists. However, some steps towards improvement have been taken, mainly by local government representatives – like the mayor of Zagreb, or non-governmental organisations. For example, such developments can be observed (discussed more in the chapter on Croatia) when it comes to the commemoration of the killing of Zec family – which, since two years ago, also features the mayor of Zagreb as the speaker. In addition, the current Prime Minister Andrej Plenković occasionally strikes a reconciliatory tone in his public addresses during commemorations. However, none of this is anywhere near enough to bring about actual truth and reconciliation. For instance, to start with, the commemorations around operations Storm, Flash, and Medak Pocket still fail to make any mention of the Serbian civilian victims (with the exception of some of Plenković's speeches, like the one

7 <http://etheses.lse.ac.uk/4409/>

8 <http://etheses.lse.ac.uk/4409/>



held in 2020) – and instead, tend to primarily focus on the victimisation of the in-group and valorisation of Croatian troops' behaviour.

And along very similar lines, Kosovo representatives also make no mention of any of the Serbian victims – solely focusing instead on crimes committed against Kosovo Albanians. Thus, in all three cases – Kosovo, Serbia, and Croatia – denialism of the crimes committed by the in-group, coupled with complete marginalisation of the suffering of the out-group, persist.

On the other hand, in North Macedonia and Montenegro we are witnessing what could be termed 'selective amnesia' – where commemorations are rarely happening or are rarely attended by high state officials (with the anniversary of the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement in North Macedonia being a rare exception), and with both countries, up to a point, either denying or actively ignoring any involvement in the war/armed conflict whatsoever. The staggering level of denialism and ignorance about the events that took place in North Macedonia and Montenegro are best illustrated in the chapters themselves and are especially notable in the empirical materials (like the speeches of high-state officials).

And perhaps the best illustrative example of the overall situation in the region is Bosnia – with three coexisting ethnicities each of which is promoting its own narrative of the events that took place in the 1990s. No country in the former Yugoslavia has such a contested politics of remembrance as Bosnia does. The three sides have yet to fully acknowledge and recognise the atrocities committed by their respective forces, although distinctions do emerge among ethnicities and events, as highlighted in the Bosnian chapter. Neither of the three sides is usually willing to acknowledge the crimes committed by their own troops. In fact, most sides are using commemorative events as platforms to promote their one-sided understanding of the conflict, coupled with marginalisation of the out-group's victims and complete disregard for their pain. One of the most egregious instances of denialism revolves around Dodik's refusal to acknowledge the Srebrenica genocide, often coupled with its glorification. However, that is by no means an exception when it comes to commemorative practices in Bosnia, as illustrated in the designated chapter.

Closer comparison of the same events and their commemorations across states further shows just how far the former Yugoslavia is from reconciliation and adequate formulation of politics of remembrance. In fact, such detailed analysis leads one to think that there are parallel 'alternative' histories existing in the region. For example, Srebrenica remains the most significant commemorations in Bosnia - with all high state officials (except the Serb officials) attending, and members of the international community often present. By contrast, Serbia does not have an official commemoration for Srebrenica, nor do any high officials make any important mentions regarding Srebrenica. In fact, most politicians in Serbia continue to deny that genocide ever took place in Srebrenica.

In Serbia, the commemoration of the Battle of Košare gained prominence once the Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska napredna stranka* – SNS) came to power in 2012. Lack of any civilian casualties makes this event particularly appropriate for promoting nationalistic narratives and portraying Serbia as a victim of unjust treatment and defeat. On one hand, the commemorations surrounding this battle always involve heroic tropes and narratives – portraying the Serbian troops as brave, young fighters willing to sacrifice their lives for their homeland. In addition, references to Serbia's unjust defeat (usually intertwined with the role of the international community) are highly prominent, alongside the general narrative that Serbs are denied the chance to properly celebrate their



historic victory. Likewise in Kosovo, commemoration of this battle remains a highly prominent event, and fits into the general narrative of Kosovo's politics of remembrance of the events that took place in the 1990s – with the battle portrayed as one of the most notable and triumphant battles of the KLA. This battle is presented and commemorated as absolutely crucial in Kosovo's years-long battle for freedom from Serbia, with its importance and significance constantly highlighted during the commemorative speeches. Contrary to what occurs in Serbia, commemorations in Kosovo are also used to celebrate the international community and express gratitude towards international politicians for their support towards Kosovo, with NATO's role often highlighted in comparison to others. In fact, in 2023, PM Kurti openly thanked NATO, arguing that the victory in this battle could be attributed to NATO. Owing to the signing of the Kumanovo agreement, which stipulated that the FRY troops must withdraw from Kosovo, this event is celebrated as a major and important victory in Kosovo. The difference between how these events are commemorated only further shows how far this region remains from a unified view of the events that took place during the violent breakup of the former Yugoslavia.

And finally, these opposing and contested narratives are particularly obvious in the case of Operation Storm commemorations. From Croatia's point of view, this was a heroic victory of the Croatian Army over the Serb occupiers. And almost 30 years after, this event is commemorated in line with such an understanding of Operation Storm. As the author of the Croatian chapter says, "Operation Storm in the dominant narrative of Croatia is celebrated as a holiday, Victory and Homeland Thanksgiving Day and the Day of Croatian Defenders." And despite an overwhelming agreement among experts and representatives of the international community that Operation Storm was, in fact, an episode of ethnic cleansing, the official establishment of Croatia continues to celebrate this day as a victorious day with little to no mention of the civilian victims or the fact that around 200,000 people were forced to flee their homes in August of 1995. In Serbia, however, this event is perceived as one of the most tragic things to have befallen the Serbian nation. The Serb state officials label Operation Storm as one of the worst crimes committed against the Serbs (albeit in a way that often instrumentalises the victims), and the single worst instance of ethnic cleansing of the Serbian people. However, the central concern regarding Serbia's commemoration of Operation Storm is that it frequently incorporates references to World War II, exacerbating tensions between Serbs and Croats and pitting them against each other, rather than sincerely honouring the victims.

Hence, as these chapters show, the politics of remembrance remains very much contested across the former Yugoslavia, with all former Yugoslav states suffering from the same illness - one-sided portrayal of the violent breakup of this Federation. The one bright exception across the cases, which brings hope that one day things may change for the better, are the non-governmental organisations, which continue to play the key role in correcting the one-sidedness of the current commemorations. In all countries of the former Yugoslavia, their role in commemorations is noted. In some cases, they are the only actors organising the commemorations in the first place – like in Serbia for commemoration of Srebrenica. In other cases, they serve to call for better representation and more inclusivity in the commemorations that are already being held. Their committed and dedicated work, as it stands, seems to be the only hope and potential for change – as the more influence and importance they gain, the more likely it is that their voices will be heard by the relevant audiences. However, in all the countries of the former Yugoslavia, the NGO sector is yet to attain the level of importance that could warrant a shift in commemorative politics or decision-making more generally.



## 4. Conclusion

To bring about reconciliation in a region enveloped in armed hostilities is always a difficult task – especially if the war includes familiar enemies, like in Bosnia, where many women report that they personally knew the men who raped them during the Bosnian War. Nevertheless, this reconciliation is far from impossible – as illustrated by the aftermath of World War II, where all countries now have normal relations with Germany, including Israel. However, to get to that point requires addressing the events of the past, coming to terms with mistakes committed by the in-group as well as the out-group, bearing responsibility for the in-group’s crimes and adequately apologising to *all* the victims and those affected, not just those who belong to one’s in-group. Without all this, any talks about reconciliation are futile. As we write this report, hopes remain low that adequate conversations about the events of the 1990s will begin in the former Yugoslav space at present – as it is more than obvious that the political establishment has no desire to deal with the events of the past. What is more, in many cases, the relevant political leaders are often willing to invoke the hateful discourses of the past if they believe it will further their political agenda and strategic interests. And for as long as such individuals lead these countries and exert control over the media (thereby limiting the influence of NGOs for example), hopes will remain low for peaceful co-existence and reconciliation among the peoples of the former Yugoslavia.

Nevertheless, it is our hope that this report will be the first step in resolving the problem. By diving deep into the politics of remembrance over the last decade, we aim to show just how big the problem actually is, and we try to provide some contextual and empirical understanding of the politics of remembrance in the post-Yugoslav space. It is our hope that such an understanding can serve as the necessary first step in thinking about creative solutions that could address the problem.



## II. Decade of Remembrance in Bosnia and Herzegovina

### II. Decenija sjećanja u Bosni i Hercegovini

by Samir Beharić

Edited by Nataša Kandić

#### 1. General Introduction

##### 1.1. History

In the aftermath of the World War II, Bosnia and Herzegovina became one of the six republics constituting the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, established in 1943. Since then, that republic was home to its Croat Catholic, Serb Orthodox, and Bosniak Muslim inhabitants, as well as numerous national and religious minorities. By 1971, Muslims formed the largest single component of the Bosnian population. In the 1990s, the term “Muslim by nationality” was replaced by the name “Bosniak”, which this ethnic group had not been allowed to use during the Yugoslav era, owing to wider Serbian and Croatian hegemonic aspirations in Bosnia-Herzegovina.<sup>1</sup>

In 1991, the country began to crack along ethnic lines. Following the disintegration of Yugoslavia and declarations of independence by Slovenia and Croatia in June 1991, the situation in neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina started to rapidly deteriorate.

Shortly afterwards, the war erupted with intense violence. The Bosnian Serb forces led by Radovan Karadžić, and with the backing of the Yugoslav National Army (JNA), started a campaign of ethnic cleansing.

The Yugoslav National Army and later the Army of Republika Srpska kept Sarajevo under siege between 5 April 1992 and 29 February 1996, which is to this day considered the longest siege of a capital city in the history of modern warfare, and to have caused the largest displacement in Europe since the Second World War.<sup>2</sup> During this time, the people of Sarajevo lived under constant terror, resulting in thousands of civilians, including children, being killed or wounded.

Throughout the war, the Bosnian Serb political and military leadership used everything from propaganda to brute force in an effort to ethnically cleanse the non-Serb population from large parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina. After expelling the Bosniak Muslim population from the Srebrenica and Žepa enclave in eastern Bosnia, the Bosnian Serb forces proceeded with another ethnic cleansing campaign that culminated in the Srebrenica genocide. During several days in July 1995, the Army of Republika Srpska under the command of General Ratko Mladić, killed more than 8,000 men and boys in the UN-designated “safe area” of Srebrenica.<sup>3</sup> To this day, the Srebrenica genocide is considered to be the worst atrocity in Europe since the Holocaust. It is Europe’s only acknowledged genocide since World War II.<sup>4</sup>

1 Bringa, T. R. (2000). Nationality Categories, National Identification and Identity Formation in “Multinational” Bosnia. *Anthropology of East Europe Review*, 11(1 & 2), 80–89. Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/aeer/article/view/591>

2 <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing-notes/looking-back-siege-sarajevo-20-years-after>

3 <https://www.irmct.org/en/mip/features/srebrenica>

4 <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/europe/05/26/Serbia.Mladic.Srebrenica/index.html>



The international community responded to the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina by imposing sanctions on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and providing humanitarian aid to Bosnian refugees. NATO conducted air strikes against Bosnian Serb positions, and the UN deployed peacekeeping forces on the ground. However, in the case of Srebrenica, the genocide unfolded in the presence of UN troops, who should have prevented it.<sup>5</sup>

The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina ended with The General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, also known as the Dayton Agreement or the Dayton Accords, which was formally signed in Paris on 14 December 1995. According to this peace agreement, Bosnia and Herzegovina is a single sovereign state composed of two entities: the Bosniak-Croat majority Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Republika Srpska, dominantly populated by Bosnian Serbs. To this day, the Dayton Peace Agreement has been criticised as an ineffective legal framework discriminating against national minorities, while at the same time being misused by various actors to achieve political gains.<sup>6</sup>

Almost three decades after the war ended, the tensions and divisions between the Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs remained. This has had a direct impact on the political scene in Bosnia and Herzegovina, hindering progress towards peace, reconciliation, and stability in the region. However, the denial of genocide, glorification of war criminals, and promotion of ultranationalist ideas that sparked the war in the first place are a considerable obstacle to the country's peaceful future. The legacy of the war still shapes the country's politics and society to this day, with numerous decision-makers exploiting the wartime events to profit politically from them.

## 1.2. Methodology

### 1.2.1. Selection of events

During the war, numerous war crimes, ranging from single murders to genocide, were committed in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Therefore, it was not an easy task to highlight five atrocities that would in the best possible way showcase how the society in Bosnia and Herzegovina remembers its victims and deals with the perpetrators. It was not only important to dwell on the war crimes with the highest numbers of victims, but also to examine how the different ethnic groups dealt with the war crimes committed by different armies.

This report focuses on the following five events: the Prijedor ethnic cleansing, the Ahmići massacre, the Kazani pit killings, the Markale massacre, and the Srebrenica genocide. Taking into account that these five war crimes have been shaping the public discourse in Bosnia and Herzegovina since the end of the war, they will significantly serve to contextualise the state of affairs surrounding the politics of remembrance in Bosnia and Herzegovina today.

### 1.2.2. Methodology used during the analysis

The methodology employed in this research involves desk research, media analysis, and content analysis of speeches delivered during commemorative events over the past decade. Desk research constitutes the primary data collection method, involving an exhaustive examination

5 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-warcrimes-bosnia-srebrenica-idUSKBN1910XZ>

6 <https://www.coe.int/ti/web/commissioner/-/opinion-the-dayton-accords-could-only-do-so-much>



of existing academic literature, court reports, official documents, and other relevant material related to the politics of remembrance in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This methodological component serves as the foundation for understanding the historical context, key events, and existing scholarly debates surrounding the five selected atrocities.

In order to supplement the desk research findings and gain insight into contemporary commemorative practices, an analysis of online media reports was conducted. A wide range of media articles published on reputable and credible online sources in Bosnian, Serbian, Croatian, Montenegrin, or English were collected and reviewed, to identify patterns and trends in how these events were portrayed and commemorated in the public domain. The media analysis also allows for an exploration of how different political and societal actors have shaped the narratives surrounding a particular event over the past ten years.

Additionally, a content analysis of speeches delivered during the commemorations was undertaken to capture the firsthand accounts and perspectives of survivors, victims' family members, local officials, and foreign diplomats. In cases when such transcripts were not available, public statements issued by non-governmental organisations were used as a complementary resource.

By combining these three methods, the research ensures a multidimensional investigation of the politics of remembrance observable in Bosnia and Herzegovina between 2013 and 2023. The integration of desk research, media analysis, and content analysis of speeches allows for a comprehensive examination of the historical background, the contemporary commemorative practices, and the socio-political implications surrounding the five selected events, enabling a nuanced and scientifically grounded analysis.

### **1.3. Argument**

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The legacy of the Bosnian war has left a lasting impact on the collective memory of Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats, the three ethnic groups that often present divergent and conflicting narratives about the wartime events.

As a result, commemorative practices vary widely across different communities. With narratives ranging from honouring war crime victims to celebrating war criminals, the politics of remembrance in Bosnia and Herzegovina remains a dynamic and contested field that has failed to provide Bosnian society with a much-needed boost towards reconciliation.

However, one of the brightest exceptions to this are the non-governmental organisations that continue exerting pressure on decision-makers, demanding that they properly honour the victims, and offering a safe space for survivors. When one views the current context, it is evident that the struggle to establish a unified and inclusive memory remains a significant challenge not only for those who lived through the war but, more importantly, for the younger generations born during and after the war.



## 2. Ethnic cleansing in Prijedor

### 2.1. Introduction

According to the 1991 census, the municipality of Prijedor had a population of 112,470 people, with 44 percent being Bosniaks (Muslims), 42.5 percent Serbs, 5.5 percent Croats, 5.7 percent Yugoslavs, and 2.2 percent national minorities such as Ukrainians, Russians, and Italians.<sup>7</sup> Some three decades later, Prijedor is known as the area with the largest number of convicted war criminals in Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>8</sup> It is also the city with the second-highest rate of civilian casualties during the Bosnian War, right after Srebrenica.<sup>9</sup>

In May and June 1992, the Serb officials used Radio Prijedor as a platform ordering Bosniak and Croat residents living in ethnically mixed areas to mark their homes with a white piece of cloth to signal surrender.<sup>10</sup> Bosniaks and Croats had been ordered to wear a white armband to identify themselves.<sup>11</sup>

In total, 3,173 innocent people were killed in Prijedor, among them 256 women and 102 children.<sup>12</sup> To this day, hundreds of victims are still considered missing. The mortal remains of those killed in Prijedor have been found at nearly 500 different locations, including 79 mass graves spread across the territory of ten municipalities in three states.

In January 1992, the Prijedor Municipal Assembly and Municipal Boards of the Serb Democratic Party (Srpska demokratska stranka, SDS) proclaimed the Assembly of the Serb People of the Municipality of Prijedor. Milomir Stakić, who was later convicted by the ICTY on the basis of superior criminal responsibility, was elected President of this Assembly. The establishment of the Omarska, Keraterm, and Trnopolje concentration camps, where the majority but not all of the war crimes against non-Serb population took place, was a secret until 6 August 1992, when British journalists from ITN and the Guardian were granted access to investigate allegations of human rights abuses in the area of Prijedor. Duško Tadić, leader of the SDS in Prijedor during the war, was the first person the ICTY to be found guilty of cruel treatment and inhumane acts towards protected persons, and sentenced to 20 years in prison. The guards of the Omarska camp, Miroslav Kvočka, Mlađo Radić, Milojica Kos, Dragoljub Prcać, and Zoran Žigić, were also convicted for crimes committed in the camps.

Dušan Sikirica, Damir Došen, and Dragan Kolundžija entered into a plea agreement with the Prosecutor, admitting the evidence showing that detainees were subjected to inhumane conditions during their confinement in the Keraterm camp. Predrag Banović, a former guard at the camp, admitted to participating in five murders, beating 27 detainees, and shooting two others. He was sentenced to eight years' imprisonment.

7 <https://web.archive.org/web/20081206012327/http://www.ess.uwe.ac.uk/comexpert/ANX/V.htm>

8 <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/01/10/culture-of-denial-why-so-few-war-criminals-feel-guilty/>

9 Berry, Marie E. (2018). *War, Women, and Power: From Violence to Mobilization in Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina*. Cambridge University Press. p. 191.

10 [https://www.icty.org/x/file/About/OTP/un\\_commission\\_of\\_experts\\_report1994\\_en.pdf](https://www.icty.org/x/file/About/OTP/un_commission_of_experts_report1994_en.pdf)

11 Ibid.

12 Ramulić, E. (Ed.). (2012). *Ni krivi, ni dužni: Knjiga nestalih opštine Prijedor*. Udruženje Prijedorčanki Izvor.





Darko Mrđa, a member of the intervention squad of the Prijedor police, admitted to participating in the execution, guarding, conducting, shooting, and murder of more than 200 unarmed men at Korićanske Stijene on August 21, 1992. Apart from 12 men who survived the massacre, all the men were killed. The ICTY sentenced him to 17 years in prison in 2001, and the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina sentenced another ten former Bosnian Serb police officers for taking part in this crime.

Almost three decades after the war ended, some groups and individuals, including the local Serb political representatives, deny and downplay the war crimes. They propagate alternative narratives that seek to shift blame to Bosniaks or Croats. On the other hand, various international organisations, human rights organisations, numerous civil society actors, and certain political parties, do acknowledge what happened in Prijedor and pay respect to the victims. Even though the local government still refuses to allow the survivors and victims' families to erect a monument that honours the children killed by the Bosnian Serb forces, commemorative events are being held every year in Prijedor.

Since 2012, activists honour the victims of the Prijedor ethnic cleansing in what is known as the “White Armband Day” commemoration. The white armbands symbolism is derived from the Bosnian Serb authorities ordering non-Serb civilians not to leave their homes without wearing a white armband to identify themselves. Every year on 31 May, the “Jer me se tiče” (transl. “Because it concerns me”) initiative organises the White Armband Day central commemoration in Prijedor. On that day, people in Prijedor, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and around the globe, are encouraged to wear white armbands for the day, to highlight the dangers of discrimination and stand in solidarity with the victims of human rights abuses and war crimes committed in Prijedor.

## 2.2. Chronological analysis

The several first commemorations were banned by the local authorities, which did not prevent civil society activists and ordinary citizens from Prijedor and other Bosnian cities from remembering the victims in Prijedor. In 2012, the police banned the “White Armband Day” in Prijedor, claiming that such a commemoration would „incite violence due to the differing national sentiments in the local community”.<sup>13</sup> However, the organisers invited citizens in Prijedor to wear a white armband and hang white sheets from their houses in order to remember those who were killed.

The official commemoration was banned the following year, too, but hundreds of citizens, including survivors and human rights activists from Prijedor and other Bosnian cities, gathered in Prijedor. Fikret Alić, one of the detainees of the Trnopolje camp who was featured on the cover of Time magazine<sup>14</sup> in 1992, attended the 2013 commemoration in Prijedor. As one anxious about what the future would bring, he recalled the memories that still haunt him:

*“Everything I survived in the Keraterm camp, as well as here in the Trnopolje camp, has remained a nightmare for me. Literally, I cannot comprehend that human beings could commit such torture. We are still in fear as to whether the war will return and whether we are going to*

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.dw.com/bs/prijedorski-dan-bijelih-traka/a-15987881>

<sup>14</sup> <https://time.com/5034826/fikret-alic-time-cover-bosnia/>



*have to flee again. Why did we then return and why do we promise a better life to each other, if that doesn't happen?"<sup>15</sup>*

Mejra Dautović lost two of her children in 1992. Her son Edin was killed in the Omarska camp, and her daughter Edna was deported in a bus full of detainees in July 1992, and later exhumed from the Lisac Pit in Donji Dubovik. She remembered the days when she was obliged to walk with a white armband, expressing her hope young people would not have to go through something she herself has had to survive:

*"One can't possibly forget those moments. We were ordered to wear a white armband every time we left our homes, and white sheets were hanging from our houses. I live for the future which will not repeat the experiences for my children. If you ask me what I would recommend to young people, it's that they should remember what happened, but refrain from hate."<sup>16</sup>*

The majority of people who gathered in Prijedor downtown in 2013 were young human rights activists, many of them arriving by buses from other Bosnian cities. Marko Šormaz, a Gradiška local, shared his optimism and high hopes while walking the streets of Prijedor together with his peers:

*"The reasons for me being here today are my personal beliefs, because I believe that human sacrifices are simply human sacrifices, regardless of religious or national affiliations. This was one of the rare opportunities to honour the victims of Prijedor. I welcome this act, and for me it means that there is still a small glimmer of awareness among people."<sup>17</sup>*

Asked about the event in Prijedor, Marko Pavić, the Mayor of Prijedor, publically called the gathering a "celebration" and a "gay parade".<sup>18</sup> The Helsinki Committee of Human Rights in Republika Srpska promptly called on him to apologise to survivors and victims' families.<sup>19</sup> Numerous activists reacted to Pavić's words, including Prijedor citizen Refik Hodžić, who said the mayor's insult to the families of Prijedor victims and survivors was „disgusting, but not unexpected”:

*"These scandalous insults only confirm that he does not consider all citizens of Prijedor equal, even in death, except when he needs their votes and money from the diaspora. I am ashamed that my city has such a mayor."<sup>20</sup>*

Another Prijedor local, activist Emir Hodžić, one of the initiators of the "Jer me se tiče" initiative, said that the authorities are targeting activists on purpose:

*"The Prijedor authorities, the mayor, are simply people who are not prepared to change their politics, and [instead] see activists from Prijedor and elsewhere as provocateurs, Bosniak extremists, etc. The fact is that the majority of our activists are not even Bosniak. But the author-*

15 <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2013/5/30/u-prijedoru-obiljezen-dan-bijelih-traka>

16 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/dan-bijelih-traka-sjecanje-na-prijedorске-zrtve/25003636.html>

17 Ibid.

18 <https://www.tacno.net/novosti/srami-se-marko-pavicu-gradonacelnik-prijedora-bijele-trake-su-gej-parada/>

19 <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/marko-pavic-nazvao-dan-bijelih-traka-slavljem-i-gay-paradom/130601057>

20 <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2013/6/1/zahtjev-da-se-gradonacelnik-prijedora-izvini>



ities have an answer for that as well. They say: 'Those are not real Serbs. They are traitors.' It always comes down to that."<sup>21</sup>

In the following years, survivors, victims' families, and numerous human rights activists directed their demands to the mayor and the local city assembly, calling for the elected officials to erect the monument honouring the killed children of Prijedor. In 2014, about 500 people participated in the commemoration by walking through the city centre and laying 102 flowers in the central square, symbolising the 102 children killed. Fikret Bačić, the father of two of the murdered children, addressed the attendees, asking for support for the parents' initiative to build a memorial to the murdered children of Prijedor:

*"I am addressing you also in the name of my daughter Nermina and my son Nermin, who were seven and fourteen years old when they were killed in front of our house in Zecovi. I am addressing you in the name of their memory, in the name of their shades and our dignity. My fellow citizens of Prijedor, we do not ask for hate, we do not ask for revenge, we do not ask for anything but recognition, justice and truth. Help us with your signature to push the city assembly to decide on the construction of a monument to our children. We need one thousand of your signatures. Let them ask themselves whether they want to go down in the history of Prijedor as people who made possible the public memory of the most innocent victims, or as those who forbade their memory and thus killed them once again."*<sup>22</sup>

In 2015 and 2016, activists came forward with demands identical to the previous years. The key demand was still related to erecting a central memorial honouring 102 children killed in Prijedor. Despite the fact that thousands of signatures were gathered through these petitions, which were delivered to the local authorities, the city assembly never reacted. "Jer me se tiče" activist Dražena Lepir said human rights organisations will not give up their demands:

*"For the last two years, we have been fighting for a monument to the 102 murdered children. This year, we will symbolically build a monument and show the authorities that it is a lesson in humanity, and to give hope to the parents of the murdered children who are still looking for their mortal remains today."*<sup>23</sup>

In Banja Luka, activists used an already existing World War Two monument commemorating the Partisan soldiers who died while fighting the Nazi-allied soldiers, to hang a white sheet with names of the 102 children killed in Prijedor inscribed on it.<sup>24</sup> During the 2016 commemoration in Prijedor, Sudbin Musić, survivor of the Trnopolje camp, shared how anxious he was about the commemoration of Prijedor victims becoming yet another initiative yielding little result:

*"Although the White Armband Day has been celebrated for years, nothing has changed. In fact, it's getting harder and harder for the returnees. I don't see it leading anywhere but to the beginning, which is the cultivation of sadness and trauma, with no effect on our lives. I'm just*

21 <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/5/30/for-bosnians-whitearmbanddaymarkspainfulchapter.html>

22 <https://centarzamladekvartprijedor.blogspot.com/2014/06/meunarodni-dan-bijelih-traka-u-prijedoru.html>

23 <https://www.dw.com/bs/obilje%C5%BEavanje-dana-bijelih-traka-dok-prijedor-%C4%87uti/a-19294941>

24 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UmC3T0AvBoY&t=142s>



*afraid that the White Armband Day is not going to become a Facebook event or anything like that. Because last year we had the fewest people from Prijedor at this celebration.”<sup>25</sup>*

The fifth White Armband Day commemoration was marked in Prijedor city centre with participants passing through the main street, holding a commemorative rally and laying 102 roses in memory of the children who were killed. It was in this year, 2017, that “Kozarski Vjesnik”, the same media outlet that was used as part of the Serb propaganda machinery, decided to publish an obituary in memory of the murdered children. Some activists, such as Goran Zorić of the “Jer me se tiče” initiative, considered this move a sign of progress, because the editorial team of this media outlet had refused to do anything similar in previous years.<sup>26</sup> Sudbin Musić, one of the Trnopolje camp survivors, considers these steps to be too small and not meaningful enough, stressing how hard it feels to live in a place where such crimes have been committed without any willingness by the authorities to show empathy towards the killed children of Prijedor:

*“The very fact that the local government does not show empathy towards the death of a child is terrifying and devastating. It is a real picture of Prijedor today. If we [Bosniaks living in the Republika Srpska entity] have been offering a hand of reconciliation for years, if we have invested money in the economy of the Republika Srpska entity through the construction and reconstruction of houses, if there is a city with more than 3,000 murdered non-Serbs without a single gesture of revenge, without a single incident, living in this current situation... you have such a situation... feels really brutal, and I must say that it’s getting harder and more painful to deal with everyday life in Prijedor.”<sup>27</sup>*

The Covid-19 pandemic significantly affected the commemorations held in 2020 and 2021. Only 50 people attended the 2020 White Armband Day event in Prijedor, adhering to epidemiological measures. All participants had to adhere to health recommendations on maintaining distance, and they also wore masks. The President of the Association of Parents of Murdered Children of Prijedor, Fikret Bačić, said the local authorities are now discussing the location where to erect the monument honouring the 102 children murdered. Edin Ramulić, a Trnopolje camp survivor and an activist with the “Jer me se tiče” initiative, said there are seven potential locations that the local authorities are considering for erecting the monument:

*“Our advocacy for equality and the right of all victims to dignity and memory has finally yielded results. The representatives of the local government have accepted the request of the parents of the murdered children, and it is now time to choose the location and conceptual solution for the future monument. This is the beginning of the realisation of one of the first goals we set for ourselves.”<sup>28</sup>*

As in previous years, flowers with the names of the 102 murdered Prijedor children were placed in a circle on the main square, which is one of the seven proposed locations for the future monument to the murdered children of Prijedor. In 2021, the police allowed the activists to organise a commemorative walk in the city centre, but this decision was overturned the following year,

25 <https://www.dw.com/bs/obilje%C5%BEavanje-dana-bijelih-traka-dok-prijedor-%C4%87uti/a-19294941>

26 <https://balkaninsight.com/sr/2017/05/31/dan-bijelih-traka-u-znak-sje%C4%87anja-na-prijedorske-%C5%BERTve-05-31-2017/>

27 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/dan-bijelih-traka/29259524.html>

28 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30644513.html>



and announced just one day before the commemoration. Instead of allowing the commemorative walk through Prijedor, the local authorities only allowed a one-hour-long gathering in the square. However, numerous activists walked to the location and laid 102 flowers at the central square. Edin Ramulić, an activist of the initiative “Jer me se tiče”, who is also one of the organisers of the event, says that this behaviour of the authorities is unacceptable and is only a continuation of what started in 1992:

*“The police still haven’t determined the responsibility of those who committed the crimes. That is the reason why they are interested eradicating this memory of the civilian victims of Prijedor.”*<sup>29</sup>

Unlike in previous years, the 2022 commemoration in Prijedor was attended by the Prime Minister of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina entity, Fadil Novalić, a high-ranking official of SDA, the biggest and most influential Bosniak party. Already upon his arrival, some attendees protested the politicisation of the event. Supported by several commemoration participants, Edin Ramulić from the “Jer me se tiče” initiative refused to give permission for Novalić to speak at the commemoration, asking him to refrain from giving any media statements at the city square, which caused Novalić to leave the commemoration.<sup>30</sup> Officials and members of the SDA, who could not accept that politicians were not allowed to speak at the White Armband Day event in Prijedor, exposed Ramulić to online harassment and attacks. Ramulić shared later in an interview that he had already been targeted not only by the Bosniak members of SDA, but also by Serb nationalist propaganda:

*“For one nationalism, I am a Bosniak extremist, and for the other, a Greater Serb police officer. That position suits me as long as I am equally distant from both of those nationalisms that are destroying my country.”*<sup>31</sup>

21

The most recent commemoration took place on 31 May 2023 in Prijedor, and was attended by hundreds of attendees gathering in Prijedor despite the heavy rain. By laying 102 white roses, which represent purity, innocence and humility, in a circle, each with the name of a murdered Prijedor child, the parents of murdered children and human rights activists marked the White Armband Day in the Prijedor city centre. Nine years after the initiative to erect the memorial honouring 102 children killed during the war was sent to the local authorities of Prijedor, the long-sought monument has not yet been built. Instead, the Mayor of Prijedor keeps avoiding the construction of the monument, which prompted the activists led by Emir Ramulić to halt any further dialogue with the Mayor of Prijedor, Slobodan Javor:

*“Until now, we have made some sort of progress, but now everything has stopped. However, it is at least positive that no politician from Prijedor has declared that he is against erecting the*

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29 <https://www.dw.com/bs/u-is%C4%8Dekivanju-spomenika-ubijenoj-djeci/a-61988722>

30 <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/novalic-zamoljen-da-ne-daje-izjave-na-trgu-u-prijedoru-gdje-se-obiljezava-dan-bijelih-traka/220531078>

31 [https://www.slobodna-bosna.ba/vijest/254328/edin\\_ramulic\\_za\\_sb\\_kada\\_me\\_sda\\_preko\\_svojih\\_medija\\_vrijedja\\_da\\_sam\\_impotentan\\_i\\_los\\_musliman\\_time\\_zeli\\_reci\\_da\\_smo\\_mi\\_krajisnici\\_svi\\_takvi\\_i\\_da\\_smo\\_zato\\_stradali\\_u\\_proslom\\_ratu.html](https://www.slobodna-bosna.ba/vijest/254328/edin_ramulic_za_sb_kada_me_sda_preko_svojih_medija_vrijedja_da_sam_impotentan_i_los_musliman_time_zeli_reci_da_smo_mi_krajisnici_svi_takvi_i_da_smo_zato_stradali_u_proslom_ratu.html)



*monument for 102 the killed children. We believe that the initiative is still possible and that the monument will be built, but it seems the politicians are just buying time.*<sup>32</sup>

### **2.3. Conclusion**

The politics of remembrance relating to the ethnic cleansing in Prijedor have remained a matter of dispute more than three decades after the war ended. The local political elite led by the Bosnian Serb decision-makers has been proactively denying the war crimes committed against non-Serbs in Prijedor. Besides the decision-makers, it is also their voters and supporters who still refuse to commemorate thousands of innocent Bosniak and Croats, including more than 100 children, killed as part of the ethnic cleansing in Prijedor. However, victims' families, survivors, and civil society groups gather every year to commemorate the innocent victims. During the past decade, on several occasions, the local police in Prijedor have banned the survivors and their families, as well as civil society organisations, from commemorating the victims in the city centre. However, it is important to note that there is still space for the politics of remembrance to evolve, especially if the local politicians allow for the monument commemorating the 102 children to be erected, which they have refused to do until today.

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<sup>32</sup> <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2023/5/31/dan-bijelih-traka-102-ruze-u-znak-sjecanja-na-ubijenu-djecu-u-prijedoru>



## 3. The Ahmići massacre

### 3.1. Introduction

The Ahmići massacre was the single largest war crime carried out by the Croat forces against Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) civilians during the Bosnian war. A total of 116 Bosniak civilians, including 11 children and 32 women, were killed by the forces of the Croatian Defence Council (HVO) and members of the “Jokers”, an anti-terrorist platoon of the 4th Military Police Battalion of the HVO. The youngest victim was a three-month-old baby Sead Ahmić, while the oldest casualty was Fatima Harčević, an 81-year-old woman.

In the aftermath of the war, the politics of remembrance for the victims killed in Ahmići went in two directions, with one of the blocs attempting to downplay or deny, or, in recent years, even to glorify the atrocity committed in central Bosnia. In an attempt to advance their own political and nationalist agenda, numerous Croat nationalists, including the top officials of the leading Bosnian Croat nationalist party, HDZ BiH, have engaged in whitewashing the role of Croat forces in this war crime. However, the highest state officials from neighbouring Croatia came to Ahmići to pay their respects to the victims of this war crime, when the political risk was minimal and political circumstances allowed. At the same time, the top Bosnian Croat officials never made an official visit to Ahmići. Instead, some of them honoured the war criminals responsible for the atrocity. As this chapter will show, the politics of remembrance relating to the Ahmići massacre has often been subject to political manoeuvring, but nevertheless, for the past decades it has been visibly commemorated by religious representatives, political actors, and civil society activists.

### 3.2. Chronological analysis

Commemoration of Ahmići victims is held traditionally on 16 April every year. Until 2010, no official from Croatia attended the commemoration. Then Croatia’s President Ivo Josipović paid a visit to Ahmići in April 2010, and laid flowers at the monument erected in front of the village mosque, which was destroyed during the HVO attack and rebuilt after the war. He was the first high official from Croatia to visit the village and commemorate the victims of the massacre.

Accompanied by the religious leaders of the Bosnian Catholics and Muslims, Cardinal Vinko Puljić and Grand Mufti Mustafa Cerić, Josipović met with some of the survivors of Ahmići massacre, who expressed their appreciation for the visit. Elvedin Kermo, president of the Association “16 April”, thanked the Croatian president for visiting Ahmići:

*“There is no apology for Ahmići that has the power to bring back our victims, but nevertheless, we consider your visit to this place as a special kind of apology and a wish that what happened in Ahmići will never happen again to anyone.”<sup>33</sup>*

A day earlier in Sarajevo, Ivo Josipović expressed his regret to the victims of the Bosnian war in a speech held at the Parliament of Bosnia and Herzegovina. While addressing the lawmakers of both chambers of the state parliament, Josipović said he was sorry for the role Croatia played

33 Arnautović, M. & Jelin, T. (2010). “Josipović se poklonio bošnjačkim žrtvama u Ahmićima”. Radio Slobodna Evropa. „[https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/josipovic\\_bih\\_Ahmići\\_posjeta/2012751.html](https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/josipovic_bih_Ahmići_posjeta/2012751.html)



in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which, according to him, had contributed to ethnic fragmentation and political deadlock in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

*“The policies of the 90s... which believed the division of Bosnia and Herzegovina was the only solution for the country, have sown the seeds of misfortune both in Bosnia and in our own countries. I deeply regret the fact that the Republic of Croatia also contributed to this calamity and to divisions that still torment us. (...) A new era has come, which requires new politics.”<sup>34</sup>*

Even though some media outlets interpreted his speech as an apology,<sup>35</sup> Josipović said he did not apologise but expressed his regret for what has happened during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>36</sup> Despite the fact that Josipović’s visit was not intended as an apology, it was praised by Bosnian lawmakers and described as positive by international actors in the country. However, the Croatian Democratic Union in Croatia, HDZ, expressed its regret that Croatia’s president “acted contrary to the Constitution” and failed to consult the government and Prime Minister, Jadranka Kosor, about the content of the speech he delivered at the Parliament of Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>37</sup>

Eight years would pass until another high official from Croatia visited Ahmići and commemorated the victims of the massacre. In the years leading up to this, the commemoration for the victim of Ahmići massacre was held mainly with politicians from Bosnia and Herzegovina attending the event together with Muslim religious leaders and representatives of foreign embassies and international organisations headquartered in Sarajevo.

The 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the massacre was held on 16 April 2013, attended by the survivors, families of victims, and numerous guests who flocked to Ahmići. The Bosniak member of the tripartite Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bakir Izetbegović, and the son of one of the victims who was killed in Ahmići, Zaim Ahmić, together unveiled the monument commemorating the victims. During the commemoration, the President of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina entity, as well as two Vice-Presidents, Mirsad Kebo and Svetozar Pudarić, laid flowers at the monument. In his speech, Bakir Izetbegović said that the victims of Ahmić will never be forgotten:

*“Our murdered sisters, mothers, daughters, grandfathers, brothers and fathers, the innocent boys murdered, and the youngest victim, a three-month-old child in a cradle, are today in our thoughts and prayers, and our deepest sympathy is with their closest ones, their families, neighbours and friends. Our truth is imprinted with the blood of the innocent, and it is permanent and indestructible, as is our centuries-long Bosnia and Herzegovina. No matter how much effort its enemies make to destroy it.”<sup>38</sup>*

34 Zuvela, M. & Taylor, P. (2010). “Croatian leader apologises to Bosnia for wartime role”. Reuters. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSLDE63D1FP>

35 Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty (2010). “Croatian Leader Apologizes For War-Time Crime”. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/2013374.html>

36 SRNA (2010). “Nisam se izvinio, nego sam izrazio žaljenje”. Klix. Available at: <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/nisam-se-izvinio-nego-sam-izrazio-zaljenje/100416003>

37 BIRN (2010). “Josipovic Faces Criticism for Bosnia Speech”. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2010/04/16/josipovic-faces-criticism-for-bosnia-speech/>

38 Transcript 2013.





During the commemoration, Habiba Pjanić, an ICTY witnesses and mother of 22-year-old Muamer Pjanić, who was killed by the HVO soldiers in front of her eyes, shared her memories about what happened exactly 20 years ago, on 16 April 1993:

*“Members of the HVO surrounded our house. (...) I was on the balcony and HVO soldiers tried provoking me to jump. I didn’t want to, because I knew they would definitely kill me. Then they took my son Muamer out. They put him down on his knees and shot him in front of my eyes. I remember how they put the weapon above his right eye and then I saw blood everywhere. (...) Then they took my second son. He was only 13 years old back then, he was just a boy. Fortunately, he managed to escape. However, I didn’t see him for nine days after that. I didn’t know if he was alive. He is the only son I have left.”<sup>39</sup>*

Next year, the commemoration was held again with numerous political representatives and locals attending the event. Both the President and the Vice-President of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina entity expressed their condolences, stressing that the horror of Ahmići must not happen ever again.

The Vice-President of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina entity, Svetozar Pudarić, stressed that he arrived to Ahmići “to remember those who were killed on their doorstep and taken away from their families while they were trying to survive and live an ordinary life in a time of evil”:

*“Today we pay our respects to the victims of that evil that was awakened and came to life during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. They say that wars bring out the best and the worst in people. Today we remember the consequences of the worst in people which those times brought out. They remind us that we won’t let it happen again.”<sup>40</sup>*

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Up till the 2014 commemoration, a total of 86 people had been identified and either buried or awaiting burial, while 30 people were considered missing. Elvedin Kermo, president of the “16 April” Association, called for his neighbours in Ahmići to share information about the burial sites of the missing victims, so that they can find final rest:

*“I publicly call on our Croat neighbours, if they don’t have the strength and will to say who killed our loved ones, at least to tell us where they are buried so we can bury them with dignity. We know that they keep secrets and hide the truth, so we have the to ask: Do they have any remorse after 21 years? What kind of believers are they? Why don’t they say where our loved ones are buried? Let them make it easier for us and themselves.”<sup>41</sup>*

Less than two months later, in early June 2014, while the families of victims were still searching for the mortal remains of their loved ones, Dario Kordić, who was sentenced by the ICTY to 25 years in prison for his role in the Ahmići massacre, was released after serving two thirds, or 17 years, of his war crimes sentence.

<sup>39</sup> Transcript 2013.

<sup>40</sup> Transcript 2014.

<sup>41</sup> Klix (2014). “Ahmići opraštaju, ali ne zaboravljaju dan kad se iz svake bošnjačke kuće čuju jecaji”. Available at: <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/Ahmići-oprastaju-ali-ne-zaboravljaju-dan-kad-se-iz-svake-bosnjacke-kuce-cuju-jecaji/140413030>



Survivors of the massacre and the victims' families were especially hurt and disappointed by the early release of Dario Kordić from jail, and the way he was welcomed in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Elvedin Kermo, the president of the "16 April" Association, who survived the massacre, published an open letter addressed to Kordić "apologising" for staying alive:

*"I apologise for staying alive, and I guess I shouldn't have, according to your tastes. Please accept my apology for not being killed on April 16, 1993 in Ahmići, because if I had been killed then I would not be writing this to you. Forgive all my fellow people of Ahmići who survived. I'm sorry that they dragged you around the ICTY, that they dragged you out and finally condemned you. Sorry about that! You know you are innocent, and no one else has to believe that."*<sup>42</sup>

On 6 June 2014, Kordić was welcomed at Zagreb airport by around 200 people. Among them were ordinary people, former politicians, as well as several Catholic clerics, including Vlado Košić, a Croatian bishop and the leader of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Sisak.<sup>43</sup> Košić led a prayer for Kordić once the war criminal had reached the arrivals terminal at Zagreb airport.

This resonated both in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, with the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina issuing a protest note to the Embassy of the Vatican in Bosnia and Herzegovina expressing its "astonishment" at the actions of the high officials of the Catholic Church and asking the Holy See for an explanation.<sup>44</sup> However, this was just an introduction to what followed.

Days after the welcoming event at Zagreb airport, a group of 116 civil society activists organised a protest in front of Zagreb Cathedral holding banners with the names of 116 Bosniak victims killed in Ahmići. Eugen Jakovčić, one of the protesters representing Dokumenta, the Centre for Dealing with the Past, said he showed up in front of the cathedral to protest the role of the Catholic Church in glorifying Dario Kordić, and also to remember the innocent victims of Ahmići, neglected by the Church officials:

*"In our opinion, the convicted war criminal was welcomed completely inappropriately - with ovations, with people shouting that he was a knight and a moral person. What was actually the most problematic was the presence of a certain number of Catholic priests - and we are primarily referring to the Bishop of Sisak, Vlado Košić -, who at the same time led a prayer for Dario Kordić, while no one - neither Dario Kordić, nor the bishop - mentioned or prayed for the victims of the war crime in Ahmići."*<sup>45</sup>

Following the protest, more than 50 intellectuals and activists from Croatia penned an open letter to the Croatian Bishops' Conference, the episcopal conference of the Catholic Church in Croatia. The co-signatories warned the Bishops' Conference that since its bishops compare Dario Kordić, a convicted war criminal, to Jesus Christ himself, the Catholic Church in Croatia "has a reason to worry for its future":

42 Transcript 2014.

43 Čurić, D. (2014). "Kordića uz pjesmu i pozdrav 'Za dom spremni' dočekalo više stotina ljudi". Večernji list. Available at: <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/dario-kordic-danas-izlazi-na-slobodu-stize-u-zagreb-943209>

44 Al Jazeera Balkans (2014). "Protestna nota IZ Vatikanu radi dočeka Kordiću". Available at: <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2014/6/13/protestna-nota-iz-vatikanu-radi-doceka-kordicu?gb=true>

45 Zebić, E. (2014). "Prosvjed u Zagrebu: Živi spomenik žrtvama u Ahmićima". Radio Slobodna Evropa. Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/prosvjed-protiv-neprijemljenog-do%C4%8Deka-darija-kordic%C4%87a/25417162.html>



*“We ask the Bishops’ Conference that the Church in Croatia return from the path of nationalistic fanaticism and exclusivity to the path of Christian tolerance and modesty, ecumenism, and dialogue. We believe that this would be important for Croatia and the Catholic Church. We also ask that our concern be conveyed to Pope Francis, whose modesty, benevolence and wisdom inspire hope in all people of good will.”<sup>46</sup>*

However, neither did the open letters nor the protest in front of Zagreb Cathedral prevented Dario Kordić from continuing his tour. On 22 June 2014, Kordić arrived in the town of Busovača in Central Bosnia, this time welcomed by thousands of people. Among them was the leadership of the Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina, HDZ BiH, who were posing for photos with Kordić.<sup>47</sup> The presence of Dragan Čović, the Chairman of the House of Peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Borjana Krišto, the Delegate of the House of Peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Marinko Čavara, MP in the House of Representatives of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and President of the HDZ caucus in the Parliament, as well as of other HDZ BiH officials in Busovača, provoked harsh reactions and condemnation both from the political parties and the civil society in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In a public statement the HDZ issued on the day Kordić arrived to Busovača, it was stated that the HDZ BiH delegation first met with him in the parish office in Busovača. They then joined Kordić for a holy mass in the local church, and finally took part in a parade honouring Kordić on the streets of Busovača. In the press release, the HDZ claimed Kordić was not responsible for his crimes in Ahmići. Instead, he was described as a “hero”:

*“The Croats of Bosnia and Herzegovina consider Kordić’s verdict to be political and unjust. Dario Kordić was welcomed as a hero who, for 17 years, did not give in or agree with his testimony to blame the Croatian military and political leadership, led by the former president of the Republic of Croatia Dr. Franjo Tudman. Kordić himself confirmed to those gathered at his reception that he is returning from prison as a new man, a man strengthened by faith.”<sup>48</sup>*

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As a reaction to HDZ officials welcoming a convicted war criminal in Busovača, 28 civil society organisations expressed their protest against the organisation of the public welcome and celebration of the release of Dario Kordić. The NGOs stressed that the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina do not deserve to be represented in their highest institutions by people who glorify war criminals, and called for the Office of High Representative to remove the HDZ politicians from office:

*“We call upon Dragan Čović, Borjana Krišto and Marinko Čavara to resign from the position of the House of Peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the House of Representatives of the FBiH Parliament, and to apologise to the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina for their actions. If this does not happen, we urge the Office of the High Representative to remove Dragan Čović, Borjana Krišto and Marinko Čavara from the functions they perform and thus send a clear*

46 Transcript 2014.

47 Večernji list (2014). “Darija Kordića u Busovači dočekalo više tisuća ljudi”. Available at: <https://www.vecernji.ba/vijesti/darija-kordica-u-busovaci-docekalo-vise-tisuca-ljudi-946234>

48 Transcript 2014.



*message that holders of public office who support convicted war criminals are not and cannot be eligible to make decisions about the present and the future of this country and its citizens*<sup>49</sup>

Anes Makul, one of the co-signatories from the non-governmental organisation ACIPS, said the actions of the HDZ leadership were unacceptable:

*“It is unacceptable that one party, which, publicly at least, advocates for better relations and a democratic society, organises a reception for a convicted war criminal, and then calls into question the final court verdict. By doing so, the HDZ has disrespected the 116 victims of the massacre in Ahmići.”*<sup>50</sup>

However, neither did the HDZ officials apologise, nor were they removed from office. Instead, the glorification and honouring of Dario Kordić continued both in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia in the following years. This has continued to be the cause of tense relations between Bosniaks and Croats, especially during the dates of the Ahmići massacre commemoration, but also in other areas of political life.

In 2015, the commemoration in Ahmići was attended by survivors, victims’ families and local politicians, and also several entity-level Bosniak politicians. The mayor of the Municipality of Vitez, Advan Akeljić, said that the commemoration of the Ahmići massacre victims offered a chance for reconciliation:

*“This commemoration is a sad memory of the massacre in Ahmići. Today is also an opportunity to remember the victims of the concentration camps in a ceremony that we are organising for the first time ever. This is useful not only for remembering the past, but also for taking lessons for the future that lies ahead of us; because reconciliation based on the truth and without forgetting the history will be the one prerequisite for a quality coexistence in our area.”*<sup>51</sup>

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During the next two years, on the day before the commemoration, and in an effort to cherish the remembrance of the Ahmići massacre victims, a history class was held for primary school students from two schools in Vitez.<sup>52</sup> A total of 116 school children flew 116 white balloons symbolising the 116 people killed by the HVO soldiers.

Elvedin Kermo, president of the “16 April” Association, said that while the Croat political leadership is celebrating war criminals, survivors are still searching for the bodies of 30 victims of the massacre. During the commemoration, Kermo said that the ICTY judgments were “shameful”, as well as the fact that the convicted war criminal Dario Kordić was released after serving two-thirds of his sentences:

*“No jail sentence can possibly replace the victims and their persecution, and especially the loss of our loved ones. What’s happening at the ICTY is a circus, as we all know what happened in*

49 Transcript 2014.

50 Boračić-Mršo, S. (2014). “Doček ratnog zločinca Kordića: Omalovažavanje žrtava”. Radio Slobodna Evropa. Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/25439381.html>

51 Klix (2015). “22. godišnjica zločina: Proučen Jasin na šehidskom mezarju u Ahmićima”. Available at: <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/22-godisnjica-zlocina-proucen-jasin-na-sehidskom-mezarju-u-ahmicima/150416053>

52 Anadolujia (2016). “Ahmići: Pušteno 116 bijelih balona za 116 ubijenih u masakru”. N1 BiH. Available at: <https://n1info.ba/vijesti/a91353-Ahmici-pusteno-116-bijelih-balona-za-116-ubijenih-u-masakru/>



*Srebrenica, but also in Ahmići. Our neighbours are glorifying the war criminals as heroes even though they were punished, but none of them have apologised for the crimes committed in Ahmići. They don't even say who committed the crimes, and it was civilians who were killed.*<sup>53</sup>

In January 2018, on the last day of her visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Croatian president Kolinda Grabar Kitarović made an unscheduled stop in Ahmići to pay her respects to the victims of the massacre. Besides Ahmići, Grabar Kitarović stopped also in Križančevo Selo, where dozens of prisoners of war and Croat civilians were killed in 1993 in an attack carried out by the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Croatian president said that she had chosen to visit both places without informing the media, as this was the best way to pay her respects to the innocent victims of the war:

*"In Ahmići and Križančevo Selo, I paid my respects to the victims of the war in central Bosnia. We must do everything so that no mother ever mourns a child or husband lost in the war in these areas. This is a permanent task for us and all future generations."*<sup>54</sup>

Ahead of her visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Youth Initiative for Human Rights, YIHR, called for Grabar Kitarović to strip the convicted war criminals Jadranko Prlić, Slobodan Praljak, Bruno Stojić, Milivoje Petković, Valentin Čorić and Dario Kordić, of their state decorations:

*"By failing to strip the war criminals of their decorations, the President has failed to symbolically deal with the aggressive nationalist policies of the Croatian leadership towards Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s. Grabar Kitarović showed that she is not ready to provide a minimum of solidarity to the victims of the crimes or offer a hand of reconciliation and cooperation to the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina and its political representatives."*<sup>55</sup>

However, Bakir Izetbegović, the Bosniak member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as the general public in the country, praised Grabar Kitarović for visiting Ahmići and Križančevo Selo, raising hopes of further work on reconciliation in the region.

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On 16 April 2018, during the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Ahmići massacre, Bakir Izetbegović spoke about the need to reconcile the peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina. He reminded listeners that on the same day, the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina committed a war crime in Trusina near Konjic, in the south of the country. A few hours after the massacre in Ahmići, members of the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina killed 18 civilians and four members of the HVO in Trusina. For this crime, Edin Džeko was sentenced to 13 years in prison and Rasema Handanović, after pleading guilty, was sentenced to five and a half years in prison. The Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina sentenced Nihad Bojadžić to 15 years in prison for this crime, Nedžad Hodžić to 12 years, and Mensur Memić to 10 years.<sup>56</sup> While addressing the audience, Izetbegović called for everyone to work together to strengthen the country, stop the evil, and prevent those who wanted to from dismantling Bosnia and Herzegovina:

53 Klix (2016). "Pomirenja i zaborava nema: Obilježene 23 godine od zločina u Ahmićima". Available at: <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/pomirenja-i-zaborava-nema-obiljezene-23-godine-od-zlocina-u-ahmicima/160416036>

54 Al Jazeera Balkans (2018). "Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović poklonila se žrtvama Ahmića". Available at: <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2018/1/18/kolinda-grabar-kitarovic-poklonila-se-zrtvama-ahmica>

55 Transcript 2018.

56 Jahić, A. (2017). "Zločin u Trusini: Potvrđena kazna pripadnicima odreda 'Zulfikar'". VOA. Available at: <https://ba.voanews.com/a/zlocin--trusina--presuda/3668735.html>



*“We must reconcile the people in Bosnia and Herzegovina, understand how the second and the third side felt. We have to fight for a unified country, for peace, for a clear perspective for our youth, for a peaceful Bosnia and Herzegovina that guarantees its people that nothing bad will happen. There is a much greater chance that Bosnia and Herzegovina will become a prosperous country in ten years than what bad people want it to become.”<sup>57</sup>*

In early 2019, the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina opened a new case accusing eight former members of the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina for war crimes committed in Križančevo Selo. They are charged for killing at least 12 of HVO soldiers and two civilian women in Vitez in December 1993.<sup>58</sup>

In April 2019, during the 26<sup>th</sup> anniversary, 32 war veterans from the region and activists from the Centre for Nonviolent Action Sarajevo/Belgrade took part in the commemoration for the victims in Ahmići. The day before the commemoration, the group of war veterans and activists visited the memorial room and held a meeting with the commemoration organisers at the nearby primary school.

The Covid pandemic affected the 2020 commemoration in Ahmići by preventing hundreds of people from attending. Instead, it was only several officials and a handful of imams from the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina who attended the commemoration and recited verses from the Qur’an. Just days before 16 April 2020, an entire family was buried in the cemetery, including the youngest victim killed by the HVO soldiers, the three-month-old Sead (Sejo) Ahmić. Ahmed ef. Adilović, the Mufti of Travnik, reminded those present that the bodies of 24 victims are still missing. He stressed that the killing of a three-month-old baby should never be forgotten:

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*“We have to ask ourselves what happened so that the three-month-old child Sejo Ahmić, his brother and sister aged 6 and 8 and their mother, and also the father who was a civilian, had to be killed so horribly. We use the opportunity to say that everything that happened on 16 April should be remembered by all generations to come and that it should not happen again to anyone.”<sup>59</sup>*

The Covid pandemic did not permit any extended commemoration in 2021 either. The anniversary of the Ahmići massacre was held modestly and led by imams reciting verses from the Qur’an. The imam of the local mosque in Ahmići, Mahir ef. Husić, said he hoped that families would find their loved ones soon:

*“Every year we send a message so that the war crime in Ahmići is not forgotten and not repeated against anyone. What happened to us should never happen to anyone. I hope that our*

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57 Klix (2018). “Bakir Izetbegović u Ahmićima: Nema ratovanja ni za kakve sile”. Available at: <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/bakir-izetbegovic-u-Ahmićima-nema-ratovanja-ni-za-kakve-sile/180416074>

58 Sorguc, A. (2019). “Bosnian Army Ex-Soldiers Go on Trial for Killing Croats”. BIRN. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/04/19/bosnian-army-ex-soldiers-go-on-trial-for-killing-croats/>

59 Klix (2020). “Pusta godišnjica zločina u Ahmićima: Tromjesečni Sejo s porodicom pronašao vječni smiraj”. Available at: <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/pusta-godisnjica-zlocina-u-Ahmićima-tromjesečni-sejo-s-porodicom-pronasao-vjecni-smiraj/200416103>



*neighbours, who know where our murdered family members are, will show their humanity and share with us what they know.*<sup>60</sup>

In March 2023, the “16 April” Association from Ahmići slammed Lidija Bradara, the President of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina entity, for honouring Dario Kordić on TV. Bradara, a high-ranking member of the Croatian Democratic Union in Bosnia and Herzegovina, HDZ BiH, said in a live TV interview she would “not give up on a friend”, referring to Kordić, and adding that he “ceased being a war time convict” after serving two thirds of his prison time.<sup>61</sup>

During the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Ahmići massacre, the newly-elected Bosniak member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Denis Bećirović, criticised the denial and glorification of war crimes. Bećirović stressed that Bosnia and Herzegovina is still under attack from politicians, who should not be underestimated, as they want to see it dismantled. Despite his warnings, he said he is optimistic about Bosnia’s future:

*“However, regardless of all the suffering, I believe in a safe future for Bosnia and Herzegovina. We have a future if we teach our children to be smarter and stronger, to love their own and respect others. We must create a democratic and civilised society in which people will measure themselves according to human virtues. Building such a society is an obligation and a historical debt not only of the people in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also of the representatives of the international community.”*<sup>62</sup>

During the same event, the Grand Mufti of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Husein ef. Kavazović, called for Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina to critically evaluate what had brought them to the state they were in during the war, as well as to the situation they are currently in:

*“I warn you, we often hear nice words, but do not let that fool us. We have to look at what brought us to the situation in which we were from 1992 to 1995, and where we are today, and whether we can even compare the two [the 1992-1995 situation with the current one]. This is a key topic for this community of ours. (...) That is why it is very important not to be servile towards those who do not wish us well. We must be determined, we must act decisively against such people, as that is God’s request to us. Therefore, let us unite and act together, if we want to save ourselves and the generations to come.”*<sup>63</sup>

### 3.3. Conclusion

As laid out in this analysis, the Ahmići massacre is a contested event in terms of how different groups are commemorating its victims. In the first place, the Bosniak and pro-Bosnian actors,

60 Klix (2021). “Još jedna godišnjica zločina u Ahmićima: U akciji HVO-a ubijeno 116 ljudi, a među njima i beba”. Available at: <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/jos-jedna-godisnjica-zlocina-u-ahmicima-u-akciji-hvo-a-ubijeno-116-ljudi-a-medju-njima-i-beba/210416063>

61 Mededović, F. (2023). “Bradara: Valjda je Kordić prestao biti osuđenik za ratne zločine”. N1 BiH. Available at: <https://n1info.ba/vijesti/bradara-valjda-je-kordic-prestao-biti-osudjenik-za-ratne-zlocine/>

62 Transcript 2023.

63 Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina (2023). “Reisul-ulema u Ahmićima: Kao narod moramo uzimati pouku u onome što se dogodilo”. Available at: <https://www.islamskazajednica.ba/index.php/vijesti/reisu-l-ulema/31062-reisul-ulema-u-Ahmicima-kao-narod-moramo-uzimati-pouku-u-onome-sto-se-dogodilo>



including the international community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, are taking part in annual commemorations demanding from the judicial institutions that they apprehend the perpetrators, many of whom are still at large. At the same time, families of the victims are still searching for the remains of their loved ones murdered 30 years ago and publicly inviting their Croat neighbours to share with them any information about the final resting places of their family members. Parallel to this, the Croat political leadership in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been engaging in activities that deny the war crimes committed by the HVO and glorify those convicted by the ICTY.

The frontrunner in honouring the war criminals convicted for the Ahmići massacre is the Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina, HDZ BiH, whose members welcomed the convicted war criminal Dario Kordić to Bosnia and Herzegovina after he was released from jail in 2014. HDZ BiH have continued to glorify Kordić and justify his wartime misdeeds to this date. A similar type of whitewashing can be observed in parts of the society in neighbouring Croatia, where the Catholic church, supported by parts of the political establishment, has been providing support and a platform to Dario Kordić in sharing his narratives denying the war crimes. Even though Ivo Josipović and Kolinda Grabar Kitarović visited Ahmići in 2010 and 2018 respectively, the Republic of Croatia has never apologised for its role in Ahmići.

As laid out in this chapter, the politics of remembrance relating to this particular war crime will remain an open question in the years to come. The obstacles to overcoming divisive politics and fostering a collective memory of the wartime events, as well as of the way how the war crimes and its victims should be remembered, remain significant.



## 4. The Kazani Pit killings

### 4.1. Introduction

For almost four years, between April 1992 and February 1996, Sarajevo was under siege by the JNA and Army of Republika Srpska forces. During that time, the Bosnian Serb forces killed thousands of people, including children. In the first year of the war, as the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina organised the defence of the city together with other military groups, such as the local Territorial Defense Force of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, certain individuals gained influence, which empowered them to act as local warlords.

One of the most infamous was Mušan Topalović, known as “Caco”, the commander of the 10th Mountain Brigade in the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Many of his victims were brought to the Kazani Pit, a natural pit located on Mount Trebević, and killed there. He was held responsible for murdering dozens of innocent people, civilians, who stayed in Sarajevo during the siege. Some of Caco’s victims were Bosnian Serbs involved in defending the city against the JNA and the Army of Republika Srpska.

On 26 October 1993, the Presidency of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina organised “Operation Trebević-2”, a coordinated effort against “criminals in their own ranks”. The main targets were the commander of the 10th Mountain Brigade, Mušan Topalović Caco, and the commander of the 9th Motorised Brigade, Ramiz Delalić Čelo. During the arrest operation, Caco and his men killed nine soldiers and policemen who participated in that action. A total of 14 soldiers of the 10th Mountain Brigade in the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina were investigated and held responsible and sent to jail.

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### 4.2. Chronological analysis

According to the Institute for Missing Persons of Bosnia and Herzegovina (INO BiH), 23 victims have been excavated from the Kazani Pit so far, and 15 of them have been identified. Out of those 15, two are Ukrainians, two Croats, one a Bosniak, and ten are Serbs. Among those victims identified, five are female and ten male, aged between 27 and 66. The final death toll has yet to be established.<sup>64</sup>

Until 2011, no political representative even visited the Kazani Pit to offer respect to the victims.<sup>65</sup> The initiative to commemorate the inhabitants of Sarajevo killed at Kazani came from Svetozar Pudarić, the Vice-President of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina entity, who visited the location in October 2011. By taking the initiative to erect the memorial to the victims killed at Kazani, Pudarić, himself an ethnic Serb and a member of the Social Democratic Party of Bosnia and Herzegovina (SDP BiH), became a pioneer in commemorating the victims of Kazani.<sup>66</sup> After

64 Hodžić, E. (2022). “Porodice žrtava zločina na kazanima traže izgradnju novog spomenika u Sarajevu”. Detektor. Available at: <https://detektor.ba/2022/10/27/porodice-zrtava-zlocina-na-kazanima-traze-izgradnju-novog-spomenika-u-sarajevu>

65 Moll, N. (2015). *Sarajevska najpoznatija javna tajna: Suočavanje sa Cacom, Kazanima i zločinima počinjenim nad Srbima u opkoljenom Sarajevu, od rata do 2015*. Friedrich Ebert Foundation. Available at: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sarajevo/12972.pdf>

66 Sandić-Hadžihasanović, G. (2011). “Inicijativa za spomenik žrtvama ubijenim na Kazanima”. Radio Slobodna Evropa. Available at: [https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/zrtve\\_ubijene\\_u\\_kazanima\\_se\\_ne\\_smiju\\_zaboraviti/24404901.html](https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/zrtve_ubijene_u_kazanima_se_ne_smiju_zaboraviti/24404901.html)



paying a visit to Kazani, Pudarić elaborated his initiative by stressing that he attributed his visit to the victims who were killed at the pit, but he also underlined that the Kazani Pit killings were the work of individuals and, as such, an exception to the struggle of the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina:

*“Those victims and those crimes should be separated precisely because of the struggle of others, because of the deep connection that the citizens felt with each other during the siege. It is necessary to show and prove that these crimes did not represent the defence of Sarajevo, although they were used as a justification for that.”*<sup>67</sup>

His visit to the Kazani Pit and the laying of a wreath in October 2011, as well as the simultaneously announced initiative to erect a memorial plaque, were highly significant. For the first time, the place of Kazani was placed physically at the centre of attention and discussion, both with an actual visit and with the initiative to raise a memorial.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, it was the first time that a high-ranking politician from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina entity committed himself to actively commemorate the victims killed at Kazani.

During the next two years, no high-ranking visits took place at the memorial, even though Svetozar Pudarić was visiting Kazani on his own. It was not until 2014 that representatives of civil society and the Ambassador of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe in Bosnia and Herzegovina (OSCE), Jonathan Moore, took part in a memorial ceremony. Again, the person initiating this memorial event was the Vice-President of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina entity, Svetozar Pudarić. During the visit, he expressed his disappointment that no proper memorial had been erected yet, despite his initiative taken in 2011:

*“If Sarajevo is considered as a collection of political structures, then Kazani will remain a stain on Sarajevo’s face. However, if Sarajevo is seen as a society in which it is not only political structures that determine the character of this city, then this stain will remain only on those structures. The pre-requisite for this is that the remaining elements of the civil society assume their role and accept the responsibility of those who committed crimes and clearly distance themselves from them.”*<sup>69</sup>

Until 2014, the only politician officially visiting Kazani was Svetozar Pudarić. However, in the fall of 2014, he stepped down from the position of Vice-President of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina entity. His initiative to erect a memorial at the Kazani Pit was echoed by the liberal Naša Stranka (transl. *Our Party*) in September 2015. Sarajevo City Council Member Sanja Lazar invited the Sarajevo City Council and the Mayor of Sarajevo to pay their respects to those inhabitants of Sarajevo killed at the Kazani Pit:

*“Commemorating the victims of Kazani is our duty, that is where we show our responsibility. That is the only way we can show that we are aware of the wrongdoings that were committed*

67 Al Jazeera Balkans (2011). “Pudarić: Spomenik na Kazanima je dug žrtvama i Sarajevu”. Available at: <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/teme/2011/12/17/pudaric-spomenik-na-kazanima-je-dug-zrtvama-i-sarajevu>

68 Moll, N. (2015). *Sarajevska najpoznatija javna tajna: Suočavanje sa Cocom, Kazanima i zločinima počinjenim nad Srbima u opkoljenom Sarajevu, od rata do 2015*. Friedrich Ebert Foundation. Available at: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sarajevo/12972.pdf>

69 FENA (2015). “Iz jame izvadeno 29 tijela: Sjećanje na žrtve stradanja na Kazanima”. Klix. Available at: <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/iz-jame-izvadjeno-29-tijela-sjecanje-na-zrtve-stradanja-na-kazanima/151024060>



in 'our' name. That is the only way we can reject collective responsibility for the wrongdoings committed by individuals. I want to believe that we, before everything else, as people, and then also as representative citizens, will never, not even now, stand on the side of crime, and that we will neither verbally nor tacitly approve the actions of criminals."<sup>70</sup>

As the momentum grew, the civil society sector joined in exerting pressure on the authorities to properly commemorate the victims killed at Kazani. On 25 October 2015, the Association for Social Research and Communications, UDIK, marked the anniversary of the crimes committed at Kazani Pit. The event UDIK organised was carried out on Fra Grga Martić Square in front of the Sacred Heart Cathedral in Sarajevo. In the press release, this NGO described Kazani as the site where Serbs and Croats from Sarajevo had been tortured, killed and dumped:

*"The city of Sarajevo has a political and moral responsibility for dealing with this crime, and it is unworthy to deny or keep silent when it comes to this crime. Because of the oblivion and negation, the crime at Kazani seems an even greater crime. The City of Sarajevo is also a city of Bosniak's victims during the siege and it should show the humility to express the deepest respect for the victims. Attempts to justify this crime offend the innocent victims."<sup>71</sup>*

Intense public pressure brought results some eight months later. In June 2016, the Bosniak member of the tripartite Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the President of the biggest Bosniak nationalist Party of Democratic Action (SDA), Bakir Izetbegović paid an official visit to Kazani. He was accompanied by a high-ranking delegation from his party, which included Denis Zvizdić, the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Fadil Novalić, the Prime Minister of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina entity, as well as Elmedin Konaković, the Prime Minister of Sarajevo Canton.

During the visit, Izetbegović said he "felt obliged" to visit Kazani and that he "should have come here sooner", adding he was willing to do more as part of his effort to build trust and reconciliation among different ethnic groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina:

*"I am ready to invest special efforts into this. I call upon all Serbs, Bosniaks, and Croats to report the [murder] locations and help people who have still not buried their family members. But that is not the main goal of my visit. I simply had a feeling and obligation to do it."<sup>72</sup>*

This was an important visit, because it was not only a visit by just any Bosniak official, but a visit made by the highest-ranking Bosniak politician. As such, it received international coverage, despite the fact that the Kazani atrocity is not widely known beyond Bosnia and Herzegovina and the region.<sup>73</sup> In addition, it is important to note that Izetbegović did not visit Kazani alone. He was accompanied by several other high-ranking SDA officials who at the same time also held high positions at various levels of government.

70 FENA (2015). "Lazar: Grad Sarajevo mora izgraditi spomen obilježje na Kazanima". Klix. Available at: <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/lazar-grad-sarajevo-mora-izgraditi-spomen-obiljezje-na-kazanima/150922101>

71 Transcript 2015.

72 BIRN (2016). "Izetbegovic Honours Bosnian Serb Victims at Kazani". Balkan Insight. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/06/13/izetbegovic-paid-respect-to-people-killed-at-kazani-06-13-2016/>

73 Eriksson, A. (2016). "Bosniak leader pays tribute to Serb victims". EU Observer. Available at: <https://euobserver.com/news/133816>



The press release published by the SDA on the same day and widely circulated by the media was clear and unequivocal: “Serb civilians were killed at Kazani”, and by visiting Kazani, Izetbegovic “paid his respects to the killed Sarajevo Serbs.”<sup>74</sup> This type of press release represents progress compared to earlier formulations, both by the SDA and by many other Bosniak officials. In earlier public statements, Bosniak decision-makers would rather vaguely refer to victims as “killed civilians” or as “killed civilians of all nationalities”. Even though not all the victims were Serbs, the vast majority of them were of Serb ethnicity.

The following year, on 26 October 2016, the new Vice-President of the Federation of BiH entity, Milan Dunović, visited Kazani for the first time to remember the victims. During his visit, Dunović called for the need to deal with the past in a structural way:

*“Today marks the 23rd anniversary of the terrible crime where citizens of Serb nationality, citizens of Sarajevo, were killed. I think that Sarajevo needs a little more talk about Kazani, that it needs a monument here, because it was something done by individuals in the ranks of the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is also true that among those killed were also members of the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, citizens who defended the city. That is why I believe that it should be talked about openly and that no one should protect criminals. We should distance ourselves from that story in such a way that it is clearly stated that this was not an official policy which was being followed in Sarajevo in 1993.”<sup>75</sup>*

During his visit, Dunović was accompanied by the Mayor of Sarajevo, Ivo Komšić, which was the first official visit of a mayor of Sarajevo to the Kazani Pit. Komšić emphasised that what happened at Kazani is a burden on the conscience of all Sarajevo citizens:

*“This is a sad and difficult day, because we are reminded of the victims of crime. Crimes in war are motivated either by revenge or by the politics they refer to, as there is no war in which there is no crime. The problem for us, the inhabitants of Sarajevo, is that during the defence and siege of the city, crimes happened. I think that is a burden on the conscience of all citizens of Sarajevo.”<sup>76</sup>*

In the upcoming years, the discussion about erecting a memorial at Kazani Pit intensified, especially after the news broke that Caco’s name had been inscribed on a memorial plaque of a primary school in Sarajevo. The Association for Social Research and Communications, UDIK, slammed the City administration for failing to erect a memorial honouring the victims at Kazani, whilst tolerating the memorial plaques honouring those responsible for the deaths of Sarajevo civilians:

*“We can say that the war crime at Kazani Pit is the biggest stain on Sarajevo under siege. The same goes also for the city that in the post-war period allowed the erection of a memorial*

74 S.H. (2016). “Delegacija SDA predvođena Izetbegovićem odala počast stradalim sarajevskim Srbima na Kazanima”. Klix. Available at: <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/delegacija-sda-predvodjena-izetbegovicem-odala-pocast-stradalim-sarajevskim-srbima-na-kazanima/160613068>

75 Zornić, A. (2016). “Dunović, pa Komšić posjetili Kazane: Sjećanje na nedužno ubijene građane Sarajeva”. Anadoluja. Available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/ba/balkan/dunovi%C4%87-pa-kom%C5%A1i%C4%87-posjetili-kazane-sje%C4%87anje-na-nedu%C5%BEno-ubijene-gra%C4%91ane-sarajeva/672671>

76 Ibid.



plaque to the war criminal Caco on the wall of the Primary School “Edhem Mulabdić” in Stari Grad.<sup>77</sup>

UDIK called upon the responsible authorities in Sarajevo to remove the memorial plaque on the wall of the school, but also “to finally keep their promises and build a monument in the city of Sarajevo so that forgetting, denying and not marking the crime in Kazani will not make this crime even bigger and more terrible.”<sup>78</sup>

During the time of Covid-19, no large gatherings at the Kazani Pit were organised owing to pandemic restrictions. Instead, in October 2020, representatives of four non-governmental organisations paid respect to the Kazani Pit victims at the Eternal Flame in Sarajevo and issued a joint statement demanding that the authorities erect a memorial at Kazani Pit as soon as possible.

Two months later, in December 2020, the Sarajevo City Council announced that a memorial to the victims of Kazani would be built in 2021. According to the official document indicating the plan to build the memorial, the purpose of erecting the monument was to honour the Sarajevo civilians who, during the Siege of Sarajevo in 1992 and 1993, were taken to the site of the Kazani Pit on Trebević and killed there.<sup>79</sup> What followed in the upcoming months was a series of public discussions and political debates on how and when to commemorate the victims of Kazani, as well as what should be inscribed on the monument. First, in October 2021, the Sarajevo City Council designated 9 November as the day of remembrance for the Kazani victims, as the exhumation of their remains began on that day.<sup>80</sup> After extensive deliberations, the City Council decided to install a monument honouring those murdered at Kazani, but without mentioning the names of the perpetrators or highlighting their affiliation with the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The inscription on the monument, which simply reads “*We shall forever remember with sadness and respect our fellow citizens who were killed*”, and lists the names of the known victims, was heavily criticised by the liberal Naša Stranka, as well as by the victims’ families, who argued that it should be stated who killed them.<sup>81</sup>

This criticism was rejected by the majority of the Sarajevo City Council, including the social democratic SDP, who argued the alternative wording proposed would imply relativisation and smeared the struggle of the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The SDP, as well as the Bosniak nationalist SDA and civic-oriented DF, argued the crime was committed by renegade

37

77 Transcript 2017.

78 Transcript 2017.

79 Kuloglija-Zolj, N. (2021). “Izgradnja spomenika na Kazanima u planu Gradskog vijeća Sarajeva za 2021. godinu”. Detektor. Available at: <https://detektor.ba/2020/12/08/izgradnja-spomenika-na-kazanima-u-planu-gradskog-vijeca-sarajeva-za-2021-godinu/>

80 Sarajevo.ba (2021). “Gradsko vijeće grada Sarajeva na inicijativu gradonačelnice Katić usvojilo odluku o podizanju spomen obilježja Kazani”. Available at: <https://www.sarajevo.ba/bs/article/12480/gradsko-vijece-grada-sarajeva-na-inicijativu-gradonacelnice-katic-usvojilo-odluku-o-podizanju-spomen-obiljezja-kazani>

81 M.G. (2021). “Srbima uvredljiv spomenik na Kazanima: Ne piše da su Srbi, ko ih je ubio, a nema ni krsta”. Klix. Available at: <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/srbima-uvredljiv-spomenik-na-kazanima-ne-pise-da-su-srbi-ko-ih-je-ubio-a-nema-ni-krsta/210930041>



military groups who faced trial, and not by the command of the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>82</sup>

On 15 November 2021, the Mayor of Sarajevo, Benjamina Karić, accompanied by the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Christian Schmidt, and the Vice-President of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina entity, Milan Dunović, unveiled the new memorial erected next to the Kazani Pit.<sup>83</sup>

In her written statement, Benjamina Karić stressed this was an important day for the city of Sarajevo, its citizens, and for “all of those who defended the city in a brave and honourable way”:

*“Our intention is to convey the truth, to teach future generations about what happened, so that such unfortunate and tragic events will never happen again. With all my heart, I sympathise with the families of those killed at Kazani Pit.”<sup>84</sup>*

However, many were sceptical as to whether the monument conveyed the truth in its full scope. One of them was the U.S. Ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Michael Murphy, who visited the Kazani Pit in April 2022, and commended the City Council for erecting the monument. In a public statement, Murphy said “reconciliation requires acknowledging all of the past’s difficult truths”, making a specific reference to the absence of the names of the perpetrators.<sup>85</sup>

Criticism of the Mayor’s decision to erect a monument which did not specify who killed the citizens of Sarajevo came also from victims’ families and the civil society representatives. In October 2022, family members of those murdered at Kazani Pit expressed their hope for a new monument to be erected, as the existing one does not explain to visitors who are not familiar with the crime exactly what happened there. However, Benjamina Karić brushed off such criticism by claiming she was “proud” of the monument erected at Kazani.<sup>86</sup>

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The following month, Karić laid flowers on the memorial at Kazani, joined by some of the victims’ family members, civil society activists, elected officials, as well as representatives of international organisations in Bosnia and Herzegovina. After paying respect to the victims murdered at Kazani, Karić said that time would be the best judge of the process that culminated with the monument being erected.<sup>87</sup>

Rajko Živković from the Serb Civic Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina, who also attended the ceremony, stressed the importance of commemorating the victims of Kazani, adding that there is a “permanent obligation to pay respect to innocent murdered citizens of Sarajevo”.<sup>88</sup>

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82 Transcript 2021.

83 RSE (2021). “Na Kazanima otkriveno spomen obilježje ubijenim srpskim i hrvatskim civilima”. Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/kazani-spomenik-ratni-zlo%C4%8Dini/31562145.html>

84 Transcript 2021.

85 Al Jazeera Balkans (2022). “Ambasador SAD-a na Kazanima: Spomenik nepotpun bez imena nalogodavaca i svih žrtava”. Available at: <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2022/4/7/ambasador-sad-a-na-kazanima-spomenik-nepotpun-bez-imena-nalogodavca-i-svih-zrtava>

86 Hodžić, E. (2022). “Porodice žrtava zločina na kazanima traže izgradnju novog spomenika u Sarajevu”. Detektor. Available at: <https://detektor.ba/2022/10/27/porodice-zrtava-zlocina-na-kazanima-traze-izgradnju-novog-spomenika-u-sarajevu>

87 Brljavac, B. (2022). “Sarajevo: Delegacije odale počast na spomen-obilježju Kazani”. Anadolija. Available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/ba/balkan/sarajevo-delegacije-odale-po%C4%8Dast-na-spomen-obilje%C5%BEju-kazani/2733670>

88 Ibid.



### 4.3. Conclusion

Looking into the commemorations held for the citizens of Sarajevo killed at Kazani, it is essential to emphasise that until 2014, such events barely occurred, despite the fact that the authorities of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, including the judiciary, had dealt with the crimes of Mušan Topalović Caco and his men already during the war.

Therefore, the analysis of the Kazani commemorations requires looking mainly at the last decade, with the former Vice-President of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina entity, Sveztozar Pudarić, being the first politician to visit the site in 2014. Since then, two main blocs have emerged. The first bloc, the civil society and engaged intellectuals, demanded from the Bosniak and pro-Bosnian politicians that they not only publicly condemn the dark legacy of Caco, but also properly remember and commemorate the citizens of Sarajevo killed at Kazani. Significantly, this bloc of engaged citizens kept emphasising the fact that the vast majority of people killed at Kazani Pit were actually Bosnian Serbs. Even though numerous NGOs were resolute in their efforts to influence the other bloc, the local politicians in the Bosnian capital, to deal with the past in a proper manner, the commitment coming from the Bosniak and pro-Bosnian leadership in Sarajevo remained bleak for many years. The elected officials in Sarajevo had in the main neglected the need to commemorate the victims of Kazani for a number of years. Once the public pressure became too high to ignore, the authorities decided to move forward with erecting a monument, which with its inscription did not fully satisfy anyone except those lawmakers who approved it at the Sarajevo City Council.

Even though those murdered at Kazani now have a monument honouring them, this chapter does not seem to be closed, as neither the civil society, nor the families of the victims, nor the international officials, hold that the current monument is properly commemorating the citizens of Sarajevo, who were killed by the soldiers of the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina - an important piece of information not included in the monument erected at Kazani. However, taking into account the wider context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, commemorating the victims of the Kazani Pit massacre can be still regarded as a positive shift within the politics of remembrance. This can be argued especially when considering that no official commemorations were held until the early 2010s, and that this war crime was not even properly addressed in the public sphere. Despite this, it is still important to emphasise that the way the victims are remembered on the memorial plaque, without the names and affiliation of the perpetrators being mentioned, casts a shade on Bosnia's politics of remembrance as related to this particular crime.



## 5. The Markale massacre

### 5.1. Introduction

The Siege of Sarajevo, which lasted for 1,425 days, is considered the longest military siege in modern history. Between 6 April 1992 and 29 February 1996, some 400,000 inhabitants of the Bosnian capital were subjected to a shelling and sniper terror campaign by the JNA and the Army of Republika Srpska. An average of 329 grenades fell on Sarajevo each day - on 2 July 1993, a record number of 3,777 grenades were fired from the surrounding hills and mountains onto the city. The exact number of killed people varies from source to source and spans between 9,500<sup>89</sup> and almost 14,000<sup>90</sup>.

The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) convicted four Bosnian Serb officials, including three high-ranking commanders of the Army of Republika Srpska, for the Siege of Sarajevo and other crimes they committed. Stanislav Galić<sup>91</sup> and Dragomir Milošević<sup>92</sup> were sentenced to life imprisonment and 29 years imprisonment respectively. In addition, their superiors, Radovan Karadžić<sup>93</sup> and Ratko Mladić<sup>94</sup>, were convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment for establishing and carrying out “a campaign of sniping and shelling against the civilian population of Sarajevo, aimed at spreading terror amongst them.”<sup>95</sup>

The bloodiest crime during the Sarajevo siege is known as the Markale market shelling or Markale Massacre.<sup>96</sup> The Markale massacre refers actually to two different bombardments that happened in the heart of the city. The first occurred on 5 February 1994, when a mortar shell hit the Markale marketplace killing at least 67 and wounding more than 140 civilians. Next year, on 28 August 1995, another grenade fell in front of the main entrance of the same market, killing 43 and wounding at least 70 civilians.<sup>97</sup>

This massacre against the civilians of Sarajevo triggered a strong international backlash. Between 30 August and 14 September 1995, NATO targeted Bosnian Serb positions during the Operation Deliberate Force bombing campaign, which resulted in the withdrawal of heavy weapons from the Bosnian Serb positions around Sarajevo.

89 ICTY (2003). “Death Toll in the Siege of Sarajevo, April 1992 to December 1995: A Study of Mortality Based on Eight Large Data Sources”. Retrieved from: [https://www.icty.org/x/file/About/OTP/War\\_Demographics/en/slobodan\\_milosevic\\_sarajevo\\_030818.pdf](https://www.icty.org/x/file/About/OTP/War_Demographics/en/slobodan_milosevic_sarajevo_030818.pdf)

90 Prometej (2013). “Pojedinačan popis broja ratnih žrtava u svim općinama BiH”. Retrieved from: <http://www.prometej.ba/clanak/drustvo-i-znanost/pojedinacan-popis-broja-ratnih-zrtava-u-svim-opcinama-bih-997>

91 ICTY (2006). “Prosecutor v. Stanislav Galić Judgement”. Retrieved from: <https://www.icty.org/x/cases/galic/acjug/en/gal-acjud061130.pdf>

92 ICTY (2009). “Prosecutor v. Dragomir Milošević Judgement”. Retrieved from: [https://www.icty.org/x/cases/dragomir\\_milosevic/acjug/en/091112.pdf](https://www.icty.org/x/cases/dragomir_milosevic/acjug/en/091112.pdf)

93 ICTY (n.d.). “Case Information Sheet: Radovan Karadžić”. Retrieved from: [https://www.icty.org/x/cases/karadzic/cis/en/cis\\_karadzic\\_en.pdf](https://www.icty.org/x/cases/karadzic/cis/en/cis_karadzic_en.pdf)

94 ICTY (n.d.). “Case Information Sheet: Ratko Mladić”. Retrieved from: [https://www.icty.org/x/cases/mladic/cis/en/cis\\_mladic\\_en.pdf](https://www.icty.org/x/cases/mladic/cis/en/cis_mladic_en.pdf)

95 Ibid.

96 Radio Sarajevo (2017). “Godišnjica masakra na Markalama: Najveće stratište tokom 1425 dana opsade”. Retrieved from: <https://radiosarajevo.ba/vijesti/bosna-i-hercegovina/godisnjica-masakra-na-markalama-najvece-stratiste-tokom-1425-dana-opsade/252838>

97 IRMCT (n.d.). “The Siege of Sarajevo 1992-1995”. Retrieved from: <https://www.irmct.org/en/mip/features/sarajevo>





As will be presented in this chapter, the politics of remembrance in the context of the Markale massacre revolves around the Bosnian Serb decision-makers attempting to deny what was proven by the international courts and pro-Bosnian actors working to reinforce the memory regarding innocent civilians of Sarajevo.

## 5.2. Chronological analysis

The commemoration takes place every year on 5 February at the Sarajevo National Theatre, and at Markale marketplace, which houses a white marble monument built to honour the victims of the massacre.<sup>98</sup> Behind the monument, a glass wall is erected with the inscribed names of the victims who were killed during the Markale massacre.

Besides the location, the date itself still bears a considerable historical significance and relevance, almost three decades later. For that reason, 5 February is also commemorated as the “Day of Remembrance for all the citizens of Sarajevo who were killed and wounded by the aggressor during the period of the siege of 1992-1995.”<sup>99</sup> This is the reason why the Markale commemoration serves as a platform for survivors of the Siege of Sarajevo to speak about their experience and advocate for preserving peace and improving reconciliation efforts.

While addressing the attendees during the 19th anniversary of the Markale massacre, held on 5 February 2014, Silvana Marić, one of the survivors of the siege of Sarajevo, said it is important to raise awareness of the bravery and resistance that the citizens of Sarajevo showed while being besieged by the enemy:

*“On days such as this one, I revive the old memories”, she said during the commemoration, stressing she felt as if she spoke on behalf of all of the victims, but at the same time emphasizing that “every victim’s name is one soul and one story.”*<sup>100</sup>

Those who usually deny the responsibility of the Army of Republika Srpska for this war crime do not stop there, but also deny the experience of the survivors who witnessed both the Markale massacre and the Siege of Sarajevo. Such a type of denial does not come only from the Republika Srpska, but also from neighbouring Serbia. Speaking at the Markale massacre commemoration held on 5 February 2014, the Croat member of the tripartite Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Željko Komšić, said he does not expect Serbia to recognise the Markale massacre:

*“Serbia will keep denying it [the Markale massacre] for the next hundred years, and people in Sarajevo should be clear about that. We are constantly witnessing such situations. Every now and then, they are trying to relativise the crimes... The maximum can we get from Belgrade is*

98 Radio Free Europe (2021). “Šta piše na sarajevskim spomen-pločama stradalim civilima tokom opsade”. Retrieved from: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/spomenici-sarajevo-rat-civili/31535466.html>

99 Radio Sarajevo (2020). “Skupština KS: 5. februar proglašen Danom sjećanja na ubijene i ranjene Sarajlije”. Retrieved from: <https://radiosarajevo.ba/vijesti/lokalne-teme/skupstina-ks-5-februar-obiljezavat-ce-se-kao-dan-sjecanja-na-sve-ubijene-sarajlije/380418>

100 Al Jazeera Balkans (2013). “Dan sjećanja na poginule Sarajlije 1992–95”. Retrieved from: <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2013/2/5/dan-sjecanja-na-poginule-sarajlije-1992-95>



*them saying 'everyone is equal'. No, not everyone is equal. We were defending ourselves. We did not attack anyone. Therefore, we are not equal.'*<sup>101</sup>

During the next year's commemoration, held on 5 February 2015 at the National Theatre in Sarajevo, the President of the Sarajevo Canton Assembly, Sabahudin Delalić, warned that forgetting the Markale massacre would be a sin. On that occasion, as he explained, the Sarajevo Canton Assembly decided to declare 5 February as a "Day of Remembrance of all the victims who gave their lives for freedom and homeland."<sup>102</sup> The Mayor of Sarajevo, Ivo Komšić, said he is certain justice will not reach all those who are responsible for the suffering of the citizens of Sarajevo, urging Bosnians to learn from their history:

*"We should remember those days, because we should always remember that some things can happen again. Unfortunately, history repeats itself and we do not learn enough from the tragedies we have experienced. The memory should not prevent us from building a better future and doing everything to restore the values of the life we lived before."*<sup>103</sup>

The 22<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the Markale massacre gathered numerous survivors, politicians, and film makers to take part at the commemoration held at the National Theatre in Sarajevo on 5 February 2016. This was an occasion for Avdo Huseinović, Bosnian journalist and publicist, to present parts of his documentary film about the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. During his address, he stressed the imperative for the judicial institutions to find and convict all those responsible for the Markale massacre:

*"There are many phenomena of the struggle for the survival of Sarajevo. I am haunted by the fact that the siege of Sarajevo is still an unpunished crime."*<sup>104</sup>

42

Dino Konaković, the Prime Minister of the Canton of Sarajevo, stressed that besides finding and prosecuting those responsible for this war crime, it was equally important to commemorate the victims of this massacre, as the commemoration itself conveys a profound message:

*"For me personally, marking this date means sending a message in two directions. First, a message to those who distort the truth about the aggression against Bosnia and Herzegovina and the suffering of our city. The second message is more important for those of us who hold positions, that the dignity of people and the sacrifices they made must be a moral obligation for all of us who do this work, and that all these lives cannot be in vain."*<sup>105</sup>

Besides the public gathering at the Markale marketplace and the official commemoration event usually held at the National Theatre, the Markale commemoration also contains a strong po-

101 Jelin Dizdar, T. (2014). "Markale 20 godina kasnije". Retrieved from: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/25254482.html> <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/25254482.html>

102 Dnevni avaz (2015). "Na Markalama odata počast zvjerski ubijenim sarajevskim civilima". Retrieved from: <https://avaz.ba/vijesti/bih/162390/na-markalama-odata-pocast-zvjerski-ubijenim-sarajevskim-civilima>

103 Transcript 2015.

104 Source (2016). "Narodno pozorište: Održana komemoracija povodom Dana sjećanja na poginule građane Sarajeva". Retrieved from: <https://source.ba/clanak/BiH/393308/Narodno-pozoriste--Odrzana-komemoracija-povodom-Dana-sjecanja-na-poginule-gradjane-Sarajeva>

105 Hadžimusić, A. (2016). "Zbog Markala se i danas budim sav u goloj vodi". Retrieved from: <https://n1info.ba/vijesti/a80706-godisnjica-masakra-na-markale/>



litical element. Prior to laying flowers on the memorial at Markale marketplace dedicated to the victims of the slaughter, a joint commemoration sessions between the Sarajevo Canton Assembly, the City Council of Sarajevo, and the Municipal Councils from the territory of the Canton of Sarajevo is usually held. During the 2017 commemoration, Ana Babić, the President of the Sarajevo Canton Assembly, spoke of the necessity to remember the victims of the Siege of Sarajevo, underlining the Markale massacre was a “terrible crime”:

*“In 2007, the Sarajevo Canton Assembly decided to declare 5 February as the ‘Day of Remembrance for all citizens who died during the 1992-1995 siege.’ Today, Sarajevo remembers all those who gave their lives for freedom.”*<sup>106</sup>

The following year, the Prime Minister of the Sarajevo Canton, Elmedin Konaković, said that dates such as 5 February inspire us to re-examine everything that happened in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the aggression.<sup>107</sup> During his address at the 2018 commemoration, Konaković made special reference to rampant genocide denial, adding that those who gave their lives for freedom are less and less appreciated in Bosnia and Herzegovina today:

*“Nowadays, the hordes from the left and the right are growing, glorifying the judgements and the war criminals, naming student dorms after war criminals, giving them awards for their life’s work in the Republika Srpska National Assembly.”*<sup>108</sup>

Honouring the victims of the Markale massacre during the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the atrocity, the coordinator of the Association for Social Research and Communication, UDIK, Edvin Kanka Ćudić, said he believes that Markale is a symbol of the inhumanity and barbarity of the Siege of Sarajevo, for which there has been no justice:

*“Recent events on the political scene of Bosnia and Herzegovina show that those who shot and divided Sarajevo, continue to behave in an uncivilised manner towards Markale, as well as other execution sites. For this reason, marking Markale should be a lesson to all those who deny war crimes, because by denying war crimes, they insult not only the victims, but also those they represent.”*<sup>109</sup>

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The commemoration events held during the pandemic drew fewer attendees owing to Covid restrictions, but the messages sent from the podium were equally impactful as in the past years. During the 2021 commemoration, Elvedin Okerić, the Chairman of the Sarajevo Canton Assembly, stressed that the terrible crime in Markale must not be forgotten:

*“Today we are gathered here with the same goal, not to allow the veil of oblivion to cover the innocent victims of Sarajevo and the crimes committed by the aggressors. (...) The biggest massacre Sarajevo citizens suffered during the siege was chosen as a symbol, and we mark it as a*

106 Transcript 2017.

107 Canton Sarajevo Government (2018). “Sarajevo se danas sjetilo svojih sugradana koji su dali život za slobodu i domovinu”. Retrieved from: <https://vlada.ks.gov.ba/aktuelnosti/novosti/sarajevo-se-danas-sjetilo-svojih-sugradana-koji-su>

108 Transcript 2018.

109 Transcript 2019.



*'Day of Remembrance for all innocent citizens of Sarajevo who were killed during the siege of Sarajevo.'*<sup>110</sup>

During the very same commemoration held on 5 February 2021, Mirko Pejanović, the wartime Member of the Presidency of Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, slammed the Greater Serbia ideology for attempting to destroy Bosnia and Herzegovina, and stressed the importance of the culture of remembrance. Pejanović recalled that “the greatest suffering of the citizens of Sarajevo in one day took place on the 5th of February 1994”<sup>111</sup>:

*“With this commemorative session, the culture of remembrance of the citizens who lost their lives for today’s freedom of the city of Sarajevo is being cultivated. And more than that, by remembering all the victims of the siege of 1992-1995, the ethical relationship of Sarajevo citizens towards the victims of the war and their families will be established.”*<sup>112</sup>

However, certain civil society organisations raised their concerns over the Markale massacre being only commemorated in Sarajevo. In its 2022 statement, the Association for Social Research and Communication, UDIK, highlighted that the reconciliation process will not make progress unless the Republika Srpska entity starts commemorating the Markale massacre. UDIK described the Markale massacre as “the paradigm of all Serb crimes in the siege of Sarajevo”.

*“Only truth, which is bitter in this case, can make progress in the reconciliation process. Not for us, but for future generations. This is how a democratic society based on trust and mutual respect is built. Marking the anniversary of the Markale massacre should be and should remain a true act in the fight against inhumanity, but also against the forgetting of all the evil that happened during the Siege of Sarajevo.”*<sup>113</sup>

44

What cast a shadow over the most recent commemoration held on 5 February 2023 at the National Theatre was a below-average attendance. Numerous officials were missing, which was a reason that the National Theatre hall looked empty, despite the importance of the 29<sup>th</sup> commemoration of the Markale massacre.<sup>114</sup> As part of the commemoration, the Mayor of the Municipality of Stari Grad, Ibrahim Hadžibajrić, announced that a new memorial located at Markale marketplace would be built and designed as “a meaningful monument to the victims, and a place where people will be able to pay their respects every day, not only once a year.”<sup>115</sup>

The High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Christian Schmidt, said that 29 years after the massacre was committed, Bosnia and Herzegovina is a different place, “turned towards a safer future in the European family”:

110 Radio Sarajevo (2021). “Sjećanje na ubijene na Markalama: Najveće stradanje građana u jednom danu”. (2021, February 5). Retrieved from: <https://radiosarajevo.ba/vijesti/bosna-i-hercegovina/sjecanje-na-ubijene-na-markalama/405702>

111 Ibid.

112 Transcript 2021.

113 Transcript 2022.

114 Klix (2023). “Razočaravajuće mali broj prisutnih na komemoraciji ubijenima na Markalama, Narodno pozorište bilo skoro prazno”. Retrieved from: <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/razocaravajuce-mali-broj-prisutnih-na-komemoraciji-ubijenima-na-markalama-narodno-pozoriste-bilo-skoro-prazno/230205056>

115 Dnevni avaz (2023). “Na Markalama će se graditi dostojanstveno spomen-obilježje žrtvama masakra”. Retrieved from: <https://avaz.ba/bih/sarajevo/806218/na-markalama-ce-se-graditi-dostojanstveno-spomen-obiljezje-zrtvama-masakra>



*“But we must never forget those who were killed and injured while trying to buy basic groceries for their families, as a reminder never to allow such atrocities again. All young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina, regardless of their background, should see it as their task that such scenes should never happen again.”<sup>116</sup>*

Hours after the 2023 commemoration had concluded in Sarajevo, the President of the Serb-majority Republika Srpska entity, Milorad Dodik, took to Twitter to deny the responsibility of the Army of Republika Srpska, despite ICTY judgements. Instead, he claimed Serbs were “falsely accused” for the Markale massacre. Additionally, Dodik went after the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Christian Schmidt, slamming him for “supporting the bombing of Republika Srpska”:

*“A fake High Representative at the commemoration of the crime described with lies. The only truth about Markale is the innocent victims whose murderers will be known one day. Markale is a crime for which the Serbs were falsely accused twice, and which was used as a reason for the NATO bombing of Republika Srpska. This is a truth that nobody can deny. Christian Schmidt then supported the bombing of Republika Srpska, which was carried out without a UN Security Council decision.”<sup>117</sup>*

### **5.3. Conclusion**

As presented in this chapter, the past decade of commemorating the Markale massacre has been framed by the two themes shaped by those attending the commemorative sessions and honouring the victims who were killed on 5 February 1994 and 28 August 1995.

The first and most visible theme is related to the remembrance of the innocent civilians who were killed at the Markale marketplace. As those speaking at the commemorations have repeatedly stressed, commemorating the victims is not intended only to honour them, but also to ensure that similar atrocities do not happen again.

The second theme that emerged during analysis of the speeches of decision-makers, politicians, intellectuals, and survivors, points to a quest for justice which has not been satisfied and remains unfulfilled. Referring to the fact that only one individual, the Bosnian Serb General Stanislav Galić, has been convicted for this war crime, numerous speeches contain calls for the judicial institutions to find and prosecute those responsible for both of the bombardments launched on Markale.

The survivors’ outcry for justice is regularly met with denial and conspiracy theories shared by Bosnian Serb politicians in the Republika Srpska entity, as well as by numerous leading policy-makers in neighbouring Serbia. Such efforts are almost always supported by the media outlets, including public broadcasters, who openly deny the ICTY judgements and honour convicted war criminals.

It is important to note that the remembrance surrounding the Markale massacre was also influenced by the broader geopolitical context, and by countries such as Serbia and Russia openly

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116 Transcript 2023.

117 Klix (2023). “Milorad Dodik sramotno negirao zlocin na Markalama”. Retrieved from: <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/milorad-dodik-sramotno-negirao-zlocin-na-markalama/230205090>



supporting the genocide-denying decision-makers in the Republika Srpska. Despite this, a memorial honouring the victims of the Markale massacre has been erected, and commemoration events have been established to remember those civilians who were killed in this heinous war crime.

The annual commemoration of Markale massacre victims, as well as the memorial at the Markale marketplace, serve as symbols of collective remembrance and reflection on the consequences of the Siege of Sarajevo. International media coverage has contributed to the fact that the Markale massacre has continued to be portrayed and remembered not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also globally.



## 6. The Srebrenica genocide

### 6.1. Introduction

Over a period of a few days in July 1995, forces of the Army of Republika Srpska, led by the Bosnian Serb commander Ratko Mladić, killed more than 8,000 Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) men and boys.<sup>118</sup> In 2001, that war crime was determined by the judgement of the ICTY to have been a crime of genocide, which was confirmed in the Radoslav Krstić Appeal Judgement in 2004.<sup>119</sup> The International Court of Justice (ICJ) also held in 2007 that the war crimes committed in July 1995 in Srebrenica were acts of genocide.<sup>120</sup> The genocidal character of the atrocities in Srebrenica was also confirmed in 2019, after the former president of Republika Srpska, Radovan Karadžić, was sentenced to life in prison by the ICTY.<sup>121</sup>

The commemoration of the Srebrenica genocide, which takes place every year on 11 July in Srebrenica, is one of the central public events honouring the victims of the 1992-1995 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Solidarity with the victims of the genocide and their families, condemnation of the genocide denial, and calls for peace and inter-ethnic cooperation are among the key messages sent every year from the Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial Centre.

As this analysis will present, those messages are a product of the interaction between three different groups of actors. The priority of the first group, the Bosniak and pro-Bosnian decision-makers, is to preserve peace, prevent the country from falling apart, and cherish the remembrance of the victims of the Srebrenica genocide. The second group, the Bosnian Serb politicians, often engage in genocide denial. Finally, the third group, the international community, is not a passive bystander, but an actor both influenced by and influencing the two above-mentioned actors. This paper will analyse how the interaction between these three groups influences the remembrance of the Srebrenica genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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### 6.2. Chronological analysis

The Bosniak people and its political leadership are traditionally dedicated to the commemoration of genocide victims and to raising awareness not only of the importance of genocide remembrance, but also of the growing genocide denial. In addition to Bosniaks, Bosnian Croats and most of the international community in Bosnia and Herzegovina recognise the Srebrenica genocide and commemorate its victims. However, the last decade has been marked by increasing genocide denial and glorification of war criminals by Bosnian Serb political representatives.

The first commemoration of the victims, accompanied by a collective funeral, was held on March 31, 2003, when 600 identified bodies were buried. Two additional commemorations were organ-

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118 International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (n.d.). "The Conflicts". Available at: <https://www.icty.org/en/about/what-former-yugoslavia/conflicts>

119 International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (n.d.). "Case Information Sheet: Radoslav Krstić (IT-98-33)". Available at: [https://www.icty.org/x/cases/krstic/cis/en/cis\\_krstic\\_en.pdf](https://www.icty.org/x/cases/krstic/cis/en/cis_krstic_en.pdf)

120 International Court of Justice (2007). "Case Concerning Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Bosnia And Herzegovina v. Serbia and Montenegro) - Judgment of 26 February 2007". Available at: <https://www.icj-cij.org/public/files/case-related/91/091-20070226-JUD-01-00-EN.pdf>

121 International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (n.d.). "Information Sheet: Karadžić, Radovan (MICT-13-55)". Available at: <http://www.irmct.org/en/cases/mict-13-55>



ised the same year. On 11 July 2003, a total of 282 victims were laid to rest. Amor Mašović, who directed the process of identifying missing persons from the mass graves as the Chairman of the Commission for Missing Persons, said that “with these 282 victims being buried in Srebrenica, the number of those Bosniaks who returned to Srebrenica in a coffin will exceed the number of those who returned alive”.<sup>122</sup> On 20 September 2003, during the official opening of the Potočari Memorial Centre, another 107 identified remains of victims were buried. On that day, the former U.S. President, Bill Clinton, opened the Memorial Centre in the presence of the more than 20,000 people who attended the commemoration. Clinton urged the international community not to stop pursuing the culprits of the Srebrenica genocide “until they are apprehended”.<sup>123</sup> Nearly 1,000 genocide victims were buried in 2003 alone. Since then, 11 July has become a fixed date for commemorating the victims of the Srebrenica genocide.

The largest individual commemoration until this day was held on July 11, 2010, when 775 victims found their final rest. One of them was a Roman Catholic Bosnian Croat, Rudolf Hren, who was killed in 1995 together with his non-Serb neighbours. To this day, he is the only non-Bosniak victim to be buried at the Memorial Centre, at the wish of his family.<sup>124</sup> This particular commemoration was also attended by the then Serbian president Boris Tadić, who stressed that he, as President of Serbia, would not “give up on apprehending those responsible for the Srebrenica genocide, with Ratko Mladić in first place.”<sup>125</sup> Mladić was arrested less than a year later in a village 80 kilometers north from Serbia’s capital Belgrade.

Ten years ago, on the occasion of the 18th anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide held on 11 July 2013, a mass funeral was held in Potočari for 409 genocide victims, including one baby. In the same week, the ICTY reinstated a genocide charge against Radovan Karadžić. In his speech at the commemoration, Husein ef. Kavazović, the Grand Mufti of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, stressed that denying war crimes is a “greater spiritual defeat” than killing innocent people.

*“Today [...] we wonder if there is a greater crime than killing an innocent person? No, but denying the crimes is a greater spiritual defeat than the crimes themselves. For that failure of the human spirit justification cannot be found, neither can it ever be forgiven. Therefore, I urge all the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina to reject the glorification and denial of genocide, and to ensure a dignified life for the survivors.”<sup>126</sup>*

Two years later, former U.S. President Bill Clinton arrived in Potočari, and praised the Prime Minister of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, for deciding to attend the commemoration and mass funeral of 136 identified Bosniak men and boys. During his speech, Clinton invited the attendees to shake Vučić’s hand for showing up in Srebrenica and “for the risky steps he took in coming

122 Voice of America (2003). “Mašović: U Srebrenicu – više mrtvih nego živih povratnika”. Available at: <https://ba.voanews.com/a/a-29-a-2003-07-08-12-1-85976092/672372.html>

123 Rolofs, O. (2003). “Commemorating the victims of Srebrenica”. SFOR Informer Online. Available at: <https://www.nato.int/sfor/indexinf/166/p03a/t02p03a.htm>

124 Associated Press (2010). “Srebrenica buries hundreds of massacre victims on 15th anniversary of killings”. Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jul/11/srebrenica-massacre-anniversary-killings>

125 Deutsche Welle (2010). “Petnaest godina tuge u Srebrenici”. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/bs/petnaest-godina-tuge-u-srebrenici/a-5782915>

126 Transcript 2013.





down here". Hours later, during the mass funeral, Vučić was forced to flee after the mourners started throwing stones and water bottles at him.<sup>127</sup> Right before the attack, a banner reading "For every Serb killed, we will kill 100 Muslims" was displayed by a group of attendees present at the Memorial Centre, referring to a speech Vučić gave in the Serbian Parliament in July 1995. A number of Bosnian state institutions, including the tripartite inter-ethnic Presidency, issued a statement expressing their "regret" over the incident, which Serbian institutions classified as "an attempted murder". Despite arriving in Srebrenica in 2015, Vučić never recognised the Srebrenica genocide. To this day, Vučić is considered not only a genocide denier, but also, by many, as the person responsible for genocide denial in Serbia.<sup>128</sup>

Cases of denying genocide and glorifying war crimes did not cease in the following months. In March 2016, the Bosnian Serb leader, Milorad Dodik, named a student dorm in Pale after Radovan Karadžić, the first President of the Republika Srpska and the mastermind behind the Bosnian Serb campaign of ethnic cleansing.<sup>129</sup> Dodik, who was acting as the President of the Republika Srpska entity at the time, did this in an attempt to defy the international community just days before the ICTY was due to deliver a verdict on Karadžić's role during the Bosnian war and his responsibility for the Srebrenica genocide. Just days later, Radovan Karadžić was found guilty of 10 out of 11 charges, including genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes, and sentenced to 40 years in prison by the ICTY.<sup>130</sup> Following the ICTY judgement, the Srebrenica Mayor, Čamil Duraković, announced that those who refuse to accept the Srebrenica massacre as genocide were not welcome in Srebrenica.

However, a few months later, in October 2016, Mladen Grujičić, a Serb nationalist politician, was elected as the new mayor of Srebrenica. From that moment, the local government in Srebrenica has been reluctant to support the activities related to the commemoration of the Srebrenica genocide. Since becoming mayor, Grujičić has openly denied the genocide and disputed the historical facts established by international courts.<sup>131</sup> During the commemorative session organised by the Srebrenica Municipal Council, Grujičić openly denied genocide, while criticising Bosniak Council members for boycotting the session:

*"I will never say that genocide was committed in these areas. Besides civilians, soldiers were also buried in the Memorial Centre. This is a bad message from Bosniak politicians in Srebrenica, individuals who work for the Serb people. They are following the politics that comes from Sarajevo."*<sup>132</sup>

127 Sito-Sucic, D., Zuvela, M. (2015). "Serbian PM forced to flee Srebrenica massacre memorial". Reuters. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bosnia-srebrenica-idUSKCN0PL00720150711>

128 Televizija Sarajevo (2022). "Žene u crnom: Vučić odgovoran za negiranje genocida u Srbiji". Available at: <https://www.tvs.ba/vucic-odgovoran-za-negiranje-genocida-u-srbiji-rijeci-su-zena-u-crnom/>

129 The Guardian (2016). "Student dorm named after war crimes suspect Radovan Karadžić". Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/21/student-dorm-named-after-war-crimes-suspect-radovan-karadzic>

130 International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (2016). "Trial Judgement Summary for Radovan Karadžić". Available at: [https://www.icty.org/x/cases/karadzic/tjug/en/160324\\_judgement\\_summary.pdf](https://www.icty.org/x/cases/karadzic/tjug/en/160324_judgement_summary.pdf)

131 Spaic, I. (2017). "Srebrenica's Serb Mayor Repeats Denial of Genocide". Balkan Insight. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/04/13/srebrenica-s-serb-mayor-repeats-denial-of-genocide-04-13-2017/>

132 Dumić, D. (2021). "Grujičić: Nikada neću izgovoriti da je u Srebrenici počinjen genocid". Retrieved from: <https://federalna.ba/grujicic-nikada-necu-izgovoriti-da-je-u-srebrenici-pocinjen-genocid-4x8jk>



In the years that followed, calls to prevent the rise of genocide denial intensified, and this was again reflected in the commemorations in Srebrenica. In 2017, the Bosniak member of the tripartite Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bakir Izetbegovic, marked the 22nd anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide by appealing to the Serb people, its leaders and intellectual elites, to “accept the truth and abandon the continued denial of the genocide committed in Srebrenica”. Speaking at the Memorial Centre in Potočari on 11 July, Izetbegovic accused the UN of failing to protect civilians and of “a cowardly abandonment of the ‘safe area’”. In April 1993, the enclave of Srebrenica had been declared a ‘safe area’ by United Nations Security Council Resolution 819, and only a month later United Nations Security Council Resolution 824 extended this status to Sarajevo, Žepa, Goražde, Tuzla and Bihać.

Next year, Izetbegovic was even more blunt in accusing the international community of “betraying the Bosniaks when the UN safe area was subjected to slaughter”. Speaking at the commemoration in Potočari, Izetbegovic condemned those planning to honour Radovan Karadžić, describing such an intention as a “terrible message”. In addition, during the commemoration of 35 genocide victims, Izetbegovic also said:

*“Those who deny the Srebrenica genocide commit an additional crime against the victims and their families, insulting all of us, and provoking the civilised world. However, such individuals cause the most harm to their own people. They will never be able to overpower the truth about Srebrenica.”*<sup>133</sup>

Izetbegovic’s message was echoed by Nermin Alivuković, the President of the Organising Committee of the Srebrenica Genocide Commemoration, who said that “the whole world knows who committed the genocide”. In his speech, Alivuković stressed that the victims of the Srebrenica genocide are “reason enough that a genocide does not happen ever again to anyone anywhere.”<sup>134</sup>

The calls for passing or imposing the law on genocide denial intensified in the following year. During the 2019 commemoration, the Bosniak member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Šefik Džaferović, urged those who deny the genocide to accept the court verdicts. He also invited them to distance themselves from the creators and perpetrators of genocide, as well as the ideology that gave rise to the genocide.

*“[I invite them] to support our efforts in passing the law that would ban genocide denial and glorification of war criminals. Only through accepting the truth and recognising the court judgements, can we build the mutual trust which we need not only because of us, but also because of future generations.”*<sup>135</sup>

Hamdija Fejzić, the President of the Organising Committee of the Srebrenica Genocide Commemoration, called on the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Valentin Inzko, to

133 Transcript 2018.

134 Danas (2018). “Održana komemoracija žrtvama Srebrenice u Potočarima”. Available at: <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/izetbegovic-srebrenica-je-tamna-mrlja-svih-onih-koji-su-mogli-a-nisu-sprecili/>

135 Transcript 2019.



impose a law banning the genocide denial. During his speech, he compared genocide denial to advocating for a new genocide.<sup>136</sup>

In 2020 and 2021, when it became evident that the MPs from the Republika Srpska entity would not support a law criminalising genocide denial, the calls for Inzko to impose such a law increased. Munira Subašić, president of the Movement of Mothers of Srebrenica and Žepa Enclave, stressed in her speech at the 2020 commemoration that those who deny the genocide will not succeed. “You will not succeed, you will not make us tired or afraid. Generations of our children, who are not being raised in hate, will continue where we stop”, she said during her address.<sup>137</sup>

A year later, Šefik Džaferović, the Bosniak member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, called for the international community to protect the verdicts of the international courts from denial and to shield the victims’ dignity. He concluded his speech by urging the High Representative, Valentin Inzko, to impose a state-wide law criminalising genocide denial and glorification of war criminals.

*“The court of conscience and the court of history will show the least mercy to those who could have stopped the evil, but did not. There is no excuse that can justify it. Mr Inzko, these people we are burying today cannot be brought back to life, but the message that their murderers are heroes is a terrible message. You can prevent it. I invite you from this sacred place to do so.”<sup>138</sup>*

Later that month, Valentin Inzko announced he would impose amendments to the country’s criminal code to ban the denial of genocide and the glorification of war criminals. Inzko imposed the changes under the so-called “Bonn powers”, which allow the High Representative to override Bosnian politicians’ obstruction of legislation if it is vital to maintain the peace. Inzko’s decision promptly caused the Bosnian Serb lawmakers to boycott state institutions, block the state-level administration, and trigger the worst political crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina since the end of the war.<sup>139</sup>

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The 2022 commemoration was the first commemoration held under the newly-imposed law that stipulates sanctions against those denying genocide and honouring war criminals. Šefik Džaferović praised Inzko’s decision, emphasising the need to fight for the Srebrenica Memorial Centre to play the role it deserves and protect the places of mass executions.

*“It will soon be one year since the former High Representative of the international community, Valentin Inzko, passed the law, after which genocide denial and the hate speech based on it have almost completely disappeared from public life. [...] Mr. Inzko, thank you for what you have done, because you have not only fulfilled the duty imposed on you by your mandate and*

136 Klix (2019). “Fejzić pozvao Inzka: Iskoristite ovlasti i donesite zakon o zabrani negiranja genocida”. Available at: <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/fejzic-pozvao-inzka-iskoristite-ovlasti-i-donesite-zakon-o-zabrani-negiranja-genocida/190711055>

137 Dizdarević, E., Kuloglija-Zolj, E., Husarić Omerović, A. (2020). “U Srebrenici obilježena 25. godišnjica genocida i ukopano devet žrtava”. Detektor. Available at: <https://detektor.ba/2020/07/11/u-srebrenici-obiljezena-25-godisnjica-genocida-i-ukopano-devet-zrtava/>

138 Transcript 2021.

139 Kovacevic, D. (2021). “Bosnian Serbs to Boycott State Institutions over Genocide Denial Ban”. Balkan Insight. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/07/27/bosnian-serbs-to-boycott-state-institutions-over-genocide-denial-ban/>



*your conscience, but you have also saved the restoration of trust among the people of this country.*<sup>140</sup>

Over the past decade, international officials have commemorated the victims of the Srebrenica genocide in a manner quite similar to that of Bosnian officials. Messages of piety and respect for the victims of the Srebrenica genocide, condemnation of genocide deniers, and the fight against the glorification of war criminals were some of the most common points made by international officials in their speeches.

In 2017, the ICTY President Carmel Agius addressed the attendees at the Srebrenica Memorial Centre, by stressing that denial or distortion of what happened in Srebrenica was “an intentional assault on truth”. Agius said that the Srebrenica genocide “is so well documented, established by two UN international courts and scientifically supported, that you will never be able to succeed in hiding the true nature of this genocide”.<sup>141</sup>

While serving as the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Valentin Inzko said the Srebrenica genocide is a stain on the conscience of the international community. However, his biggest concern was with those still honouring the war criminals.

*“In our fear that some may still seek to revive evil ideologies, with monuments, posters, student dorms or parties that are named after war criminals, we should also remember that the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina lived together for centuries in peace and good neighbourly love, for much longer than they have been separated.”*<sup>142</sup>

Similarly to Inzko’s 2018 speech, two years later, the UN Secretary-General António Guterres underscored the need for reconciliation and opposing denial of the genocide 25 years after it was committed.

*“Reconciliation must be underpinned by mutual empathy and understanding. Reconciliation means rejecting denial of genocide and war crimes and any effort to glorify convicted war criminals. It also means recognising the suffering of all victims and not attributing collective guilt.”*<sup>143</sup>

Criticism of the UN and the Dutch government for failing to protect civilians in Srebrenica in July 1995 has also been a constant theme, usually coming from Bosniak officials. During the most recent commemoration on 11 July, the Dutch Minister of Defence, Kasje Ollongren, responded to such statements and apologised on behalf of the Dutch government for failing to protect the victims of the Srebrenica genocide.

*“As part of this [international] community, the Dutch government shares political responsibility for the situation in which this failure could happen. For that we offer our deepest apologies.”*<sup>144</sup>

140 Transcript 2022.

141 Rovčanin, H. (2017). “Thousands Commemorate Anniversary of Srebrenica Killings”. Balkan Insight. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/07/11/thousands-commemorate-anniversary-of-srebrenica-killings-07-11-2017/>

142 Transcript 2018.

143 Transcript 2020.

144 Transcript 2022.



### 6.3. Conclusion

As of July 11, 2023, a total of 6,752 victims of the Srebrenica genocide have been buried at the Srebrenica Memorial Centre in Potočari.<sup>145</sup> In terms of logistics and established practice, the recent commemorations do not differ much from those held more than 25 years ago. Days before the commemoration, the coffins with the mortal remains of the victims of the Srebrenica genocide are transported from the town of Visoko, with a brief stop in Sarajevo, where the citizens of the Bosnian capital can pay their respects to the victims. Since 2003, the Visoko City Cemeteries has been the same company responsible for exhuming the bodies, preparing them for identification, and transporting the remains to the Srebrenica Memorial Centre for a collective funeral.<sup>146</sup>

As the analysis of the commemoration of the Srebrenica genocide shows, there are three main actors influencing each other on how the Srebrenica genocide is being perceived, framed, and commemorated in the public sphere in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The first group are Bosniak and pro-Bosnian decision-makers who commemorate the Srebrenica genocide and advocate for its remembrance. The other group, the Bosnian Serbs, openly denies the Srebrenica genocide. The effects of this type of denial have been noticeable in the past decade, as the speeches of Bosniak and pro-Bosnian attendees have focused primarily on condemning genocide denial and calling for the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina to act. It has driven Bosniak and pro-Bosnian forces to advocate and lobby for the High Representative to use its exclusive Bonn Powers and impose a law prohibiting the genocide denial. The third key actor in this nexus is the international community, which is primarily embodied in the Office of the High Representative.

Valentin Inzko's decision to impose a law criminalising genocide denial served as a trigger for Bosnian Serb politicians to set off the worst political crisis in post-Dayton Bosnian history. Such a crisis, which paralysed the state institutions and opened a series of security concerns, did not impact the High Representative, who imposed it, but did impact everyone else, and Bosnian citizens the most. Even though imposing the law created a political gridlock, the law itself did not live up to its expectations and failed to sanction those who continued to openly deny genocide.

Regardless of this, the Srebrenica genocide has remained the key event from the wartime period, and is widely considered the worst atrocity in Europe since World War II. Countries such as Russia and Serbia support Bosnian Serb genocide deniers even in institutions such as the UN Security Council, which further complicates the politics of remembrance within Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Despite the obstacles, thousands of people from Bosnia and Herzegovina and abroad gather every year in Srebrenica to commemorate the victims of genocide and raise awareness about this war crime, ensuring that the victims are not forgotten. It is important to note that the Srebrenica Memorial Centre remains the key institution in preserving the memory of the Srebrenica genocide, providing information to visitors about the events that took place, and educating young people about the dangers of genocide denial, historical revisionism, and glorification of war criminals. Investing in the younger generations by educating them about the past is the best way to preserve the memory of the victims and prevent any similar event from taking place in the future.

<sup>145</sup> <https://euronews.al/en/30-genocide-victims-buried-in-srebrenica-among-them-minors/>

<sup>146</sup> Al Jazeera Balkans (2022). "Počast žrtvama genocida i u Srebrenici, prvi put pred gradskom džamijom". Available at: <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2022/7/8/kamion-s-tabutima-50-zrtava-genocida-polazi-iz-visokog-ka-pocarima>



## 7. General Conclusion

The politics of remembrance in Bosnia and Herzegovina is still a sensitive and contested issue that continues to shape the country's social and political landscape. As such, it is deeply intertwined with the complex structure of Bosnia and Herzegovina, characterised by a constitutional framework based on the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement. The politics of remembrance is observed in line with ethnic and political interests, often contradicting court rulings, denying internationally recognised war crimes, and honouring those responsible for killing innocent civilians.

Analysis of the commemorations of these five war crimes shows that selected events have the capacity to considerably contextualise the state of memory politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina today. Additionally, the atrocities selected have undoubtedly shaped the public debate in the country since the end of the war.

In the case of the ethnic cleansing in Prijedor, the local Bosnian Serb decision-makers have actively denied the war crimes committed against the non-Serb population. However, during the last 10 years, the commemoration of the innocent Bosniaks and Croats went from being banned by the mayor to being attended by hundreds of people from Bosnia and Herzegovina and abroad, which is obvious progress as to how the victims are being honoured. Nevertheless, the Bosnian Serb political representatives are regularly absent from the commemorations.

The Ahmići massacre, committed by Bosnian Croat forces in Central Bosnia, is an example of war crime denial and glorification of those responsible for killing of innocent civilians. The Catholic Church in Croatia has provided support and a platform for the convicted war criminals responsible for the Ahmići massacre to deny the war crime. The politics of remembrance surrounding this particular war crime will remain an open question, with Bosniak and pro-Bosnian actors honouring the 116 civilians killed in the atrocity, and Bosnian Croat officials glorifying the perpetrators and hindering the collective memory effort.

Compared to all the other atrocities covered in this research, the commemoration of the Kazani Pit killings has undergone the biggest transformation throughout the past decade. Up to 10 years ago, this war crime committed by the soldiers of the Army of Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina was barely remembered and its victims were not officially commemorated. The last decade has witnessed determined civil society activists and engaged public intellectuals urging Bosniak and pro-Bosnian decision-makers to publicly condemn the war crime committed at the Kazani Pit located on the outskirts of Sarajevo. The public pressure has resulted in the leading Bosniak and pro-Bosnian politicians starting to commemorate the victims on a regular basis, and in addition, erecting a monument honouring the innocent civilians. Whilst unveiling a memorial plaque with the victims' names inscribed on it, the memorial still falls short in clearly addressing who the perpetrators were, which serves as a serious obstacle to deal with the past in a proper manner and fully address the war crimes carried out at the Kazani Pit.

Finally, as the analysis of the genocide in Srebrenica shows, the politics of remembrance revolving around this case is characterised by the deeply entrenched denial prevalent among the Bosnian Serb political elite. Strong links between Bosnian Serb politicians and officials in neighbouring Serbia, who also engage in open genocide denial, serve as an obstacle for bridging ethnic gaps, dealing with the past, and fostering reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the whole region.

The politics of remembrance related to the Srebrenica genocide is also shaped by the decisions of the High Representative of the international community, who imposed a law sanctioning genocide denial which has so far proven ineffective, as Bosnian Serb officials continue not only to deny the genocide, but also to glorify its perpetrators.

As this research has shown, the politics of remembrance in Bosnia and Herzegovina is characterised by a struggle for collective memory, as different ethnic groups led by nationalist politicians seek to reconcile their past experiences with their current identities and political aspirations. What remains essential for building a shared vision for the country's future is achieving a more inclusive approach to remembrance. This will not happen until everyone in Bosnia and Herzegovina recognises the genocide and other war crimes established by local and international courts that have already sentenced numerous individuals for various atrocities committed during the war. Glorifying war criminals remains an obvious burden on the country's future, as younger generations have engaged in honouring those responsible for killing innocent civilians, including children. Today, some of those young people who celebrate war criminals are elected officials who, by shaping policies on the local and national levels, also influence the politics of remembrance in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

This analysis of the five selected commemorations has also pointed to the crucial role of civil society organisations and human rights activists, who have tirelessly lobbied elected officials, advocated within their local communities, and raised awareness about the importance of promoting reconciliation, dealing with the past, and establishing a politics of remembrance that brings people together. Throughout the past decade, non-governmental organisations have acted as trailblazers in commemorating victims of certain war crimes, and have often been the decisive factor in decision-makers erecting monuments honouring the victims. Their work has proven to be of great importance, as it has resulted in Bosnian society being more aware of certain war crimes. With political leaders not delivering from their end, it is to be expected that the civil society will play a key role in shaping the politics of remembrance in the upcoming decade too.



# III. Decade of Remembrance in Croatia

## III. Decenija sjećanja u Hrvatskoj

by Branka Vierda

Edited by Nataša Kandić

### 1. Introduction

*“War itself is one of the major generators of human rights violations.” - Zoran Pusić*

As Tamara Banjeglav has stated, while the past strongly influences the shaping and interpretation of the present, the present, in turn, modifies perceptions of the past. The social or collective memory of what actually happened may not necessarily align with the facts, but more with what “(post-conflict) governments” and decision-makers see as possible or politically appropriate to narrate. Thus, Banjeglav points out that the goal of those in power may not be to commemorate victims and contribute to opening a dialogue about the past, but rather to highlight certain identities in the public sphere that *“articulate narratives of political legitimation, and these narratives may even be harmful for victims.”*<sup>1</sup>

In the early 1990s, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was one of the largest, most developed, and diverse countries in the Balkans, consisting of six republics: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Croatia, Macedonia, Slovenia, and Serbia. Coinciding with the collapse of communism and the resurgence of nationalism in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Yugoslavia experienced a period of intense political and economic crisis.<sup>2</sup>

*“Political leaders used nationalist rhetoric to erode a common Yugoslav identity and fuel fear and mistrust between different ethnic groups. By 1991, the break-up of the country loomed with Slovenia and Croatia blaming Serbia of unjustly dominating Yugoslavia’s government, military and finances. Serbia in turn accused the two republics of separatism.”*<sup>3</sup>

Croatia declared independence on June 25, 1991. The large Serbian minority in Croatia openly expressed dissatisfaction with the authorities of the newly declared Croatian state, insisting on remaining within Yugoslavia. With the assistance of the Yugoslav People’s Army (JNA) and Serbia, the Serbian community in Croatia organised a rebellion and declared an independent Serbian state on almost a third of the Croatian territory (Republic of Serbian Krajina). Croats and other non-Serbian citizens were forcibly *“expelled from its territories through a violent campaign of ethnic cleansing”*<sup>4</sup>. In the second half of 1991, fierce battles took place, resulting in the shelling of the Old Town of Dubrovnik and the siege and destruction of Vukovar by the JNA and Serbian forces.<sup>5</sup>

Despite a ceasefire monitored by the United Nations, which came into force in early 1992, Croatian authorities were determined to regain control of their territory and made efforts to develop and equip their armed forces. In the summer of 1995, the Croatian Army launched two major

1 Banjeglav, Tamara. “Memory of War over Memory? The Official Politics of Remembering in 1990s Croatia”.

2 <https://www.icty.org/bcs/o-mksj/sta-je-bivsa-jugoslavija/sukobi>

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.





offensives and reclaimed all previously occupied territory, except for a small part in eastern Slavonia. During the large exodus, tens of thousands of Serbs fled from Croatian forces to parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina under Serbian control, and some continued on to Serbia. The war in Croatia practically ended in the autumn of 1995. Croatia regained full control of its territory in 1998, when eastern Slavonia returned under Croatian authority after a peaceful transitional period under the United Nations administration.<sup>6</sup>

To address the complexity of this historical period, crucial for shaping the 'official memory' of that period, the analysis focuses on commemorative practices related to five events that occurred in Croatia in 1991, 1993, and 1995. These events include the commemoration of the Day of Remembrance for the Victims of the Homeland War and the Remembrance Day for Vukovar and Škabrnja on November 18, the commemoration of the day when Aleksandra, Marija, and Mihajlo Zec were killed on December 7, the commemoration of the "Medak Pocket" military-police operation on September 9, the commemoration of the "Flash" military-police operation on May 1, and the commemoration of Victory Day, Homeland Thanksgiving Day, and Croatian Defenders Day on August 5.

## 1.1. Methodology

This paper analyses five commemorative events in Croatia over a ten-year period from 2012 to 2022, approached through the analysis of speeches and media statements made by the highest officials in Croatia during these occasions. The goal of the analysis is to understand and systematise the politics of memory related to the wars of the 1990s.

The commemorations of the "Storm" (*Oluja*) military-police operation, which took place in August 1995, and the Fall of Vukovar, which occurred in November 1991, were chosen to examine the narrative of events that represent the fundamental aspects of the war through the symbol of the victory of Croatian forces (Operation Storm) and the symbol of the victim and the greatest suffering (the Fall of Vukovar). The analysis aims to determine what messages were conveyed to the public during the official commemorations of these events in the last ten years.

Commemorations of the Medak Pocket (*Medački džep*) military-police operations, which occurred in September 1993, and "Flash" (*Bljesak*), which occurred in May 1995, were selected because of the significant suffering and killing of civilians belonging to the Serbian minority during and after these operations. The analysis of commemorative events from 2012 to 2022 examines whether the memory of the victims belonging to the Serbian national minority in Croatia was part of the speeches of high officials during the official commemorations in Gospić and Okučani.

The murder of twelve-year-old girl Aleksandra Zec, her mother Marija, and father Mihajlo in December 1991 was chosen to determine how the killing of members of this Zagreb-based Serbian family influenced the creation of social memory about the 1990s.

One of the criteria selected for analysing memory policies in Croatia over the last ten years is temporal – analysing events from different periods of the war, from its beginnings to its end. The chronological sequence of the analysed events is as follows: the Fall of Vukovar on November 18,

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6 Ibid.



1991, the murder of the Zec Family on December 7, 1991, the Medak Pocket Operation on September 9, 1993, the Flash Operation on May 1, 1995, and the Storm Operation on August 5, 1995.

Similarly, the analyses examine events remembered through official commemorations and alternative commemorations (organised by civil society), in order to investigate the potential for inclusive commemorations involving representatives of the government and civil society, with the aim of shaping more inclusive approaches to collective memory.

The methodology used to analyse these events has involved collecting speeches and public statements made by the highest state officials in Croatia during the mentioned anniversaries at locations where official or alternative commemorations were held. Depending on the event, video recordings and written statements from the President of the Republic of Croatia, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Croatia, the President of the Croatian Parliament, ministers in the Government of the Republic of Croatia, and the Mayor of Zagreb have been collected.

The goal of analysing the speeches given by the highest state officials in Croatia during official anniversaries of these events is to identify how these speeches and statements interpret the facts that occurred during these wartime events. Facts are considered to be the events and numbers provided by international and domestic courts and those established in reports by domestic non-governmental organisations (Croatian Helsinki Committee, Documenta – Center for Dealing with the Past, Serbian National Council).

Furthermore, it is important to determine what messages officials were sending to the public from the locations of official or alternative commemorations, and how they fit into the overall memory politics regarding the war that occurred in Croatia from 1991 to 1995 – whether officials conveyed messages related to peacebuilding, reconciliation, and respecting all civilian war victims, and at which political functions and commemoration locations they were doing so. Additionally, I have found it important to determine if there was temporal continuity over the past ten years in certain politics of memory regarding certain events I examined.

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## 1.2. Key findings

The findings indicate that the politics of memory in Croatia regarding the 1990s war on Croatian territory is generally framed in ethno-nationalist terms, and the narrative accompanying the interpretation of the facts is closed towards and exclusive of the suffering and killings of civilians belonging to the largest national minority in Croatia, i.e., the Serbs. Exceptions in which high officials address and publicly speak about (war) crimes and human rights violations committed by Croatian forces and the victims of these crimes are rare, do not represent commemorative continuity, and do not generate public apologies to the victims and their families for those crimes.

The complexity of the war events in the 1990s, including operations that included actions considered legitimate under humanitarian law, as well as mass and serious violations of human rights and war crimes, is not taken into account in the official politics of memory. The political leadership in Croatia during the observed period over the last ten years has not offered a way to align the narrative about the war with the facts of the past during official commemorations and celebrations, nor has it established inclusive memory practices based on egalitarianism rather than ethnic exclusivism.



## 2. Remembrance Day for the Victims of the Homeland War, and Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Vukovar and Škabrnja (November 18, 1991)

### 2.1. Introduction

On November 18, 1991, the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA), including Serb forces, took control of the city of Vukovar. Thus ended the Siege of Vukovar, which lasted for 87 days. During the siege, several hundreds of citizens were killed and the city suffered significant destruction.<sup>7</sup>

The civilian population was surrounded and shelled. Vukovar was attacked from the land, from the air and from the River Danube. The city was almost completely destroyed during the siege, which lasted 87 days.

More than 2,500 citizens were wounded, while about 5,000 people were taken to prisons and camps in Serbia. All residents of Vukovar of non-Serbian nationality were expelled after the fall of the city. After the Fall of Vukovar, a mass war crime was committed, when the JNA command handed over more than 200 prisoners of war and civilians of Croatian nationality from the Vukovar Hospital to members of the Territorial Defence (TO). They were killed on the Ovčara Farm on November 20, 1991.<sup>8</sup>

In Vukovar, every year, starting from 1998, on November 18 an official commemoration has been held, which in 2012 was called, "Vukovar – sacred name"; in all subsequent years, the commemoration has borne the name, "Vukovar – place of special reverence".<sup>9</sup>

Every year, on November 18, in order to remember the suffering in Vukovar during the siege of the city and during its actual fall, the Column of Remembrance of the Victims of Vukovar is organised, starting at the "Dr. Juraj Njavro" National Memorial Hospital (Vukovar Hospital) and ending at the Memorial Cemetery of the Victims of the Homeland War.<sup>10</sup>

Among others, the highest state officials participate in the Column of Remembrance, and the commemoration itself neither begins nor ends with speeches by high state officials. Often, even making statements for the media is skipped on that day.

The only analysed speech has been the one published on the YouTube channel of President Ivo Josipović in 2014, which, among other things, referred to the expectations he offered the public on the eve of the 23<sup>rd</sup> anniversary, given that high officials were prevented from joining the Column of Remembrance in 2013.

Although the last ten years of commemorating have been marked by various events and statements that are not in favour of building an inclusive approach for commemoration of the victims

7 [https://www.hlc-rdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Dosije\\_JNA\\_eng\\_inter.pdf](https://www.hlc-rdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Dosije_JNA_eng_inter.pdf)

8 <https://zeneucrnom.org/images/pdf/Nikada-necemo-zaboraviti-zlocine-u-Vukovaru.pdf#Nikada%20ne%u0107emo%20zaboraviti%20zlo%u010Dine%20u%20Vukovaru.indd%3A%u010Cinjenice%20o%20zlo%u010Dinama%20u%20Vukovaru%3A11>

9 Pavlaković V., Pauković D., Židek N., *Uokvirivanje nacije i kolektivni identiteti, politički rituali i kultura sjećanja na traume 20. stoljeća u Hrvatskoj*, Slobodna Europa, Zagreb 2022, p. 228.

10 Ibid., p. 227



in Vukovar, public statements given by high-ranking officials, especially in recent years, aim to stabilise inter-ethnic relations in Vukovar. This is particularly evident from the statements of PM Andrej Plenković, who continuously, on the anniversary of the Fall of Vukovar, connects seemingly unrelated events, the Fall of Vukovar and the peaceful reintegration of Eastern Slavonia that followed some years after. The Deputy Prime Ministers from the ranks of the Serbian national minority, from the political party SDIP, attend the Column of Remembrance, from where they also send messages about peace, tolerance and coexistence.

## 2.2. Commemorative practices of the politics of remembrance over the last decade

In 2012, and marking the 21st anniversary of the Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Vukovar, President Josipović said: *“We are here together again to remember the suffering of Vukovar, to remember the innocent victims and to promise our children that nothing like this will ever happen again.”*<sup>11</sup>

This anniversary, under the name “Vukovar – the sacred name”, *“is imbued with satisfaction, owing to the fact that Gotovina and Markač were freed and that The Hague confirmed that there was no joint criminal enterprise in Operation Storm.”*<sup>12</sup>

The following year will be remembered for the fact that the highest state officials were prevented from joining the Column of Remembrance, and on that occasion the President of the Republic, Ivo Josipović, the President of the Croatian Parliament, Josip Leko, and the Prime Minister, Zoran Milanović, laid wreaths and lit candles at the Memorial at the site of the mass grave in Ovčara. However, a few hours after they were prevented from joining the column, Bojan Glavašević, the Assistant Minister for Croatian Veterans and son of the respected journalist of the Croatian Radio Vukovar, Siniša Glavašević, who was killed at Ovčara in 1991, together with the Minister of Culture, Andreja Zlatac, Colonel Ivan Grujić and a group of friends laid candles under the memorial at the Memorial Cemetery of the victims of the Homeland War.<sup>13</sup>

On that occasion, Bojan Glavašević said: *“Something like this should not have happened. We shouldn't have split up. This is a defeat for all of us. This is a human defeat, a defeat of humanity and humility (...) They managed to destroy something that was pure and a place of unity for all people regardless of politics, belief - regardless of everything. Vukovar and the victims of Vukovar were the only things we were together about. Without these people, there would be no free Croatia, and neither would we be free. Perhaps the minority language on public signs in Vukovar would today be in the Latin script. (...) It is reasonable that no one should block someone's path and deny something that belongs to him by nature. No one has the right to deny anyone who wants to lay a wreath and light a candle. I believed in the people we know, whom I've known for years, I thought they wouldn't touch what everyone has in common. I want next year to be different, to lay wreaths and light candles together again, regardless of political beliefs and other things.”*<sup>14</sup>

11 From the transcripts.

12 <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/bit-ce-to-najponosnija-kolona-sjecanja-ali-mozda-bez-gotovine-1363728>

13 <https://vlada.gov.hr/print.aspx?id=11235&url=print>

14 Ibid.



President Ivo Josipović addressed the public in a video statement on the eve of November 18, 2014, in order to call on the public for *“the full political responsibility and mature behaviour of all participants in the procession”*. He characterised the impossibility of the head of state to access the column in the previous anniversary as a shame, which he emphasised that he hoped would not be repeated. *“Last year,” he pointed out, “we saw an attack on state institutions for which, among others, Vukovar veterans gave their lives.”*<sup>15</sup>

He concluded his statement by saying: *“When (...) we start a new working day, we must be proud of Vukovar, proud of the maturity and respect we showed to the victims of the Homeland War, proud of the self-respect we knew how to show as a nation that respects itself, its heroes and its past. That’s the only way we have the right to hope for a good future.”*<sup>16</sup>

At the anniversary held in 2015, the President of the Croatian Parliament, Josip Leko, referred to freedom and democracy as *“the values of the struggle for the Homeland War, as well as the values of the defenders”*, while on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, in 2016, Prime Minister Andrej Plenković told the media: *“Our deep respect and gratitude to the Croatian veterans, to all those who gave their lives for Croatia, for the freedom of modern Croatia. May we always remember their sacrifice, and may this unity of Croatia which we see in Vukovar be an incentive for action towards the future.”*<sup>17</sup>

The anniversary of 2017 was the first in a series in which the Prime Minister, Andrej Plenković, would link the commemoration of the suffering of Vukovar with the peaceful reintegration of Western Slavonia, by which *“Croatia once again rounded off its territorial integrity and established control in all parts of the Motherland.”*<sup>18</sup> On that occasion, he emphasised the importance of building a *“modern, democratic and inclusive Croatian society”*, which was stimulated precisely by the peaceful reintegration which had created *“an incentive for the European path of the country, the strengthening of our institutions and the integration into society of the minorities in Croatia.”* Plenković’s messages about the Government’s measures related to investment in economic revitalisation and the development of Vukovar and its surroundings were an integral part of that statement to the media, underlining the importance of *“returning people to the City, which has significantly fewer inhabitants than before 1991.”*<sup>19</sup>

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This anniversary will also be remembered for the statement of the President of the Republic of Croatia, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, who said on that occasion: *“A lot of water will flow down the Danube before Croatia and Serbia can say that they are friendly countries, but that doesn’t mean that we don’t have to or cannot talk - indeed, it is our responsibility to talk and resolve open issues, especially the painful issue of the missing persons.”*<sup>20</sup>

On the occasion of the anniversary in 2018, Andrej Plenković, in the statement he made before the Column of Remembrance had started, as on the previous years, in front of the Vukovar hospital, focused on the three main thematic elements of his speech: the peaceful reintegration

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15 From the transcripts.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.



of eastern Slavonia, the economic measures and projects that the Government had implemented or would implement in order to create a stimulative environment for entrepreneurial investments in Vukovar, and the challenges related to the demographic deficit of the area.

Referring to the arrival of the president of the Serbian Democratic Independent Party (SDIP) and MP Milorad Pupovac on the eve of the anniversary itself, on November 17, Plenković stated: *“Each commemoration should first of all remind us of the truth, of respect for the victims, but also open pages to the future – pages of reconciliation and coexistence”*.<sup>21</sup> In his statement, Plenković linked the issue of reconciliation and coexistence with peaceful reintegration, which he described as *“one of the key legacies of the first Croatian president, Dr. Franjo Tudman.”*<sup>22</sup>

In his statement, Plenković emphasised the importance of prosecuting war crimes and indicated the difference between the Law on Amnesty for Criminal Offences and war crimes. When asked by journalists about why the “Danube” intercultural school project turned out to be unsuccessful, he answered: *“A certain amount of time must pass, trust must be built through the process of coexistence, and building trust goes from small steps to creating a general climate. It is up to the state to create a general climate, and in concrete life these are procedures that require a lot of time. There are too many scars here for it to happen overnight.”*<sup>23</sup>

On the same occasion, the President of the Croatian Parliament, Gordan Jandroković, said: *“Today we remember the victims, we remember our dead and missing veterans and civilians. It was a great tragedy, but it was a decisive battle that won the war. It is a message that war is the worst way to solve conflicts and problems, that we must always solve problems through negotiations. Regardless of all the tragedy, this was a great victory.”*<sup>24</sup>

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On the anniversary of 2019, in his statement Andrej Plenković focused on the relationship between the issue of the missing and the information in possession of the Serbian authorities: *“I think that there needs to be the political will where the information that currently exists in Belgrade is submitted to Croatia, so that we finally know the fate of all our people.”* He also pointed out that this information relates to *“so-called fundamental issues that should be resolved within the framework of the chapter related to fundamental rights”*, referring to the issues of Serbia’s accession to the European Union.<sup>25</sup>

*“On behalf of the entire Government of the Republic of Croatia, today we are here on the Day of Remembrance for the Victims of the Homeland War, the Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Vukovar, the Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Škabrnja, which, as you know, following the proposal of our government, the Croatian Parliament included in the law on holidays and memorial days as a non-working day by which we give additional meaning and symbolism to the City of Vukovar, to all Croatian veterans, to all victims who ensured victory in the Homeland War and who are responsible for our freedom. Therefore, we express our gratitude to them*

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21 From the transcripts.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.



once again.”<sup>26</sup> This was the statement with which Plenković began his address to the media on the 29<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Vukovar tragedy, referring to the law passed in 2020 that declared Vukovar a city of special reverence. On this occasion, too, Plenković looked back and linked November 18 with peaceful reintegration.

He extolled the strength of the Croatian state *“for the strides that are important for coexistence, for reconciliation, for historical truth first of all, in the victory in the Homeland War as soon as it had achieved all its national tasks, liberated the formerly occupied territory, consolidated itself democratically and institutionally”* and then *“firmly anchored herself in NATO and the EU”*.<sup>27</sup>

In the same way, Croatia *“has stretched out its hand to the minorities in the Republic of Croatia, including the Serbian minority, which, among other things, is present here in Vukovar, and in Slavonia in general, and that is why it is good and normal and natural for us that the Vice- President of the SDIP, government leader Boris Milošević, is with us today in Vukovar, as he was in Knin.”*<sup>28</sup> He concluded his speech with the statement: *“These are messages oriented towards the future, oriented towards cooperation, oriented towards development, towards Europe, towards the values we share, and I think that this is a good path, a path on which we will persevere with all the attention and respect we give to the Homeland War and the dignity of the Croatian veterans, those who gave the most for Croatia.”*<sup>29</sup>

On the occasion of his first participation in the Column of Remembrance as Deputy Prime Minister, Boris Milošević in his statement expressed the hope that *“dialogue will open in the coming period and that we will find, if not all, then the greatest possible number of those who have disappeared”*, an issue he emphasised that he would personally endorse, and added: *“Today, just like in ‘91, before the war, more than a third of the citizens of the City of Vukovar were citizens of Serbian nationality. I think that for the sake of the future and for the sake of young people, we need to find a common path, a path of reconciliation and dialogue. A real dialogue should be established at the local level.”*<sup>30</sup>

And in 2021, Plenković spoke at the anniversary in Vukovar about the importance of working on *“mutual tolerance and respect”*. He said: *“We want an inclusive society where everyone will feel good. Croats, of course, because this is our country - but also all minorities, including the Serbian minority. We have to respect each other and then those severe wounds, which take generations to heal, will heal. Let’s remember that there was a peaceful reintegration here... There was the greatness and strength of President Tudman, who managed to reintegrate it.”*<sup>31</sup> He also referred to the fact that from 2020, November 18, the Croatian Parliament declared that day was a non-working day, and added that [the non-working day] *“enables all people who feel Vukovar to come here. Croatia is united here, and that must be nurtured and maintained.”*<sup>32</sup>

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26 Ibid.

27 From the transcripts.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.



He also assessed that Croatia was on the road to democratic maturation much faster than other countries, and that surely many would like to be in Croatia's place. When asked by journalists about the arrival of Milorad Pupovac in Vukovar on the eve of the anniversary, Plenković answered: *"He has found his own way to show respect."* He continued: *"The Deputy Prime Minister is Boris Milošević and he is here today, he was with us in Knin as well. We are building the framework of society as we think it is good to build, everyone contributes. I am pleased that the Deputy Prime Minister is here, which is a clear signal of respect for the victims and the veterans."*<sup>33</sup>

Boris Milošević also participated in the Column of Remembrance in 2021, and in a statement for N1 television, he agreed with the assessment that there are divisions in the memories of the victims, but also said that his arrival in that city was a step to overcome these divisions. *"I agree that there are divisions - my arrival today is a step to overcome these divisions."* Milošević's participation in the Column of Remembrance in 2021 was the second in a row.<sup>34</sup>

The statement made by Prime Minister Andrej Plenković on the occasion of the 31<sup>st</sup> anniversary, which was celebrated in 2022, was dedicated to the memory of – among other victims – the deceased pediatrician and longtime director of the Vukovar Hospital, Vesna Bosanac, after whom a street in Vukovar is named, and Juraj Njavro, doctor and minister and parliamentarian, after whom the hospital in Vukovar is named.

When asked if he felt embarrassed when citizens turned their backs on Deputy Prime Minister Anja Šimpraga during their visit to Škabrnja the night before, he answered: *"The policy of reconciliation, the policy of coexistence, is the only policy that is important for the future. Terrible crimes were committed in Škabrnja, we understand the feelings of the victims' families - in such a small place, in a single day, that such a terrible crime took place. What I think is good is that the SDIP representative, who is the Deputy Prime Minister, came and paid tribute to the victims."*<sup>35</sup>

When asked about bilateral cooperation in finding missing persons, he pointed out that in the last six years the Croatian Government had achieved very good results in finding missing persons, and pointed out: *"Of course, we know very well that the places where the missing persons are located could really be uncovered, it is important that we have the cooperation of those who know more about it than we do. And those who know more than us are not in Croatia, but in Belgrade. Accordingly, we will continue to insist on reliable data that will really be of value, and not some minor information, as was the case in the past and which was all the knowledge the Croatian government already had."*<sup>36</sup>

Regarding whether he considers it appropriate to lay a wreath for both Croatian and Serbian victims on November 17, which was done on November 17, 2022, Plenković answered: *"What is important is that the representatives of the Serbs in Croatia - they are represented in the*

33 Ibid.

34 <https://vlada.gov.hr/vijesti/milosevic-moj-dolazak-u-vukovar-korak-je-u-prevladavanju-podjela/33399>

35 From the transcripts.

36 Ibid.





*Croatian Parliament by the SDIP - show their respect for the victims of Vukovar. The fact that they also mark their respect for the Serbs who died in the Homeland War is something we also understand.*<sup>37</sup>

### 2.3. Conclusion

*“Vukovar remains a symbol of Croatian suffering and Serbian aggression, savage destruction of cultural monuments, ethnic cleansing and merciless attacks on civilians.”*<sup>38</sup>

The commemoration in Vukovar, the Column of Remembrance, which is joined by tens of thousands of citizens every year, is five and a half kilometers long and leads from Vukovar Hospital to the Memorial Cemetery. This kind of commemoration is unique in Croatia, and politicians' speeches are not expected, which also makes it one of a kind.

After the year 2013, when the top state officials (President of the Republic Ivo Josipović, President of the Croatian Parliament Josip Leko, and Prime Minister Zoran Milanović) were prevented from joining the Column of Remembrance before the commemoration of the Vukovar victims, Ivo Josipović spoke out. On that occasion, he called for November 18 to be marked with compassion, solemnity, dignity, and pride, expressing “the self-respect that we know how to show as a nation that respects itself, its heroes, and its past.”<sup>39</sup> After President Grabar-Kitarović's statement in which she said that “a lot of water will flow down the Danube before Croatia and Serbia can call themselves friendly states,” as from November 2017, a period of somewhat more open approaches in the memory politics of the events in Vukovar during 1991 begins. From 2018 onwards, Prime Minister Plenković, in his statements, talked about the future in the context of reconciliation and coexistence. Starting from 2019, November 18, the Remembrance Day for the Victims of the Homeland War and the Remembrance Day for the Victims of Vukovar and Škabrnja, was declared a non-working day.<sup>40</sup>

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In Vukovar, a city that before the war was an exceptionally multi-ethnic city, and where members of the Serbian community were killed in 1991 as well, the official commemoration keeps the memory of the civilians very strictly separate. Representatives of the Serbs in Croatia, as can be seen from the analysis, occasionally participate in the Column of Remembrance, but also organise unofficial, alternative commemorations for killed civilians - Croatian Serbs, and for civilian victims of Croat ethnicity as well. This commemoration usually takes place on the eve of November 18.

At the moment, there is no vision among the highest state officials on how to open a space for more inclusive memories and commemorations.

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37 Ibid.

38 Pavlaković, V., Pauković, D., Židek N., *Uokvirivanje nacije i kolektivni identiteti; Politički rituali i kultura sjećanja na traume 20. stoljeća u Hrvatskoj*, Zagreb, 2022, p. 35.

39 From the transcripts.

40 <https://www.zakon.hr/z/372/Zakon-o-blagdanima%2C-spomendanima-i-neradanim-danima-u-Republici-Hrvatskoj>



### 3. Killing of the Zec Family members (December 7, 1991)

#### 3.1. Introduction

On December 7, 1991, Munib Suljić, Siniša Rimac, Nebojša Hodak, Igor Mikola and Snježana Živanović, members of the reserve unit of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, also known as Merčep's Unit ("Merčepovci"), killed Mihajlo Zec and kidnapped his twelve-year-old daughter Aleksandra and his wife Marija.<sup>41</sup>

After Siniša Rimac, then a nineteen-year-old soldier, had shot and killed Mihajlo Zec with several shots in front of his doorstep in the Trešnjevka neighbourhood of Zagreb, the perpetrators tied up his wife Marija and daughter Aleksandra and took them to the Adolfovac mountain lodge on Mount Sljeme, where one of Merčep's bases was located, and there they were killed with gunshots. The other two, Mihajlo' and Marija' Zec's children, Gordana and Dušan, survived because they had hidden themselves in the family house.<sup>42</sup>

*"Nebojša and Munib were carrying a pickaxe and a shovel, and when we got to the dump, they started digging. Igor and I were ordered to go get the wife. Igor led her towards the garbage dump, and I followed him. Everything happened around midnight. It was dark, and I was lighting the way with a flashlight,"* Živanović added, in her testimony. Mikola then brought Marija Zec, who had a bandage around her head and her hands tied behind her back, to the edge of the pit. *"I pointed the barrel of the Hoeckler at her head, closed my eyes, turned my head to the side and fired one shot. When I opened my eyes, I saw that the woman had fallen to the ground next to the pit. Then Igor took his rifle from my hands and fired several more bullets at the woman. Nebojša was inside the hole and started dragging the body there",* confirmed Munib Suljić.<sup>43</sup>

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Rimac, Mikola and Živanović then returned to the house to pick up Aleksandra. *"The little girl went out of the door, her hands were tied. However, it was snowing and she started to slip on the snowy ground. I picked her up in my arms and carried her... Someone told me to blindfold her, I took a piece of sheet that was hanging around her neck... After that I turned away and didn't want to look. Then I heard more shots. When I turned around again, I saw the Hoeckler in Munib's hand,"* Rimac confessed. After Suljić had fired six bullets into the back of her head, Aleksandra fell to the ground. Hodak and Rimac then threw the lifeless body into the pit. They heard a death rattle, and Mikola took his rifle and shot at the bodies in the pit. *"Someone suggested that Igor and I go to the house to get a trash can. While we were doing this, the other three buried the woman and the child in the hole that had been dug previously. When we arrived, I saw that Munib and Rimac were still removing the bloody soil, and that was at the place where the girl had fallen after screaming. When they had dumped that earth as well, they shook out the garbage over it, so that it couldn't be seen that it had been dug up,"* Živanović concluded.<sup>44</sup>

41 [https://snv.hr/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/2014\\_Aleksandra\\_Zec\\_knjiga\\_web.pdf](https://snv.hr/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/2014_Aleksandra_Zec_knjiga_web.pdf)

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.



On December 14, 1991, the Zagreb police found the bodies and the hidden rifle with which Mihajlo Zec was killed. Rimac, Hodak, Mikola and Suljić were detained several days apart on suspicion of having committed the crime of murder. *“In the morning hours of December 14, members of the Zagreb Police Department found two female bodies, suspected to be Marija and Aleksandra Zec, near the Adolfovac mountain lodge. Along with investigators and members of the special police unit, who had secured the crime scene, Hodak and Rimac attended the investigation to show the place where the bodies were buried.”*<sup>45</sup>

A few days later, the police found the second rifle with which Aleksandra and Marija Zec were killed in the vehicle of Stjepan Manderalo, a member of the Ministry of Internal Affairs reserve unit. The detainees, who were soon joined by Živanović, pregnant at the time, confessed to the investigators that they had committed the murders.<sup>46</sup>

Although during the interrogation they admitted responsibility for the murders committed, the records of the interrogation of the defendants were eventually separated from the file at the request of their lawyers and were not considered as evidence at the trial.<sup>47</sup>

During the trial, which began in June 1992, the aforementioned five defended themselves by remaining silent. In July 1992, the District Court in Zagreb terminated the custody of the defendants and issued an acquittal in the same month. The State Attorney’s Office did not appeal against this court decision.<sup>48</sup>

Three and a half years after the acquittal, Siniša Rimac, the murderer of Mihajlo Zec, who in the meantime had been promoted to security guard of the Minister of Defence Gojko Šušak, was awarded the Order of Nikola Šubić Zrinski. The President of the Republic of Croatia, Franjo Tuđman, awarded him the award “for a heroic act in the war”. The award granted to Rimac would be taken away by President Stipe Mesić during his mandate.<sup>49</sup>

In October 2003, lawyer Anto Nobilo, on behalf of Dušan and Gordana Zec and their grandmother Bosa, filed a claim for damages against the Republic of Croatia, due to the fact that there was “no doubt that the harmful event was caused by members of the Croatian armed forces based on the Liability Act of the Republic of Croatia for damage caused by members of the Croatian armed and police forces during the Homeland War”.<sup>50</sup>

In 2004, the State Attorney’s Office of the Republic of Croatia rejected a settlement with the Zec family, explaining that it was not clear whether the members of the Zec family “were killed by members of the Ministry of Internal Affairs reserve in the performance of their duties or in connection with their duties, or whether they committed the crime off-duty as civilians.” In April 2004, the main hearing began at the Zagreb Municipal Court, in a process by which the surviving members of the Zec family claimed compensation for the damage suffered. “Apart from

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45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.



*the compensation for the lost maintenance and mental pain due to the murder of their mother, father and sister, Gordana and Dušan Zec expect the state to apologise to them”, lawyer Maro Mihočević said on that occasion.<sup>51</sup>*

In the same month, Croatian parliamentary representatives called on the Government to pay compensation in view of the fact that the murderers were released due to the cardinal mistake of the then state attorney Vladimir Šeks. The Government of the Republic of Croatia made a decision on the payment of a one-time financial aid to the members of the Zec family, to the amount of HRK 1,500,000, in April 2004.<sup>52</sup>

*“I think this money will be used to create the prerequisites for their independent life in the future... I have expressed my deep sympathy for their family tragedy and wished them much happiness and health in life. We talked a lot about their future and what’s coming, what they do, what they think and dream about. It was a very nice meeting and conversation, we agreed to meet again”, said Jadranka Kosor, then Deputy Prime Minister in charge of social activities and human rights, who personally awarded the one-time financial aid to Gordana and Dušan Zec.<sup>53</sup>*

In February 2012, the County State Attorney’s Office filed an indictment against Tomislav Merčep. Among other things, he was charged with the responsibility for the murder of members of the Zec family. He was charged with war crimes against civilians committed by his unit in the second half of 1991 in the areas of Zagreb, Pakrac and Kutina. Merčep was indicted and convicted, among other things, of the murder of members of the Zec family<sup>54</sup>, on the basis of command responsibility - that is, of having failed to prevent the unit under his command from abducting, torturing and killing civilians, and having personally witnessed some of the aforementioned crimes.

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*“Aleksandra Zec serves exclusively to establish the difference between ‘our’ and ‘their’ victims. In such a victimological dichotomy, ‘our victims’ are given places of special reverence and ‘are immortalised in marble’, while we leave ‘theirs’ to the media’s carrion crows, to the ever-new rumination over what the lobotomised national consciousness cannot digest.”<sup>55</sup>*

To this day, except for Deputy Prime Minister Boris Milošević of the Serbian Democratic Independent Party, who attended in 2021, the highest state officials have never attended the commemorations for the murdered members of the Zec family, which have been organised by civil society organisations for years.

A positive shift has been visible only in the last two years, when the Mayor of Zagreb, Tomislav Tomašević, has participated in the commemorations and given valuable speeches, joined by other representatives of the local authorities and a few members of the Croatian Parliament, all mostly from left-of-centre political parties, but none from the centre-right, e.g. the Croatian Democratic Union (CDU).

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51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 <https://www.nacional.hr/kako-je-nacional-objavom-fotografija-ubojstva-obitelji-zec-moralno-slomio-sanadera-i-omogucio-isplatu-odstete-bez-presedana/>

55 [https://snv.hr/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/2014\\_Aleksandra\\_Zec\\_knjiga\\_web.pdf](https://snv.hr/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/2014_Aleksandra_Zec_knjiga_web.pdf)



### 3.2. Commemorative practices of the politics of remembrance over the last decade

The memory of the murdered members of the Zec family in Zagreb has been preserved and nurtured for years through the organisation of annual commemorations by civil society organisations, primarily the Anti-Fascist League of Croatia and the Serbian National Council.

Commemorations are held on the anniversary of the murder, December 7, near the Adolfovac ski resort on Mount Sljeme above Zagreb, the place where Marija and Aleksandra Zec were killed and dumped.

Every year, the Anti-Fascist League invites the Mayor of Zagreb, the Government and the President to join the commemoration. Deputy Prime Minister Boris Milošević attended the commemoration for the first time in 2020, while Mayor Tomislav Tomašević became the first mayor of Zagreb to attend the commemoration in 2021. He continued his presence at the commemoration for the murdered members of the Zec Family in 2022. However, from the year of the assassination until today, the highest government officials have never attended the commemoration.

In addition to making an appearance there, Tomašević also marked the occasion with a speech the likes of which had not been heard before from the executive authorities of the City of Zagreb.

Attending the commemoration in 2021, Tomašević declared that, at the place of the murder of Marija and Aleksandra Zec, he was standing “... *humbly, as the Mayor of the City of Zagreb, in order to pay tribute to the innocent victims of the innocent [murdered] Zec Family...*”. He stated that he wanted to live in a city where crimes and their perpetrators are punished, and noted how important it was to remember civilian victims, and continuing: “*I am here precisely because I believe that such crimes must not be forgotten, so that they never happen again in the future.*”<sup>56</sup>

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He concluded his speech with the sentence: “*[...] I am also here as a pledge of a better future...*”<sup>57</sup>

Thanks to the attendance of Mayor Tomislav Tomašević, Speaker of the Zagreb City Assembly Joško Klisović and representatives from the City Assembly and the Croatian parliament, information about the murder of members of the Zec family and the chronology of bad moves by representatives of the executive and judicial authorities in connection with the case became more accessible to the public.

Such a strong response motivated a number of public figures to step into the public space and speak about the importance of this tragedy, and the need to preserve the memory of the Zec Family, to emphasise the symbolic meaning of that nationalistic murder, as well as to register the fact that the state of Croatia is facing the facts surrounding this crime – that it had failed and made a mistake.

The highest Croatian political leadership did not take the opportunity to join in acknowledging that this shameful event from the past had happened in the capital of the country, or to take advantage of the public’s attention and to speak responsibly, honestly and unequivocally about

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56 From the transcripts.

57 From the transcripts.



the mistakes of the past. Unfortunately, both Prime Minister Andrej Plenković and President Zoran Milanović missed that opportunity.

Moreover, Milanović marked the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the murder of members of the Zec Family with a shamefully callous statement, in which he said: “The Zec family was invited to meet the Government [...], they received compensation, what else do we need to do...?”<sup>58</sup>

A positive shift in the politics of memory by the local government, however, also followed in 2022, when Tomašević announced the installation of a memorial at the site of the murder of Aleksandra and Marija Zec, in order to preserve the memory of that crime permanently, with the aim of not repeating it.

By erecting a memorial, but also by naming a public area in the city of Zagreb after the Zec Family, a significant shift in the politics of remembrance of this cruel event from Croatia’s past would be made. The process of naming a public area, advocated for years by the non-governmental organisation Youth Initiative for Human Rights, achieved concrete progress in 2022 when, at the suggestion of the aforementioned organisation, the name of the Zec Family was entered into the Name Fund by the decision of the Committee for Naming Settlements, Streets and Squares of the Zagreb City Assembly, from which names for public areas in the city of Zagreb are chosen.

### 3.3. Conclusion

The murders of Aleksandra, Marija and Mihajlo Zec are only the beginning of the recognition of a shameful part of the past that official Croatia has not yet faced – neither comprehensively in criminal law, nor in the politics of memory; and the role of the competent institutions was mostly harmful and callous. The material compensation awarded by the Government of the Republic of Croatia to the surviving members of the Zec Family, Dušan and Gordana, Aleksandra’s brother and sister, is actually the outcome of political tactics because according to the predictions of some experts, “*the Government, by deciding on the payment of one-time financial assistance, admitted that this dispute would probably be lost in court, which would create a court precedent on which judicial practice would be created in the processes by which victims’ families seek to receive compensation*”.<sup>59</sup>

The last two years have brought positive changes, at least at the level of the local authorities, in commemorating the murdered members of the Zec Family in December 1991. The annual commemorations (in 2020 and 2021), organised by civil society organisations, gained significant attention with the presence of Zagreb Mayor Tomislav Tomašević. His speeches during these events, along with his promises to erect a memorial at the site of Aleksandra and Marija’s murder in Sljeme, brought the past tragedy to the forefront of public debate during the anniversary month. As a result, a large amount of information, including about the names of perpetrators, the “Merčepovci” unit and the state’s judicial and political shortcomings in addressing the responsibility for the Zec Family murders, became widely available to the public. This development has created a favourable environment for future involvement of the state leadership in the commemorations, and their taking responsibility for these atrocities.

58 <https://www.kulturesecanja.org/blog/zagreb-je-progovorio-o-svojoj-sramoti/>

59 [https://snv.hr/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/2014\\_Aleksandra\\_Zec\\_knjiga\\_web.pdf](https://snv.hr/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/2014_Aleksandra_Zec_knjiga_web.pdf)



## 4. Operation Medak Pocket, September 9, 1993

### 4.1. Introduction

The military operation “Pocket ‘93”, better known to the public as the military police operation “Medak Pocket”, took place from September 9 to 17, 1993, in the surroundings of Gospić, the villages of Čitluk, Počitelj, Divoselo and their hamlets. More than eighty civilian and military victims were murdered during the operation.

According to the 1991 census, 780 inhabitants lived in the mentioned villages (344 in Divoselo, 129 in Čitluk, 307 in Počitelj), of whom 92% were Serbs.<sup>60</sup>

*“The Croatian forces involved in offensive and defensive operations of the ‘Medak Pocket’ military police operation included members of the 9<sup>th</sup> Guards Brigade and joint forces of 19 Special Police Units of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Croatia, as well as members of the Gospić and Lovinac Home Guard Battalions, and the 263<sup>rd</sup> Reconnaissance Company of A[ssembly]A[rea] Gospić, the 71<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Rijeka Military Police and the 111<sup>th</sup> Brigade.*

*During combat operations until the withdrawal of Croatian forces, from September 9 to 17, 1993, a total of 6 members of the Croatian Army and 7 members of the special police units were killed, and 53 were wounded.”<sup>61</sup>*

The Serb National Council reported that *“on the first day of action many civilians were killed and/or wounded, the great majority of whom were elderly people, including at least ten women. One woman, blind and aged 84, was killed in her own courtyard. By the end of the operation, i.e. by the time Croatian forces withdrew from the Medak Pocket as a consequence of pressure by the international community on the Croatian authorities and an agreement signed on 15 September 1993, at least 28 civilians and 50 soldiers on the Serb side had died. It has to be said that not all soldiers died in combat, but that some were killed after having been taken prisoner and in some cases, grave abuse and torture were proven. At least one civilian victim had their throat cut, and there were several undisputed cases where corpses had been burnt. It is certain that almost without exception all the victims were Serbs, save for one Croatian woman who was married in Čitluk. After the decision on withdrawal, between 15 and 17 September, Croatian soldiers mined practically all the houses which had survived the operation undamaged, live-stock was killed and wells with drinking water were contaminated in order to make a return to these villages permanently impossible – i.e. the entire area was ‘ethnically cleansed’”<sup>62</sup>*

*“Because of the crimes committed at Medak Pocket and on the basis of the indictment taken over from the Hague Tribunal, criminal proceedings were conducted against Rahim Ademi and Mirko Norac before the County Court in Zagreb. The defendants, each with three counts of the indictment, were charged with having committed the criminal offence of a war crime against the civilian population and the criminal offence of a war crime against prisoners of war, and that by*

60 <https://snv.hr/zlocini/medacki-dzep/>

61 <https://morh.gov.hr/vijesti/svecano-obiljezana-25-obljetnica-operacije-medacki-dzep/1886>

62 Op.cit, SNV.



*an act of inaction, or omission. Rahim Ademi was acquitted, and Mirko Norac was found guilty of failing to take the actions necessary to prevent his subordinate members of the 9<sup>th</sup> Guards Brigade from killing four civilians and one captured Serbian soldier, and was sentenced to prison.*

*During the evidentiary proceedings, it was established that the commanders, directly subordinate to Mirko Norac, issued an order to give the soldiers explosives with which they could blow up houses, and to transport 40 corpses in an organised manner, and throw and bury them in the septic tank of a house in the suburbs of Gospić. Eleven bodies were found in the septic tank. After DNA analysis, it was determined that six bodies were from the Medak Pocket. The indictment failed to include these facts. In the aftermath of the operation, during 1993, in the actions of the Croatian side and UNPROFOR (because at the time of the “Pocket ‘93” operation, the area of the Medak Pocket was located in the UNPA zone), a total of 76 bodies of victims, most of them civilians, were handed over to the Serbs.*

*Although the final judgment determined that the zone of responsibility was that of the Special Police, where there were the most victims, not a single indictment has been brought to date, neither for command responsibility nor against individual perpetrators of crimes.”<sup>63</sup>*

The anniversaries of the Medak Pocket military police operation in the period from 2012 to 2022 are predominantly marked by the memory of the killed Croatian soldiers and members of the Special Police and the complete neglect of the victims of the crimes committed during and after the operation by members of the Croatian military and police forces.

Only civil society organisations strive to preserve the memory of the killed civilians by organising “parallel/alternative” commemorations, during which they go to the aforementioned villages in the area of Gospić, where the names of the killed civilians are read and flowers are left at the sites where atrocities happened.

In the observed period, for the first time on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, in 2018, the ceremony was attended by high-ranking military and civilian officials, including the representative of the President of the Croatian Parliament, the representative of the President of the Republic of Croatia, the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister of Defence.

## **4.2. Commemorative practices of the politics of remembrance over the last decade**

During the ten years of commemoration of the Medak Pocket Operation observed, in the period from 2012 to 2022, only a small number of sources about official commemorations were available.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> commemoration of the Pocket ‘93 operation held in the year 2013, the Minister for Croatian Veterans, Predrag Matić, participated in the official ceremony and said: *“There were also some controversies in that action, which we are sorry ever happened, and it involved violations of the Geneva Convention, the law of war and customs of war.”<sup>64</sup>* However, his speech focused on the “unjustified neglect” of this operation, “because it was com-

63 <https://documenta.hr/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/ManipulacijaMedackiDzepOZ-crvena.pdf>

64 From the transcripts.





pletely legitimate, in liberating this part of Croatia from where the enemy forces insidiously shelled Gospić and the surrounding settlements”, whilst also referring to the aforementioned controversies and commenting that “such situations cannot take away from the magnificence of those events of September 9, 1993, the importance of the Medak Pocket Operation, which ranks alongside all the other major actions in the Homeland War, such as Plitvice, Peruća, Maslenica, Flash and Storm.”<sup>65</sup>

The year that would be the first one to give continuity to the celebration of the Medak Pocket operation was 2018. The 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Medak Pocket military police operation is notable because of several significant events. Firstly, the commemoration ceremony, organised by the Government of the Republic of Croatia, was attended by Mirko Norac, a convicted war criminal, found guilty, among other things, of crimes committed during the Medak Pocket Operation; and secondly, Damir Krstičević, Minister for Croatian Veterans, welcomed Mirko Norac and expressed satisfaction with his presence at the ceremony.<sup>66</sup>

Minister Krstičević said on that occasion: “We have to be proud of the Medak Pocket action. And as for Mirko Norac, there was a war, he was the commander of the Gospić Assembly Area, and because of what happened there, he carries his cross, and I am glad that is here with us today.”<sup>67</sup>

The non-governmental organisation Youth Initiative for Human Rights informed the Office of the Ombudsman, the Office for Human Rights and the Rights of National Minorities, the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, the Office of the Prosecutor of the Mechanism for International Criminal Courts, and the President of the European People’s Party about the statements of Minister Krstičević and the presence of Mirko Norac on that occasion, publicly requesting a suitable reaction from Prime Minister Plenković to the Minister’s speech, as well as an apology for the inclusion of Mirko Norac in the Government’s protocol for celebrating the anniversary, neither of which materialised.<sup>68</sup>

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The year 2019 and the commemoration of the 26<sup>th</sup> anniversary came to the centre of public attention thanks to the attendance of high school pupils at the commemoration and celebration of the military police operation at Medak Pocket, where it was also possible to talk about the entire corpus of facts related to what happened during this military operation. Furthermore, the member of the Croatian parliament Stevo Culej on that occasion pointed out that “today it is not popular to remember Mirko Norac, nor many others. We were in the midst of a war, and wars tend to dictate different rules, where emotions, stress, and pressure often override rules, and that sometimes happened; but the war is over, and we now live in a free Croatia.”<sup>69</sup>

The presence of children at this event elicited a response from civil society organisations, which called on youth care institutions to condemn this action and emphasised that it must be ensured that this practice of manipulating and exploiting young people would never happen again

65 Ibid.

66 <https://www.oslobodjenje.ba/vijesti/region/ko-je-mirko-norac-dvapat-osudeni-ratni-zlocinac-i-ubica-zene-392301>

67 Ibid.

68 <https://yibr.hr/hr/ne-zelimo-biti-ponosni-na-medacki-dzep>

69 <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/ucenici-prvi-dan-skole-slusali-culeja-kako-brani-norca-tko-ih-je-na-to-vodio/2115129.aspx>



so as not to reaffirm the premise that violence and human rights violations were a veritable 'school of life' in Croatia.<sup>70</sup>

During the anniversary of the Medak Pocket Operation in 2021, Minister of Defence Mario Banožić also referred to the operation in a similar way, greeting the attendees on behalf of Prime Minister Andrej Plenković and pointing out: *"The Medak Pocket [Operation] also sent a message to all other defenders on other battlefields in the Republic of Croatia – that the sacrifice was there, that it was not in vain [...] but the strength that resulted from this victory gave wings to all other Croatian defenders in other areas, [convincing them] that they too could win victories and ultimately contribute to the territorial integration of the Republic of Croatia."*<sup>71</sup>

The last three years of the commemoration of this military police operation have not brought any new or progressive practices in inclusive memorialisation. These are events that are now already an established practice, attended and acknowledged by the representatives of the President of the State, the President of the Parliament and the Government of the Republic of Croatia, with the presence of church dignitaries and the families of killed veterans and members of veteran associations. Their addresses exclusively focus on the strategic and military successes achieved by that operation.

### 4.3. Conclusion

Operation Medak Pocket is celebrated by the official state as a victorious operation, which is described as "a successfully executed, impeccably managed operation that accomplished all its objectives."<sup>72</sup>

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Croatian Minister for War Veterans Predrag Matic's speech during the official commemoration held in Gospić in September 2013, had the potential to open up a space for future high-ranking government officials to publicly discuss and address all the victims of operation "Pocket 93" with greater openness and responsibility.

Instead, the opposite happened. The 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary was marked not only by the presence of the convicted war criminal Mirko Norac during the official ceremony, but also by the greeting shared by the Minister of Defence, Damir Krstičević, who was delighted with Norac's presence.

The commemorations organised in the following years weren't marked and won't be remembered as occasions in which high state officials publicly acknowledged that very serious war crimes were committed, or that they remembered or showed remorse for the civilians who were killed during the operation in an extremely brutal way.

The commemorations marking the Medak Pocket Operation were the only ones, within the periods observed and events analysed in this research, not personally attended by the highest state officials, neither prime ministers nor heads of state, except for President Grabar-Kitarović, who participated in the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the operation.

<sup>70</sup> <https://documenta.hr/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/ManipulacijaMedackiDzepOZ-crvena.pdf>

<sup>71</sup> From the transcripts.

<sup>72</sup> From the transcripts.



## 5. Operation Flash remembrance (May 1, 1995)

### 5.1. Introduction

On May 1, 1995, the Croatian armed forces began the recovery of the occupied territory of western Slavonia with the military-police operation “Flash”. The operation was approved by the then President of Croatia, Franjo Tuđman, and based on the order of the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces, Janko Bobetko. Operation Flash began on May 1, 1995 at 5:21 a.m., on a battlefield about 80 kilometres long and in three directions – from the east, north and west.<sup>73</sup>

*“In less than 32 hours, on May 1 and 2, Croatian forces liberated about 500 square kilometres of the previously occupied Western Slavonic territory and established control over the Zagreb-Lipovac highway and the railway line to Eastern Slavonia.”<sup>74</sup>*

About 7,200 Croatian soldiers and police officers participated in Operation Flash. Fifty-one were killed or died as a result of injuries, and 162 defenders were wounded.<sup>75</sup>

About 15,000 Serbs lived in the area of the mentioned territory. The Serb National Council states that *“during the operation, Serbian civilians were killed, refugee columns were attacked, and after the operation, 2,000 to 3,000 Serbs would remain in the area of the then UN Sector West, which means that almost the entire Serbian population had left the area.”<sup>76</sup>*

*“On the first day of Operation Flash, at around six in the morning, just half an hour after the start of the operation, members of the Croatian Army entered the village of Medari, which was located right next to the demarcation line. They soon committed a war crime against the civilians they found in their homes. (...)*

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*Among those killed were twelve women. Seven members of the Vuković family were killed, among them two girls, seven and eight years old, and an 11-year-old boy. The oldest victim was 88 years old. The inhabitants of Medari believed that in the event of a military operation by the Croatian Army, they would be protected by UN peacekeeping forces whose base was in the immediate vicinity of the village.*

*In the middle of 2010, the exhumation of the mortal remains of 28 people from the mass grave in the area of the local cemetery of Trnava was completed. By the spring of 2012, the Institute for Forensic Medicine had identified 14 residents of Medari killed on May 1, 1995, including all members of the Vuković family.*

73 <https://www.morh.hr/28-obljetnica-vro-bljesak/>

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid.

76 <https://snv.hr/zlocin-u-medarima/>



*No one was held criminally responsible for the crime in Medari, and no indictment was brought.*<sup>77</sup>

In the report “Military Order Operation Flash” which the Croatian Helsinki Committee (CHO) published in 2003, the names of 83 Serbian civilians who, according to the CHO, were killed by members of the Croatian Army during Operation Flash, were listed.<sup>78</sup>

*“According to CHO data collected over three months, at the end of 2001 and the beginning of 2002, 30 Serbian civilians were killed in Croatian Army attacks on refugee columns that were retreating towards the Republika Srpska in the morning hours of May 1, 1995.”*<sup>79</sup>

At the presentation of the aforementioned report, CHO President Žarko Puhovski “criticised the state bodies for failing to provide CHO with any information about the civilian victims of Flash and request any information from CHO, even though these victims were Croatian citizens”, the index.hr portal reported.<sup>80</sup>

Together with Puhovski, the report was presented by Ranko Helebrant, who pointed out that the report was based on the statements of 500 to 600 witnesses, that all items of information were confirmed by two independent sources, and that CHO members visited almost all settlements of the former West sector, as well as being in Republika Srpska and Serbia.<sup>81</sup>

The military-police Operation Flash in official Croatia’s memory policies for the past ten years has been characterised by a completely closed narrative exclusively oriented towards preserving the memory of the dead and wounded members of the armed forces and police officers of the Republic of Croatia. During the official commemorations, commemorative events were organised in the town of Okučani, near Ogulin, where in 2018 the “Crystal Cubes of Serenity” monument was erected in order to preserve the memory of the killed members of the Croatian forces during Operation Flash.

The commemoration is usually attended by the entire state leadership, who on this occasion, in their speeches or statements to the media, show their gratitude to the members of the Croatian armed forces for achieving victory in Operation Flash, and link it to Operation Storm that would follow a few months later, and, more broadly, to the victory in the Homeland War.

## **5.2. Commemorative practices of the politics of remembrance over the last decade**

In 2012, when the observed period began, the commemoration of the anniversary of the killed veterans took place on May 1 in the town of Okučani. On this occasion, the President of the Croatian Parliament, Boris Šprem, together with the delegation of the President of the Republic of Croatia and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Croatia, led by the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Croatia, Colonel-General Drago

77 Ibid.

78 <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/hho-iznio-imena-83-srpska-civila-koje-je-navodno-ubila-hv-tijekom-bljeska/150324.aspx>

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid.

81 Ibid.



Lovrić, and the delegation of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Croatia led by the Minister of Defence Anto Kotromanović, laid flowers and lit candles in honour of the killed veterans.<sup>82</sup> In his speech, Šprem pointed out that the Flash actions “*are remembered by Croats with special pride - today, after 17 years, as then, when the whole of Croatia followed the news from the Western Slavonic battlefield with a sense of trepidation.*”<sup>83</sup>

The remaining part of Šprem’s speech focused on the chronology of the events that followed after Flash, among which he highlighted Operation Storm and the peaceful reintegration of Western Slavonia. In his speech, Šprem also talked about political readiness for cooperation and dialogue, peaceful coexistence and mutual tolerance.<sup>84</sup>

The eighteenth anniversary was also attended by the President of the Republic of Croatia Ivo Josipović, Prime Minister Zoran Milanović and other members of the delegation, including four ministers. On that occasion, in his speech, Josipović pointed out that “*the commemoration of Operation Flash is a sign of respect above all for those who died in this operation and in other ways in the Homeland War, as well as for that great and important victory by which the Croatian army and police started finally to liberate our Homeland.*” He added that without actions such as Flash and Storm, there would be no free Croatia. On that occasion, the Minister for Croatian Veterans, Predrag Matić, opened a Memorial Room in Okučani in memory of the veterans who died in Operation Flash.<sup>85</sup>

In 2013, the commemoration lasted about twenty minutes, and President Josipović described it as “*decent and dignified*”. The portal Glas Slavonije pointed out on its pages that “*there are usually no speeches on Operation Flash anniversaries unless they are decennial, so yesterday only a military ordinary, Juraj Jezerinac, had the opportunity to say a few words, as part of a prayer, about the action that liberated a large part of Croatian territory, heralding Operation Storm.*”<sup>86</sup>

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In 2014, the entire state leadership attended the commemoration: the President of the Republic of Croatia, Ivo Josipović, the Prime Minister, Zoran Milanović, and the President of the Parliament, Josip Leko. On that occasion, Leko described operation Flash as “*a groundbreaking action by the Croatian Army and the Croatian state, which aptly demonstrated that Croatia was not fighting for reasons of hatred, but for establishing freedom, the independence of its state and freedom for all citizens.*” Josipović said that “*this is the day of commemoration of the victory in the Homeland War, in defence of freedom, democracy, the state*”, Milanović declared: “*We are proud of this. A big thankyou to everyone who made even the smallest contribution, and to those who gave their lives - in fact, we can’t thank their families enough.*”<sup>87</sup>

The following, decennial, twentieth anniversary of the military police operation Flash was marked by the statements of President Grabar-Kitarović, whose speech focused on the unity that brought victory in the Flash Operation, but also in the Storm Operation that followed, and in

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82 <https://mup.gov.hr/vijesti-8/obiljezana-17-obljetnica-blistavog-bljeska/121875>

83 Ibid.

84 From the transcripts.

85 Ibid.

86 <http://www.glas-slavonije.hr/197399/1/Osamaest-godina-Bljeska-bez-politickih-govorancija>

87 From the transcripts.



general the victory in the war, which she then connected with the fact that Croatia is a member of both the European Union and the NATO alliance. The President of the Parliament, Josip Leko, in his statement pointed out that the Flash Operation was gaining more and more importance because it had brought peace to Western Slavonia. He also indicated that *“commemoration of such operations is aimed at building peace, democratic values, human rights and freedoms”*.<sup>88</sup>

The President of the “technical” Government, Tihomir Orešković, and the President of the Croatian Parliament, Željko Reiner, gave statements on the twenty-first anniversary on behalf of high-ranking officials, who, like the officials in the years before, expressed gratitude and paid tribute to all those who had fought in Operation Flash, while Reiner pointed out that Operation Flash represented a turning point, and together with Storm and peaceful reintegration, made possible what *“we have today, that is, democracy, freedom, independence.”*<sup>89</sup>

At the twenty-second commemoration, Prime Minister Andrej Plenković with a delegation of seven other ministers came *“to express the deepest respect for all the fallen Croatian veterans, soldiers and members of the special forces of the Croatian police who, in the shortest possible time, carried out a key operation in the Homeland War, showed the strength and preparedness of the Croatian army and the Croatian police. (...) With that great event 22 years ago, a turning point was reached, which was later continued just as quickly and just as efficiently by the Croatian Army in Operation Storm.”*<sup>90</sup> In the press statement he gave on that occasion, he also pointed out that the Government protects the dignity of the Homeland War with every move they make and, given that the commemoration was held on May 1, he congratulated those present on International Labour Day and added that *“the Government will persist in social dialogue, in partnership with unions and employers.”*<sup>91</sup>

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On that occasion, President Grabar-Kitarović emphasised that she was *“extremely glad to be in Okučani”* and added, among other things, that *“Operation Flash was extremely important because it re-established traffic communication between Eastern and Western Slavonia, and, as the crowning glory of all operations, she prepared for Operation Storm”*.<sup>92</sup>

On the twenty-third anniversary of Operation Flash, the “Crystal Cubes of Serenity” monument by the academic sculptor Dalibor Stošić and designer Hrvoje Bilandžić was officially unveiled. The monument is the first prize-winning work financed by the Ministry for Croatian Veterans. The monument consists of *“51 cubes of highly polished reflective material that symbolise the 51 Croatian soldiers who died in that action.”*<sup>93</sup> In his statement, Prime Minister Andrej Plenković highlighted some of the Government’s recent results, praised the appearance of the monument and especially thanked the Minister for Croatian Veterans, Tomo Medved, the Ministry and the Municipality of Okučani, i.e. those responsible for the installation of the “Crystal Cubes of Serenity”.<sup>94</sup>

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88 From the transcripts.

89 From the transcripts.

90 Ibid.

91 Ibid.

92 Ibid.

93 From the transcripts.

94 From the transcripts.



The commemoration held in Okučani in 2019 did not bring any new messages that the public had not had the opportunity to hear before.

The anniversary of 2020, which would be attended for the first time by Zoran Milanović as the President of the Republic of Croatia, would be remembered for the fact that Milanović left it very soon after his arrival. In a statement to the media, Milanović explained what happened: *“One of the participants who was supposed to lay a wreath wore a uniform with the coat-of-arms “For the Homeland – at the ready!” and I want no part in that. That is a matter for the organizer, who should have taken care of it, and that is my position, I’m sorry. It was a deliberate provocation that we had expected and indeed happened. I consider it an act that tramples the victims and the memory of this event.. Therefore, this unfortunately had to happen, or someone wanted it to happen.”*<sup>95</sup>

Other high-ranking officials who attended the commemoration, Prime Minister Andrej Plenković and President of the Croatian Parliament Gordan Jandroković, did not support Milanović’s position and decision to leave. Plenković said that *“the division we are making today, in this way, in my opinion, in this place, is not good”*<sup>96</sup> and added: *“All [those] who gave their lives for Croatia have my respect. And so do members of Croatian Defence Forces (CDF). What President Tuđman did, and what the Croatian Army did, was to integrate all Croatian forces into the official, formal framework of the Croatian Army and the Croatian Police.”*<sup>97</sup> In a similar tone, Jandroković commented on Milanović’s decision to leave the official commemoration of the 23<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the Flash action: *“I don’t know why there is a need to reopen those ideological disputes that we had in the past. We have managed to stabilise the situation. We were all together in Jasenovac too. But, now the same things are happening to us that happened to us before.”*<sup>98</sup>

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The following year, Zoran Milanović, Andrej Plenković and Gordan Jandroković again attended the commemoration. In his brief statement, Milanović said that during Operation Flash *“Croatian heroes liberated this part of Croatia with their determination, knowledge, patience and courage, and after Operation Maslenica in 1993, made it possible a few months later, in August 1995, for Croatia finally to unite and become free. It was a handful of good and brave people (...).”*<sup>99</sup> Plenković’s and Jandroković’s statements were focused on gratitude to those who brought victory in this action and the Homeland War in general.

Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, at the 2022 commemoration, also highlighted the importance of familiarising all generations with *“what happened in the early 1990s in the Great Serbian aggression against Croatia and the occupation of this part of Western Slavonia.”*<sup>100</sup>

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95 From the transcripts.

96 Ibid.

97 Ibid.

98 Ibid.

99 Ibid.

100 Ibid.



Plenković also emphasised the following: *“These operations freed up this area in an extremely short period of time and made it possible to drive smoothly on the highway from Zagreb to Lipovac. I want to once again thank all Croatian veterans, all Croatian soldiers, all Croatian policemen for everything they have contributed to the strengthening of the Croatian state.”*<sup>101</sup>

### 5.3. Conclusion

The report of the Croatian Helsinki Committee for Human Rights (CHO), “Military Operation Flash”, presented in July 2003, listed the names of 83 Serbian civilians killed during this operation. It indicated that the total number of civilians killed was even higher, although the number currently mentioned is the result of multiple verified data. Regardless of this fact, not a single word was uttered during the official commemorations (in the observed period 2012–2022) about this side of the operation or the memory of the killed civilians.

High-ranking officials who participate in official commemorations, which are usually held on May 1 in Okučani, express their gratitude to the members of the Croatian forces who participated in Operation Flash, and offer their deepest respects to the members of the military forces who died during the operation. The operation is often described as one of those that achieved the return of the occupied territory to the borders of the Republic of Croatia, an operation that brought peace to those areas and an introduction to, announcement of, and victory heralding the operation that would follow a few months later – Operation Storm. On the 2018 anniversary, when the “Crystal Cube of Serenity” monument was erected and unveiled, to show that it consists of 51 cubes symbolically representing the members of the Croatian forces who died during or as a result of this operation, children were also present near those cubes during the official commemorative programme, holding roses.

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101 Ibid.





## 6. Victory and Homeland Thanksgiving Day and the Day of Croatian Defenders (August 5)

### 6.1. Introduction

One of the key events for understanding the war during the 1990s in the territory of the former Yugoslavia is the Storm military-police operation. Operation Storm aimed at returning part of the territory in the Republic of Croatia that was under occupation by the Republika Srpska Krajina (RSK) in the period from 1991 to 1995.

With this operation, Croatia recovered about 11,000 square kilometres or 18.4 percent of its total area<sup>102</sup>. This ended the war on the territory of Croatia. However, during and after the end of this military operation on the territory where the operation took place, more than 600 civilians were killed and several thousand houses and outbuildings were burned.<sup>103</sup> During and after Storm, about 200,000 of its former inhabitants, mostly Serbs, left Croatia.<sup>104</sup>

Operation Storm enabled the achievement of the legitimate goal of reintegrating part of the territory within the internationally recognised borders of Croatia and marked the end of the war on the territory of Croatia. During and after Operation Storm, crimes were committed against the Serbian population, which included the murder of civilians, the destruction of their property and their persecution, as was established in the judgment of the Trial Chamber in the Gotovina et al. Case (IT-06-90) before the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, and in the verdict of the International Court of Justice<sup>105</sup> regarding the mutual lawsuits for genocide of the states of Croatia and Serbia.

In 2012, 2013 and 2014, while Ivo Josipović was President of the State, the Operation Storm commemorations concentrated on messages that tried to open a space for public awareness of the problematic aspects of Operation Storm. President Josipović didn't question the necessity of Storm and its victorious character; however, continuously throughout the years mentioned, he devoted parts of his speeches to pointing out the importance of remembering all the victims.

For example, President Josipović did this with appeals for “*victory in peace*”, with which he drew attention to how important it was to “*reach out to our fellow citizens of Serbian nationality and acknowledge their sacrifices and bow to them*” – with the additional explanation that “*winning in peace [...] means overcoming economic difficulties, and ensuring human rights, religious and national freedoms, and prosperity*”.<sup>106</sup>

The anniversary of 2020 was marked in a positive sense by the speech delivered by Prime Minister Plenković at the official celebration in Knin. He pointed out that “*today is celebrated as a sign of victory, gratitude and pride, and it is imbued with reconciliation and reverence, which*

102 <https://www.morh.hr/26-obljetnica-vro-oluja/>

103 CHO.

104 SNV.

105 <https://www.scribd.com/document/254566797/Odba%C4%8Dene-tu%C5%BEbe-za-genocid>

106 <https://brantelji.gov.hr/vijesti/sredisnje-obiljezavanje-dana-pobjede-i-domovinske-zahvalnosti-dana-hrvatskih-brantelja-i-17-obljetnice-vojno-redarstvene-operacije-oluja/573>



are the foundations of Croatia's future". In that speech, Plenković also stated that he regretted the "[victims] of war crimes committed on the Croatian side" - making the significant remark that there is no justification for a "misdeed".

That important speech, from which, admittedly, one gets the impression that war crimes were the "missteps" of individuals, brought an opportunity for transformation in the politics of the remembrance of events related to the Storm military police action, and represented acknowledgment of its shameful, dark, and criminal side. In the statement on reconciliation, Plenković incorporated views on how the Croatian state and society should move forward, indicating firmly and clearly that social progress was not possible unless the interpretation of the past reflected the facts.

## 6.2. Commemorative practices of the politics of remembrance over the last decade

During the years 2012, 2013 and 2014, when Ivo Josipović was the President of the Republic of Croatia and Zoran Milanović the President of the Government, the Operation Storm celebrations focused on messages that, in principle, tried to carve out a space for public awareness and discussion about problematic aspects of Operation Storm.

The speeches of Prime Minister Milanović tried to expand the understanding of the winner concept through the concept of magnanimity, which enables the winner to be envisioned as the one who remembers all the victims: *"We, the winners - that's why today we have strength and can condemn every evil committed, grieve for every innocent victim, every life lost in this war that was forced on us. Let's do everything in our power to be worthy of those sacrifices and build the Croatia that its defenders dreamed of. A better Croatia."*<sup>107</sup>

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In 2015, in addition to the traditional commemoration of Operation Storm in the City of Knin, there were also two additional events that influenced the creation of a narrative about the memory of Operation Storm. The first was a ceremonial military parade held in Zagreb on August 4 to mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Operation Storm.<sup>108</sup> The second was the concert of the singer Marko Perković Thompson<sup>109</sup>, in previous years held in the town of Čavoglave, but on the occasion of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary on August 5, 2015, took place at the football stadium of FC Dinara in Knin.

After the parade, in Zagreb's Upper Town, one of the speakers was Prime Minister Zoran Milanović, who also emphasised in his television appearances that with this military parade Croatia was not celebrating war: *"It is not about celebrating anyone's suffering or persecution, let that be clear to those who have not yet understood. Croatia did everything to avoid war, it offered peaceful solutions. And was rejected."*<sup>110</sup> He also emphasised the following: *"For those who*

107 <https://vlada.gov.hr/vijesti/predsjednik-vlade-zoran-milanovic-cestitao-dan-pobjede-i-domovinske-zahvalnosti-i-dan-hrvatskih-branitelja/14468>

108 <https://vlada.gov.hr/vijesti/odrzani-svecani-vojni-mimohod-povodom-20-obljetnice-vro-oluja/17460>

109 Croatian nationalist singer. One of his songs opens with the chant "Za dom spremni!"—"At the ready for the homeland!", the Croatian Ustaša version of the Nazi salute "Sieg Heil!"

110 <https://vlada.gov.hr/vijesti/predsjednik-vlade-milanovic-cestitao-dan-pobjede-i-domovinske-zahvalnosti-i-dan-hrvatskih-branitelja/17459>



*did not return, the door is open to them! (...) We made some bad decisions as a country after 'Storm', and we didn't exactly cover ourselves in glory in some things. Grave omissions were made, and the state should have acted more assertively. But after that, people started returning to Croatia (...)*"<sup>111</sup>

Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović in Gornji Grad, for her first time at the commemoration as Croatian President, declared: *"We regret every life that was lost in the Homeland War, both Croatian and Serbian."*<sup>112</sup>

Grabar-Kitarović used her first official speech at the commemoration of Operation Storm in Knin on August 5, 2015 also to express her regret *"for every lost life, both Croatian and Serbian"*, immediately adding: *"But I emphasise again that the cause of this was Milošević's Greater Serbian expansionist policy"*. She emphasised that *"We in Croatia do not want to go back to the past - we extend the hand of friendship, coexistence and tolerance. We do not want to blame the Serbian people as such for the aggression against our country"*; but she also affirmed that *"we will never allow the aggressor and the victim to be equated"*.<sup>113</sup>

With this speech, she also addressed the political leadership of the Republic of Serbia, explaining that *"In his proclamation, President Tuđman called on citizens of Serbian nationality who did not actively participate in the rebellion to stay in their homes and welcome the Croatian authorities without fear for their lives and property. The order to evacuate the Serbian population from the occupied territories was signed by their political and military leaders Martić and Mrkšić."* She also emphasised the importance of the magnanimity of the victor, saying: *"We Croats, on the other hand, must be magnanimous in victory. I want to highlight the City of Knin as an example of coexistence and tolerance. I most resolutely reject attempts to impose the thesis that Serbs in Croatia today are second-class citizens - on the contrary, the Serbian national minority is guaranteed all civil and minority rights according to the highest European standards. I would be extremely happy if our Croats in Serbia enjoyed the same rights."*<sup>114</sup>

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Although she did not herself attend the concert organised by the City of Knin, she did invite the citizens to attend Marko Perković Thompson's concert. The concert, which was attended by over 90,000 people, began with the greeting *"Za dom spremni!"*, an integral part of the *Bojna Čavoglave* song. The police recorded six violations during the concert, including the wearing of a hat and a flag with Ustaša symbols. In addition to the above, *"Kill the Serb!"* was also chanted at the concert.<sup>115</sup>

At the commemoration of Operation Storm in 2016, President Grabar-Kitarović especially thanked the members of the Croatian Defence Forces (CDF)<sup>116</sup>, and indicated that: *"We respect every victim, because every human life is equally valuable and every family has the same grief for*

<sup>111</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bUdtsHBDzD4>

<sup>112</sup> <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/kolinda-ovo-je-bio-mimohod-buducnosti-i-mira.-zalimo-za-svakim-zivotom-koji-je-izgubljen-u-ratu-i-hrvatskim-i-srpskim-287356>

<sup>113</sup> From the transcripts.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> <https://www.telegram.hr/politika-kriminal/na-thomposonovom-koncertu-skandiralo-se-ubij-srbina-i-nosilo-ustaska-obilježja/>

<sup>116</sup> Paramilitary unit.



*their loved ones. But it must also be known that Storm was a politically justifiable, ethically pure and militarily glorious victory for a just cause. With it we proved our determination to be free and our ability to be sovereign.*"<sup>117</sup> On this occasion, however, with regard to the Serbs in the context of Storm, Grabar-Kitarović also said: *"The Croatian people do not forget that many Serbs, who saw Croatia as their homeland, participated in the liberation of the country."*

The incident that marked the twenty-first anniversary was the burning of the flag of the Republic of Serbia. Namely, a group of young men and women set fire to the flag of the Republic of Serbia in Knin, to the beats of a song by Marko Perković Thompson, a few hours after members of the IX battalion of the Croatian Defence Forces (CDF) sang Ustasha songs and marched through Knin.<sup>118</sup>

Also this year, at the invitation of the Ministry for Croatian Veterans, in co-organisation with the City of Knin, Marko Perković Thompson performed at the football stadium in Knin. The special feature of this year's concert, under the name "Victory for a Hero", was that it collected financial resources for the restoration of the Water Tower in Vukovar.<sup>119</sup>

In a speech Prime Minister Plenković gave in 2018, he opened the perspective for a more self-critical approach to "Oluja" (Storm) with the following affirmation: "We are building a Croatia in which, with a policy of truth and reconciliation, we respect all victims, guarantee the rights of all our minorities, and strive to reach a broad consensus on important social issues. We want to build a society where divisions are replaced by dialogue and mutual respect."<sup>120</sup>

President Grabar-Kitarović gave her last speech as president in August 2019. She also used it to call the first Croatian president, Franjo Tuđman, "Vrhovnik" ("Supremo"), an informal and stylistically blatant title that connotes extreme ethno-nationalist attitudes; and to refer to the Croatian flag as the "Croatian national flag", in reference to the "Croatian State Parliament", as the largely symbolic and advisory pseudo-parliamentary institution was called during the Independent State of Croatia (the NDH - the Nazi-Fascist state of World War Two). She delivered another speech the next day, August 5, at the central ceremony.

At the commemoration of 2020, without any previous obvious indications in the public space, a significant change took place in the policy of commemorating all civilian victims of this operation, especially compared to 2019, but also to all previous years. This is also the year in which Zoran Milanović, as the President of the Republic of Croatia, gave his first speech on the occasion of Victory and Homeland Thanksgiving Day and the Day of Croatian Defenders.

The anniversary of 2020 was marked in a positive sense by the speech given by Prime Minister Plenković at the official celebration in Knin. Already from the first words of his address, it became clear that it would go down a different path than most of the previous ones. He stated

117 From the transcripts.

118 <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2016/8/5/ustaski-pozdravi-i-pjesme-na-ulicama-knina>

119 <https://tris.com.hr/2016/08/josipa-rimac-o-proslavi-oluje-govori-i-titule-mi-nikad-nisu-bili-vazni/>

120 From the transcripts.



that, “*Today is a day we celebrate as a sign of victory, gratitude and pride, and it is imbued with reconciliation and reverence, which are the foundations of Croatia’s future*”.<sup>121</sup>

For the first time at a commemoration, Plenković’s speech was structured in seven parts in such a way that he systematised a more progressive approach to memory than any other since 2012. Within the components of the speech – Knin, Victory, Gratitude, Pride, Reconciliation, Reverence and Future Challenges – he offered detailed reviews of those events that until now could not be heard at official commemorations, but which also marked Operation Storm.

Expressing his regret for the “*numerous innocent civilian victims*”, in the course of which he particularly emphasised the importance of understanding victims outside of their national identities, Plenković pointed out that it was important to mourn the victims who were civilians, Serbs and of “*all other nationalities*”. He also stated that he regretted the “[*victims*] of war crimes committed on the Croatian side”, with an important note to the effect that there is never justification for a “*misdeed*”. Plenković did not omit to mention that Storm “*was traumatic for many Croatian Serbs who primarily associate it with the departure of part of the Serbian population from their homes*.” He also pointed out to the public that a “*calm*” assessment of the “*many layers of the events at that time*” was needed. In connection with the events of the war, he brought up the current situation in relation to the challenges that Croatia has in achieving a higher standard of living for members of the Serbian national minority, with the comment that “*there are still difficulties that need to be overcome in order for them [i.e. Croatian Serbs] to feel equal*”. The final parts of the address in the Reverence section of his speech concluded with an exhortation to sincere reconciliation, which “*can only be built on truth based on facts, on cooperation with everyone in finding all the missing, and on justice for all victims*”; and with the assurance that all crimes would “*continue to be prosecuted, regardless of the nationality of the victim or the perpetrator*”.<sup>122</sup>

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It was a rare example of a speech that highlighted values and attitudes that have been almost never heard in this context before, such as “*reconciliation*”, the truth rooted in the facts, the innocence of Serbian victims, the magnanimity and humanity of the victors, the war crimes of the Croatian side, and empathy towards the innocent victims from other nations.

The appearance of Boris Milošević, the Vice-President of the Government of the Republic of Croatia and the first high-ranking representative of the Serbs, to the commemoration of Operation Storm in Knin was a particularly important step towards establishing better relations between the majority and minority peoples, having in the mind that the anniversary of the operation affected the future lives of both. Milošević’s appearance offered an additional contribution to the creation of a multi-layered interpretation of the consequences of the Operation Storm in the public space, not least because of his personal story. A month after Operation Storm, Milošević’s grandmother was killed by Croatian forces, along with many other Serb civilians.<sup>123</sup>

121 <https://vlada.gov.hr/vijesti/oluju-obiljezavamo-u-znaku-pobjede-zahvalnosti-i-ponosa-uz-osjecaj-pomirbe-i-pijeta-ta/30080>

122 <https://vlada.gov.hr/vijesti/oluju-obiljezavamo-u-znaku-pobjede-zahvalnosti-i-ponosa-uz-osjecaj-pomirbe-i-pijeta-ta/30080>

123 <https://hr.n1info.com/vijesti/milosevic-tesko-je-bilo-prihvatiti-da-je-baka-ubijena-mjesec-dana-nakon-oluje/>



Unfortunately, the new inclusive approach to remembering all civilian victims of Operation Storm, was not continued in 2021’.

The anniversary for the year 2022 seems to have thrown all the efforts and appeals of 2020 for the opening of dialogue, empathy, the prosecution of all crimes and awareness of the reverse side of Operation Storm down the drain. The speeches of the highest officials, both the prime minister and the president, at the commemoration of Storm in 2022, were marked by strong hostility towards and non-acceptance and condemnation of the then still unconfirmed indictments of the Public Prosecutor’s Office of the Republic of Serbia against four officers of the Croatian Air Force. These officers are Vladimir Mikac (67) from Ptuj, Zdenko Radulj (69) from Osijek, Željko Jelenić (69) from Pula, and Danijel Borović (64) from Varaždin<sup>124</sup>, and they are charged with war crimes against the civilian population - that is, that they “on 7 and 8 August, 1995, ordered the shelling of a column of refugees”<sup>125</sup> on the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina, specifically on Petrovačka cesta near Bosanski Petrovac and in Svodna near Novi Grad (formerly Bosanski Novi).

On this occasion, Prime Minister Plenković referred to the “[false] but [futile] [accusations] about the expulsion of the Serbian population”, adding that “it is known that the leadership of the rebel Serbs in cooperation with Belgrade [...] forced these people to evacuate from Croatia”.

In his speech, President Milanović pointed out that the case of the exodus of Serbs was a “*human tragedy*” which, however, was preceded by “*the human greed and stupidity of those in power in Belgrade, the short-sightedness and arrogance of those who did not want to agree to the Z4 plan in the days before the Storm*”. Admittedly, according to him, Croatia “*kept silent for the first five years after the Storm*”, due to “*pressure and blackmail*”, sending “*the best people to The Hague*”, and now a different time had come. A time where it can be said that “*our faults are inevitable, as in every human action*”, but “*we have nothing to be ashamed of*”.<sup>126</sup>

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It was a rare occasion when Prime Minister Plenković and President Milanović, who had been continuously quarrelling with each other, united to defame the Public Prosecutor’s Office of Serbia and the unconfirmed indictments for war crimes against the civilian population. In their speeches, there was no mention of the civilians who had died, especially the children who were undoubtedly killed during the bombing of the Petrovac road, as is evident from witness statements collected by the Humanitarian Law Center and written about by Documenta – the centre for dealing with the past – in its press release back in 2012.<sup>127</sup>

The official celebration held in 2023 included very concrete statements given by Prime Minister Plenković, emphasising that Croatia doesn’t want to collaborate with the Public Prosecutor’s Office in Belgrade on the prosecution of Croatian generals.

124 <https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/tanjug-sud-u-beogradu-potvrdio-optuznicu-protiv-hrvatskih-pilota-navedeno-za-koje-ih-se-akcije-tocno-progoni-20220820>

125 <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/objavljena-optuznica-protiv-hrvatskih-pilota/2389068.aspx>

126 <https://www.portalnovosti.com/oluja-i-ogluha>

127 <https://documenta.hr/novosti/priopcenje-povodom-obljetnice-stradanja-civila-nakon-vojno-redarstvene-akcije-oluja/>



The official commemoration in 2023 was marked by a clear message from Prime Minister Plenković, stating, “Croatia will never allow anyone to cast a shadow on Operation Storm, on Croatian defenders, soldiers, and police,” and referring to messages that were sent the day before from Prijedor during the Day of Remembrance for the victims of Operation Storm, “at the first joint commemoration of the leadership of Serbia, the entity of Republika Srpska, and the Serbian Orthodox Church in that city in northwestern Bosnia and Herzegovina.”<sup>128</sup>

During this anniversary, in the same way as during the previous one, Plenković referred to the war crimes indictments against civilians brought by the Public Prosecutor’s Office of Belgrade in March 2022, stating: “We will never accept indictments coming from the Belgrade Prosecutor’s Offices, from Serbia, which pretends to be both the regional prosecutor and judge.” He directed this message to “those who secured freedom for Croatia”, and emphasised that “all measures have been taken so far to neither consider nor accept such indictments.”<sup>129</sup>

President Milanović began his address by emphasising the importance of establishing the truth, which “is not seen in the same way by everyone” – as, he noted, “in Prijedor yesterday.” Continuing his speech about the need for truth to be disclosed “in its entirety,” he stressed that it was his duty, in order to ensure self-respect, to determine and reiterate that “we haven’t done anything remarkably wrong. Nothing more nor less than an ordinary person, an ordinary community.” He described the way Croatia conducted the war as “smart - the people who led it were intelligent,” but “never perfidious. They fought against a force stronger than themselves.” Milanović considered the statement “when someone tells you that you expelled so many people, yet no one was there [when you arrived]” to be an insult “to the common sense and self-respect of every person, regardless of their faith and nationality.” He was referring to Croatian Serbs who lived in Knin and had already left by the time the Croatian army entered the city on May 5, 1995.

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The importance of nurturing the “culture of memory, for all of us present here, but specifically for the next generation”, was mentioned by the President of the Croatian Parliament Jandroković. In his speech he stated that “Operation Storm was the crucial, formative moment in the creation of our country, which made it possible for us to fully achieve the age-old Croatian dream of freedom, sovereignty and independence.”<sup>130</sup>

### 6.3. Conclusion

August 5 is a national holiday in Croatia and marks one of the most important events in Croatian history. It is celebrated as Victory and Homeland Thanksgiving Day and the Day of Croatian Defenders - the day when the City of Knin was liberated in the Storm military-police operation.<sup>131</sup> Operation Storm is publicly recognised as the most relevant operation during the 1990s war. It is a symbol of the Croatian victory in the war, and the City of Knin, where the official celebration each year takes place, is a symbol of that glorious victory.

128 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/oluja-prijedor-hrvatska-srbija-bih/32533964.html>

129 From the transcripts.

130 From the transcripts.

131 <https://www.sabor.hr/hr/o-saboru/povijest-saborovanja/vazni-datumi/5-kolovoza-dan-pobjede-i-domovinske-zahvalnosti-i-dan>



From 2012 to the present, the anniversaries of the armed military Operation Storm (*Oluja*) in Croatia - apart from the important but limited moments of progress in 2012 and 2020 - have not included the moves from the political elites necessary to create the celebration of the social memory of the events of August 1995 in a spirit of reconciliation, with an honest and open discussion of the causes and consequences of the crimes committed by the Croatian forces, and an attempt to open a space for critical reflection on the problematic vision of the Croatian political leadership in the 1990s on inter-ethnic relations and the future of Croatia.

The important speech given by PM Plenković in Knin in 2020 highlighted values and attitudes such as “reconciliation”, truth rooted in the facts, the innocence of Serbian victims, the magnanimity and humanity of the victors, the war crimes committed by the Croatian side, and reverence towards innocent victims from other nations.

Unfortunately, a commemoration – or, in the context of dominant official memory politics, a celebration – of Operation Storm, which would include an unequivocal, clear and public statement about the facts related to war crimes against the Serbian population and would call for an open discussion about the reasons and causes of their mass exodus with a *de facto*, and in some situations *de iure*, impossible return, did not occur in 2021 or 2022, with new steps, such as reading the names of all civilian victims at the official commemoration in Knin.



## 7. Conclusion

*“After more than twenty years, the name Aleksandra Zec still remains a dividing line in Croatian society. On one side, there are those who lament the judicial farce that left well-known killers, regardless of their confessions and material evidence, free. On the other side, there are those who use Aleksandra Zec solely to establish a distinction between ‘our’ and ‘their’ victims. In such a victimological dichotomy, ‘our victims’ receive special reverence, and ‘are immortalised in marble,’ while ‘their victims’ are left as media carcasses, subjected to constant rehashing, which the nationalistically lobotomised conscience cannot digest.”<sup>132</sup>*

This statement by theatre director Oliver Frlić about the social memory of Aleksandra Zec, twenty years after her murder, unfortunately still illustrates the dominant commemorative practices related to the wars of the nineties in Croatia. The commemorative rationale is thus based on the “victimological dichotomy” that divides civilian victims into “ours” and “theirs”, and consequently leaves “theirs” mostly forgotten.

The politics of memory in Croatia concerning the 1990s wars are deeply ethnocentric, and statements by high-ranking officials recognising the sufferings of and crimes against civilians from minority communities, committed by Croatian forces, are extremely rare.

Although in the last ten years messages related to coexistence, tolerance, and reconciliation have been heard during official commemorations, they are often expressed in a very general, imprecise, and abstract manner, without providing clearer and more specific details on how to achieve these goals. For example, the names of civilian victims who belong to the “Others” – in the Croatian context, Serbian civilian victims of the war specifically – are not mentioned during official commemorations. They are either discussed in a very general way (during commemorations in Knin and Vukovar) or not mentioned at all (during commemorations in Gospić and Okučani). There is no discussion of perpetrators, crimes, the political motivation behind certain crimes, or other harmful consequences of military operations. Moreover, in 2018, convicted war criminal Mirko Norac attended a supporting event at an official commemoration and was enthusiastically greeted by the minister delivering a speech on that occasion.

For this research, I have selected the following commemorations or events related to operations from 2012 to 2022: the commemoration of the Day of Remembrance for the Victims of the Homeland War and the Commemoration of the Victims of Vukovar and Škabrnja on November 18<sup>th</sup>; the commemoration of the day – December 7<sup>th</sup> – when Aleksandra, Marija, and Mihajlo Zec were killed; the commemoration of the military-police operation Medak Pocket on September 9<sup>th</sup>, the commemoration of the military-police operation Flash on May 1<sup>st</sup>; and the commemoration of the Victory Day, Homeland Thanksgiving, and Croatian Veterans Day on August 5<sup>th</sup>.

On the Day of Remembrance for the Victims of the Homeland War and the Commemoration of the Victims of Vukovar and Škabrnja, the main commemorative event is the “Column of Remembrance,” which has gathered tens of thousands of people since it was first organised in

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132 [https://snv.hr/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/2014\\_Aleksandra\\_Zec\\_knjiga\\_web.pdf](https://snv.hr/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/2014_Aleksandra_Zec_knjiga_web.pdf)



1998. Each year, on November 18, people come to Vukovar to pay tribute to the killed soldiers and victims of the three-month siege and fall of Vukovar, which happened in 1991. Although no speeches are planned during the commemoration, various high-ranking officials give statements to the media on that occasion. Symbolically, the presence of the highest officials of the Serbian Democratic Independent Party (SDIP/SDSS) is always noticed, recognised in the media and publicly visible. Over the past decade, this commemoration was marked, among other things, by an incident in 2013 when the state leadership was prevented from joining the Column of Remembrance, and by President Grabar-Kitarović's statement in 2017 that *"a lot of water will flow down the Danube before Croatia and Serbia can say they are friendly states"*; as well as by statements by Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, who sent positive messages about peace and a common future by emphasising the subsequent peaceful reintegration of Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Srijem, and supporting the commemoration organised by the Serbian community representatives on the eve of November 18<sup>th</sup>.

To preserve the memory of the murdered girl Aleksandra Zec, her father Mihajlo and mother Marija, alternative commemorations have been organised for many years by the civil society, drawing attention to the legal and political defeat of a society that has allowed the killers to remain free. Some high-ranking officials, exclusively those who are members of the SDIP/SDSS, participate in this commemoration, while the highest representatives of the ruling CDU/HDZ, or the SDP before them, have never attended commemorations. A significant positive contribution to the public recognition of this crime and expression of condolences to the victims has been made since 2020 by Zagreb Mayor Tomislav Tomašević, who in 2021 promised to erect a memorial to the murdered Zec family members. Since 2020, he and other representatives of the local and national authorities from the green-left coalition have attended this commemoration.

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Commemorations of the Medak Pocket and Flash operations, which took place in September 1993 and May 1995, leave the victims of killings, torture, burning, and destruction of the property of Croatian Serbs during and after these operations completely forgotten. War crimes and human rights violations that occurred during this period, for which Croatian forces were responsible, as evidenced by verdicts of domestic courts and witness reports documented by NGOs, remain completely silenced. Official commemorations held in Gospić and Okučani preserve the memory exclusively of military victories and achievements, and the geostrategic gains achieved through the liberation of the occupied territories. High-ranking state officials attending these commemorations express condolences only for members of Croatian forces who were killed during or as a result of these military operations. In addition to Mirko Norac's attendance in 2018, a particularly problematic incident was the bringing of high school students to the commemoration on their first day of school.

The Victory Day, Homeland Thanksgiving, and Croatian Veterans Day, which marks the end of the military-police Operation Storm in Croatia, is a day symbolising the victory (of all victories) of Croatia in the 1990s war. Speeches by the highest state officials are an integral part of the official protocol and commemorations. On this occasion, they extensively reflect on the importance and contribution of this operation in defining the overall narrative of the war. However, unlike with the shameful sides of the Medak Pocket and Flash operations, the shameful side of the Storm operation is somewhat more publicly visible; although during official speeches, the details, specifics, data and facts about that part of the story are mentioned



very circumspectly. Nevertheless, of all the events observed in this research, some positive progress in recognising the suffering of those who are not ethnic Croats can be seen during official commemorations of the Storm military-police operation; particularly since 2020, when a series of events during and after the anniversary have created positive progress in acknowledging the suffering of “the others.”



## IV. Decade of Remembrance in Serbia

### IV. Decenija sećanja u Srbiji

### IV. Dhjetëvjetëshi i përkujtimit në Serbi

by Isidora Stakić

Edited by Nataša Kandić

## 1. Introduction

As the historian Dubravka Stojanović points out: unlike, say, a summer storm, a war doesn't just *happen* – it needs a thorough ideological preparation.<sup>1</sup> In the Socialist Republic of Serbia, the ideological preparation for the wars of the 1990s started in the early 1980s. It continued throughout the decade by generating a feeling among ethnic Serbs of being deprived and threatened by other Yugoslav peoples, and by Yugoslavia itself.<sup>2</sup> Reinterpreting certain historical events, such as the First World War, was crucial for this ideological venture.<sup>3</sup> Various actors contributed to this atmosphere of resentment and fear, all belonging to the social elite: writers, historians, the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences, key players in the media, and eventually, politicians.

In January 1990, the League of Communists of Yugoslavia was dissolved, and the multi-party system was introduced in all the federal republics. Ethnic-nationalist parties seized power. The secession of the Yugoslav republics triggered armed conflicts. While the war in Slovenia ended in 10 days, the wars in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo lasted for years, and marked the last decade of the 20th century. At least 130,000 people were killed in the Yugoslav Wars, while over four million became refugees or internally displaced persons. Countless war crimes were committed, many of which have never been prosecuted. In the Bosnian town of Srebrenica, Bosnian Serb forces committed genocide against the Bosniak population – the first crime of genocide in Europe since the Second World War.

Serbia was involved in the wars in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo. While the trial of Slobodan Milošević remained unfinished due to the defendant's death, other trials concluded that Serbia was implicated in the wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina through giving financial assistance to Serb forces, supplying weapons, dispatching paramilitaries, paying pensions, salaries and benefits to members of the VRS directly from Belgrade, the indirect and direct participation of the armed forces of the FRY in military operations, etc.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the final IRMCT judgment established that the highest representatives of the intelligence service of the Republic of Serbia were part of a joint criminal enterprise whose aim was ethnic cleansing, or the permanent removal of the non-Serb population from territories under the control of Ser-

1 Stojanović, Dubravka (2022) "Dissolution of Yugoslavia: Ideological Preparation for War", lecture given at the Humanitarian Law Center's *Regional School of Transitional Justice* on December 6, 2021.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid, see also: Stojanović, Dubravka (2017) *Populism the Serbian Way*, Belgrade: Peščanik, pp. 139-152.

4 See, for example: ICTY (2007) *Prosecutor vs. Milan Martić*, Case No. IT-95-11, Trial Chamber Judgment; ICJ (2007) *Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Bosnia and Herzegovina v. Serbia and Montenegro)*; IRMCT (2023) *Prosecutor vs. Jovica Stanišić and Franko Simatović*, Case No. MICT-15-96-A, Appeals Chamber Judgment.



bian forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia. Stanišić and Simatović were found guilty for the crimes committed by members of paramilitary and special units under their control.<sup>5</sup>

War also took place on the territory of the Republic of Serbia. Besides the war in Kosovo, which was under Serbia's sovereignty at the time, and the NATO bombing of the FRY, a number of crimes and violations of human rights related to the 1990s wars were committed on Serbian territory: after the fall of Vukovar in 1991, several thousands of captured members of the Croatian forces and civilians were detained in camps in Sremska Mitrovica, Begejci, Stajičevo, Aleksinac and Niš, where they were exposed to torture;<sup>6</sup> from 1995 to 1996, hundreds of Muslim refugees from eastern Bosnia were confined in camps in Šiljivovica and Mitrovo Polje and subjected to starvation, sexual violence, etc;<sup>7</sup> after the Croatian military operations "Flash" and "Storm", Serbian police forcefully mobilised thousands of Serbian refugees and handed them over to the RS and RSK military, police and paramilitary units;<sup>8</sup> Croats from Vojvodina<sup>9</sup> and Bosniaks from Sandžak<sup>10</sup> were subjected to organised and continuous campaign of violence, intimidation and pressure to leave Serbia; in order to cover up the evidence of crimes committed during the Kosovo war, the bodies of 948 killed Albanians were transported to Serbia and buried in mass graves on five locations, in an operation that was planned at the highest political level.<sup>11</sup>

During the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the official memory politics in Serbia did not focus on the events of the 1990s, but mostly revolved around the revisionism regarding the Second World War and Socialist Yugoslavia (e.g. rehabilitation of Chetniks, the erasure of the emancipatory legacies of the SFRJ and NOB from all public discourses and spaces, etc.).<sup>12</sup> Although the 1990s were not at the centre of the official memory politics of that time, certain forms of denial were widely present, most prominently the denial of the genocide in Srebrenica, the externalisation of responsibility for crimes to paramilitaries, the narrative that Serbia did not participate in the wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and so on.

Since the arrival of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) to power in 2012, the 1990s wars have become the main topic of the Government's memory work. Historian Jelena Đureinović refers to the new direction taken in the politics of remembrance as the "populist discourse of the return

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5 IRMCT (2023) *Prosecutor vs. Jovica Stanišić and Franko Simatović*, Case No. MICT-15-96-A, Appeals Chamber Judgment.

6 Kolarić, Jovana (2020) *Dossier: Camps for Croats in Serbia*, Belgrade: HLC. Available at: [http://hlc-rdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Dosije\\_Logori\\_za\\_Hrvate\\_u\\_Srbiji-eng.pdf](http://hlc-rdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Dosije_Logori_za_Hrvate_u_Srbiji-eng.pdf)

7 Žanić, Ivana (2016) *Dossier: Šiljivovica and Mitrovo Polje*, Belgrade: HLC. Available at: [https://www.hlc-rdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Dosije\\_Sljivovica\\_i\\_Mitrovo\\_polje\\_eng.pdf](https://www.hlc-rdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Dosije_Sljivovica_i_Mitrovo_polje_eng.pdf)

8 Kolarić, Jovana (2019) *Dossier: Forcible Mobilisation of Refugees*, Belgrade: HLC. Available at: [https://www.hlc-rdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Dossier\\_Forcible\\_Mobilisation\\_of\\_Refugees.pdf](https://www.hlc-rdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Dossier_Forcible_Mobilisation_of_Refugees.pdf)

9 Kolarić, Jovana (2019) *Dossier: Crimes against Croats in Vojvodina*, Belgrade: HLC. Available at: [https://www.hlc-rdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Dossier\\_Crimes\\_against\\_Croats\\_in\\_Vojvodina.pdf](https://www.hlc-rdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Dossier_Crimes_against_Croats_in_Vojvodina.pdf)

10 HLC (2022) *Digitalna arhivska kolekcija: Zločini u Sandžaku devedesetih godina*, Belgrade: HLC. Available at: <https://zonaneodgovornosti.net/digitalne-kolekcije/zlocini-u-sandzaku-devedesetih-godina/>

11 Stjepanović, Nemanja (2017) *Dossier: The cover-up of evidence of crimes during the war in Kosovo: THE CONCEALMENT OF BODIES OPERATION*, Belgrade: HLC. Available at: [https://www.hlc-rdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Dosije\\_OPERACIJA\\_SKRIVANJA\\_TELA\\_eng.pdf](https://www.hlc-rdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Dosije_OPERACIJA_SKRIVANJA_TELA_eng.pdf)

12 Đureinović, Jelena (2021) *Memory Politics of the 1990s Wars in Serbia: Historical Revisionism and Challenges of Memory Activism*, Belgrade: Humanitarian Law Center, available at: [https://www.hlc-rdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Politika\\_secanja\\_en.pdf](https://www.hlc-rdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Politika_secanja_en.pdf), p. 12.



of national pride”.<sup>13</sup> Thanks to the SNS and their coalition partners – or so the dominant narrative claims – Serbs can finally remember their victims and heroes with pride. The discourse of the return of national pride is grounded in the victimhood-heroism dichotomy, which considers Serbia and Serbs as either victims or heroes, and leaves no space for a critical assessment of the recent past.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, it designates all the wars that Serbia was involved in as Serbian liberation wars – a concept that exists officially in the Government’s policies.<sup>15</sup>

In today’s Serbia, a number of state institutions, as well as public services such as the public broadcaster RTS, are involved in memory work. The central and most prominent memory actor is the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić. As regards the institutions, the politics of remembrance is within the competence of several ministries, primarily those concerned with culture, education, information, and veterans’ issues, as well as certain inter-ministerial bodies, such as the Board for the Preservation of the Traditions of the Liberation Wars of Serbia, which is the official organiser of state commemorations and responsible for their programme. It is important to note that the security institutions, namely the ministries of defence and internal affairs, are also prominent memory actors.

Official memory politics are financed from the state and municipal budgets and, as such, are liable to public scrutiny.

## 1.1. Methodology

This chapter analyses the official memorialisation in Serbia of five selected events from the 1990s wars, focusing on state-organised commemorations or, in the case of Srebrenica, their absence. The analysis examines whether and how official memory politics have changed over the last ten years, referencing earlier periods in some instances. The five selected events are (chronologically) the crime in Štrpci, the Srebrenica genocide, Operation “Storm”, the beginning of the NATO bombing of the FRY, and the Battle of Košare.

Operation “Storm” and the beginning of the NATO Bombing are the two events from the 1990s wars that have been commemorated with central-state commemorations organised at town squares and other outdoor venues as large popular gatherings. The highest state and Church representatives speak at these events each year, while the RTS public media service provides nationwide broadcasts. Over the last five years, the Battle of Košare has also been commemorated through state-organised commemorative cultural event, which take place in Belgrade, in indoor venues, and with the participation of ministers and other officials. No other event from the 1990s is commemorated in Serbia at a high political level. The Municipal Government of Prijepolje commemorates the crime in Štrpci, which is also a state ceremony, albeit only on the local level. This event has been selected for analysis as a rare example of the official remembrance of victims from ethnic communities other than Serb. Lastly, the genocide in Srebrenica, which the Serbian state has never commemorated, has been chosen as an event that is widely present in the official discourse, despite the absence of commemorative ceremonies.

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13 Ibid, p. 5.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid, p. 22.



This chapter (except in the case of Srebrenica) focuses on annual commemorations, and does not deal in detail with other forms and fields of memory work, such as (formal) education, publishing, cultural production, usage of new media, etc. The chapter also does not analyse the media as an (independent) memory actor, but uses media texts – mainly those that report about official statements and speeches – as a primary source of data. The analysis includes a variety of media texts from dailies, weeklies, news agencies, and internet portals of media outlets, including RTS, RTV, *Politika*, *Danas*, *Večernje novosti*, *NIN*, *Vreme*, *Blic*, *Kurir*, *Beta*, *Tanjug*, etc. Apart from the media reports, the analysis relies heavily on the transcripts of commemorative speeches as a primary source of data.

I use critical discourse analysis (CDA) to analyse speeches, statements and other texts within the given socio-political context. Discourse analysis is not only a qualitative method in social research, but also a theoretical perspective that treats language as an element of material social processes.<sup>16</sup> CDA places particular importance on the relations between language, power, history and ideology, and could be defined as “fundamentally interested in analysing both opaque and transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power, and control as manifested in language”.<sup>17</sup> By using CDA, this chapter will try to uncover how certain power relations are reflected in and reproduced through the official politics of remembrance.

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<sup>16</sup> Fairclough, Norman (2001) “Critical discourse analysis as a method in social scientific research”, in Wodak, R. and Meyer, M. (ed.) *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*. London: Sage Publications.

<sup>17</sup> Wodak, Ruth and de Cillia, Rudolf (2006) “Politics and Language: Overview”, in Brown, K. (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Language & Linguistics*, Amsterdam: Elsevier.



## 2. Crime in Štrpci

### 2.1. Introduction

On the morning of February 27, 1993, train no. 671 of the Yugoslav Railway on the Belgrade-Bar route departed from Belgrade railway station. In the afternoon, a group of 20 armed members of the Bosnian Serb forces, headed by Milan Lukić, stormed into the room at Štrpci railway station (BiH) and ordered the train dispatcher with threats to stop the train. Some of the armed group members surrounded the train, while others got into the carriages and began to identify the passengers. After the identification process, they took twenty non-Serb men and boys off the train, drove them to a village in Višegrad Municipality and robbed and beat them, before killing them on the bank of River Drina. Among the abducted passengers were 19 citizens of the FRY, 18 Bosniaks and one Croat, and one unidentified person.

So far, 14 people have been convicted of this crime before the courts in Montenegro, BiH, and Serbia. Despite 30 years passing, only two of the verdicts are final: Nebojša Ranisavljević, commander of a volunteer squad that was part of the Intervention Platoon of the Višegrad Brigade of the VRS, was sentenced before the Higher Court in Bijelo Polje (Montenegro) to 15 years in prison, and Mićo Jovičić, member of the Višegrad Brigade, who was tried before the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, pleaded guilty and was sentenced to five years in prison.<sup>18</sup> Milan Lukić, the commander of the “Avengers” (“Osvetnici”) unit that committed the crime, was convicted before the ICTY for other crimes and is currently serving a life sentence in Estonia. On October 21, 2022, the Court of BiH acquitted the defendant Luka Dragičević, commander of the Višegrad Brigade of the VRS, because the Prosecutor’s Office failed to prove his guilt in the Štrpci Case. This verdict is still not final.

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To date, the mortal remains of only four victims have been found. The families of the victims, most of whom are citizens of Serbia, still have not obtained the status of family members of civilian victims of war.<sup>19</sup> Among other reasons, victims of the crime in Štrpci are not recognised by the Republic of Serbia as civilian victims because they were killed on the territory of another country.

This crime is commemorated officially, which is a rare example of Serbian institutions marking the anniversaries of the suffering of victims who were not ethnic Serbs. However, the memorial ceremonies are organised at the municipal level, without the participation of the highest state officials. The only other war crime against non-Serb civilians that is officially memorialised in Serbia, also locally, is the crime against Bosniak civilians from Sjeverin (Priboj Municipality).

### 2.2. Commemorative Practices

In 2009, the local Government in Prijepolje (Serbia) erected a memorial dedicated to the victims of the Štrpci Crime. The white marble monument, shaped like a traditional Muslim tombstone with a metal construction above it symbolically representing railways, is located next to the Old

<sup>18</sup> HLC (2022) *Digitalna arhivska kolekcija: Zločini u Sandžaku devedesetih godina*, Belgrade: HLC. Available at: <https://zonaneodgovornosti.net/digitalne-kolekcije/zlocini-u-sandzaku-devedesetih-godina/>

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.





Bridge on Lim River, in the town of Prijepolje. The monument has a prominent sign that reads: “Whoever in this country forgets February 27, 1993, and Štrpci Station, has given up on the future”. However, the memorial plaque displays only the names of the nine victims who were residents of Prijepolje. In 2018, the Polimlje Centre for the Protection of Human Rights and Tolerance, with the support of 50 NGOs and individuals, submitted a request to the Municipality of Prijepolje to add the names of other victims to the monument, with the explanation that “a victim is a victim, regardless of his or her identity, origin, and residence”.<sup>20</sup> This request has not been met so far.

Each year, on February 27, the local government in Prijepolje organises a commemoration that takes place in front of the memorial. The programme of this ceremony is similar each year, including speeches by local and state officials, and the laying of wreaths on the monument. At the same occasion, the President of the Municipality holds a reception for the victims’ families and awards them modest financial support from the municipal budget. Although the commemoration in Prijepolje takes place each year regardless of the party affiliation of local officials, their speeches slightly differ. Municipality presidents from the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) speak about the killed Bosniaks primarily as “fellow citizens” and “innocent victims”. They explicitly condemn the crime, demand effective prosecution of suspects and indictees, and stress the duty to remember. For example, Dragoljub Zindović (SNS), who was the President of the Municipality from 2009 to 2012 and from 2016 to 2020, stated in 2018:

*Impunity for crimes and failure to find the suspects burdens the conscience of all honest and good-hearted citizens, especially when innocent people suffer, and even more so if the crimes are motivated by nationalism of any kind.<sup>21</sup>*

In a similar tone, the current President of Prijepolje Municipality, Drago Popović, who is also an SNS member, stated in 2023:

*We deeply regret that this happened to our fellow citizens, who perished because of their names. Gathering together every February 27 is a minimal consolation for the families of the innocent abducted victims. [...] The names written on this memorial are our permanent reminder of the times of conflict, wars and suffering in the territory of the former Yugoslavia. Our duty, as well as the duty of all future generations, is and must be to preserve the memory of innocent victims. What we all have to do together is, by talking about this crime, to strengthen unity and cooperation, and prevent every form of evil.<sup>22</sup>*

Emir Hašimbegović from the Sandžak Democratic Party, who was the President of Prijepolje Municipality from 2012 to 2016, was more critical of the state institutions in his speeches at the commemorations. That could be partially explained by the fact that his party did not participate in the Government on the national level. In 2013, Hašimbegović criticised the Republic of Serbia

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20 Polimlje Centre for the Protection of Human Rights and Tolerance (2018) *Request to the Municipality of Prijepolje*, available at: <https://nasepravo.org/2018/02/27/centar-za-zastitu-ljudskih-prava-i-tleranciju-polimlje-podnio-zahtjev-opstini-prijepolje/>

21 Transcript 2018.

22 RTV Novi Pazar (2023) *Delegacija SDP na obeležavanju 30 godina od zločina u Štrpcima*, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CHH9adP6cnk>



for financially supporting the ICTY indictees, while doing nothing to assist the families of the Štrpci victims.

*To overcome the dark period of the 1990s, Serbia must face the truth and, above all, the judgments of the competent courts. The state is also obliged to provide compensation to the families of the victims of the Štrpci Crime,*<sup>23</sup> said Hašimbegović.

In parallel with the commemorations held by the Prijepolje Municipality, the Bosniak National Council, the Bosniak Cultural Community and the Islamic Community in Serbia jointly organise separate commemorative events in the Cultural Centre of Prijepolje. These cultural events, entitled “Štrpci without a Grave” (“Štrpci bez mezara”), are characterised by a more religious and ethnic discourse than the official municipal commemorations. Regular speakers are Samir Tandir, the President of the Bosniak National Council, and Muamer Zukorlić (until he died in 2021), Mufti, and the founder of the Justice and Reconciliation Party, formerly known as the Bosniak Democratic Union. Besides these two, the commemorative events have featured speeches by other muftis from Serbia and BiH, representatives of the Liberal Democratic Party and the League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina, and, from 2018, representatives of the Serbian Government.

Samir Tandir each year points out the Bosniak community’s demands of the Serbian state institutions: the arrest and prosecution of the the perpetrators, finding the mortal remains of the Štrpci victims, and naming the square in front of the Prijepolje Cultural Centre “The Square of those Abducted in Štrpci”. He insists that responsible for the crime are not only the enactors, but also the “highest state, military, political and police leadership [who] knew everything, but did nothing to prevent the crime”.<sup>24</sup>

Mufti Zukorlić, on the other hand, would talk about the crime in Štrpci as part of the long-term suffering of Bosniaks in the Balkans, connecting it with other ethnically motivated crimes against Muslims. He would point out that the Bosniak community must neither forget nor seek revenge, but strive for justice, remembrance, and the preservation of their ethnic and religious identity. In 2016, which was an election year in Serbia, part of Zukorlić’s speech resembled a political campaign, and was directed against his political rivals among the Bosniak parties:

*Brothers and sisters, unfortunately, those responsible in the state of Serbia do not have sufficient awareness, nor are they up to their responsibilities and this challenge, and pro-Belgrade politicians in Sandžak – the ruling pro-Belgrade politicians in Sandžak –, help them in this. [...] They are trying to give these people anaesthetics, analgesics, so that we don’t feel pain, the pain that is torturing us. [...] We must not submit to this anaesthesia! We cannot agree that the policies offered us lead us to the future, to a European Sandžak, to a European future, whilst at the same time exhibiting the highest immorality towards such events and the victims.*<sup>25</sup>

23 FoNet (2013) “Ugljanin: Da se zločin u Štrpcu nikad ne ponovi”, *Blic*, 27 February 2013, available at: <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/ugljanin-da-se-zlocin-u-strpcu-nikad-ne-ponovi/zlmcnvg>

24 Transcript 2017.

25 Transcript 2016.



After the change of the local Government in Prijepolje in 2016, relations between the organisers of the “Štrpci without a Grave” commemorative events and the local authorities improved, and the municipal officials started participating in those events. After the commemorative event in the Cultural Centre, all the participants would go for a commemorative walk together to the memorial of the Štrpci victims, where the municipal officials would give speeches followed by a religious ceremony. In 2018, officials of the Government of the Republic of Serbia, namely State Secretaries and Ministers, also started participating in the cultural events. It is noticeable that the officials from the national Government who are part of the Štrpci commemorations are members of the Bosniak community, with the exception of Tomislav Žigmanov, the current Minister for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue, who spoke at the cultural event in 2023, and who is a member of the Croatian community.

*As the Government and Ministry, we will continue to do our best to fight against intolerance, hatred, against all those forms of evil that are at the root of what happened in Štrpci 30 years ago. Likewise, we will advocate even more strongly for the affirmation of fundamental values, the inviolability of the human dignity of every person,* Žigmanov said.<sup>26</sup>

Apart from the commemorative activities that take place in Prijepolje, in 2016, the Municipality of New Belgrade unveiled a memorial plaque dedicated to Tomo Buzov, one of the victims of the Štrpci Crime, on the building in which he had lived with his family as a retired JNA officer. On February 27, 1993, he boarded train no. 671, planning to visit his son, who was doing his military service in Podgorica (Montenegro) at the time. According to some testimonies,<sup>27</sup> Buzov, a Croat, rose up against taking passengers off the train at Štrpci Station – a gesture which has been recognised as heroic by many, including the New Belgrade local authorities. The President of the Municipality, Aleksandar Šapić (the current mayor of Belgrade), unveiled the memorial plaque together with Tomo Buzov’s grandson and, on that occasion, pointed out:

*Captain Tomo Buzov deserves much more, because his action of more than 20 years ago was not usual in those unfortunate years. He would probably have been with us here today, if he had not tried to prevent something that could not be prevented.*<sup>28</sup>

According to the media reports,<sup>29</sup> the President of the Municipality did not mention the circumstances of the Crime in Štrpci: he avoided mentioning the perpetrators, the reason why passengers were taken off the train and killed, as well as the fact that the Republic of Serbia refuses to grant the status of civilian victims of war to the victims from Štrpci. Using phrases such as “the

26 SANA (2023) “BNV organiziralo komemorativnu akademiju i mimohod šutnje u povodu 30 godina zločina u Štrpcima”, Sandžak PRESS, 27 February 2023. Available at: <https://sandzakpress.net/bnv-organiziralo-komemorativnu-akademiju-i-mimohod-sutnje-u-povodu-30-godina-zlocina-u-strpcima/>

27 Anastasijević, Dejan (2016) “Sudbina kapetana Buzova”, Vreme, 3 March 2016, available at: <https://www.vreme.com/vreme/sudbina-kapetana-buzova/>

28 RTV (2016) “Spomen ploča Tomi Buzovu, žrtvi zločina u Štrpcima”, RTV, 20 April 2016, available at: [https://rtv.rs/sr\\_lat/drustvo/spomen-ploca-tomi-buzovu-zrtvi-zlocina-u-strpcima\\_711228.html](https://rtv.rs/sr_lat/drustvo/spomen-ploca-tomi-buzovu-zrtvi-zlocina-u-strpcima_711228.html)

29 Ibid, see also: D.R. (2016) “OMAZ HRABROM OFICIRU JNA Na Novom Beogradu otkrivena spomen ploča Tomu Buzovu”, Blic, April 20 2016, available at: <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/beograd/omaz-hrabrom-oficiru-jna-na-novom-beogradu-otkrivena-spomen-ploca-tomu-buzovu/x31vbq8>; Tanjug (2016) “Otkrivena spomen ploča velikom čoveku i heroju!”, Alo!, April 20 2016, available at: <https://www.alo.rs/vesti/drustvo/otkrivena-spomen-ploca-velikom-coveku-i-heroju-fo-to/46566/vest>



unfortunate years” and “something that could not be prevented”, Šapčić presented this crime as something similar to a natural disaster.

In December 2022, unknown perpetrators took down the memorial plaque dedicated to Tomo Buzov from his building in New Belgrade.<sup>30</sup> There were no official reactions to this act, but in April 2023, at the initiative of Tomo Buzov’s neighbours, the authorities of the New Belgrade Municipality installed a new memorial plaque.<sup>31</sup>

The only annual commemoration of the Štrpci Crime in Belgrade is the street performance by Women in Black in which other NGOs and individuals take part each year on February 27 at 3:48 pm – the exact time when train no. 671 was stopped at Štrpci Station.

Serbian media, including the national broadcaster RTS, regularly report on the anniversary of the Štrpci Crime and the related court proceedings. However, the perpetrators are usually described as a paramilitary unit, while the fact that most of them were members of the VRS is disregarded. Furthermore, the media outlets generally do not deal with the involvement of the institutions of the Republic of Serbia in this crime - for instance, the fact that the police officers from Užice (Serbia) who patrolled train no. 671 had patrol instructions to allow the VRS members at Štrpci Station to identify passengers and evacuate VRS conscripts. On the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the crime, RTS broadcast a 35-minute documentary programme that addressed the majority of commonly disregarded facts about the responsibility and circumstances of this crime.<sup>32</sup> This opens a small space for a more inclusive memory culture.

### 2.3. Conclusion

The annual commemorations of the crime in Štrpci take place on the local level, in Prijepolje Municipality. Although from 2018 the representatives of Serbia’s Government have started participating in the ceremonies, it is striking that the participants from the national government are exclusively Bosniaks and Croats.

The official remembrance of the Štrpci victims does not essentially call into question the dominant victimhood-heroism dichotomy. First, the remembrance is confined to the local community and does not resonate in the memory work of the crucial memory actors on the national level. Second, even when the national media thematise the Štrpci Crime, the responsibility of the state institutions and the broader context of the war are rarely discussed. Nevertheless, the memorialisation of this crime remains a rare positive case in which non-Serb victims are officially remembered.

30 Telegraf (2023) “Skinuta spomen-ploča Tomu Buzovu na Novom Beogradu: Ubijen jer je hteo da zaštiti otete putnike iz voza za Bar”, *Telegraf*, 24 February 2023, available at: <https://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/beograd/3635874-skinuta-spomen-ploca-tomu-buzovu>

31 Radio Free Europe (2023) “Bio je naš heroj: Komšije u Beogradu vratile spomen-ploču ubijenom u Štrpcima”, *RSE*, 25 April 2023. Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/tomo-buzov-spomen-ploca-beograd/32378616.html>

32 Kostić, Stevan (2023) “Oko magazin: Otmica u stanici Štrpci, mrak između dva tunela”, *RTS*, February 27 2023, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tbcuBqU7Is>



## 3. Srebrenica

### 3.1. Introduction

The town of Srebrenica, in which about 40,000 displaced persons from all over eastern Bosnia had taken shelter since the beginning of the Bosnian war, was declared a “protected zone” by the UN Security Council on April 16, 1993.

On March 8, 1995, the President of Republika Srpska, Radovan Karadžić, signed Directive No. 7, ordering the creation of “an unbearable situation of total insecurity with no further hope of survival or life for the local inhabitants of Srebrenica and Žepa”.<sup>33</sup> On July 6 the Bosnian Serb forces launched an attack on the “protected zone” of Srebrenica, under the VRS General Ratko Mladić’s command.

From July 11 to around July 16, 1995, Serb forces killed around 8,000 Bosnian Muslims from Srebrenica, men and boys who were captured or had surrendered. The shootings took place at several locations in the municipalities of Srebrenica, Bratunac and Zvornik. About 25,000 women, children, and elderly men were displaced from this part of eastern Bosnia.

Sixteen people have been convicted of crimes in Srebrenica before the ICTY, seven of them for genocide. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) acted on a lawsuit filed by BiH against Serbia and Montenegro for genocide, and ruled, on February 26, 2007, that Serbia had not, through its institutions, committed genocide in Srebrenica, but was responsible for the violation of the Genocide Convention, because it had not done everything in its power to prevent the genocide, and afterwards had not done enough to prosecute those responsible for this crime. Before the Court of BiH, 25 people have been convicted for crimes in Srebrenica, 13 of them for genocide. Before the High Court in Belgrade, no one has been tried for genocide. Five people were convicted of killing six civilians in Trnovo in mid-July 1995, but in the verdict issued in April 2007, the Court omitted that those six civilians had been brought from Srebrenica.

Serbian state institutions do not commemorate Srebrenica victims, nor have any government representatives ever participated in any such commemorations organised by the civil society. However, Srebrenica is a frequent topic in the Serbian public discourse. Over the past 28 years, the official discourse in Serbia about the Srebrenica genocide has gone through several phases, all of which have presented a common feature: denial.

Unlike the other sections in this chapter, this section analyses the general official discourse on the topic of Srebrenica and, therefore, it is not structured chronologically around commemorative events, but according to the specific forms of denial.

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33 VRS Main Staff (1995) *Directive No. 7*, March 17 1995.



### 3.2. Commemorative Practices

Sociologist Stanley Cohen<sup>34</sup> distinguishes between three levels of denial: *literal denial* – a denial of the facts themselves; *interpretative denial* – a rejection of a specific interpretation of an event - for example, of the legal description of an act, but also the rejection of responsibility for an act; and *implicative denial*, which encompasses a whole range of narrative strategies, from invoking the principle of necessity, or shifting blame to the victim, to attempts to discredit those who make accusations of atrocities. Building upon Cohen's framework, I distinguish here between five forms of denial related to Srebrenica that have been present in the Serbian public sphere.

The first and most heinous is the denial that a crime happened at all in Srebrenica in July 1995. After 28 years, during which vast volumes of evidence have been collected and presented in courts, denying that Srebrenica was a crime goes against all the evidence. What is more, going one step further and glorifying those responsible for the massacre who have been convicted of genocide conveys the message that they did nothing criminal or immoral, thus implying that Srebrenica was not a crime.

During the first decade of this century, the current President of Serbia, who at the time was an MP of the Serbian Radical Party, an extreme-right parliamentary party, expressed support for Mladić and Karadžić on various occasions. For example, in 2007, he participated in a street performance where he hung up posters resembling a regular street sign, which read "Ratko Mladić Boulevard".<sup>35</sup> In 2008, after the arrest of Radovan Karadžić, Vučić protested in the streets of Belgrade together with hundreds of other right-wingers. He told the media that Karadžić's arrest had been "horrible news" and that Serbia was "on the verge of extinction".<sup>36</sup>

As Prime Minister and then President of Serbia, Vučić had to tone down his support for convicted war criminals, in order to build an image of a moderate politician. Nonetheless, his ministers and other associates took over from him with such expressions of support - most notably, the former Minister of Defence and Minister of Internal Affairs, Aleksandar Vulin, who later became the Director of the Serbian Intelligence Agency (BIA), but resigned from that position in November 2023 after the United States placed him on the sanctions list. Vulin has often praised Ratko Mladić, calling his conviction "a revenge",<sup>37</sup> and "a perversion of justice".<sup>38</sup> On November 3, 2021, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, headed by Vulin, banned a gathering which aimed to remove the mural of Ratko Mladić from a wall in the centre of Belgrade. Hence it appears the mural has

34 Cohen, Stanley (2003) *Stanje poricanja: znati za zlodela i patnje*, Belgrade: Samizdat B92.

35 Šekularac, Ivana (2007) "Mladić's Serbian supporters in new act of defiance", *Reuters*, May 26 2007, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSHAM652082>

36 Dedeić, Siniša (2011) "Karadžić i Mladić u ogledalu političara ovdašnjih", *Istinomer*, May 3 2011, available at: <https://www.istinomer.rs/analize/karadzic-i-mladic-u-ogledalu-politicara-ovdasnjih/>

37 Tanjug, FoNet (2021) "Odjeci presude generalu Mladiću", *The Public Broadcasting Service of Vojvodina*, June 8 2021, available at: [https://www.rtv.rs/sr\\_lat/hronika/odjeci-presude-ratku-mladicu\\_1246929.html](https://www.rtv.rs/sr_lat/hronika/odjeci-presude-ratku-mladicu_1246929.html)

38 Ibid.



been granted state protection. Other politicians close to the Serbian President, such as the MP Vladimir Đukanović, openly celebrate Mladić as a national hero.<sup>39</sup>

The second and most common form of Srebrenica denial is the denial of its legal description, namely genocide. This form of denial began after the first final verdict for genocide in Srebrenica, which found Radislav Krstić guilty, among other things, of aiding and abetting genocide.

Today, as over the past decade, most Serbian state officials recognise that a “horrible crime” was committed in Srebrenica, but resolutely deny its legal qualification.<sup>40</sup> Serbian schools and the mainstream media generally follow this ideological line. History textbooks dedicate little space to the 1990s wars, and disproportionately less attention to the crimes committed by the Serbian forces than to those committed against Serbs.<sup>41</sup> One high school textbook discusses what happened in Srebrenica in July 1995, calling it a war crime and crime against humanity, and mentioning that the ICTY “qualified this crime as genocide but did not link Serbia to this event”.<sup>42</sup>

Genocide denial is often justified under the false premise that the official recognition of genocide in Srebrenica would mean that Serbian people have been declared “genocidal”,<sup>43</sup> as well as that any conviction or acknowledgement of such a legal qualification would bring harm to Serbs. Just before the final verdict pronouncement against Ratko Mladić, on June 8, 2021, the President of Serbia, Alexander Vučić, stated that “the Serbian people are facing a difficult situation”,<sup>44</sup> and when in June and July 2021 the parliaments of Montenegro and Kosovo adopted resolutions defining the Srebrenica massacre as genocide, he dubbed it “political abuse of Serbs”.<sup>45</sup> Current government officials, like those previous to them, continue to emphasise the need to prevent the alleged imposition of collective guilt on Serbs, offering no explanation as to who is imposing that guilt. The mainstream media, which are mostly government-controlled, manage to keep that fictional threat alive and well.

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The denial of the legal description is sometimes linked to contestations of the number of Srebrenica victims. It should be noted that attempts to dispute the number of Srebrenica victims are much older than the denial of genocide: they started as early as in July 1995. An article in the weekly *NIN* of July 21 1995, titled “Ghost Town”, points out: “Bosnian Serb spokesman Jovan

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39 Stojanović, Milica (2019) “Hague Prosecutor Criticises Serbian Politicians for Genocide Denial”, *Balkan Insight*, July 17, 2019, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/07/17/hague-prosecutor-criticises-serbian-politicians-for-genocide-denial/>

40 See, for example: Beta (2019) “Vučić: U Srebrenici se dogodio strašan zločin”, *Danas*, 14 July 2019, available at: <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-u-srebrenici-se-dogodio-straasan-zlocin/>; Sebastian, Tim (2018) “Ana Brnabić: ‘U Srebrenici nije bio genocid’”, *DW*, 15 November 2018, available at: <https://www.dw.com/bs/ana-brnabic/C4%87-u-srebrenici-nije-bio-genocid/a-46294469>

41 Đureinović, Jelena & Jovanović, Rodoljub (2020) *The 1990s Wars in Former Yugoslavia in History Education*, Belgrade: Humanitarian Law Center, available at: <http://www.hlc-rdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Policy-paper-The-1990s-Wars-in-Former-Yugoslavia-in-History-Education.pdf>, p. 24.

42 Ibid.

43 Mondo (2019) “Vučić: Srebrenica je strašan zločin, ne smemo zaboraviti”, *Mondo*, 14 July 2019, available at: <https://mondo.rs/info/Srbija/a1203262/Vucic-o-Srebrenici-i-genocidu.html>

44 Diković, Jelena (2021) “Vladimir Vukčević: Očekujem doživotnu za Mladića”, *Danas*, 5 June 2021, available at: <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/vladimir-vukcevic-ocekujem-doivotnu-za-mladica/>

45 Srna (2021) “Vučić o usvajanju Rezolucija o Srebrenici u Podgorici i Prištini: Političko izživljavanje nad Srbima biće nastavljeno”, *Blic*, 7 July 2021, available at: <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-o-usvajanju-rezolucija-o-srebrenici-u-podgorici-i-pristini-politicko/3qbbjnw>



Zametica has denied the accusations of executions. He has stated that deaths are a normal thing in war and that the numbers of the missing are exaggerated, because the initial estimates of the population have been exaggerated”.<sup>46</sup> Denying the number of victims has been a recurrent topic in the Serbian public discourse over the past 28 years.

The third form of denial is the denial of state responsibility or of any connection of the Serbian state with the Srebrenica genocide. As a rule, it goes hand in hand with a denial of the legal description, but the association is ideological rather than related to the structure of the arguments. Although the denial of state responsibility has been frequent over the past decades, two events have been particularly paradigmatic of this type of denial.

On June 1, 2005, at the trial of Slobodan Milošević before the ICTY, a video made in July 1995 in Godinjske Bare, near Trnovo (BiH), was played, showing members of the “Scorpions” (“Škorpioni”) unit shooting six captured civilians from Srebrenica, two of whom were minors. Thanks to the Humanitarian Law Center (HLC), the video was shown on B92 television, which confronted the Serbian public with the truth about crimes committed during the Bosnian war. Although the “Scorpions” were a unit under the control of the State Security Service of Serbia, the authorities, after the video was released, denied any connection with the state institutions. The majority of politicians, both from the government and the opposition, argued that linking “Scorpions” with the institutions of Serbia would impose guilt on the entire Serbian people for crimes committed by individuals, and that that should be prevented. The police arrested five members of the “Scorpions” within two days, and the Court convicted them of war crimes. However, despite sound evidence, namely the testimonies of victims’ family members, the verdict did not establish the connection between this crime and the Srebrenica genocide.

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The second event is the ICJ judgment of February 26, 2007, on the lawsuit of BiH against Serbia and Montenegro for genocide, which found that the massacre in Srebrenica was a genocide committed by the Bosnian Serb forces. Furthermore, it was found that there were strong political, military and financial ties between the FRY, on the one hand, and the Republika Srpska and VRS, on the other. However, the Court held that the subjects who committed the genocide did not have the status of organs of the FRY, and that the genocide was not committed by the order or under the control of the FRY. Nevertheless, the ICJ ruled that “the Respondent has not shown that it took any initiative to prevent what happened [...] that the organs of the Respondent did nothing to prevent the Srebrenica massacres, claiming that they were powerless to do so, which hardly tallies with their known influence over the VRS”.<sup>47</sup> The court concluded that Serbia violated its obligation to punish the perpetrators of the genocide in Srebrenica, primarily because it did not extradite General Ratko Mladić to the ICTY, and was therefore responsible for violating the Genocide Convention. The fact that Serbia had been acquitted of one part of the charges created the space for media manipulation of the facts about this judgment. Triumphant headlines appeared on the front pages: “Serbia is not guilty of genocide”,<sup>48</sup> “Serbia acquitted of

46 D.Č. (1995) “Grad duhova”, *NIN*, 21 July 1995.

47 ICJ, *Bosnia and Herzegovina v. Serbia and Montenegro*, Judgment of 26 February 2007, available at: <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/91/091-20070226-JUD-01-00-EN.pdf>

48 *Danas*, 27 February 2007.





genocide”,<sup>49</sup> “Serbia is not guilty”,<sup>50</sup> etc. At the time, all the media, as well as the state officials, were focused on one thing: stressing that Serbia had nothing to do with Srebrenica. That narrative has remained strong until today.

The fourth type of Srebrenica denial is relativisation, popularly known as “whataboutism”. Although whataboutism is not denial in the strict sense, it serves the purpose of diminishing the scope and gravity of the Srebrenica massacre, or even of justifying it as a defence. The relativisation of Srebrenica is common among Serbian officials; it consists of calling to mind or enumerating crimes committed against Serbs, with the implication that it is morally and politically wrong to commemorate Srebrenica whilst for certain crimes against Serbs no one has so far been held responsible. On the anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide in 2022, the Serbian President wondered why Serbian victims were not important to anyone (except him).<sup>51</sup> When Ratko Mladić’s final verdict was pronounced in June 2021, the then minister Vulin stated: “Mladić is guilty because he responded to Naser Orić’s crimes, but Naser Orić is not guilty of the massacre of Serbian civilians in Podrinje”,<sup>52</sup> thus implying that the Srebrenica genocide was a sort of self-defence.

A unique and particularly crude example of relativisation could be observed in relation to the at event in July 2015, when Aleksandar Vučić, the Serbian Prime Minister at the time, went to the annual commemoration in Potočari (BiH). At the commemoration, Vučić was first booed and then attacked with stones and bottles thrown at the procession of which he was a part. The pro-regime media in Serbia presented this as “an attempted murder”,<sup>53</sup> “the assassination of Vučić”<sup>54</sup> and possible “revenge on Serbs”.<sup>55</sup> From that year onwards, the government-controlled media in Serbia, especially the tabloids, have marked July 11 as the anniversary of the “attempted murder” of Aleksandar Vučić, which is particularly humiliating for the victims of the genocide.

Over the past decade, a new type of literal denial has emerged in Serbia: the denial that verdicts for genocide exist at all. What is written in the verdicts is not disputed, but those same verdicts are denied as fact. For example, in 2012, the then President Nikolić stated that “there was no genocide” in Srebrenica, and that “genocide is difficult to prove in court”<sup>56</sup> – which implied that the Srebrenica genocide had never been proven in court. In March 2017, Aleksandar Vučić stated, “No one questions the gravity of the crimes in Srebrenica”, but then went on to raise a new

49 *Politika*, 27 February 2007.

50 *Večernje novosti*, 27 February 2007.

51 *Večernje novosti* (2022) “VUČIĆ O UDARU IZ SREBRENICE: Od nas ne žele pijetet, već pravne formulacije kako bi ukinuli Republiku Srpsku”, *Večernje novosti*, 13 July 2022, available at: <https://vecernjenovosti.ba/73021/vijesti/vucic-od-udaru-iz-srebrenice-od-nas-ne-zele-pijetet-vec-pravne-formulacije-kako-bi-ukinuli-republiku-srpsku/?c=lat>

52 Tanjug, FoNet (2021) “Odjeci presude generalu Mladiću”, *The Public Broadcasting Service of Vojvodina*, June 8 2021, available at: [https://www.rtv.rs/sr\\_lat/hronika/odjeci-presude-ratku-mladicu\\_1246929.html](https://www.rtv.rs/sr_lat/hronika/odjeci-presude-ratku-mladicu_1246929.html)

53 *Večernje novosti* (2015) “Stefanović: Pokušaj ubistva premijera; Majke Srebrenice: Ovo nije napad na Vučića, ovo je napad na žrtve”, *Večernje novosti*, 11 July 2015, available at: <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/politika/aktuelno.289.html:556993-Stefanovic-Pokusaj-ubistva-premijera-Majke-Srebrenice-Ovo-nije-napad-na-Vucica-ovo-je-napad-na-zrtve>

54 *Kurir* (2015) “ATENTAT NA VUČIĆA U SREBRENICI: Ekstremisti urlali - ubij govno četničko!”, *Kurir*, 12 July 2015, available at: <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/1855731/atentat-na-vucica-u-srebrenici-ekstremisti-urlali-ubij-govno-cetničko>

55 Baković, Biljana (2015) “Kamenovanje Vučića ili osveta Srbima”, *Politika*, 13 July 2015, available here: <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/333002/Kamenovanje-Vucica-ili-osveta-Srbima>

56 Tanjug, Beta (2012) “Nikolić: U Srebrenici nije bilo genocida”, *The Public Broadcasting Service of Vojvodina*, 31 May 2012, available at: [https://www.rtv.rs/sr\\_ci/politika/nikolic-u-srebrenici-nije-bilo-genocida\\_322678.html](https://www.rtv.rs/sr_ci/politika/nikolic-u-srebrenici-nije-bilo-genocida_322678.html)



question: “What is it that makes someone want a legal qualification?”<sup>57</sup> – which again might suggest that a legal qualification, otherwise contained in the verdicts, (still) does not exist, or that its existence would be based on dubious premises. In April 2021, on a national frequency TV station, the then Minister of Defence, Aleksandar Vulin, also denied the existence of verdicts which qualified the crime in Srebrenica as genocide. “Where was the genocide in Srebrenica proven?” he wondered rhetorically. “What court verdict stated it? How was it done? Who was convicted of genocide and not simply of a crime?”<sup>58</sup> Thus he suggested that such a verdict does not exist. This narrative strategy seeks to create the belief that the genocide in Srebrenica is an arbitrary assessment and not a legal qualification obtained through exhaustive evidentiary proceedings by courts whose jurisdiction the Republic of Serbia recognises.

There are very few political parties in Serbia whose official stand is that genocide was committed in Srebrenica in July 1995. These parties are small, and their influence on public opinion is limited, because the majority of media is tightly controlled by the government. Some of the media, through collaboration with the ruling parties, have implicitly supported the official memory politics. However, after the parliamentary elections in April 2022, two movements that are opposed to the current government and recognise the Srebrenica genocide entered the National Parliament – namely, the “Do not let Belgrade Drown” initiative, and the Movement of Free Citizens.

Only a part of the civil society in Serbia commemorates the anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide in an organised manner. The Women in Black organise a yearly commemorative performance in downtown Belgrade, and the Youth Initiative for Human Rights has been lighting candles for the victims of Srebrenica every year since 2015.

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On July 11, 2022, a virtual memorial to the Srebrenica victims was presented in front of the Serbian Parliament, authored by Mia David and attended by a few nongovernmental organisations and citizens. Through a digital app, observers could see on their phones the names of the Srebrenica victims projected onto the Parliament building. The virtual memorial highlighted the absence, as well as the impossibility of a physical memorial in Serbia. In the evening of the same day, the Serbian authorities organised a big public celebration of the Wimbledon victory of the Serbian tennis player Novak Đoković. The festivity took place in front of the Serbian Presidency building, only a hundred metres from where the candles for the Srebrenica victims had been lit. The decision to organise a public celebration on the date of the Srebrenica anniversary was another example indicative of the official position of Serbian state institutions.

### 3.3. Conclusion

Despite the absence of official commemorations, Srebrenica features prominently in Serbia’s memory politics and cultures. While a small part of civil society and the parliamentary opposition advocate for accepting the legal qualification of genocide and the facts about this crime,

57 Beta (2017) “Vučić: Zašto se insistira da je zločin u Srebrenici genocid?”, *N1*, 17 March 2017, available at: <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/a235660-vucic-zasto-se-insistira-da-je-srebrenica-genocid/>

58 Istinomer (2021) “Koja to presuda kaže da je bio genocid?”, *Istinomer*, April 6 2021, available at: <https://www.istinomer.rs/izjava/koja-to-presuda-kaze-da-je-bio-genocid/>



the political mainstream has continuously resorted to some form of denial. From the glorification of Ratko Mladić and Radovan Karadžić, through the denial of genocide or of the Serbian state's responsibility, to relativisations and “whataboutisms” and denial of the existence of the court verdicts – different ideological distortions of the facts have dominated the Serbian public discourse over past decades.

Although the victims of Srebrenica were Bosniaks, the official memorialisation of this crime constitutes a specific victimhood narrative of Serbian nationalism – it seeks to present Serbs and Serbia as victims of those who allegedly want to impose collective guilt on them, establish them as the ultimate villains and keep Serbs in a perpetual position of moral inferiority. At the same time, the dominant narratives strengthen those in power who claim to protect Serbs and Serbia from the alleged dangers of accepting facts and legal qualifications.



## 4. Operation “Storm”

### 4.1. Introduction

On August 4, 1995, the Republic of Croatia launched a military-police offensive called Operation “Storm” to reintegrate the territory of the self-proclaimed Republika Srpska Krajina and thus restore its internationally recognised borders. While Operation “Storm” achieved its goal and marked the end of the war in Croatia, during and immediately after the operation, Croatian forces committed systematic and widespread crimes against civilians of Serb ethnicity.

According to the records of D.I.C. Veritas, 1,877 Serbs were killed and disappeared in Operation “Storm”, of whom 1,228 were civilians.<sup>59</sup> The operation also led to the expulsion of around 200,000 Serbs from Croatia and the destruction and looting of their property.

The Croatian generals Ante Gotovina, Ivan Čermak, and Mladen Markač were prosecuted before the ICTY for crimes against humanity and war crimes committed during Operation “Storm” and in its aftermath. The ICTY Trial Chamber unanimously convicted Gotovina and Markač and sentenced them to 24 and 18 years in prison respectively, but the Appeals Chamber acquitted them by a three-to-two majority of the judges. Of all the ICTY judgments, the Operation “Storm” judgment remains one of the most controversial – as one of the dissenting judges put it, it “contradicts any sense of justice”.<sup>60</sup>

Although Gotovina and Markač were pronounced not guilty by the ICTY, the Trial Chamber’s findings about the numerous crimes against Serb civilians committed during the Operation “Storm” were not disputed. The majority of these crimes have not been prosecuted to this day.

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Over the past decade, Operation “Storm” has been established as one of the focal points in the official memory politics in Serbia. The dominant narrative about the past, promoted by the state institutions, maintains that Serbia and Serbs, throughout history, have always been either heroes or victims. In such a dichotomy, Operation “Storm” represents one of the paramount symbols of Serbian victimhood.

### 4.2. Commemorative Practices

Presently in Serbia, anniversaries of Operation “Storm” are commemorated through large-scale state events. That was not always the case. Until 2015, Operation “Storm” was commemorated with a religious memorial service in St. Mark’s Church in Belgrade. Unlike the present-day state commemorations, these were organised by the “Suza” (“Tear”) Association of Families of Missing and Killed Persons, while state officials attended.<sup>61</sup> Vojislav Koštunica, the former President and

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59 D.I.C. Veritas (2021) *Saopštenje povodom godišnjice stradanja Srba u agresiji hrvatska vojske na RSK u avgustu 1995. godine (“Operacija Oluja”)*. Available at: <http://www.veritas.org.rs/e-veritas-03-08-2021-saopstenje-povodom-godisnjice-stradanja-srba-u-agresiji-hrvatske-vojske-na-rak-u-avgustu-1995-operacija-oluja/>

60 ICTY (2012) *Prosecutor vs. Ante Gotovina and Mladen Markač*, Case No. IT-06-90-A, Appeals Chamber’s Judgement.

61 Đureinović, Jelena (2020) “The Commemoration of Operation Storm in 2020 and its Position in the Official Memory Politics in Serbia”, in Đureinović, J. (ed.) *Reconciliation and Official Memory Politics: Commemorations of the Victory and of the Victims of Operation Storm in Croatia and Serbia*, Belgrade: RECOM Reconciliation Network, available at:



then Prime Minister of Serbia, stated that Operation “Storm” was the biggest ethnic cleansing in Europe since the Second World War,<sup>62</sup> while the former President Boris Tadić demanded prosecution of those responsible for the crimes committed during Operation “Storm” and called for urgent dealing with the issues the victims were still facing.<sup>63</sup> Aleksandar Vučić, who at the time was the Secretary-General of the extreme-right Serbian Radical Party, pointed out that Operation “Storm” was “the most monstrous criminal action of the Croatian state against the Serbian people since the end of the Second World War”.<sup>64</sup>

The arrival of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) to power in 2012 brought a shift in memory politics, especially regarding the 1990s wars. The new official narrative announced the return of national pride. According to that narrative, the previous regime and the international community had forced Serbs into being ashamed of their national history, while the SNS liberated them from shame and enabled the whole nation to remember its heroes and victims with pride.<sup>65</sup> The new direction in memory politics has been established through the state-sponsored memory industry, including big commemorations, cultural productions, media broadcasting, etc.<sup>66</sup>

Large-scale state commemorations of Operation “Storm” started on its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary with the symbolic meeting of Aleksandar Vučić and Milorad Dodik in the middle of the bridge of Sremska Rača, which many refugees from the “Storm” had crossed 20 years earlier. August 4 was established as the Day of Remembrance for Killed and Expelled Serbs in both Serbia and Republika Srpska. Since 2015, the commemorations have taken place each year on the evening of August 4, at different locations in Serbia (and in 2023 in Prijedor, BiH), usually in towns and settlements with large communities of Serbs from Krajina. The travelling commemorations are set up jointly by Serbia and Republika Srpska, and attended by several thousands of citizens, many of whom are brought to the events in an organised fashion by the ruling SNS. Radio Television of Serbia (RTS), the leading media partner for official commemorations, organises the live broadcast.

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Officially, the primary purpose of the state commemorations is honouring the victims of Operation “Storm” and preserving the memory of their suffering. However, these events are an example of the instrumentalisation of victims for the political benefit of the political ruling class. The programme is emotionally loaded and set up to appeal to people’s legitimate sense of injustice, with the aim of consolidating identitarian narratives and ethnic distance. At the same time, however, the Serbian state still denies the status of civilian victims of war to those who fled Croatia in 1995, which leaves them without concrete institutional support.<sup>67</sup>

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<https://www.recom.link/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Commemorations-of-the-victory-and-of-the-victims-of-operation-Storm.pdf>, p. 13.

62 VoA (2005) “Obeležavanje 10. godišnjice početka vojne akcije Oluja, tokom koje je proterano 250.000 Srba”, VoA, 4 August 2005, available at (BCS): <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/a-34-2005-08-04-voa2-86898592/748990.html>

63 Politika (2007) “Tadić: Odgovorni za ‘Oluju’ moraju biti kažnjeni”, *Politika*, 4 August 2007, available at (BCS): <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/29021/Tadic-Odgovorni-za-Oluju-moraju-biti-kaznjeni>

64 B91 (2005) “B92 Specijal: 10 godina od ‘Oluje’ nad Krajinom”, B92, August 5 2005, available at (BCS): [https://www.b92.net/specijal/oluja/index.php?nav\\_id=174036](https://www.b92.net/specijal/oluja/index.php?nav_id=174036)

65 Đureinović (2021), p. 9.

66 Ibid, p. 5.

67 Mušanović, Meris (2020) “Oluja – civilne žrtve rata i dalje obespravljene u Srbiji”, *Peščanik*, 5 August 2020, available at (BCS): <https://pescanik.net/oluja-civilne-zrtve-rata-i-dalje-obespravljene-u-srbiji/>



The line-up of commemorative functions displays several constant features: speeches by Aleksandar Vučić and Milorad Dodik – regardless of either of their institutional positions at any given time –, a memorial service and speech given by the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church, and performances of the national anthems of Serbia and Republika Srpska, as well as of other patriotic songs. The majority of commemorations so far have included the testimony of “the girl from the convoy” – a young woman who was a child when she fled Croatia in August 1995. Another customary act is the recital of the poem “On the Petrovac Road” (“Na Petrovačkoj cesti”), by Branko Ćopić, which speaks about fascist crimes against Serbs during the Second World War, particularly about the killing of a child on the Petrovac Road, near Bosanski Petrovac. At the same place, in August 1995, Croatian air forces bombed a convoy of Serb refugees, killing nine civilians, four of whom were children, and wounding many others. The recital of this song at the “Storm” commemorations is part of a broader official narrative that seeks to establish historical continuity between the fascist Independent State of Croatia (NDH) and the Croatian state of the 1990s.

Since 2020, the commemorations of Operation “Storm” have been directed by Dragoslav Bokan, former commander of the “White Eagles” paramilitary unit and a prominent figure on the far-right political and cultural scene in Serbia. Since then, the programme has featured re-enactments of the convoy of refugees and has seen an increase in inappropriate dramatisation of suffering. This development occurred in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, when it was uncertain whether large gatherings would persist. Hence, more attention has been given to theatrical elements, which are important for TV and Internet broadcasts.

The 2022 commemoration, which took place at the central square in Novi Sad, resembled the previous ones in content and structure. It started with the memorial service conducted by Patriarch Porfirije, after which the Patriarch gave a speech in which he emphasised that “we”, as Orthodox Christians, must forgive but not forget the suffering of “our people”.<sup>68</sup> By invoking at several points crimes against Serbs committed during the Second World War, Patriarch joined in on the narrative of the complex continuity of Serbian victimhood, particularly in Croatia:

*We do not forget the victims and destruction on the Kristallnacht in Zadar, the execution of the old and powerless in Medak and the villages of Lika, the terrible terror and those killed in houses and flats all the way to Pakrac and the Slavonian villages. All of these are pebbles in the mosaic of our sufferings and crucifixions, together with Jadovno, Sisak, Jastrebarsko, Mlaka, Glina and Jasenovac,* said the Patriarch.<sup>69</sup>

Milorad Dodik was more explicit on the continuity of crimes against Serbs:

*“Storm” is a pogrom, it is a crime, it is a genocide, it is ethnic cleansing, it is the continuation of what we could see from the Second World War, the “final solution” for the Serbs.*<sup>70</sup>

68 Transcript 2022.

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.



On the same occasion previously, in 2017, he had stated:

*We are gathering to commemorate once again the suffering of the Serbian people, the suffering that has been continuously, throughout the centuries and time, always reserved for Serbs, wherever they are. [...] Today, no serious person can fail to see the continuity in those policies, which led to 1995.*<sup>71</sup>

In Dodik's speeches, Operation "Storm" and its victims are, as a rule, a marginal theme. The central topics are the victimhood and heroism of the Serbian people throughout history. Dodik paints Serbs as brave, honest, and freedom-loving, the only true antifascists, but naïve, and therefore the perpetual victims of their neighbours and the political West. Above all, the Serbs are represented as victims of Yugoslavia, which was, according to Dodik, the biggest national and political delusion of the Serbian people. He argues that the Serbs, by fighting against fascism in the Second World War, "selflessly gave freedom"<sup>72</sup> to other ethnic groups in the former Yugoslavia, who, in turn, attacked and expelled them from wherever they lived. The historical revisionism of the Second World War and socialist Yugoslavia is a recurring element of Dodik's speeches at commemorations, which contributes to a discourse of insurmountable ethnic divisions and the impossibility of non-ethnic identities.

Dodik sometimes uses this opportunity to openly negate war crimes committed by Serbian forces. For instance, at the commemoration in 2017, he shouted from the stage: "Show us one place where Serbs committed mass killing of Croats! Is there such a place in history? No, there is not!"<sup>73</sup> In 2022, he claimed: "There is no place in the former Yugoslavia where Serbs [...] ran concentration camps. They are accusing us of it, but we didn't do that".<sup>74</sup> Such a claim is particularly inappropriate, given that during the Bosnian war Serbian forces set up a number of detention centres on the territory of today's Republika Srpska, in which thousands of non-Serbs were tortured, raped and killed.

Special attention in Dodik's speeches is dedicated to praising Serb identity, which is, according to him, "embodied through Republika Srpska and Serbia as states, through our Serbian Orthodox Church, our faith and patron saints, our alphabet and language" (2018).<sup>75</sup> Serbian identity is somehow always threatened; hence there is a need to defend it. In contrast to this endangered identity, Serbia and Republika Srpska, Dodik argues, are potent, stable and fully functioning, thanks to Vučić's and his political leadership. The usual conclusion is that Serbs, should they want to survive and defend their identity, must support the current regimes, and Serbia and Republika Srpska should unite, on the basis of ethnic principle.

The central act at the commemorations is the speech by Aleksandar Vučić. Although he pays more attention than Dodik to Operation "Storm" itself – to the particular killings of civilians, numbers of victims, the column of refugees, their integration in Serbia, etc. – Vučić talks as much about the crimes of the Second World War. His speeches suggest that all the crimes

71 Transcript 2017.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

74 Transcript 2022.

75 Transcript 2018.



against Serbs in Croatia are part of a unified whole – of what the Patriarch described in 2022 as “the mosaic of our sufferings and crucifixions”.<sup>76</sup> By calling the disappearance of Serbs from Croatia a “seventy-years-long process” (2017),<sup>77</sup> Vučić also negates the entire period of SFR Yugoslavia as a period of peaceful multi-ethnic life. While repeatedly stating the obvious fact that the victims of Operation “Storm” are innocent, he is consistently silent about the responsibility of the Serbian leadership of the 1990s for the war in Croatia, and sometimes cynical about the term “aggression” as applied to Serbian wartime activities against Croatia, arguing that those who use it consider the refugees from Krajina to be aggressors.

“There will be no new ‘Storms!’” is the punchline of Vučić’s speech every year. Serb leaders from Serbia and Republika Srpska, he claims, will not allow it to happen. Vučić also argues that Operation “Storm”, as well as other crimes, have happened to Serbs because they were not united. Consequently, he calls for the unity of all Serbs, which, in practice, means support for his and Dodik’s rule. Thus, the promise that there will be no more “Storms” contains an implicit threat that such events might repeat if widespread support for Vučić’s regime is missing.

The narrative of the recovery of pride is a prominent element in all Vučić’s speeches at commemorations. According to him, previous Serbian governments were intentionally silent about Operation “Storm”, forcing the Serbian people to feel guilty, and ashamed of their victims.

*For years, no one in Serbia spoke about the crimes committed against our people. [...] We thereby justified and repeated the crime. We declared indifference as the ruling ideology and oblivion as a national obligation. Ultimately, we threw a stone at the saddest column in our history. We have been doing that for 18 years and haven’t felt any better,* said Vučić in 2022.<sup>78</sup>

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According to Vučić, it is the merit of the SNS that the victims of Operation “Storm” have not been forgotten. Nevertheless, the victims are remembered only once a year, on August 4, whilst for the rest of the time the Serbian institutions mostly ignore them. Many of the victims are socially marginalised and still have unresolved housing issues. The fact that in the months after Operation “Storm”, the Serbian MUP arrested several thousands of refugees and handed them over to RS and RSK military, police and paramilitary units is never mentioned in Vučić’s speeches.<sup>79</sup> Although Serbian courts have held Serbia accountable for violations of refugees’ rights,<sup>80</sup> the officials have never apologised to forcefully mobilised refugees. The Serbian public is generally unfamiliar with the issue of these enforced mobilisations, since this topic is not a part of any mainstream discourse.

Another constant element of Vučić’s speeches is criticism of the official ceremonies related to Operation “Storm” anniversaries in Croatia. The Serbian President usually claims that not only does Croatia celebrate Serbian suffering, but also that the whole world is either indifferent to Serbian suffering or hostile towards Serbs.

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76 Transcript 2022.

77 Transcript 2017.

78 Transcript 2022.

79 Kolarić, Jovana (2019) *Dossier: Forcible Mobilisation of Refugees*, Belgrade: Humanitarian Law Center, available at: [http://www.hlc-rdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Dossier\\_Forcible\\_Mobilisation\\_of\\_Refugees.pdf](http://www.hlc-rdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Dossier_Forcible_Mobilisation_of_Refugees.pdf)

80 Ibid, p. 10.





*The world will never recognise our sacrifices. No one will ever cry for Serbian children. [...] And they will never accept that genocide was committed against Serbs in Jasenovac [...] They will never tell us that Serbs were the victims, because there is always only one truth for them: "The Serbs stick out, the Serbs are disobedient, the Serbs are obstinate and insubordinate, and that's why we don't need them".*<sup>81</sup>

Furthermore, the Serbian President usually mentions that, of all the former Yugoslav republics, only Serbia has accepted its responsibility for war crimes of the 1990s, repented, and dealt with war criminals from its own forces. In reality, the prosecution of war crimes in Serbia has been inefficient, convicted war criminals and those suspected of war crimes enjoy public esteem and sometimes direct state support, while the crimes committed by Serbian forces are frequently denied by public officials and omitted from school curricula and all official discourses.

In July 2023, Aleksandar Vučić, Milorad Dodik and the Patriarch Porfirije of the Serbian Orthodox Church decided to organise the coming commemoration in Prijedor, BiH.<sup>82</sup> Given that during the Bosnian war Bosnian Serb forces committed numerous crimes against Bosniaks in Prijedor Municipality, such a decision seems most controversial, and indicates the intention to symbolically mark Serb territories through commemorative events.

#### 4.3. Conclusion

State commemorations of Operation "Storm", especially in their current form, do not serve the purpose of honouring the victims, but are a powerful tool of historical revisionism, as well as part of the ruling elite's never-ending political campaign.

The discourse of commemorations has several constant elements. First, it emphasises the continuity of Serb victimhood and the perpetual hostility of Croats, thus cementing ethnic distance and encouraging nationalist mobilisation. Second, these commemorations are particularly focused on criticising socialist Yugoslavia as a historical mistake that Serbs had to pay for, which contributes to promoting ethnic identity and the idea of the ethnic state as the only viable form of socio-political organisation. Finally, like all other commemorative practices since 2015, Operation "Storm" commemorations emphasise the recovery of national pride and the allegedly meritorious contribution of the current regime to this process, and therefore serve as a potent campaigning tool.

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81 Transcript 2021.

82 Danas (2023) "Vučić, patrijarh i Dodik odlučili: Dan sećanja na sve žrtve Oluje ove godine u Prijedoru", *Danas*, 20 July 2023. Available at: <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-patrijarh-i-dodik-odlucili-dan-secanja-na-sve-zrtve-oluje-ove-godine-u-prijedoru/>



## 5. The Beginning of the NATO Bombing of the FRY

### 5.1. Introduction

Although the crisis in Kosovo had been growing since the 1980s, it was not until February 1998 that it turned into an armed conflict between the forces of the FRY and the Kosovo Albanian rebel forces – that is to say, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). After the failure of the Rambouillet peace talks and the multiple violations of ceasefire agreements, in March 1999, NATO decided to intervene with an aerial bombing campaign – without obtaining a mandate from the UN Security Council, as Russia and China had announced that they would veto such a measure.

The NATO bombing of the FRY lasted from March 24, 1999 to June 11, 1999. While the supporters of the bombing argue that it brought an end to the Kosovo war and prevented greater suffering, critics point out that it violated international law. The Independent International Commission on Kosovo concluded that the intervention was “illegal but legitimate”, since “all diplomatic avenues had been exhausted and because the intervention had the effect of liberating the majority population of Kosovo from a long period of oppression under Serbian rule”.<sup>83</sup>

In its report from June 2000, Amnesty International pointed out that, on the basis of the available evidence, it believed that “NATO forces did commit serious violations of the laws of war leading in a number of cases to the unlawful killings of civilians”.<sup>84</sup> Human Rights Watch was also concerned that NATO forces took insufficient precautionary measures to avoid civilian casualties.<sup>85</sup>

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The beginning of the NATO bombing of the FRY in 1999 is one of the war events from the 1990s that feature most prominently in the official memory politics in Serbia. This event serves as a paradigm of Serbian suffering and victimhood, but also of the bravery of the Serbian nation in front of an incomparably stronger enemy. On the other hand, the way the beginning of the NATO bombing is officially remembered serves as an example of the instrumentalisation of victims, ignoring and relativising historical facts, and promoting the current regime as the saviour of the Serbian nation.

### 5.2. Commemorative Practices

Since 2015,<sup>86</sup> central state commemorations of the beginning of the NATO bombing have been held in various towns and cities throughout Serbia that are remembered as the places of greatest destruction or killing of civilians. Apart from the central commemorations, various smaller events take place across Serbia, mostly at military bases and in front of monuments.

83 Independent International Commission on Kosovo (2000) *The Kosovo Report*. Available at: <https://www.law.umich.edu/facultyhome/drwcasebook/Documents/Documents/The%20Kosovo%20Report%20and%20Update.pdf>

84 Amnesty International (2000) *NATO/FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF YUGOSLAVIA “COLLATERAL DAMAGE” OR UNLAWFUL KILLINGS? Violations of the Laws of War by NATO during Operation Allied Force*. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/eur700182000en.pdf>

85 Human Rights Watch (2000) *War Crimes in Kosovo – 16. The NATO Air Campaign*. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/kosovo/undword2b.html>

86 With the exception of 2020, when the central commemoration was not organised due to the COVID-19 pandemic.



The central state commemorations resemble the Operation “Storm” commemorations in several ways. First, they promote the narrative that Serbian victimhood has been the greatest of any nation throughout history. However, unlike the Operation “Storm” commemorations, the memorialisation of the NATO bombing includes the heroic narrative too, i.e. the story of David and Goliath. Secondly, the state officials’ speeches at both commemorations emphasise that President Vučić’s regime has finally enabled the Serbian people to remember its victims with pride, whereas under the previous regime, Serbs had not been allowed to remember the past in a dignified and proper way. Thirdly, central state commemorations of both events are held in various places in Serbia. In the case of Operation “Storm”, this could be seen as a part of the regime’s populist strategy, namely, an attempt to engage with the entire population of Serbs from Krajina; while in the case of the NATO bombing, the travelling commemorations primarily symbolise the suffering of Serbia as a whole. Fourthly, both events include similar cultural and artistic programmes, with some inappropriate dramatisations of suffering, loaded with nationalist pathos.

Finally, in the last five years, the line-ups of both commemorations have been almost identical in terms of speakers. The regular speakers are Aleksandar Vučić and Milorad Dodik, regardless of their political function, the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church, and guest speakers who are victims of atrocities.

The Patriarchs of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Irinej in 2019 and Patriarch Porfirije from 2021 to 2023, have striven to send a message of peace and forgiveness. However, they have also engaged in political commentary, sometimes referring to current events in a manner that echoes the official narratives. In 2023, Patriarch Porfirije alluded to the ongoing Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue:

*We pray and fight so that our suffering does not repeat for us or anyone else. Let us persevere in all talks and negotiations, on the path of a dialogue aimed at least at elementary mutual understanding between people. But let us not accept ultimatums and blackmails at any cost – ultimatums and blackmails that imply giving away ourselves and what is ours, renouncing ourselves and what is ours.*<sup>87</sup>

Milorad Dodik has been a regular speaker at the commemorations of the beginning of the NATO bombing since 2017. His speeches on this occasion share many points in common with his speeches at the Operation “Storm” commemorations. For instance, he often mentions the continuity of the crimes against Serbs, stressing the NATO bombing of Republika Srpska in 1995, but also mentioning fascist crimes against Serbs from WWII. In 2021, Dodik insisted that the NATO members from the 1990s were the descendants of the WWII fascists.<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, each year, he uses both commemorations to praise Aleksandar Vučić, as a politician who protects Serbian interests and enables Serbs to remember their victims and heroes in a dignified way. Finally, Dodik, in his commemorative speeches, always calls for the unification of Serbia and Republika Srpska. On March 24, 2019, he pointed out:

*I cannot and will never allow the establishment of a border on the River Drina, which would be a NATO border. [...] The years and the decades to come are our years, the years of our national*

87 Transcript 2023.

88 Transcript 2021.



*gathering and our state unification [...]. I believe it will become very clear to others, because there is simply no other way. Why can others have their states, but Serbs cannot have their unified state?*<sup>89</sup>

The specific theme of Dodik's speeches at the NATO bombing commemorations is his firm promise never to forgive NATO for the aggression against the FRY, which juxtaposes him against the previous speaker, the Patriarch, whose tone is peaceful and reconciliatory. In his descriptions of atrocities during the NATO bombing, Dodik emphasises the alleged "pleasure" with which NATO killed Serbs. Year in and year out, he incorrectly points out that the NATO operation was named "Merciful Angel", a myth that in the 1990s served as a propaganda tool of the then government and is still utilised for provoking strong emotional reactions.

In 2023, Dodik particularly emphasised that Serbs are allegedly threatened by other peoples who live in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but thanks to Aleksandar Vučić, they will not give in to pressures. In the words of Dodik:

*Bosnia and Herzegovina is not what they say in Sarajevo, but should be what we say it is. They only want one thing: to create the conditions for the Serbs to move out of this land. [...] They have a problem with Serbia, which today is more powerful and stronger than ever. Well, they want something else, and that is the opposite: a weak, powerless, scattered, divided Serbia. Such a Serbia would be good for everyone around us, but we are proud of what the generation of politicians led by Mr. President Vučić has done in recent years for the prosperity and development of Serbia.*<sup>90</sup>

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The speech of Aleksandar Vučić is the central act of all the commemorations. Each year, on March 24, he gives the same talk with minor alterations, structured around two main narratives. The first is grounded in the resolute refusal to forget the NATO aggression and a commitment to eternal reverence for the victims. Vučić often emphasises that Serbia is small but proud and freedom-loving, simultaneously a hero and a victim of great injustices. The second narrative calls for peace and cooperation, even with those who bombed Serbia. As a rule, this narrative culminates in what seems to be the SNS permanent electoral campaign: Vučić uses this opportunity to present Serbia under his leadership as stronger than ever. According to him, Serbia nowadays cooperates with everyone and, unlike in the previous periods, builds, creates, and flourishes.

The President's speeches are full of excessive enumerations, dramatic pauses, quoting of historical figures, and self-victimisation. For example, in a speech in 2015, he emphasised that he has made personal sacrifices for all the citizens of Serbia:

*We will bear any punishment, if necessary. I will bear it because, believe me, I have no greater duty than that, neither today nor in the future – to accept every punishment for Serbia, so that people who live in Serbia will not live in punishment.*<sup>91</sup>

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89 Transcript 2019.

90 Transcript 2023.

91 Transcript 2015.



Addressing the families of the victims during the speech in Varvarin in 2016, Vučić used one of many “poetic” figures:

*[...] I'm afraid that even today, we remain indebted to you, and if each of us were one word, it would be too few words. We would make a bad sentence – too short, banal, without a full stop at the end. Even if we all turned into tears, those tears wouldn't be enough for all your sorrows to drown in them. And if each of us was daylight, we couldn't end your night.<sup>92</sup>*

On the 18<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the NATO bombing of Serbia in 2017, Vučić declared it to be a symbolic birth:

*In these days of mourning, the whole of Serbia today is celebrating its coming of age: the coming of age of its pride, dignity, and brave heart. Serbia celebrates being visible again, rising, walking, passing the test, maturing, and being able to move forward from today onward.<sup>93</sup>*

Apart from the heightened pathos, the President's speeches abound in factual inaccuracies. The most prominent falsehood concerns the number of persons killed in the NATO bombing, and represents an example of the humiliation and instrumentalisation of the victims by the Serbian state. Back in 2015, Vučić talked about the “thousands” of victims,<sup>94</sup> in 2017 about “more than 2,000 civilians and almost 1,000 soldiers and policemen”;<sup>95</sup> but most often, he claims that 2,500 people were killed in the NATO bombing of the FRY. At the 2018 commemoration, he stated that the Republic of Serbia had “more than 2,000 recorded, well-remembered names”.<sup>96</sup> However, on October 19, 2021, the Serbian Parliament rejected the proposal to set up the previously announced national commission, which would have been tasked with making a list of the bombing casualties.<sup>97</sup>

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Unlike the official institutions of the Republic of Serbia, the Humanitarian Law Center (HLC) and the Humanitarian Law Center Kosovo (HLC Kosovo) published a list of all the victims' names in 2014. According to this register, 756 persons were killed in the NATO attacks in 1999, amongst whom 452 were civilians and 304 members of the armed forces.<sup>98</sup> Of the killed civilians, 206 were Serbs or Montenegrin by ethnic background, 218 were Albanians, 14 were Roma, and 14 were civilians of other ethnicities.<sup>99</sup> In the bombing, 275 members of the Yugoslav Army (VJ) and Ministry of the Interior (MoI) were killed, whereas the number of the killed members of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) was 29.<sup>100</sup> A total of 261 persons were killed on the territory

92 Transcript 2016.

93 Transcript 2017.

94 Transcript 2015.

95 Transcript 2017.

96 Transcript 2018.

97 Otvoreni Parlament (2021) *Third meeting of the second regular session*, October 19 2021. Transcript available at: <https://otvoreniparlament.rs/transkript/7906?tagId=69392&page=2>

98 Humanitarian Law Center and Humanitarian Law Center Kosovo (2014) *Human Losses in the NATO bombing of FRY*. Available at: <https://www.hlc-rdc.org/db/nato/index.html>

99 Ibid.

100 Ibid.



of Serbia, 10 in Montenegro, and 485 in Kosovo.<sup>101</sup> That is the only and most complete list of victims of NATO's bombing of the FRY so far.

The President of Serbia, in his speeches, usually lists the names of some of the victims. What those names have in common is that none of them is Albanian – although about one-third of the total number of NATO victims and almost half of the killed civilians were Albanians. In his speech in 2021, Vučić mentioned for the first time “16 children aged from two to seventeen from the Ahmetaj and Hasani families”, without listing their names.<sup>102</sup> That indicates the attitude of Serbia's state institutions towards Albanians and non-Serb victims.

An important element of Vučić's speeches, as well as of the official memory politics in general, is either silence or the relativisation of what was happening in Kosovo before and during the NATO bombing. At the 2023 commemoration, the Serbian President stated that Serbia had been found guilty of nothing else but “wanting to be on its own”, and cynically commented on the term “humanitarian disaster” which was used to describe the situation in Kosovo before the NATO bombing.<sup>103</sup>

*You claim that you attacked one sovereign and free country because of a humanitarian disaster. You didn't prevent any humanitarian disaster, you armed rebel and renegade groups in a free and sovereign country that never set foot on the territory of another country.*<sup>104</sup>

In 2018, the Serbian President stated that what provoked the bombing was “the struggle of the Serbs to preserve their territory, their integrity”, and that the bombing was “the fight against an imaginary evil”.<sup>105</sup> According to HLC and HLCK data, from March 20 to June 14, 1999, Serbian forces killed 6,872 Albanians who were not participating in hostilities.<sup>106</sup> In the same period, members of the KLA killed 328 Serbian civilians and 136 Roma and members of other nationalities.<sup>107</sup> In the clashes between Serbian forces and the KLA, 1,204 members of the KLA and 559 members of the VJ and MUP of Serbia were killed.<sup>108</sup>

At the time of the 2023 commemoration, the negotiations between Belgrade and Prishtina were ongoing and intense, and the Serbian President frequently referred to it in his speech, albeit not always explicitly. He pointed out that Serbia was going through tough times and that he was doing everything in his power to preserve peace. At the same time, Vučić insisted that the country was prospering in many aspects: economic, military, cultural, etc. Finally, he warned the unspecified “them” that Serbia would react if certain red lines were crossed, but whether the President was referring to a military response was left to interpretation.

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101 Ibid.

102 Transcript 2021.

103 Transcript 2023.

104 Ibid.

105 Transcript 2018.

106 Humanitarian Law Center (2023) *On the Occasion of the State Commemoration of the NATO Bombing Anniversary*, March 25, 2023. Available at: <http://www.hlc-rdc.org/?p=38701&lang=de>

107 Ibid.

108 Ibid.



*And that's why, people, I'm doing my best to preserve the peace. And just so you know, no one has confused my reason, no one has darkened my mind, I have not become a despicable traitor. That is what those who have not only remained silent, but have carried out the orders of the aggressors, say [...]'*<sup>109</sup>

*My message to you is: yes, we want peace. We do not want any conflicts with NATO or anyone else. But we are telling you nicely: we will protect our country. And when we tell you what the red lines are, then don't play with it. Do not play with it and do not press further.* With these words, Vučić concluded his most recent commemoration speech.<sup>110</sup>

### 5.3. Conclusion

The NATO bombing of the FRY caused tragic human losses, as well as substantial damage to civilian infrastructure and the environment. According to the HLC and HLCK register, 756 persons were killed in the NATO strikes, amongst whom were 452 civilians and 304 members of armed forces.<sup>111</sup> When the bombing began, the leadership of the Republic of Serbia responded by massive retaliation against Kosovo Albanian civilians. During the bombing – or, more precisely, in the period from March 20 to June 14, 1999 –, 6,872 Albanian civilians were killed, for whose deaths the Serbian forces are responsible; whilst to the KLA can be attributed responsibility for the death of 328 Serbs and 136 Roma and other non-Albanians who were not involved in the armed conflict.<sup>112</sup> In the clashes between Serbian forces and the KLA, 1,204 members of the KLA and 559 members of the VJ and MUP were killed.<sup>113</sup>

Current commemorations of the beginning of the NATO bombing of the FRY have three main characteristics. First, by increasing the number of the casualties, they in fact imply that the actual victims are not sufficiently important and thus offend their dignity. Second, by ignoring or relativising the historical context of the NATO bombing, i.e. the Kosovo war and the war crimes committed by the Serbian forces, the speakers create a false narrative about the innocence and victimhood of the Republic of Serbia. Finally, by promoting the narrative about Serbia being continuously threatened by its neighbours and the West, the commemorations convey that the current regime is the only one capable of protecting Serbs and Serbia from new wars.

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109 Transcript 2023.

110 Ibid.

111 Humanitarian Law Center and Humanitarian Law Center Kosovo (2014) *Human Losses in the NATO bombing of the FRY*. Available at: <https://www.hlc-rdc.org/db/nato/index.html>

112 Humanitarian Law Center (2023) *On the Occasion of the State Commemoration of the NATO Bombing Anniversary*, March 25, 2023. Available at: <http://www.hlc-rdc.org/?p=38701&lang=de>

113 Ibid.



## 6. The Battle of Košare

### 6.1. Introduction

The Battle of Košare was fought between the armed forces of the FRY (VJ) and the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) supported by the Albanian army and NATO. It started on April 9, 1999, and officially ended on June 10, 1999, although the members of the VJ withdrew from Košare four days later.<sup>114</sup> The battle occurred on the slopes of the Junik and the Prokletije mountains, on rough terrain over 2000 metres above sea level.

The fighting started with a massive artillery attack by the KLA coming from Albania, directed at the FRY border outpost in Košare, near the FRY–Albanian border. During the first two days of the battle, the KLA seized two nearby mountain peaks, the Rasa Kosares peak and the Maja Glava peak, and then shelled the Košare outpost from there, conquering it during the second day, April 9, 1999. The VJ troops retreated to the second line of defence and launched a counterattack in mid-April but failed to reclaim the border outpost.<sup>115</sup> The signing of the Kumanovo Agreement on June 9, 1999 marked the end of the Kosovo War. Four days later, all VJ formations left Košare. Serbian forces had to withdraw from the territory of Kosovo within 11 days.

According to the VJ sources, 108 of its soldiers were killed during the Battle of Košare.<sup>116</sup> According to Albanian sources, 114 KLA fighters died in the battle.<sup>117</sup>

The Battle of Košare had been unknown to most Serbian people until roughly a decade ago. Even under Milošević's regime, the state propaganda remained largely silent about the fighting around the THE FRY-Albanian border during the NATO bombing, and the media never referred to these fights as "the Battle of Košare".<sup>118</sup> However, with the arrival of the SNS regime, this event has become one of the major episodes from the 1990s wars on which the official memory politics focuses, with the intention of constructing a heroic narrative, namely, the story about the bravery, strength, and the defensive role of the Serbian forces in the Yugoslav Wars.

### 6.2. Commemorative Practices

The anniversary of the end of the Battle of Košare (June 14) became a part of the *State Programme for Marking the Anniversaries of Historical Events in the Liberation Wars of Serbia* in December 2016. Since then, the Battle of Košare has been popularised through the state-sponsored memory industry, including commemorative cultural events, publications, film and TV series productions, the naming of streets "The heroes of Košare", and so on. Most importantly, from 2016 onwards, the media, primarily those controlled by the Government, started intensive

114 Jovanović, Jelena (2022) "A Battle for Remembrance? Narrating the Battle of Košare/Koshare in Belgrade- and Pristina-Based Media", *Comparative Southeast European Studies*, Volume 70 Issue 2. Available at: <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/soeu-2022-0018/html>

115 Ibid.

116 Mutavdžić, Radenko (ed.) (2018) *Bitka na Košarama: sećanja učesnika 1999*. Belgrade: Medija centar "Odbrana", p. 9.

117 Koha (2019) "Presidenti shpall heronj të Kosovës 114 dëshmorët e rënë në Koshare", *Koha.net*, 9 April 2019. Available at: <https://www.koha.net/arberi/155784/presidenti-shpall-heronj-te-kosoves-114-deshmoret-e-rene-ne-koshare/>

118 Jovanović (2022).





reporting about the Battle of Košare, narrating a story of heroism and sacrifice. Until then, the collective memories of the Kosovo War were dominated by accounts and personal experiences related to the NATO bombing. Mass dissemination of the Košare story has consolidated the victimhood-heroism dichotomy, leaving no space for critical examination of the role of the Serbian forces in the atrocities committed during the Kosovo War.

The official narrative describes the Battle of Košare as “one of the brightest moments of our military and national history”.<sup>119</sup> In the press release of the Government Office for Kosovo and Metohija in April 2017, it was pointed out that “the heroic epic of the Defenders of Košare will forever remind us that the Serbian people are unbeatable when they fight against evil and injustice and protect what is dearest and most precious to them”.<sup>120</sup> The press release uses mythical tropes, such as the fight between good and evil, and unspecified terms (“dearest and the most precious”) that are left open to interpretation. Such a style of discourse indicates the intention to construct a myth, rather than to narrate a historical event from the perspective of established facts. The official narrative also emphasises that the Battle of Košare was a military victory, although it ended in an allegedly unjust political defeat.

It is frequently pointed out that the Serbian soldiers who fought in Košare were heavily outnumbered by the enemy, as well as that the majority of the VJ troops were young conscripts, 19 or 20 years old. The young age of many of the soldiers killed is used to promote the idea of patriotic youth willing to sacrifice even their lives for their homeland. It is noticeable that Serbian officials do not offer an explanation of why so many young and inexperienced soldiers, without proper training, were sent to such a difficult battle. What is more, many of the veterans who fought in Košare are still in a difficult socioeconomic situation, without state support, which clearly indicates that the state institutions do not actually care about those whose bravery they are officially glorifying. In 2022, the President of Serbia, who on all occasions, including commemorations, emphasises the economic strength of Serbia, told the veterans from Košare that the state has not been able to fulfill all their requirements, because it would have “completely destroyed [the state] financially”.<sup>121</sup>

The commemorations at the high political level started in 2017, and have since been held in different forms, at different places, and with the participation of various actors. On the anniversary of the Battle of Košare in 2017, in the village of Debeljača (Kovačica Municipality, Serbia), the President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić unveiled the Monument to Tibor Cerna, one of the young soldiers killed in Košare, in the presence of Cerna’s mother. Numerous officials attended the commemorative event, including ministers in the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of the Republic of Srpska, a delegation from the Serbian Ministry of Defence and the Serbian Army, representatives of the diplomatic corps, local officials, et al. The speakers at the ceremony were Vojislav Vukašinović, a VJ soldier who fought in Košare, Tibor Cerna’s mother, Kata Cerna, and the Serbian President.

119 Politika (2017) “Godišnjica bitke za Košare”, *Politika*, 9 April 2017. Available at: <https://rb.gy/q9j8j>

120 Ibid.

121 Transcript 2022.



President Vučić pointed out on this occasion that Tibor Cerna “died for his country and for each one of us”, in the “small, dirty, and indescribably horrible war imposed on us by the aggressor”.<sup>122</sup> These were the two main points that ran through the speech: the heroism of Tibor Cerna and the allegedly defensive character of the Kosovo War.

*He consciously placed his heroic breast in the path of the enemy's bullet. His big, loving heart received the lead but continued to beat. The noble Tibor stayed standing and continued to challenge the Albanian terrorist, knowing his mission was not over. The second bullet killed him and brought him Eternity,*<sup>123</sup> the President said, before continuing about the Battle of Košare and the Kosovo War:

*The Serbian Thermopylae, the second Battle of Kosovo, one of the countless wars of our people – a war we didn't want, a war we didn't start, a war in which we defended our country, our children, our future, our homeland.*<sup>124</sup>

The following year, on June 14, a smaller commemoration took place in front of the Monument to Tibor Cerna, without the participation of the highest state representatives.

The most significant ceremony in honour of the Battle of Košare was organised for its 20th anniversary, in 2019. The cultural event, which was held in the “Sava” Centre in Belgrade, resembled in type and structure the commemorations of Operation “Storm” and of the beginning of the NATO bombing of the FRY, with certain differences which reflected the distinctions between the victimhood and heroism narratives: whilst President Vučić's speech was again the central act of this event, the guest speakers were army officers, instead of civilian victims; the short theatrical pieces depicted the bravery of the Serbian soldiers, rather than the suffering of the Serbian civilians; and the musical programme featured patriotic songs, some of which were markedly militaristic.

The musical number “The Fairy of Košare”, which was performed at the cultural event, deserves special attention, since it is dedicated precisely to the Battle of Košare. The song was written by Neven Milaković, and the music was composed by Vuk Popović, but Milaković suggested that “the real author of the song was truly the Serbian people”.<sup>125</sup> In the song, the Fairy of Košare calls out the killed soldiers:

*Come back, falcons, come back to me,  
Our great-grandfathers have charged us to expel the enemies.*

And continues:

*There is no one to defend Kosmet, their bones are rotten,  
Rise up, falcons, and may God forgive them.*

122 Transcript 2017.

123 Ibid.

124 Ibid.

125 Čolović, Ivan (2019) “Vila sa Košara”, *Peščanik*, 23 October 2019. Available at: <https://pescanik.net/vila-sa-kosara/>



As anthropologist Ivan Čolović points out, “The Fairy of Košare” fits the new heroic narrative about the Kosovo War perfectly. It does not only celebrate the unjustly neglected heroism of the soldiers of Košare, but also has an explicit mobilising function – it calls for a showdown with the enemies, shaming those who do not want to fight for Kosovo.<sup>126</sup> “The Fairy of Košare” is today a part of the programmes of various ceremonies organised by the Serbian state, and is also popular among “Red Star” football fans.<sup>127</sup>

Apart from paying tribute to the Serbian soldiers who fought in Košare, President Vučić spoke mostly about the restoration of pride at this commemoration. This discourse promotes the idea that the previous regime forced Serbs into being ashamed of their history, particularly of the 1990s, while the current regime enables them to remember the past with pride.<sup>128</sup>

*We were not even whispering it – we were hiding it during the previous 15 or 20 years, we were afraid and ashamed to talk about the heroism of our people and our men; we were hiding it in order to ingratiate ourselves with those who fought against us, those who killed our people,* Vučić said.<sup>129</sup>

The restoration of pride is a common motif in Vučić’s speeches at all ceremonies commemorating events from the 1990s wars. On this occasion, it was particularly emphasised owing to the relatively new heroic narrative (in relation to the 1990s wars) and the Serbian regime’s intention of building an exclusively positive image of the armed forces and their role in the Yugoslav Wars.

In line with the words of the above-mentioned song, President Vučić did not only celebrate the bravery of the Serbian army in past wars, but also referred to potential future events, with the warning:

*If anyone thinks [...] that Serbia, because it wants peace, is weak, and that it will be possible to persecute and kill Serbs, they must know that the Serbian response will be stronger than ever before in modern history.*<sup>130</sup>

Commemorative events on the anniversaries of the Battle of Košare were held in 2021, 2022 and 2023, but without the participation of President Vučić. However, apart from speakers from the ranks of the Serbian army and family members of the killed soldiers, high political officials also spoke at these events, such as the Minister of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Policy, Darija Kisić Tepavčević, in 2021,<sup>131</sup> the Prime Minister Ana Brnabić in 2022,<sup>132</sup> and

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126 Ibid.

127 Ibid.

128 Đureinović, Jelena (2021) *Memory Politics of the 1990s Wars in Serbia: Historical Revisionism and Challenges of Memory Activism*, Belgrade: Humanitarian Law Center, available at: [https://www.hlc-rdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Politika\\_secanja\\_en.pdf](https://www.hlc-rdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Politika_secanja_en.pdf), p. 22.

129 Transcript 2019.

130 Transcript 2019.

131 RTS (2021) “Sećanje na heroje sa Košara: Nema nazad, iza je Srbija”, RTS, 14 June 2021. Available at: <https://www.rts.rs/lat/vesti/drustvo/4411155/kosare-borci-komemoracija.html>

132 Topalović, Igor (2022) “Komemorativna akademija povodom 23. godišnjice bitke na Košarama”, RTS, 13 June 2022. Available at: <https://www.rts.rs/lat/vesti/drustvo/4849330/bitka-na-kosarama-23-godine-akademija.html>



the Minister of Defence, Miloš Vučević, in 2023.<sup>133</sup> The narrative remained unchanged: while glorifying the bravery of the Serbian soldiers who fought at Košare, the Government officials emphasised the strength of present-day Serbia and its readiness to defend itself in front of the ever-present threat.

*We promise tonight to all the heroes that we will strongly, proudly, and honourably protect Serbia, its freedom and independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, that we will never threaten others, but that we will always defend what is ours,* declared Prime Minister Brnabić in 2022.<sup>134</sup>

In 2020, the Monument to the Heroes of Košare was unveiled in Belgrade, in the park near the “Dragiša Mišović” Clinical Hospital Centre. The initiator of the memorial was the tabloid daily *Serbian Telegraph* (*Srpski Telegraf*), and the sculptor was Miodrag Rogan, who worked on this piece pro bono.<sup>135</sup> The names of 108 soldiers who died at Košare are engraved on the Monument’s pedestal.

President Vučić laid wreaths at this memorial on the anniversaries of the Battle of Košare in 2021 and 2022, in the presence of the representatives of the Serbian Government, Army, and veterans. The restoration of pride, after a period of oblivion, remained the main motif of the President’s speeches. In 2022, he talked about the current situation in Kosovo, claiming that the only goal of the Prishtina authorities was to expel Serbs loyal to Serbia from the northern municipalities.<sup>136</sup> Vučić also accused Western powers of hypocrisy, arguing that they were turning a blind eye on violence against Kosovo Serbs and even potentially rewarding Prishtina for such policies.<sup>137</sup> The main message of the President’s speech was that the battles in which everyone was against Serbia were still ongoing, and that he was doing everything to protect Serbian interests.

On the anniversary of the Battle of Košare in 2023, the Minister of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Policy, Nikola Selaković, and the President of the Serbian Parliament, Vladimir Orlić, laid wreaths on the Monument to the Heroes of Košare,<sup>138</sup> whilst President Vučić had a meeting that day about the situation in Kosovo with the ambassadors of the Quint countries (US, Great Britain, France, Germany, and Italy) and the head of the EU Delegation in Serbia,<sup>139</sup> and did not participate in the commemorative activities.

133 Tanjug, RTS (2023) “Vučević: Vitezovi na Košarama svojim životima stvorili bedem za odbranu Srbije”, *RTS*, 14 June 2023. Available at: <https://www.rts.rs/lat/vesti/drustvo/5212951/vucevic-akademija-kosare-html>

134 Topalović, Igor (2022).

135 *Srpski Telegraf* (2017) “Podignimo spomenik junacima sa Košara: Srpski Telegraf skuplja novac za obeležje herojima”, *Srpski Telegraf*, 1 June 2017. Available at: <https://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/2809214-podignimo-spomenik-junaci-ma-sa-kosara-srpski-telegraf-skuplja-novac-za-obelezje-herojima-foto>

136 Kozarov, Branimir (2022) “Vučić položio venac na Spomenik junacima sa Košara: Sloboda Srbije ostaje najveća vrednost za koju se borimo”, *RTV*, 14 June 2022. Available at: [https://www.rtv.rs/sr\\_lat/drustvo/vucic-polozio-venac-na-spomenik-junacima-sa-kosara-sloboda-srbije-ostaje-najveca-vrednost-za-koju-se-borimo\\_1348852.html](https://www.rtv.rs/sr_lat/drustvo/vucic-polozio-venac-na-spomenik-junacima-sa-kosara-sloboda-srbije-ostaje-najveca-vrednost-za-koju-se-borimo_1348852.html)

137 Ibid.

138 RTS (2023) “Obeležena godišnjica bitke na Košarama”, *RTS*, 14 June 2023. Available at: <https://www.rts.rs/lat/vesti/drustvo/5212421/godisnjica-bitke-za-kosare-polaganje-venaca.html>

139 Radio Free Europe (2023) “Vučić o sastanku sa predstavnicima Kvinte: Bolje da ne kažem ništa”, *Radio Free Europe*, 14 June 2023. Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/vucic-sastanak-kvinta/32458840.html>



An important part of the memory industry related to the Battle of Košare is the flourishing pop-cultural production and publishing activity, sponsored by the Serbian state. In 2019, on the 20th anniversary of the beginning of the Battle of Košare, the Serbian public broadcaster RTS aired the feature-length documentary film “War Stories from Košare”, which was co-produced by the Ministry of Defence and RTS. The film is high-budget and includes testimonies of participants in the battle and other actors, as well as dramatisations of the fights. Together with two other state-financed documentaries about the Kosovo War, this film was aired in prime time, with record-breaking viewership; and in 2021, it was transformed into a series as well.<sup>140</sup> The documentaries are accessible on YouTube, which is not typical for film production,<sup>141</sup> and “War Stories from Košare” has had 7.5 million views so far.

Besides films, the Serbian state, through the Ministry of Defence’s publishing house “Odbrana”, also finances various books supporting revisionist narratives about the 1990s wars. Among other publications primarily related to military history, “Odbrana” publishes “The Warrior” book series, that includes the memoirs and testimonies of numerous participants in the Kosovo War, including those who were convicted of war crimes and crimes against humanity, such as Nebojša Pavković and Dragoljub Ojdanić. For example, in 2021, “Odbrana” published the book *Košare and Paštrik – the Serbian Thermopylae*, co-authored by Pavković.<sup>142</sup> The same year, another Serbian general convicted of war crimes in Kosovo, Vladimir Lazarević, participated in the central commemorative event on the Battle of Košare anniversary.<sup>143</sup>

### 6.3. Conclusion

The Battle of Košare has been introduced to the collective memory of the Serbs rather recently. Since 2016, it has been promoted as an event of paramount importance for Serbian history and identity, in order to build a new Kosovo myth – the myth of heroism and defence in front of a much stronger enemy. The Battle of Košare has been purposefully singled out and separated from other war events during the Kosovo War which the official memory politics want to conceal and forget.

The heroic narrative of the Battle of Košare has several main features: it celebrates the bravery of the fallen soldiers – which is a common and legitimate part of war memorialisation –, but it also aims at demonstrating the military strength of present-day Serbia, with the implicit message that it will not hesitate to use armed force if necessary. Finally, the new heroic narrative seeks to present the war in Kosovo as a defensive/liberation war waged for Serbia, while neglecting the mass atrocities committed by Serbian forces. Such an approach amounts to historical revisionism.

<sup>140</sup> Đureinović (2021), p. 28.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> J.T. (2021) “Predstavljena knjiga Košare i Paštrik – srpski Termopili”, *Danas*, 22 September 2021. Available at: <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/predstavljena-knjiga-kosare-i-pastrik-srpski-termopili/>

<sup>143</sup> RTS (2021).



## 7. Conclusion

Over the last decade, the 1990s wars have become significantly more prominent in Serbia's official politics of remembrance than they used to be between 2000 and 2012. The regime of the SNS and their coalition partners claims to be restoring the pride of the Serbian people by enabling them to remember their heroes and victims in a dignified way. Big state-organised commemorations have come to be a vital memory practice through which the new narratives about the 1990s wars have been disseminated and consolidated.

What do the new narratives have in common? They are all part of the state-sponsored project of historical revisionism that “obsessively exploits history as an area that serves as a decorative authorisation of disastrous political processes, while obsessively erasing and denying the historical facts that do not suit the ideology in power”.<sup>144</sup> Through various discursive acts – denial, relativisation, decontextualisation, selective use of facts, etc. – the memory actors reinterpret the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to legitimise their political views and consolidate positions of power.

The official memory politics in Serbia are ethnocentric – victims and heroes are almost always of Serb ethnicity, while the villains are the ethnic Other. Such a division of roles does not correspond with the historical facts, but it serves certain purposes: first, it strengthens ethnic identity among Serbs, since it presents their ethnic group exclusively in a positive light; secondly, it reinforces ethnic distance, fear of the Other, and even ethnic hatred. In such a symbolic order, people might form the belief that they have more in common with officials of Serb ethnicity – be it current politicians or war criminals from the 1990s – than with their neighbours from other ethnic groups. The anti-Yugoslav narrative, a significant part of the commemorations of Operation “Storm”, plays an important role in promoting ethnic identity as the only authentic one. In the commemorative speeches, particularly those of Milorad Dodik, Yugoslavia is marked out as being the greatest of historical mistakes, which Serbs have to pay for, with the implication that multi-ethnic political communities are unsustainable and even the root causes of armed conflicts. Consequently, the official discourse endorses ethnic identity as the basic principle of state organisation and political subjectivity.

The ethnocentric character of state-sponsored memory politics makes non-Serb victims virtually invisible in the national mainstream. Local communities in Sandžak commemorate victims of the crime in Štrpci and those from Sjeverin, who were Serbian citizens of Bosniak ethnicity. Representatives of the Serbian Government attend some of these commemorations, but the fact that the representatives attending are never of Serb ethnicity indicates the official attitude that Serbs should mourn only “their” victims. The state-sponsored politics of remembrance consistently ignore the crimes that Serb forces committed during the wars, even those that took place on the territory of Serbia. The most striking example is that of the mass graves in Batajnica, near Belgrade, in which the bodies of 744 killed Albanians were buried in a secret state operation. The mass graves were discovered more than 20 years ago, but the site has never been marked with a memorial – the Serbian MUP still uses the site, while all the state institutions are per-

144 Dimitrijević, Branislav (2020) “The Monument to Concealment”, *Memory Cultures in Dialogue*. Available at: <https://www.kulturesecanja.org/en/blog/the-monument-to-concealment/>



sistently silent about the operation for the concealment of bodies. This noticeable physical and discursive void has been filled up with memorials, memorialisation and history – but exclusively those that fit into the victimhood-heroism dichotomy and celebrate Serbdom.

By invoking and reinterpreting historical events, the dominant memory actors present Serbs and Serb identity as continuously threatened by their neighbours, by the political West, and by the idea of multi-ethnic/non-ethnic communities. In that sense, the official narrative is a narrative of perpetual crisis and ever-present danger from the ethnic Other. Official commemorations contribute to the atmosphere of fear and uncertainty. As a result, the politicians in power can present themselves as the dedicated protectors of the people, the saviours of national pride, and the only ones who know how to defend national interests. Such discourse always contains an implicit threat: should the current regime fall, there will be no one to protect Serbs and Serbia, and the dreadful events of the 1990s might repeat. Official memory politics over the last decade does indeed resemble the ideological preparation for war during the 1980s, which is a peculiar paradox – Socialist Yugoslavia has been gone for decades, but former Yugoslav republics are still seen as a cause of Serbia's hardship.

The dominant revisionist narratives in Serbia prevent citizens from viewing historical events in a non-ethnic perspective. Consequently, by promoting ethnocentrism, they also influence citizens' perceptions of the ongoing political processes.

An alternative memorialisation would be not only grounded in historical and judicial facts, but also critical of the ethnocentric perspective that is currently dominating memory cultures. That would not imply a negation of ethnic identity, nor of its importance for people's perceptions of themselves, but it would enable a better understanding of non-identitarian causes and of the consequences of wars, such as economic and political power relations, social inequalities, ownership of the means of production and resources, etc. It would also allow for a critical analysis of the role of nationalism in obfuscating power relations and exploiting peoples' identities and loyalties. Furthermore, an alternative memorialisation would enhance empathy for victims regardless of their ethnic belonging. Finally, it would open a space for strengthening non-ethnic identities, developing new forms of solidarity, and building a more just and egalitarian society.

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# V. Decade of Remembrance in Kosovo

## V. Decenija sećanja na Kosovu

## V. Dekada e kujtesës në Kosovë

By Jora Lumezi

Edited by Nataša Kandić

### 1. Summary

This report delves into the dynamics of remembrance politics in Kosovo, scrutinising the commemoration of war events over the past decade and directing a spotlight on the pivotal role played by political figures. The research investigates state-led commemorations, with a particular emphasis on speeches delivered by political figures during these events. The focus of the analysis is on five events during the 1998-1999 armed conflict in Kosovo – namely, the Reçak Massacre, the Attack on Prekaz, the Krusha Massacres, the Battle of Koshare, and the Dubrava Prison Executions and Bombings.

The study aims to unravel the evolution of these commemorations over the last decade, giving special attention to speeches by various political figures, including former members of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). Within this framework, specific events and individuals are strategically commemorated in line with certain political objectives, fostering unity, identity, and legitimacy among Kosovo Albanians. These commemorations contribute significantly to the construction of a collective memory that reinforces shared narratives and historical consciousness. The study highlights how these practices strengthen the population's sense of national identity and solidarity, within the context of widespread experience of hardship, ranging from the tragic loss of loved ones to displacement, loss of possessions or jobs, coupled with emotional and physical trauma. The interplay between memory politics, political figures, and commemorative events thus emerges as a crucial aspect of Kosovo's socio-political landscape.

The first event analysed, namely the Reçak Massacre, is considered a pivotal event in the armed conflict in Kosovo, which marking a turning-point in the conflict, escalating violence and drawing international condemnation. Commemoration practices for Reçak reveal that memory politics in Kosovo are rooted in traditional depictions, emphasising the glorification of the military, especially the KLA. The narrative portrays KLA members as heroic figures who brought stability and strengthened ethnic nationalism. Annual speeches by political leaders consistently express gratitude for international contributions, and emphasise Ambassador Walker's pivotal role as the first international witness to the massacre, influencing NATO's intervention.

The glorification of the KLA and the international community's role in Kosovo's liberation contribute to a collective memory, solidifying a sense of victimhood and shared trauma among Kosovo Albanians. The Reçak Massacre represents a crucial event that prompted global action, shed light on human rights abuses, and elevated the Kosovo conflict to a global concern.

Pursuing our study further, we focus on the Attack on Prekaz in March 1998, a critical juncture in the Kosovo War. It unfolded as Serbian security forces launched a brutal assault on this KLA stronghold, resulting in the deaths of Adem Jashari, the revered leader of the KLA, and his family. The armed resistance of the Jasharaj came to be seen as a patriotic sacrifice, playing a crucial role in Kosovo's quest for independence. Their legacy was embedded in national ideologies, Kosovo War narratives, and state-building practices. The remembrance of the Jashari family



served as a powerful tool in shaping and legitimising the narrative of resistance against oppression, fostering a collective memory that symbolised broader resistance against Serbian forces.

The three-day gatherings at the “Adem Jashari” memorial complex in Prekaz, occurring between March 5<sup>th</sup> and March 7<sup>th</sup>, underscore the ongoing commitment to remembering the Prekaz Massacre. Political leaders reiterate the bravery and selflessness of the Jashari family, emphasising their role as cornerstones in Kosovo’s ongoing fight for liberation. The collective recollection of the Prekaz Massacre remains a testament to the nation’s history, affirming its place in the present and guarding against the threat of forgetting. Moreover, the family’s loss, as an emblematic representation of sacrifice and resilience, resonates deeply with the Kosovar population, evoking a profound emotional response and forging a sense of collective solidarity and trauma.

The next event analysed as part of this comprehensive study focuses on the Krusha Massacres. The Krusha remembrance provides a unique perspective on the Kosovo War, deviating from the typical focus on KLA fighters and international assistance. It highlights the gendered dynamics, where women took center stage in the aftermath of massacre, addressing the challenges of widowhood and resilience faced by women. This distinctive narrative stands out in the memory politics of Kosovo, in acknowledging the strength and courage of the surviving women, a departure from the conventional commemorative discourse. The annual commemorations in both Krusha e Madhe and Krusha e Vogël serve as tributes to the victims, whilst also emphasising the unresolved fate of many missing persons.

The politics of remembrance surrounding Krusha delve into the dimensions of gender, challenging hegemonic narratives and drawing on feminist memory studies. By centering on the experiences of women, Krusha’s remembrance practices create a more inclusive and gender-sensitive memory landscape, recognising the unique challenges faced by women in the post-conflict period. However, the intersection of memory politics with transitional justice reveals tensions between commemoration and the pursuit of accountability. Whilst commemorations pay tribute to victims and survivors, the limited investigations and convictions highlight the complexities and challenges of achieving meaningful accountability in post-conflict Kosovo.

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The next conflict-related event analysed is the Battle of Koshare, which distinguishes itself from other war events in Kosovo on account of its nature as a battle rather than a one-sided massacre. With more than 100 KLA fighters reported to have lost their lives, this engagement shifts the narrative away from portraying Kosovo Albanians solely as victims. Instead, it becomes an emblem of resistance and empowerment, emphasising the agency and bravery of Kosovars in confronting Yugoslav forces.

Two key factors elevate the importance of the Battle of Koshare in the eyes of Kosovar society. Firstly, it represents a victory, as it involves breaking the border with Albania, facilitating the safe passage of volunteers and the transportation of weapons. Secondly, the aftermath of the battle coincides with the signing of the Kumanova Agreement between NATO and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, shaping the perception of victory.

The politics of remembrance surrounding the Battle of Koshare, therefore, diverges significantly from other war events in Kosovo. It not only challenges the victimhood narrative but also underscores the unique characteristics that make Koshare a symbol of resistance and victory. The battlefield dynamics, the unity of ethnic Albanians, and the strategic implications



of breaking the border contribute to the enduring significance of this battle for the country's history and politics.

The last focus within this study analyses another severe event during the armed conflict in Kosovo, which unfolded within the confines of Dubrava Prison, the largest detention facility in the region. The discourse surrounding Dubrava goes beyond preserving the memory of the victims; it also aims to spotlight the agency and resilience of the oppressed Kosovo Albanians. Emphasising the specific category of Albanian political prisoners becomes a cornerstone in constructing a narrative that reinforces the collective struggle for freedom and statehood. The stories and sacrifices of these individuals contribute to the formation of a collective memory that underscores the enduring spirit of the Kosovo Albanians and their commitment to political activism. In this way, the commemorative discourse surrounding the Dubrava Prison Massacre serves to amplify the notion that the victims were not mere casualties but pivotal figures shaping Kosovo's political landscape. Furthermore, examining the commemorative speeches delivered by political leaders reveals a shared apprehension regarding the lack of accountability for those responsible for the Dubrava Prison Massacre and beyond.

## 2. Introduction

### 2.1. History

The political crisis in Kosovo developed from the late 1980s and during the 1990s, culminating in an armed conflict starting in mid-1998 involving the forces of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) and Serbia, and the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). During this conflict, incidents occurred where the Yugoslav Army (VJ) and Serbian police (MUP) used excessive and indiscriminate force, resulting in damage to civilian property, displacement of populations, and civilian casualties. Despite efforts to resolve the crisis, including the introduction of an international verification mission in Kosovo, the conflict continued until March 24, 1999, afterwards, when NATO forces began an aerial bombing campaign targeting FRY.<sup>1</sup> Between March 20 and June 14, 1999, a total of 9,383 people lost their lives, including 7,091 Albanian civilians, 340 Serbs and Roma, 1,221 members of the KLA (Kosovo Liberation Army), and 731 members of Serbian forces.<sup>2</sup> The NATO air campaign ended on June 9, 1999, with the signing of the Kumanovo Agreement, which obligated the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) and Serbia to withdraw their military and police forces from Kosovo within 10 days.

The withdrawal of Serbian forces and institutions from Kosovo paved the way for the establishment of the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK). On February 17, 2008, the Assembly of Kosovo declared the independence of the Republic of Kosovo, which has been recognised by about 100 countries. Serbia still does not recognise the Republic of Kosovo, continuing to consider Kosovo as part of Serbia, despite not having control over the territory of Kosovo since June 1999.<sup>3</sup>

### 2.2. Methodology

This study seeks to analyse comprehensively the commemoration of five events that occurred in Kosovo during the 1998-1999 war. Specifically, the focus of the research centres on state-organised commemorations over the past decade and their underlying structure. By examining these events, the analysis aims to shed light on how they unfolded over the years, with a particular emphasis on the speeches delivered by various political figures, including former members of the KLA. The objective is to understand the common narrative woven through these speeches and how they have significantly influenced the collective memory and fostered a sense of solidarity concerning the past. The five selected events are: the Reçak Massacre, the Attack on Prekaz, the Krusha Massacres, the Battle of Koshare, and the executions and bombings at Dubrava Prison.

The selection of these events aims to encompass all dimensions of state commemorations, particularly the narrative surrounding the remembrance of the past in Kosovo. The events are memorialised by the Government of Kosovo through large gatherings held at the respective memorials and towns. This chapter focuses exclusively on the annual commemorations, drawing

1 SENSE – Transitional Justice Center (2023). *ICTY: The Kosovo Case 1998–1999*, available at: <https://sensecentar.org/activities/interactive-narrative-icty-kosovo-case-presented-public>

2 HLC and HLCK, Database.

3 Aljazeera (2023). "Kosovo-Serbia tension: History, latest flare-up and what's next?", Aljazeera, 29 May 2023, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/29/kosovo-serbia-tension-history-latest-flare-up-and-whats-next>.



from transcripts of political speeches and statements made by government officials as well as representatives of opposition parties.

The selection of these five events aims to include multiple aspects of the war and highlight their significance in today's socio-political landscape of Kosovo. Each event has been carefully chosen to provide a comprehensive narrative. The first event, the Reçak Massacre, is pivotal in illustrating how the conflict in Kosovo initially gained international attention. It also underscores the losses endured by unprotected civilians and their unwavering determination to defend their families and homes. Moving on to the Attack on Prekaz, specifically the assault on the town's founders and leaders of the KLA, Adem Jashari and his family, this event holds immense importance for the Kosovo Albanian population. Adem Jashari and his brothers are considered the founding figures of the KLA, who dedicated themselves entirely to the fight for Kosovo's liberation and autonomy. The next event focuses on the massacres in the town of Krusha (Krusha e Madhe and Krusha e Vogël). The aftermath of these massacres has resulted in an inspiring success story – the resilience of the women survivors of Krusha and their determination to rebuild their lives despite losing husbands, sons, and fathers in the war. Continuing to the fourth event, the Battle of Koshare stands apart from most conflict-related events in Kosovo because it took the form of a battlefield engagement, involving both the KLA and the Yugoslav forces. Its importance lies in its success in breaking the border with Albania, enabling the movement of volunteers, weapons, and essential supplies to support the people of Kosovo. Lastly, the Dubrava Prison executions and bombings represent another significant event during the war. Many political prisoners who opposed Serbian oppression were held in that prison. The attacks endured by the victims and survivors of Dubrava, from NATO bombings to executions by Serbian forces, highlight the profound impact of this event.

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This qualitative analysis relies on secondary data as a crucial research tool, and the nature of the study involves both analytical and descriptive research. The methodology employed has involved comprehensive desk research, encompassing the examination of a wide range of sources, including transcripts, online video recordings, diverse media articles, official government publications, academic papers, relevant laws, and more. To gather statements from political figures, the research primarily drew from local media outlets, their social media pages, and related government websites. It is worth noting that while there are articles and transcripts available online concerning the commemorations of the past 10 years, some of them have expired or been deleted, therefore they could not be accessed. As a result, not every year has its own complete transcript; however, crucial segments of various speeches have been preserved. Moreover, it is important to highlight that this research has been conducted in both the English and Albanian languages. Considering that Kosovo is the subject of examination, a significant portion of reports, articles, media coverage, and official documents are exclusively available in Albanian. The inclusion of both languages ensures a comprehensive analysis on the politics of remembrance surrounding Kosovo.

### 2.3. Argument

The politics of remembrance in Kosovo exert a significant influence over the construction of the collective memory and the shaping of national identity. In Kosovo, commemorations of various conflict-related events follow a consistent structure, reflecting the complex interplay between memory, politics, identity formation, agency, and international dimensions – all contributing to a multifaceted understanding of the politics of remembrance in Kosovo.



Within memory politics, specific events and individuals are often commemorated to serve political objectives, fostering a sense of unity, identity, and legitimacy among Kosovo Albanians. These commemorations contribute to the formation of a collective memory that reinforces shared narratives and historical consciousness, strengthening the population's sense of national identity and solidarity, in the consciousness that the majority of individuals experienced some form of hardship, be it the loss of loved ones, displacement from their homes, loss of possessions or jobs, followed by the enduring effects of emotional and physical trauma.

The remembrance of conflict-related events in Kosovo such as massacres and other intentionally directed attacks against the civilian population, evoke strong emotional responses, solidifying perceptions of victimhood and resistance, depending on the narrative constructed around them. Therefore, the commemorative practices taking place play a vital role in cultivating a collective identity rooted in shared experiences during times of war and trauma in Kosovo.

Throughout history, conflicts have played a pivotal role in shaping societies, leaving a lasting impact on collective memory. The events examined in this chapter are a testament to the enduring significance of these historical upheavals. As we venture into the narratives surrounding the war, we come across certain accounts that have been preserved and perpetuated by particular groups. These narratives, often rooted in the experiences and perspectives of the dominant actors during the conflict, have become the focal point of commemoration practices in Kosovo. Hence, this dominance of certain groups in shaping the commemorative narrative can lead to the marginalisation of other specific groups involved in the Kosovo War.



## 3. The Reçak Massacre

### 3.1. Introduction

The massacre at Reçak is considered to be one of the most significant events during the Kosovo-Serbia war for several reasons. Firstly, it marked a turning point in the conflict and was seen as a major escalation of violence. Secondly, it led to widespread international condemnation and increased pressure for intervention to resolve the conflict. Additionally, it resulted in 45 civilian casualties, including women and children, further fuelling outrage and galvanising the international community to act. Based on comprehensive international reports and investigations, and on the trial of General Vlastimir Đorđević of the Serbian Ministry of Internal Affairs before the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), it has been documented that Serbian forces carried out a severe military action in Reçak, where the victims were subjected to execution within their homes, in the surrounding area, and in the nearby fields of the village.

The collective memory and historical narratives surrounding the Reçak Massacre have had a significant impact on contemporary politics in Kosovo. This chapter therefore aims to provide an analysis of how political figures and society as a whole have commemorated the massacre over the past decade. In particular, the focus will be on how the annual remembrance of Reçak is organised and how this highlights the narrative of memory politics in Kosovo. The analysis will examine the discourses of Kosovo's political leaders, with a specific emphasis on several themes. These themes include the glorification of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), recognition of the beneficial role of the international community – especially for the role played by US diplomat William Walker, who served as the Head of the Kosovo Verification Mission at the time, the denial of the atrocities by Serbian officials, as well as the calls for justice for Reçak's victims and survivors by political figures and the victims' families.

### 3.2. Commemorative Practices

The official state commemoration of the Reçak Massacre was initiated in the mid-2000s with the launching of the construction of the “Reçak Massacre” Memorial Complex by the Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning in 2008, after Kosovo had declared its independence. The complex, which was completed in 2022, is comprised of several elements, including a cemetery for the victims, a memorial wall, a statue of William G. Walker, administrative offices, a fountain, seating areas, parking lots, and green spaces. Within the designated area, there are also two houses which were sites of the massacre.<sup>4</sup>

The annual observance of the Reçak Massacre is organised by the Government of Kosovo and hosted by the Mayor of Shtime Municipality. A few days before the commemoration, the Mayor of Shtime convenes a meeting with the Organisational Council in the context of preparation for the commemoration. Participants in this meeting include law enforcement personnel at both regional and local levels, representatives from the Prime Minister's Office and the Presidency, representatives of organisations and associations established in the aftermath of the war, representatives from public television, and other representatives from local institutions. The

4 AMMKM (n.d.). “Kompleksi Memorial ‘Masakra e Reçakut’ – Reçak, Shtime – AMMKM”, available at: [https://amkmk.rks-gov.net/acadp\\_listings/kompleksi-memorial-masakra-e-racakut-racak/](https://amkmk.rks-gov.net/acadp_listings/kompleksi-memorial-masakra-e-racakut-racak/).



participants engage in a dialogue and reach a consensus on the planning and execution of the activities, which are usually held on January 15<sup>th</sup>.<sup>5</sup> The proceedings commence with a gathering and traditional procession of participants in the vicinity of the city market in the morning of January 15<sup>th</sup>. Subsequently, homage is paid at the cemeteries of the victims in Shtime, Mollopolc, and the Reçak Memorial Complex by state entities and organisations established as a result of the war. The memorial event then proceeds to the Reçak Memorial Complex, where tributes are usually made by heads of state, Ambassador Walker, and the Mayor of Shtime.<sup>6</sup> The ceremony continues with a commemorative cultural event at the House of Culture in Shtime, during which heads of state and Ambassador Walker deliver their speeches. In the last few years, the observance has also included a documentary produced by the public Radio Television of Kosovo (RTK), and a performance by the “Siparantum” Choir.<sup>7</sup>

The memory politics in Kosovo are depicted mostly in a traditional manner, showcasing a glorification of the military, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), masculine strength and endurance, and a sense of allegiance and solidarity with allies, whilst portraying women as merely victims, automatically separating men and women into combatants and victims.<sup>8</sup> The prevailing customs of remembrance are focused on honouring the KLA, as is evident in both the official and private commemorations. The narrative that has developed depicts the KLA members as heroic figures who provided security and stability to the Albanian population of Kosovo during challenging times, and who strengthened ethnic nationalism. The members of the KLA are regarded as the “founding fathers” who freed Kosovo and brought peace.<sup>9</sup> In her 2022 commemoration speech, the President of Kosovo, Vjosa Osmani, highlighted that this massacre marked the most important turning-point of the war period and intensified the efforts of the girls and boys of the KLA to fight for the freedom of Kosovo.<sup>10</sup> Prime Minister Albin Kurti, also President of the Lëvizja Vetëvendosje (LVV) party, in his 2023 speech acknowledged for his part that a total of 11 KLA soldiers lost their lives while steadfastly safeguarding the bodies of 45 civilians who were killed on January 15, 1999 in Reçak.<sup>11</sup>

In the discourse of the political leaders in Kosovo, it is noticeable that there exists a consistent pattern of recognition and admiration of the efforts of the international community, both during and after the war. This phenomenon was particularly pronounced under previous governments, but has since diminished under the administration of Prime Minister Kurti. In March of 1999, Former U.S. President Bill Clinton announced in an interview the refusal of Serbian negotiators to sign the peace agreement and therefore the commencement of NATO’s intervention, mentioning Reçak as a significant factor in the decision to launch air strikes against Serbian military and police forces in Kosovo. “*We should remember what happened in the village of Racak back*

5 Municipalities of the Republic of Kosovo (2023). “Mbahet takimi konsultativ për shënimin e përvjetorit të Masakrës së Reçakut.” 9 February 2023, available at: <https://kk.rks-gov.net/shtime/news/mbahet-takimi-konsultativ-per-shenimin-e-pervjetorit-te-masakres-se-recakut-2/>.

6 Ibid.

7 Transcript 2023.

8 Kosovo Memory (n.d). “Memory Map”, available at: <http://kosovomemory.org/memory-map/>.

9 Çoçaj, V. (2020), “*Transcript: The Politics of Memory and Remembrance Practices in Southeast Europe*”, RECOM Reconciliation Network and HLC Kosovo, 22 October 2020, available at: <https://www.recom.link/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/HLC-brochure-ENG-The-Politics-of-Memory-and-Remembrance-Practices.pdf>.

10 Transcript 2022.

11 Transcript 2023.



in January – innocent men, women and children taken from their homes to a gully, forced to kneel in the dirt, sprayed with gunfire -- not because of anything they had done, but because of who they were. Now, roughly 40,000 Serbian troops and police are massing in and around Kosovo. Our firmness is the only thing standing between them and countless more villages like Racak – full of people without protection, even though they have now chosen peace”<sup>12</sup> – this was the way President Clinton put it during a press conference in Washington, D.C.

In the decade following the cessation of hostilities in Kosovo, during each commemorative ceremony held in honour of the Reçak Massacre, the country’s political leaders have consistently expressed gratitude for the contributions of international players towards Kosovo’s overall progress. This sentiment has been a recurrent theme in their speeches. Former President Atifete Jahjaga, in the commemoration event of 2016, expressed the belief that “*Reçak is inseparable from the eternal friendship with the USA and the strong bond with the EU*”<sup>13</sup>; whereas former PM Isa Mustafa, head of the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), declared the commitment of the Government of Kosovo to strengthening partnership with international friends, the United States of America, European Union countries and all democratic states, further adding that these partnerships were an aspiration of all those who had fallen for freedom, for independence and for the state of Kosovo, which was now being built.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, former President and previous head of the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), Hashim Thaçi, in his 2017 speech, pointed out that even the new administration of President Trump was dedicated to maintaining attention on Kosovo, for the people of Kosovo, for peace and stability and the perspective of Kosovo becoming part of NATO and the European Union.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, in his 2022 speech, PM Kurti said that “*it took a Reçak for NATO and the West to understand that when the carnage does not stop, it cannot return to normality*”<sup>16</sup>, asserting that the occurrence of the Reçak event was necessary before NATO and the Western powers could understand the danger of violence persisting in the absence of intervention. During the same event, President Osmani reiterated the role played by the international community in Kosovo, stating that Kosovars were able to attain freedom thanks to the commitment and sacrifice of the people of Kosovo, as well as to the help of the permanent allies from the democratic world.<sup>17</sup>

The former OSCE chief in Kosovo and American diplomat, William Graham Walker, played a substantial role in the aftermath of the Reçak Massacre in Kosovo. The day after the massacre had occurred, Walker went to the scene and became the first international witness to report to the world that the events in Kosovo were a violation of human rights - more specifically, he referred to the mass killings as “a crime against humanity”.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, the Reçak Massacre and Walker’s statement played a role in NATO’s decision to employ military force against the Serbian army and police in Kosovo. Since then, Walker has held a prominent role in the annual

12 U.S. Department of State. (1999). “Clinton Press Conference (Excerpts on Kosovo).” 19 March 1999, available at: [https://1997-2001.state.gov/policy\\_remarks/1999/990319\\_clinton\\_kosovo.html](https://1997-2001.state.gov/policy_remarks/1999/990319_clinton_kosovo.html).

13 Transcript 2016.

14 Ibid.

15 Transcript 2017.

16 Transcript 2022.

17 Ibid.

18 Morina, D. (2016) “Kosovo Massacre Village Honours OSCE Chief with Statue.” *Balkan Insight*, 23 December 2016, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/12/23/kosovo-keeps-memorialization-to-statue-12-22-2016/>.





commemorations of Reçak, and despite his advanced age, he has persevered in attending these commemorations and delivering a speech on each occasion.

In recognition of Walker's contributions, a statue was installed in his honour in the village of Reçak in early 2017, as a testament to the impact of his efforts and as a symbol of appreciation for his role in helping the Kosovo Albanians during and after the war.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, in January of 2023, the Government of Kosovo announced the allocation of 70 thousand euros for the publication of a book on the Reçak Massacre. The book will provide an account of the massacre from the perspective of Ambassador William Walker and, according to PM Kurti, it will be financially supported on account of its historical significance. *"This Sunday marks 24 years since the Reçak Massacre that horrified and shocked Kosovo, but also alerted and alarmed the democratic world and international diplomacy," said Kurti at the government meeting. "In front of you stand the proposal-decision for the allocation of 70,000 euros for the research, writing, editing, translation and printing of the book of the memoirs of Ambassador William Walker and the Massacre of January 15, 1999, in the village of Reçak"*.<sup>20</sup>

The annual commemoration event of the Reçak Massacre, since the mid-2000s up to now, typically features a speech by Ambassador Walker and is often accompanied by recognition of his noteworthy contributions for Kosovo by all political leaders present at the event. During the 24<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the massacre, Kosovo's political leaders once again reinforced the narrative that the mass killings committed in Reçak turned into one of the most powerful and indisputable arguments for the NATO intervention which came two months later.<sup>21</sup> During the 2023 event, Kurti expressed his appreciation for Walker's efforts, saying, *"The Albanian people will always be grateful to Ambassador Walker, that at a time when there were few voices who spoke clearly and strongly about Kosovo in the international discourse, he told the truth about the war crimes that Serbia committed in Kosovo, speaking not simply with diplomatic language, but with the language of pure humanity"*.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, President Osmani expressed her gratitude to Walker, by saying that *"the turning-point for Kosovo was connected with a name and a man who had undertaken to lead the observation mission in Kosovo: Ambassador William Walker, who today, just like in 1999 and every year after that, is here together with the residents of Reçak, together with his family and together with all of Kosovo"*.<sup>23</sup>

During the annual 2023 commemoration event, Ambassador Walker recounted a series of questions a young Kosovar journalist had put to him, including as to whether the events that transpired following the Reçak Massacre, including the NATO bombing campaign, the withdrawal of Serbian forces, and the subsequent emergence of an independent Republic of Kosovo, would have occurred if he had not been present on January 16th and spoken the words he did – to which he answered with a very simple answer, "Absolutely".<sup>24</sup>

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19 Ibid.

20 Nacionale (2023). "Qeveria Ndan 70 Mijë Euro Për Botimin e Një Libri Për Masakrën e Reçakut Nga Perspektiva e William Walker." *Nacionale*, 8 February 2023, available at: <https://nacionale.com/politike/qeveria-ndan-70-mije-euro-per-botimin-e-nje-libri-per-masakren-e-recakut-nga-perspektiva-e-william-walker>.

21 Transcript 2023.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.



Another recurrent feature in the discourse of Kosovo's political leaders regarding the Reçak Massacre is reference to the denial of the atrocities and the derogatory characterisation of the killed civilians by the Serbian officials. In 2019, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic declared that the Reçak Massacre was "fabricated". *"It was all falsified by that global fraudster, scammer, and swindler Walker"*, according to Vucic, who added that he would persistently assert, on a daily basis, that the Reçak Massacre was a fabrication.<sup>25</sup> Vucic's declaration came after Ivan Todosijevic, a Member of Parliament for the Lista Srpska party, was found guilty by the Basic Court of Prishtina of inciting ethnic, racial, or religious hatred through the remarks he made regarding the Reçak Massacre during a commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the NATO bombing of former Yugoslavia.<sup>26</sup> *"The reason for the [NATO] aggression in our country was the so-called humanitarian catastrophe in Kosovo, and the fabricated Reçak"*, stated Todosijevic.<sup>27</sup> These statements provoked anger in Kosovo, leading Kosovo's political leaders to express their condemnation. In 2019, former PM, Ramush Haradinaj, leader of the AAK party, wrote on a Facebook post that Vučić has a *"pathological hatred of Albanians"*, and that Serbia *"shamelessly preserves the criminal mentality inherited from Milosevic's time"*<sup>28</sup>; whilst former President Taçi declared that the future is not built by denying crimes or by labelling or insulting civilians killed in Kosovo.<sup>29</sup> In her recent speech of 2022, President Vjosa Osmani also addressed the issue of the denial of the Reçak Massacre, reiterating her stance on the matter: *"The tendencies to deny the Reçak Massacre are a clear attempt to rehabilitate those who committed the crime, but propaganda can never change historical facts. Especially not a truth that happened before the eyes of the whole world. A crime against humanity took place in Reçak, but also a manifestation of the intention of Serbia at that time to wipe out Albanians from the face of the earth – and Reçak is one of the many terrible massacres where this intention was witnessed"*.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, regarding Vucic's statements on the denial of the massacre committed in Reçak, Prime Minister Kurti said that *"those who deny the genocide, dream of its repetition"*.<sup>31</sup> Likewise, Ambassador Walker also reacted to these statements during his visit in Reçak in 2020, commenting that *"when people ask me about my reaction regarding the statements of President Vucic, who calls me a liar, and claims that Reçak did not happen, my reaction is that I am once again listening to the words of Slobodan Milošević"*.<sup>32</sup>

A frequent feature of the discourse observed in the speeches delivered by the heads of state during the commemoration of Reçak is the persistent call for justice to be served for the victims and survivors of the violent conflict, which according to them, thus far remains inadequately addressed so far. Former PM Haradinaj, during his 2019 speech at the Reçak commemorative cultural event, stated the following: *"No one has given Kosovo any certificate showing how all these people died. How were they taken from Reçak, Meja, Suhareka, Studimja? Who took them? Did they take any of their organs? Did they kill or rape them? No data has been given to this country by anyone. No one has given us an explanation, a simple certificate showing*

25 Prishtina Insight (2019). "Vucic Denial of Reçak Massacre Sparks Outrage in Kosovo", *Prishtina Insight*, 6 December 2019, available at: <https://prishtinainsight.com/vucic-denial-of-recak-massacre-sparks-outrage-in-kosovo/>.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Transcript 2019.

30 Transcript 2022.

31 Transcript 2023.

32 Transcript 2020.



clearly what has happened”.<sup>33</sup> On January 15<sup>th</sup> 2019, former President Thaçi wrote on his Facebook page: “One day Serbian police and military forces will be held accountable for the crimes that they were committed in Kosovo. Bilateral relations can only be built when Serbian leaders accept responsibility and apologise for the crimes committed in Kosovo”.<sup>34</sup> In 2020, Thaçi once again addressed the demand for justice to be adequately dispensed to the victims and survivors of Reçak, and of Kosovo more broadly. “Despite the killings, rapes, deportations, and houses burned by Serbia in Kosovo, international justice, in which the people of Kosovo had hoped, has failed. The international silence on the Serbian genocide in Kosovo has encouraged or emboldened the Serbian authorities to deny the crime and massacre in Reçak”<sup>35</sup>, the former President of Kosovo stated. Statements by political leaders continued during the COVID-19 period as well, when PM Kurti asserted with the utmost emphasis that “Justice delayed is justice denied”; whilst according to President Osmani, since justice is still not being served, it means that the genocidal mind is still dominant.<sup>36</sup>

Kosovo’s political leaders have consistently claimed throughout the years that the violent acts committed by Serbia in Reçak and other parts of Kosovo amounted to genocide. “Genocide denial is the final stage of genocide. It is what Elie Wiesel called a ‘double murder’. Denial kills the dignity of the survivors and seeks to destroy the memory of the crime. In a century ravaged by genocide, we affirm the moral necessity of remembrance”,<sup>37</sup> declared PM Kurti during his 2022 speech at the Reçak memorial event. Likewise, in the same year, President Osmani stated; “We will never allow the truth to be covered by the dust of history or the tendencies to change history, and we will not allow it to be repeated – and not only in Kosovo: being witnesses and victims of a genocide regime, we will we raise our voice against genocide, crimes against humanity, and against war crimes, all over the world”.<sup>38</sup>

Even though state commemorations of the Reçak Massacre are organised every year, the survivors of Reçak have nevertheless expressed their discontent with the institutions of Kosovo, citing the lack of attention paid to the families of those who lost their lives during the massacre. When asked about this in 2019, they declared that their biggest disappointment is that the perpetrators are not being punished – on the contrary, only Kosovo Albanians are being subjected to punishment.<sup>39</sup> The record shows that convictions in relation to Reçak have been exceedingly rare. Vlastimir Đorđević, a Serbian former police colonel-general, was found guilty of war crimes against Kosovo Albanians before the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), and Reçak was one of several crimes for which he was accused and convicted.<sup>40</sup> However, at the 24<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration of the Reçak Massacre, it was announced that, for the first time since the cessation of the armed conflict between Kosovo and Serbia, 18 individuals suspected of being involved in the killings that occurred on January 15, 1999, in the

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33 Transcript 2019.

34 Ibid.

35 Transcript 2020.

36 Transcript 2021.

37 Transcript 2022.

38 Ibid.

39 Insajderi (2019). “Familjarët e Viktimave të Masakrës Së Reçakut, të Zhgënjyer me Institucionet Shtetërore,” *Insajderi*, January 2019, available at: <https://insajderi.com/familjaret-e-viktimave-te-masakres-se-recakut-te-zhgenjyer-me-institucionet-shteterore/>

40 ICTY (2014) *Prosecutor v. Vlastimir Đorđević*, Case No. IT-05-87/1-A, Appeals Chamber’s Judgement.



town of Reçak, are finally being sought by Kosovo's judiciary.<sup>41</sup> The request was made by Kosovo through UNMIK to Interpol, for the issuance of red notices that would require states globally to detain the suspects.

### 3.3. Conclusion

Between 2013 and 2023, the ceremonial observances of the Reçak Massacre have remained the same in structure. Notwithstanding, a notable development is the progressively increasing number of individuals visiting the site annually to honour the victims. In the first years, when the commemorations at the memorial complex had just started, the event was mostly attended by the families of the victims, whereas now it has expanded to political figures and other individuals coming from all across the region. The Reçak Massacre holds a special place in the memory politics of Kosovo as it symbolises the event that prompted international action and intervention. The international community's response was crucial in elevating the Kosovo conflict to the status of a global concern, shedding light on the widespread human rights abuses committed at that time. Therefore, this massacre became a rallying point for the Kosovo Albanians, solidifying their perception of victimhood and fostering a sense of collective memory and shared trauma.

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41 Bami, Xh. (2023). "Kosovo Seeks Arrest of 18 Wartime Massacre Suspects." *Balkan Insight*, 16 January 2023, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/01/16/kosovo-seeks-arrest-of-18-wartime-massacre-suspects/>



## 4. The Attack on Prekaz

### 4.1. Introduction

The Attack on Prekaz, which took place from March 5<sup>th</sup> to March 7<sup>th</sup>, 1998, in the region of Drenica, was a crucial event in the Kosovo-Serbia conflict. Serbian security forces launched a violent three-day assault on the village of Prekaz, which was known to be a stronghold of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), resulting in the deaths of 59 ethnic Albanians. Among the victims were Adem Jashari, the leader and founding member of the KLA, his brother Hamëz Jashari, also an important KLA commander, and most of their family members, including several young children.<sup>42</sup>

The killing of the Jashari family evoked an outpouring of anger and grief among Kosovars and across the Albanian diaspora, releasing a wave of solidarity and drawing international attention to the conflict. Likewise, it also served to inspire a sense of homogeneity among members of Kosovar society, pushing them to unify and stand together against the Serbian forces. Over half a million Kosovars protested over the killing of the Jashari family. A large number of people attended the Jashari family's funeral, while Ibrahim Rugova, the former President of Kosovo, declared two days of mourning.<sup>43</sup> The Jashari family's armed resistance was seen as a patriotic sacrifice for the nation, played a critical role in Kosovo's quest for independence, and then became enshrined as the central theme in Kosovar national ideologies, Kosovo War narratives, and state-building practices.<sup>44</sup>

In Kosovo, the remembrance of the Jashari family serves as a potent tool for shaping and legitimising the narrative of resistance against oppression, underlining the significance of their sacrifice in the struggle for independence. The remembrance of the Jashari family, as founders and leaders of the KLA, represents a deliberate effort to forge a collective memory that not only acknowledges their pivotal role but also symbolises the broader resistance against Serbian forces during the Kosovo conflict. By highlighting their bravery and sacrifice, political events and commemorations in their honour reinforce a shared narrative of heroic struggle, cultivating a collective memory that strengthens the sense of national identity and solidarity. Moreover, memory politics in Kosovo also reflect the complex interplay between individual and collective memory. The Jashari family's loss, as an emblematic representation of sacrifice and resilience, resonates deeply with the Kosovar population, evoking a profound emotional response and forging a sense of collective trauma. This emotional resonance helps foster a collective identity rooted in shared experiences and historical consciousness, further shaping the memory politics of Kosovo.

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42 Bailey, F. (2018), "20 years later, fires still burn in Prekaz." *Prishtina Insight*, 6 March 2018, available at: <https://prishtinainsight.com/20-years-later-fires-still-burn-prekaz-mag/>.

43 Krasniqi, V. (2016), "Between History and Memory: The Jashari Family Memorial in Prekaz." *Cultures of History Forum*, 25 July 2016, available at: <https://www.cultures-of-history.uni-jena.de/debates/the-jashari-family-memorial-in-prekaz-kosovo>.

44 Ibid.



## 4.2. Commemorative Practices

Annually, from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> of March, a multitude of citizens convene at the “Adem Jashari” Memorial Complex located in Prekaz, in the Skenderaj municipality, to commemorate the marking of ‘The Epopee of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA)’, also referred to in Albanian as ‘Epopëja e UÇK-së’. The Memorial Complex stands out as the most expansive memorial complex built after the war, thereby emphasising its utmost historical importance. The purpose of the three-day gatherings is to honour the Jashari family and their relatives, who lost their lives at the hands of Serbian forces in what is widely considered one of the most significant atrocities perpetrated during the conflict. In March of each year, the political leaders of Kosovo reiterate that the Jashari family’s bravery and selflessness represent a cornerstone in the country’s ongoing fight for liberation – a fight which continues to this day, as the perpetrators of the massacre remain unpunished. Hence, this analysis seeks to examine the collective recollection and historical accounts of the Prekaz Massacre. Specifically, it intends to highlight how political leaders and society at large have memorialised this event during the past decade, emphasising the pivotal role played by Adem Jashari and his family, who are considered as being among those who made the ultimate sacrifice in the struggle for freedom. This study aims to explore several key themes related to the Prekaz massacre commemoration, starting with a particular focus on the organisation of the three-day commemorative events, as well as the construction of the Jashari Family Memorial and its symbolic meaning. It further continues with identifying common elements present in the speeches of Kosovo’s political leaders, including the reverence for Adem Jashari and his family’s selflessness in fighting for their country’s liberation, the glorification of the KLA and its impact on contemporary Kosovo politics, and the appeal to shared honour and to the duty never to forget the atrocious events that took place during the conflict.

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Over the past decade, the commemoration of the anniversary of the “Epopee of the KLA” has been marked annually with a diverse range of events organised on March 5, 6, and 7. Typically, the programme of activities is overseen and sponsored by the Government of Kosovo, with the Ministry of Defence serving as the primary organising body. The activities typically include sports tournaments, tributes, and exhibitions. The programme of activities follows a standard structure each year, beginning on the morning of March 5<sup>th</sup> with activities involving local students in schools around Kosovo, followed by activities on the social media channels of the diplomatic missions of the country. This is then followed by a Solemn Session in all Municipal Assemblies, as well as at the main Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo. The Kosovo Security Force (KSF) then assembles at the “Adem Jashari” Barracks, culminating in an open day for citizens to visit the barracks, which are located in Prishtina.<sup>45</sup> On March 6<sup>th</sup>, the day’s events begin with the paying of homage at the Memorial Complex in Prekaz, followed by similar homages at all of the KLA Martyrs’ memorial complexes. Photo and video installations, or other appropriate exhibitions, depicting the history of March 5, 6, and 7, are usually set up at “Skënderbeu” Square in the capital city. The day concludes with a Memorial Cultural Event, typically held at the Red Hall in the Palace of Youth in Prishtina.<sup>46</sup> On the third and final day, March 7<sup>th</sup>, the first lesson taught in schools throughout Kosovo is dedicated to the ‘Epopee of the KLA’. Additionally, the Night of Fires is celebrated with a concert held at “Adem Jashari Square” in Skenderaj. Finally, as a longstanding tradition, flares are lit in the seven operational areas of the KLA and

45 Ramadani, D. (2022), “Programi i aktivitetëve për manifestimin e Epopesë së UÇK-së.” *Kallxo*, 26 February 2022, available at: <https://kallxo.com/lajm/programi-i-aktivitetëve-per-manifestimin-e-epopese-se-uck-se/>.

46 Ibid.



at the “Adem Jashari” Memorial, with citizens lighting bonfires around Prekaz and gathering to remember the Jashari family and their legacy, with traditional music and dancing.<sup>47</sup>

The Jashari Family Memorial has emerged as the foremost destination for political tourism in Kosovo, with a visitor count surpassing 11 million.<sup>48</sup> Following the cessation of hostilities in 1999, construction of the “Adem Jashari” Memorial Complex commenced at a gradual pace, culminating in its finalisation in 2022, which is presently administered by the Agency for the Management of Monuments and Memorial Complexes (AMKMK) in Kosovo. The Memorial is situated in Prekaz, Skënderaj, and stands as a commemorative monument to the Martyrs of the Battle of Jasharaj. In recognition of its profound significance for the citizens of Kosovo from the ontological, anthropological, historical, and cultural perspectives, the Kosovo Assembly passed a law to declare the complex an area of special national interest, thereby affirming the need to safeguard this significant location.<sup>49</sup> The “Adem Jashari” Memorial is comprised of a garden, a museum and two buildings, and is guarded by members of the KSF. The graves of the fallen soldiers are located in the garden, whereas the museum features an array of everyday objects that once belonged to those who died in the clash, including Adem Jashari’s rifle, which he used during the battle. The two buildings that form part of the complex are situated within the battleground, and bear evidence of the combat in the form of the bullet holes and significant structural damage caused by heavy artillery. Furthermore, they are enveloped in scaffolding, allowing visitors to witness the extent of the destruction caused by the battle.<sup>50</sup>

The memorial’s architecture is rooted in a triple symbolism, which corresponds to its three constituents: the residence, the graveyard, and the museum/gallery. The significance of the numeral “three” in the memorial’s design represents the three assaults on the Jashari family, that of 1992, and those later of January and March of 1998, and highlights their three-day armed confrontation. Moreover, it alludes to the reality that there were three Jashari brothers and that Adem had three young sons.<sup>51</sup> The memorial aims to encapsulate both life and death, and represents a platform for constructing national identity. It is designed as a nationalist space where the essence of the nation is displayed openly, functioning as a locus for collective memory where visitors actively recollect the violent conflict. The memorial aims to foster national public grief, and to commemorate the nation’s struggle as well as legitimise state authority, by glorifying the Jashari family and their armed struggle.<sup>52</sup> The Memorial has become a dominant symbol of collective memory, and is included in history textbooks with the aim of serving as a pedagogical venue for organised school visits. It represents an affirmation of place, family, and nation, and it serves as a linkage of three important elements – memory, history, and the nation.<sup>53</sup>

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47 Ibid.

48 Krasniqi, V. (2016), “Between History and Memory: The Jashari Family Memorial in Prekaz.” Cultures of History Forum, 25 July 2016, available at: <https://www.cultures-of-history.uni-jena.de/debates/the-jashari-family-memorial-in-prekaz-kosovo>.

49 AMKMK (n.d.). “Kompleksi Memorial Adem Jashari - Prekaz, Skenderaj,” AMKMK, available at: [https://amkmk.rks-gov.net/acadp\\_listings/kompleksi-memorial-adem-jashari-prekaz-prekaz/](https://amkmk.rks-gov.net/acadp_listings/kompleksi-memorial-adem-jashari-prekaz-prekaz/)

50 Cortesi, M. (2022). “Memorial Complex Adem Jashari.” *Atlas Obscura*, 5 August 2022, available at: <https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/memorial-complex-adem-jashari>

51 Krasniqi, V. (2016), “Between History and Memory: The Jashari Family Memorial in Prekaz.” Cultures of History Forum, 25 July 2016, available at: <https://www.cultures-of-history.uni-jena.de/debates/the-jashari-family-memorial-in-prekaz-kosovo>

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.



An integral aspect of the annual Prekaz commemoration involves the delivery of speeches and declarations by political leaders, including representatives from both the ruling and opposition parties, with particular emphasis on political figures who were formerly associated with the KLA. Remarkably, amidst the varying political affiliations and ideologies, a shared reverence for the Jasharaj family, and in particular for the “legendary commander” Adem Jashari, is evident in these speeches. Throughout them, a recurring motif is the emphasis on the Jasharaj family’s fortitude in the face of persistent assaults by Serbian police and military forces, providing a symbol of unwavering resilience, sacrifice, and determination. In her 2022 speech, the President of Kosovo, Vjosa Osmani, highlighted that for the Jashari family, as well as for all of Kosovo, besiegement, torture, murder, and imprisonment were becoming a grim part of their daily reality. *“The Jashari family was surrounded on December 30, 1991, and on January 22, 1998, but they never surrendered. Not even in the decisive battle of March 5, 6 and 7, when numerous paramilitary and military forces surrounded the town of Jasharaj, in Prekaz. The family, alongside fellow villagers and fighters, resisted for many hours, although many of its members fell from the grenades that destroyed the roof of the house and the walls of the tower. Among them were many children under the age of 16, but also Adem Jashari himself, who thus became a symbol of human sacrifice and a symbol of resistance, thereby laying our strong foundations for freedom.”*<sup>54</sup> Similarly, in 2023, the Prime Minister of Kosovo, Albin Kurti, during the commemorative event of Prekaz, stated the following: *“On March 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, and 7<sup>th</sup> of 1998, members of the Jashari family resisted in their hometown, where they had learned to love their homeland and been raised to fight for its freedom even at the cost of their lives. In the family home of Shaban Jashari in Prekaz, there was a three-day-long battle, under a siege by several thousand Serbian police troops who, using heavy military machinery, fired grenades, and bombarded intensely on Shaban’s house, killing a total of 59 people.”*<sup>55</sup> Likewise, the former PM of Kosovo, also a former commander of the KLA, Ramush Haradinaj, in his 2019 speech stated that *“thanks to the ultimate and unparalleled sacrifice of the Jasharaj for freedom, a historical turning point had occurred for Kosovo. A sacrifice unmatched in its grandeur, which amplified the call for oppressed Albanians on a global scale. The Jasharaj gave everything they had for us and for what is ours.”*<sup>56</sup>

The events surrounding the Jasharaj family and the violent attack that transpired in Prekaz are inextricably linked to the KLA, as well as to the establishment of the current military of Kosovo, the FSK. This connection is prominently exemplified during the commemoration of the Prekaz Massacre, as evidenced by the speeches delivered by various political leaders. PM Kurti in his 2023 speech said that *“the origin of the Kosovo army must be sought in the late 80s, when Adem started to talk with his comrades about the need for Kosovo to have its own army. Therefore, today we are fulfilling Adem Jashari’s vision for the Kosovo army, as we assist the Kosovo Security Force, which is in the process of transformation into the Armed Forces of Kosovo, by increasing personnel and enhancing capacities, equipping them with modern weapons and training them in the best military academies of our allied countries.”*<sup>57</sup> He further told the story of how the first armed groups created by the Jashari brothers later formed the core cells from which the KLA would emerge and be born. *“It was 1993 when their older brother, Rifat Jashari, who worked in Germany, would send military uniforms to Hamza and Adem. It is those uni-*

54 Transcript 2022.

55 Transcript 2023.

56 Transcript 2019.

57 Transcript 2023.





forms that we have seen Adem and Hamza wearing in photographs and video recordings from that time. Symbolically, they can be called the first uniforms of the KLA. The one who bought those military uniforms in 1993, making the biggest and most valuable investment for Kosovo, Rifat Jashari, is with us today, facing thousands of uniforms worn by the soldiers of the KSF.<sup>58</sup> Also in 2023, President Osmani emphasised that during the days of the Epopee, we remember not only those who gave their lives for freedom, but also the courage and bravery of all KLA soldiers who fought without hesitation to defend Kosovo. *“I am proud of every one of our soldiers, because, led by the memory and honour of our glorious history, together we are building, developing, and strengthening our capacities with our international allies, to become fully effective, and contributors to the defence of the values that unite us: peace, freedom, and democracy at home and everywhere in the world.”*<sup>59</sup> Likewise, former President as well as ex-member of the KLA, Hashim Thaçi, who today stands before the Kosovo Specialist Chambers (KSC) in the Hague facing charges on war crimes, said in his 2017 speech, *“No unfriendly stance can ever tarnish the KLA, it remains our greatest and richest heritage, created by the history of Kosovo. Just as the sublime sacrifice of the Jasharaj and all the martyrs of Kosovo will be eternal and highly valued, so will be the glory and name of the KLA”*.<sup>60</sup>

The President of the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) Party, also a former minister, Lumir Abdixhiku, in the recent 2023 annual remembrance of Prekaz expressed the belief that remembering and marking the ‘Epopee of the KLA’ means remembering and marking the very foundation of the state of Kosovo and our collective effort for freedom. He added, *“Remembering the Jasharaj means to remember and mark the sacrifice, resilience, and determination of our people reflected in one single family, in what today stands as a pilgrimage temple for future generations, and what a quarter of a century ago stood as a call for our final road towards freedom.”*<sup>61</sup> In a similar vein, PM Kurti, in his 2022 memorial speech, stated that we must always talk about the past. *“We should honour it, especially in these difficult times we are going through together. We need to actively work to remember our past for what it was, so that we never falter in the face of the provocations being made against us as a people – before the attempts to change the truth of the war.”*<sup>62</sup> Moreover, he insisted on putting differences aside and coming together to appreciate the war of the KLA and the sacrifices made. In the same way, former KLA commander and leader of the Nisma Socialdemokrate Party, Fatmir Limaj, in 2019 stated that *“The visits to Prekaz should serve all of us to remember that what we have and enjoy today is the result of the biblical sacrifice of the Jasharaj family”*.<sup>63</sup> President Osmani in her latest speech at the Prekaz annual commemoration also stated that we must continue to honour the memory of all those who came before us, inspire future generations, and follow in their footsteps.<sup>64</sup>

### 4.3. Conclusion

The narratives of the Prekaz Massacre have remained static throughout the last decade. The event is commemorated annually, over the course of a prominent three-day observance, with politi-

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58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.

60 Transcript 2017.

61 Transcript 2023.

62 Transcript 2022.

63 Transcript 2019.

64 Transcript 2023.



cal speeches exhibiting minimal variation from year to year. Typically characterised by a uniform structure, the speeches of political leaders at the commemoration events for the Prekaz Massacre exalt the KLA and their endeavours for the sake of self-determination, while venerating the Jashari family's sacrifice for freedom and for the future of Kosovo. This can be evidenced in every commemorative occasion of Prekaz, such as in the former President Atifete Jahjaga's speech in 2014: "Every year on this day, we remember and honour the sublime sacrifice of all those who gave their lives for the country, for freedom, and for peace. We also remember the sacrifice of all the generations who, with their ideals, gave their lives and spirits for our independence."<sup>65</sup> Similarly, in 2016, former PM and leader of the LDK party, Isa Mustafa, stated: "Today, we are paying tribute to the Jashari Family, all those who fell for the freedom and independence of Kosovo. Today, we are commemorating the most brutal and barbaric actions of the Serbian army and paramilitary forces that occurred in Kosovo, but also the bravery and greatest sacrifice made by an Albanian family for the independence and freedom of Kosovo."<sup>66</sup> Likewise, according to former President Hashim Thaçi, the sublime sacrifice of the family marked an extraordinary turning-point in the national and international level of the Kosovo conflict.<sup>67</sup> "The world began to understand Kosovo correctly. The Epopee of the KLA proved that there was no turning back in our struggle for freedom and liberation. The KLA became the greatest national project in the history of the Albanian nation."<sup>68</sup> During the commemorative speech in 2021, President Osmani recounted what Adem Jashari once said. "In one of the few video recordings of Adem Jashari, our freedom missionary, he made it clear what he wanted at the time. The freedom of the country, without any conditions, bound by a pledge of allegiance with all those comrades-in-arms who had the courage to become servants of freedom."<sup>69</sup> So also, in the latest 2023 annual observance, PM Kurti expressed that "It was precisely this war that not only freed us from the occupier and brought us the state of the Republic, but also created the space for us to live in freedom, and paved the way for us to build democratic and sustainable institutions."<sup>70</sup>

Adem Jashari, the "legendary commander", is the saintly figure and source of inspiration for Kosovo's national tale, just as every nation has its own saint(s) and narrative. The legacy of Adem Jashari and his family is evidenced by the many schools, squares, and streets named after him throughout the country.<sup>71</sup> He is also celebrated in traditional songs, literature, and paintings, and his image appears on various souvenirs, including calendars, watches, and notebooks.<sup>72</sup> The enduring presence of Adem Jashari's legacy is evident in the annual speeches delivered by political leaders, no matter what party they represent, with the aim of honouring the memory of the Prekaz resistance and its significance. Adem Jashari's name is deeply ingrained in the politics of remembrance in Kosovo, symbolising patriotism, resistance against Serbian forces, and the selfless pursuit of the nation's liberation.

65 Transcript 2014.

66 Transcript 2016.

67 Transcript 2019.

68 Ibid.

69 Transcript 2021.

70 Transcript 2023.

71 Di Lellio, A. & Schwandner-Sievers, S. (2006). "The Legendary Commander: The Construction of an Albanian Master-Narrative in Post-War Kosovo", *Nations and Nationalism* 12, no. 3 (2006): 513–529, July 2006, available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/227723130\\_The\\_Legendary\\_Commander\\_the\\_construction\\_of\\_an\\_Albanian\\_master-narrative\\_in\\_post-war\\_Kosovo](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/227723130_The_Legendary_Commander_the_construction_of_an_Albanian_master-narrative_in_post-war_Kosovo).

72 Ibid.



## 5. The Krusha Massacres

### 5.1. Introduction

Between March 25<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup>, 1999, over 300 civilians, including men, women, elderly, and children, were killed in the village of Krusha in the Municipality of Rahovec, both in Krusha e Madhe and Krusha e Vogël. More than 150 women were widowed and over 500 children were left orphaned, and the mortal remains of more than 130 missing persons have not yet been discovered.<sup>73</sup>

The remembrance of the Krusha Massacres presents a distinctive perspective on the Kosovo War, offering insights that set it apart from other events. What unfolded in Krusha revealed a gendered dynamics, where men were notably absent and women predominantly took centre stage. This unique dynamic profoundly influenced the shaping of Krusha's memory, bringing to light the experiences of widowhood and the specific challenges faced by women in the aftermath of the war. Unlike the typical focus on KLA fighters, international assistance, and justice for the victims in conflict-related commemorations, the remembrance of the Krusha massacres highlights the strength, courage, and resilience of the surviving women. It acknowledges the profound loss they endured and the lasting impact it has had on their lives. This case stands out within the context of memory politics in Kosovo, serving as an example of recognising and amplifying women's experiences. Importantly, Krusha is perhaps the sole instance related to the 1998–99 war in Kosovo that centres on women, giving voice to their stories and contributing to healing and reconciliation within the community. By doing so, it aims to ensure a more inclusive narrative, demonstrating the commitment to embrace the experiences of all those affected by the war.

### 5.2. Commemorative Practices

A commemorative complex has been built as a tribute to the fallen, predominantly comprising martyrs from Krusha e Madhe and other neighbouring villages. This complex encompasses the graves of civilians and soldiers, a memorial inscribed with the names of all those who were executed, an amphitheater, pedestrian pathways, landscaping, and electrical facilities, among other features. It is situated in the heart of Krusha e Madhe. Construction of the complex commenced in collaboration with local Krusha residents in 2013, with finalisation achieved in 2022. Additionally, a memorial complex has been constructed in memory of the fallen in Krusha e Vogël as well, which comprises the cemetery for the slain, greenery, pathways, and fencing. This commemorative monument was developed by the village of Krusha and the municipality of the city of Prizren.<sup>74</sup> Likewise, the construction of a museum near the Memorial Complex in Krusha e Madhe was inaugurated in 2020. According to those in charge of the museum, the construction project will involve the gathering of artifacts and survivors' testimonies, enabling both citizens of Kosovo and foreign individuals to learn about the heroism and significant resistance demonstrated by the residents of Krusha during the war for liberation.<sup>75</sup>

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73 Insajderi (2019). "Tregimi për gratë e Krushës, produktet e të cilave po shiten në Evropë." *Insajderi*, 28 September 2019, available at: <https://insajderi.org/tregimi-per-grate-e-krushes-produktet-e-te-cilave-po-shiten-ne-evrope/>.

74 AMKMK (n.d.). "Memoriali i Martirëve - Krushë e Vogël, Prizren," AMKMK, available at: [https://amkmk.rks-gov.net/acadp\\_listings/memoriali-i-martireve-krushe-e-vogel/](https://amkmk.rks-gov.net/acadp_listings/memoriali-i-martireve-krushe-e-vogel/).

75 Top Channel (2020). "Latifi: Muzeu në Krushë të Madhe vepër e rëndësishme e kujtesës historike", *Top Channel*, 28 November 2020, available at: <https://top-channel.tv/2020/11/28/latifi-muzeu-ne-krushe-te-madhe-veper-e-rendesishme-e-kujteses-historike/>.



Annually, typically on March 25<sup>th</sup> or 26<sup>th</sup>, political leaders from both the government and opposition parties, activists, family members of the victims, and people from all around Kosovo pay tribute to the victims. A common feature of these tributes is the delivery of speeches by political leaders and representatives from the surrounding municipalities. These speeches often draw attention to the unresolved fate of more than 130 missing persons from Krusha, whose remains have yet to be discovered. According to established facts, the remains of the victims were disposed of in the River Drini. The identification of the bodies was initially based on traditional methods, such as clothing or possessions, but was later replaced by DNA matching.<sup>76</sup> The search for missing individuals has been beset by challenges, including instances of misidentification. Consequently, family members have had to endure the distressing process of graves being repeatedly reopened.<sup>77</sup>

The status of the missing persons from Krusha is always addressed by political leaders during their annual commemorative speeches. In her 2023 speech in Krusha e Madhe, President Vjosa Osmani stated the following: *“The fate of the 72 residents of Krusha e Madhe, who still appear on the list of the forcibly disappeared persons, remains the same. The broken hearts of mothers, wives, sisters, and children of the people of Krusha still seek the missing justice. War crimes never age, just as genocide aimed at the destruction of the Albanian people won’t either. Today and always, we will not stop seeking that the perpetrators be brought to justice and that the fate of the great patriot Ukshin Hoti and all other Krusha residents be revealed.”*<sup>78</sup> On the same year, in Krusha e Vogël, President Osmani, tackled once again the issue of missing persons. *“We will never forget, and we will never forgive the crimes committed against the innocent people of Kosovo. Even today, 60 of your loved ones are among the missing persons who were subjected to violence, just like the over 1,000 others throughout Kosovo. With determination and perseverance, we will do our best and we will never stop seeking to clarify their fate. The fight for the freedom of Kosovo was a fight to defend the threshold of our homes, therefore this is the truth of our country, the truth of the people who sacrificed everything for the freedom of their country.”*<sup>79</sup> Former President of Kosovo, Hashim Thaçi, in 2019 also emphasised the fate of the missing persons. *“We will never forget them. We know that we haven’t done enough, as long as all the bodies of the victims have not been found and identified, which even today we have not been able to bring to the graves of Krusha e Vogël.”*<sup>80</sup> In 2017, former PM and leader of the LDK party, Isa Mustafa, issued a plea to the international community concerning the unresolved destiny of the missing individuals from Krusha. *“The democratic world must compel the Serbian state to condemn all the leaders in the commission of crimes, to clarify the fate of the missing persons, and to seek forgiveness for the countless crimes in Kosovo.”*<sup>81</sup>

During the commemorative speeches, another recurring element is the prominent attention given by politicians to Ukshin Hoti, a highly esteemed professor, writer, philosopher, patriot, and activist. Coming from the village of Krusha e Madhe, Hoti faced multiple arrests by Serbian authorities starting from 1982. In 1994, he was sentenced to a five-year prison term, which he served in Niš. Following the beginning of the NATO bombing of the FRY, he was transferred to the Dubrava pris-

76 Kadriu, A. (2020). “We Were Left Behind to Suffer.” Kosovo 2.0, 13 November 2020, available at: <https://kosovotwo-pointzero.com/en/we-were-left-behind-to-suffer/>

77 Ibid.

78 Transcript 2023.

79 Ibid.

80 Transcript 2019.

81 Transcript 2017.



on in Kosovo. He was released from prison a day before the end of his sentence, on May 16, 1999, and has been untraceable since then.<sup>82</sup> In his 2023 speech in remembrance of Krusha, Albin Kurti, Prime Minister of Kosovo, referred to Ukshin Hoti several times during his speech. *“Here we bow with deep longing, pain, and sorrow, but at the same time with great love, pride, and admiration for these men and women, led by Ukshin Hoti, who achieved the liberation of our country. Simultaneously, we also have guidance on how to move forward without stopping, precisely because of their deeds, because of their lives, because of their falling in acts of dedication and sacrifice.”*<sup>83</sup> In the same year, President Osmani stated the following: *“Krusha e Madhe is one of the most terrifying stories of our war. Unfortunately, the story of Krusha e Madhe is not over yet. We still need to work towards finding peace for the people of Krusha and all our citizens. The intellectual Ukshin Hoti’s vision of freedom, republic, and democracy has not yet been fulfilled, as we still lack justice for the victims. Therefore, we are left with the obligation to repay our debt to him.”*<sup>84</sup> Similarly, in the commemoration event of 2021, the Chairman of the Assembly of Kosovo, Glauk Konjufca, stated that for the past 22 years, the families in Krusha had endured the weight of profound suffering each day, owing to the unresolved fate of their relatives. Among them, Konjufca also referenced the disappearance of Ukshin Hoti, whose whereabouts remain unknown.<sup>85</sup> He further added: *“Institutions need to do more, including uncovering the fate of Ukshin Hoti. I pledge to do everything possible and will never cease not only to raise our voice on these issues, but also undertake concrete actions, not just declare ourselves on this matter.”*<sup>86</sup> Likewise, former PM and leader of the AAK party, Ramush Haradinaj, during his 2019 speech in Krusha, emphasised that Kosovo was willing to live in peace with others and that he strongly opposed any form of tragedy.<sup>87</sup> However, he further added: *“It is crucial to acknowledge the rights and tragic experiences of our own people, exemplified by notable cases such as the case of Professor Ukshin Hoti, which deeply impacted us and the world.”*<sup>88</sup> In 2012, during the commemorative event on the anniversary of the massacre, former President Atifete Jahjaga stated: *“We desire nothing else but freedom, independence, and democracy. This was also the ideal of the distinguished intellectual, the esteemed Professor Ukshin Hoti, to whom we owe the philosophy of political resistance, freedom, and state-building.”*<sup>89</sup>

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The village of Krusha is renowned for the remarkable resilience and determination exhibited by the women of Krusha as they rebuild their lives. Displaced with their children and forced to flee to the Albanian border, leaving behind their male family members, the women faced a tragic ordeal. The Serbian army ordered all the men in the village, aged 14 to 73, to gather, as their homes were set ablaze. Ultimately, most of the male family members were killed, leaving many women widowed.<sup>90</sup>

Initially, the women formed the “Widowed Women” (“Gratë e Veja”) organisation to locate missing individuals. Owing to limited support, it evolved into an agricultural cooperative called “Krusha”,

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82 Lajm.co (2020). “Kush ishte Ukshin Hoti.” *Lajm.co*, 16 May 2020, available at: <https://lajm.co/kush-ishte-ukshin-hoti/>  
83 Transcript 2023.

84 Ibid.

85 Transcript 2021.

86 Ibid.

87 Transcript 2019.

88 Ibid.

89 Transcript 2012.

90 Hyseni, A. (2021). “Re-claiming Life After War: Women of Krusha e Madhe.” Utopia-500, 13 October 2021, available at: <https://www.utopia500.net/post/re-claiming-life-after-war-women-of-krusha-e-madhe#:~:text=The%20women%20of%20this%20village,Afterwards%2C%20they%20were%20all%20killed>



where the women became primary providers for their families through farming and cultivation.<sup>91</sup> The women of Krusha are consistently acknowledged as a symbol of success and resilience in the aftermath of the conflict, as emphasised in commemorative annual speeches delivered by political figures in Kosovo, and recognised by the international community as well. In 2023, President Osmani during the commemorative event said: *“The women of Krusha have now become the embodiment of courage, sacrifice, and strength, transforming their pain into power for the present and the future. They serve as a motivation to move forward. The life stories of all the women of Krusha are an inspiration to all of us. It is your truth, but also our truth, and above all, it is an inspiration for all the citizens of Kosovo.”*<sup>92</sup> Likewise, in her 2022 speech, the President stated: *“Krusha e Madhe and Krusha e Vogël evoke pain, sorrow, but also pride. 23 years after the crime, the women of Krusha have transformed into a source of inspiration and a model of resilience against evil.”*<sup>93</sup> On the same year, in recognition of the sublime sacrifice and dedication of the women of Krusha, the Minister of Justice, Albulena Haxhiu presented them with a token of appreciation as a testament to their contribution to Kosovo.<sup>94</sup> Similarly, in 2020, the President of the Swiss National Council, Isabelle Moret, alongside the Swiss Ambassador to Kosovo, Thomas Kolly, visited the Memorial Complex in Krusha e Madhe. The delegation expressed Switzerland’s profound admiration for the unwavering dedication of the women of Krusha, despite their suffering, and commended the exceptional quality of their products, which have gained recognition both in Switzerland and beyond.<sup>95</sup> In 2012, former President Jahjaga, also expressed her acknowledgment to the women of Krusha. *“The commitment of the residents of Krusha, especially the women of this village, who lost the pillars of their families, who lost their loved ones, but never lost faith, determination, courage, and their spirit, is remarkable. They organised themselves, mobilised, and not only managed to survive but also to progress, develop, and return to a normal life, without ever forgetting the great tragedy that had befallen them.”*<sup>96</sup>

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A few investigations have been undertaken to address the massacre, mainly by the international missions operating in Kosovo, UNMIK and EULEX. In 2012, EULEX announced that over 50 Kosovo Serbs and former members of the Serbian security forces could be charged with war crimes for their alleged involvement in the killings of 113 ethnic Albanian civilians, expulsion of women and children, and destruction of property in the village of Krusha e Vogël.<sup>97</sup> However, so far, these inquiries and trials have produced limited results. Only one defendant has been identified and subsequently convicted of war crimes. In 2022, during the annual commemorative event, Selami Hoti, the representative of Krusha village, stated the following: *“Unfortunately, no one has been convicted for this crime so far. In two cases, there are suspicions that one individual, immediately after the war, Sava Matić, was involved, while now it is Darko Tasić. The former has not been sentenced at all, while the latter received a decision of 22 years initially, which was later halved to 11 years by the Court of Appeals, despite our complaint. He is convicted for the crimes committed in Krusha e Madhe and Krusha e*

91 Ibid.

92 Transcript 2023.

93 Transcript 2022.

94 Telegrafi (2022). “Gratë e Krushes marrin mirënjohje nga ministria Haxhiu.” *Telegrafi*, 8 March 2020, available at: <https://telegrafi.com/grate-e-krushes-marrin-mirenjohje-nga-ministria-haxhiu/>

95 Transcript 2020.

96 Transcript 2012.

97 Aliu, F. (2012). “Kosovo: Krusha e Vogel Massacre to be Investigated.” *Balkan Insight*, 18 June 2012, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2012/06/18/krusha-e-vogel-massacre-to-be-investigated/>



Vogël, but has only received an 11-year sentence.”<sup>98</sup> Similarly in 2021, PM Kurti also acknowledged the unresolved issue of accountability regarding the perpetrators of the Krusha massacres. “Justice for the crimes committed during the war by Serbia is lacking, and it is our institutional obligation to fully engage with the upcoming institution for war crimes and activate the special prosecution and justice system as a whole, in order to heal the wounds of war by uncovering the fate of the missing and delivering the justice that should prosecute and condemn the war criminals.”<sup>99</sup> He further added that: “Our wound is still open, because the criminals who committed these atrocities have not received the deserved punishment.”<sup>100</sup> In 2019, former US Ambassador to Kosovo, Philip Kosnett, stated the following in a tweet: “In Krusha we discussed how survivors of all communities deserve closure and justice, and how all governments can do more.”<sup>101</sup> Former President Thaçi in 2017 made a call to the justice authorities: “I once again encourage the justice authorities to investigate the Krusha murders and massacres, as well as everything throughout Kosovo, as soon as possible.”<sup>102</sup>

### 5.3. Conclusion

While the structure of these commemorations has remained unchanged, recent years have witnessed an increased focus from political leaders, who often participate in the remembrance events in both villages. Notably, attention has been directed towards the women of Krusha and their engagement in local product enterprises, a unique outcome of the aftermath of the war. Numerous books have been written about Krusha, including specific works focusing on the women of Krusha. In 2021, the film “Hive”, directed by Blerta Basholli, was released, depicting the true story of widows from Krusha who embark on a business venture to sell local food products with the aim of supporting their families. Regarding this, in 2022, PM Kurti tweeted: “Tomorrow Oscar nomination voting begins, including for ‘Hive’. This film, based on a true story, depicts the resilience of the women of Krusha. Their triumph came as a result of the strength they gave one another.”<sup>103</sup> The politics of remembrance surrounding Krusha shed light on the gendered dimensions of collective memory and the pursuit of justice in post-conflict Kosovo. Drawing on feminist memory studies, the remembrance of Krusha challenges the hegemonic narratives that often exclude or marginalise women’s experiences in conflicts. It emphasises the women’s agency and resilience, offering a counter-narrative that disrupts traditional power structures and redefines notions of heroism and victimhood. By centering on the experiences of women, the remembrance practices in Krusha, intentionally or unintentionally, create a more inclusive and gender-sensitive memory landscape, recognising the unique challenges that women face after the war. On the other hand, the memory politics related to Krusha also intersect with transitional justice, as they reveal the tensions between commemoration and the pursuit of accountability. While the commemorative events and speeches by political leaders pay tribute to the victims and survivors, the unresolved issue of justice underscores the complexities and limitations of transitional justice mechanisms in the country. The limited investigations and convictions for the atrocities committed in Krusha, and in Kosovo in general, raise questions about the effectiveness of post-conflict justice processes and the challenges in achieving meaningful accountability.

98 Transcript 2022.

99 Transcript 2021.

100 Ibid.

101 Transcript 2019.

102 Transcript 2017.

103 KultPlus (2022). “Kryeministri Kurti përkrah filmin Zgjoji: Triumfi i tyre erdhi si rezultat i forcës që i dhanë njëra-tjetrës.” *KultPlus*, 26 January 2022, available at: <https://www.kultplus.com/tag/hive-movie/>



## 6. The Battle of Koshare

### 6.1. Introduction

The Battle of Koshare (Beteja e Kosharës), a significant military engagement between the Yugoslav Army and the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), holds profound historical and political implications in Kosovo at present. Commencing on the morning of April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1999, a clash ensued when KLA members launched an offensive on the Yugoslav border outpost situated in Koshare, near the Yugoslav–Albanian frontier. The operation carried out by the soldiers of the KLA targeted three key positions of the Serbian forces: “7 Korriku” base, Rrasa e Kosharës, and the peak of Maja Gillava.<sup>104</sup> This encounter unfolded amidst the challenging topography of the Junik Mountains, characterised by rough terrain and elevations exceeding 2000 metres above sea level, compounded by inclement weather conditions, including cold temperatures and snow-fall.<sup>105</sup> The battle lasted until June 10<sup>th</sup>, 1999, which coincided with the NATO bombing campaign targeting the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY). The primary objective of the KLA was to infiltrate Kosovo from Albania and sever the communication routes of the Yugoslav Army. The KLA seized control of the Koshare outpost, along with several neighbouring border regions, in coordination with the Albanian army’s Kukës Division.<sup>106</sup> According to reports, 114 KLA fighters lost their lives during the Battle of Koshare.<sup>107</sup> The capture of Koshare from the Yugoslav forces represented a pivotal triumph for the KLA, particularly against the backdrop of mass deportations targeting ethnic Albanians.

From a strategic perspective, the Battle of Koshare held particular importance in capturing and securing the border with Albania, but also in establishing a stable background for support, logistical operations, medical aid, and so on. The breaking of the border between Yugoslavia and Albania not only marked a moral victory for the KLA, but also opened the way for the supply of weapons and logistical support to many war zones within Kosovo.<sup>108</sup> That fighters from all parts of Kosovo had been brought together in Brigade 138 under the one command of Commander Agim Ramadani, served to strengthen the trust of the local population in the KLA, as well to provide a motivation for the increased recruitment of volunteers.<sup>109</sup> Furthermore, this battle is considered as one of the strongest links in the unbreakable chain of national history, and is highly commemorated among the Albanians.

The government of Kosovo recognised the Battle of Koshare as a significant event in the establishment of their statehood, and consequently, they incorporated the date of the battle, specifically the 9<sup>th</sup> of April, into the national calendars and initiated annual commemorative ceremonies at the highest level of state involvement. Following the cessation of hostilities, the for-

104 Transcript 2023.

105 Jovanović, J. (2022). “A Battle for Remembrance? Narrating the Battle of Košare/Koshare in Belgrade- and Pristina-Based Media.” De Gruyter, 1 June 2022, available at: [www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/soeu-2022-0018/html?lang=en#j\\_soeu-2022-0018\\_ref\\_051](http://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/soeu-2022-0018/html?lang=en#j_soeu-2022-0018_ref_051)

106 Wikipedia (2023). “Battle of Koshare”, available at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_Ko%C5%A1are](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Ko%C5%A1are)

107 Koha (2019). “Presidenti shpall heronj të Kosovës 114 dëshmorët e rënë në Koshare.” *Koha*, 9 April 2019, available at: <https://www.koha.net/arberi/155784/presidenti-shpall-heronj-te-kosoves-114-deshmoret-e-rene-ne-koshare/>

108 D, B. (2023). “24 vjet nga Beteja e Koshares, thyerja e kufirit Kosovë-Shqipëri.” *Gazeta10*, 9 April 2023, available at: <https://gazeta10.com/24-vjet-nga-beteja-e-koshares-thyerja-e-kufirit-kosove-shqiperi/>

109 Ibid.





mer Koshare outpost emerged as a site of remembrance for Kosovo Albanians. Even during the ongoing military action, fallen fighters of the KLA were buried in that location, so that, by the time of the conclusion of the battle, a cemetery had already been established nearby to honour the fallen KLA members. However, over the years, some families chose to repatriate the remains of their loved ones and rebury them in their hometowns; although the memorial site continued to receive annual visits from people all around Kosovo and the broader region.<sup>110</sup> During the initial years of commemoration, in the early 2000s, an impactful display of unity took place as citizens assembled to form a procession stretching several kilometers towards Koshare.<sup>111</sup> This demonstration underscored the deep-rooted significance of the event for Kosovo Albanians, as it represented one of the most consequential days in their recent history. And political institutions and influential figures continue to orchestrate annual ceremonies and commemorations, ensuring the active participation of representatives at the highest levels of state authority.

The politics of remembrance surrounding the Battle of Koshare diverges from other war events because of its distinctive nature as a battle rather than a one-sided massacre. Unlike many other incidents that have portrayed Kosovo Albanians primarily as victims of Serbian aggression, the Battle of Koshare stands out as an emblem of resistance and empowerment. This shift in narrative presents Kosovars not only as victims but as fighters, shifting away from the victimhood narrative and emphasising their agency and bravery in confronting Yugoslav forces.

## 6.2. Commemorative Practices

In 2011, the Government of Kosovo designated the location where the Battle of Koshare occurred as a protected area of special interest. Likewise, based on that decision, the Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning – specifically, the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments - was obliged to develop a spatial plan for the protected zone of Koshare for a future period of at least 10 years.<sup>112</sup> The government's declaration recognised the zone's cultural and historical significance as a key part of the KLA war of 1998-99. According to the government, beyond its association with the liberation war, the area holds additional value in terms of its diverse landscape, biological richness, and natural and cultural heritage.<sup>113</sup> The memorial complex encompasses various components, such as the resting places of martyrs and veterans, a grandiose triumphal gate featuring 114 pillars that symbolically represent the 114 martyrs, an amphitheatre, a reception facility, a water fountain, a helipad, parking areas, pedestrian paths, landscaping, barracks, and an observatory. Furthermore, there are ongoing plans for the construction of an additional amphitheatre, a museum, a memorial park integrated within the gravesites, and a bridge.<sup>114</sup>

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110 Jovanović, J. (2022). "A Battle for Remembrance? Narrating the Battle of Košare/Koshare in Belgrade- and Pristina-Based Media." De Gruyter, 1 June 2022, available at: [www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/soeu-2022-0018/html?lang=en#j\\_soeu-2022-0018\\_ref\\_051](http://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/soeu-2022-0018/html?lang=en#j_soeu-2022-0018_ref_051)

111 Ibid.

112 Qeveria e Republikës së Kosovës, Ministria e Mjedisit dhe Planifikimit Hapësinor & Agjencia për Mbrojtjen e Mjedisit të Kosovës (2013). "Plani Hapësinor: Zona e Mbrojtur me Interes të Veçantë – Beteja e Koshares." Instituti për Planifikim Hapësinor, November 2013, available at: <http://www.testenv.info/DivisionDocs/1113%20-%20PH%20Beteja%20e%20Koshares%20-%20shqip.pdf>

113 Ibid.

114 Ibid.



As previously stated, the annual commemoration of the Battle of Koshare holds a prominent place among the remembrances of the Kosovo War. What sets this commemoration apart is its distinction as one of the most notable and triumphant battles of the KLA. It stands out on account of the unique circumstances in which KLA fighters engaged in a frontal battle along the Albanian border against Serbian forces. This battle marked a significant milestone, as it was the first time such a confrontation had taken place, further contributing to its esteemed status within the narrative of the war. The commemorative event, known as the “Days of the Eagle”, is celebrated annually to honour the heroic battle of the KLA which resulted in the breakthrough across the Yugoslav-Albanian border in Koshare. The “Days of the Eagle” event comprises three significant commemorations: April 9<sup>th</sup>, marking the day when the border was breached; April 11<sup>th</sup>, commemorating the sacrifice of the National Hero Agim Ramadani; and April 19<sup>th</sup>, remembering the fall of the National Hero Sali Çekaj. Both men were killed in action during the Battle of Koshare.<sup>115</sup> Annually, on April 9<sup>th</sup>, political figures from both the governing and opposition parties come together to honour the Battle of Koshare at the Memorial Complex dedicated to the battle. Following this solemn occasion, a commemorative gathering takes place, typically featuring speeches by government representatives, who share their reflections and remembrance speeches.

A recurring theme evident in the annual commemorative speeches surrounding the Battle of Koshare pertains to the profound pride associated with this historical event in Kosovo’s narrative. It is widely regarded as one of the defining moments in the struggle for freedom by the KLA. The battle’s decisive significance and enduring impact on the collective memory of the Kosovar people are consistently emphasised, underscoring its enduring role as a cornerstone of Kosovo’s historical consciousness. In 2022, President Vjosa Osmani declared: *“Today, we commemorate this battle as one of the proudest moments in our glorious history. This battle demonstrated that freedom is priceless, but it also revealed the exorbitant cost of that freedom for which we, as a nation, have paid. However, it has also showcased that the determination to achieve freedom and the indomitable spirit of the people are unyielding.”*<sup>116</sup> She further added: *“In its grandeur, in its indispensable and decisive role in the KLA’s struggle for freedom, this battle maintains an honourable place in our collective memory as a nation. Without exaggeration, as Mr. Quni, the commander of the reconnaissance sabotage battalion, has himself said, it transcends the boundaries of legend in terms of its organisational prowess.”*<sup>117</sup> In 2020, former President Hashim Thaçi also highlighted the significance of this battle: *“The Battle of Koshare was a decisive military triumph and a clear message to the displaced population of Kosovo that soon they would return to their homes.”*<sup>118</sup> Likewise, in 2016 former PM Isa Mustafa stated the following: *“This battle was one of the significant victories of the KLA’s war. In Koshare, the historical injustice of a century was halted and justly punished. On that day, more than ever before, the occupiers understood their weakness and recognised the power of the readiness and sacrifice displayed by our sons and daughters for the cause of freedom and independence. In Koshare, military discipline was intertwined with the professionalism of the leaders in this battle, as well as courage blended with willingness to spare nothing for the liberation of Koso-*

115 Telegrafi (2011). “Filloi manifestimi “Ditët e Shqipës.” *Telegrafi*, available at: <https://telegrafi.com/filloi-manifestimi-ditet-e-shqipes/>

116 Transcript 2022.

117 Ibid.

118 Transcript 2020.



vo.<sup>119</sup> As the current PM, Albin Kurti, recently summed it up: *“The Battle of Koshare is one of the greatest and most significant in our struggle for freedom.”*<sup>120</sup>

During the commemorative ceremonies, another prominent recurring theme has been evident – specifically, the immortal legacy of Agim Ramadani, widely known by the moniker “KATANA”, is consistently invoked. Ramadani lost his life while leading operations in the Battle of Koshare. In 2023, President Osmani initiated her commemorative discourse by paying homage to Commander Agim Ramadani. *“The man of the pen, the brush, and the rifle is the personification of freedom, both on the path to it, and in eternal glory”*, she declared. *“Our freedom bears the mark of Agim Ramadani and the other heroes who fulfilled the ideals of generations, defended dignity, restored hope, and determined the course of the state of Kosovo. We bow in respect to the heroism of Agim and his comrades, and we shall daily and forever remember and honour their legacy to the Republic.”*<sup>121</sup> Likewise, in the same year, PM Kurti spoke as follows: *“On the third day of the Battle of Koshare, on April 11<sup>th</sup>, 1999, Agim Ramadani fell as a martyr in a confrontation with Serbian forces. The brigade he commanded was named after him – the 138<sup>th</sup> Brigade ‘Agim Ramadani’, and his name became synonymous with the entire Battle of Koshare. Returning from Switzerland, where he had sought political refuge as an immigrant, Agim Ramadani reentered Kosovo in June 1998, joining the KLA. Today marks the 24<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the martyrdom of Agim Ramadani, whose military, political, and artistic legacy continues to astonish us as we witness his photographs, poems, paintings, and manuscripts. A poet, painter, political activist, and soldier, a patriot with an artist’s soul, Agim Ramadani will be studied and remembered in all the complexities of his profile.”*<sup>122</sup> Similarly, in 2021, the Speaker of the Assembly, Glauk Konjufca, stated: *“We are here to bow before the sacrifices of the martyrs of the Battle of Koshare. In 1999, precisely on April 9<sup>th</sup>, the glorious Battle of Koshare commenced, which served as our arrow to liberation and freedom. Led by the heroes of Kosovo, Agim Ramadani and Sali Çekaj, along with the numerous fighters and martyrs who gave their lives for the liberation of Kosovo, the Battle of Koshare stands as one of the most significant moments in the struggle of the KLA.”*<sup>123</sup> Former PM Mustafa in 2016 also remembered Commander Ramadani during the commemoration event of Koshare. *“Koshare was the clearest evidence of the unity within the KLA, and this historic and decisive role was played by the 138<sup>th</sup> Brigade, which later took on the name of its strategist, Agim Ramadani. This was sealed with the valorous acts of heroes such as Sali Çekaj, Abaz Thaçi, Xhemajl Fetahu, and all the heroes, martyrs, and veterans of this brigade.”*<sup>124</sup> These speeches provide clear evidence to support the considerable significance attributed to Agim Ramadani in relation to the Battle of Koshare and its profound influence on the collective remembrance within the Kosovo population. Revered as a national hero, Agim Ramadani symbolises the embodiment of Kosovo’s historical memory.

A fundamental aspect of the 1999 Battle of Koshare was the significant support and solidarity extended by the neighbouring country across the Albanian border, specifically the Albanian army. This military engagement was distinguished by the unity of ethnic Albanians hailing from

119 Transcript 2016.

120 Transcript 2023.

121 Ibid.

122 Ibid.

123 Transcript 2021.

124 Transcript 2016.



both Kosovo and Albania, fighting together within the 138<sup>th</sup> Brigade. Under the leadership of Commander Agim Ramadani, this collective effort led to the dismantling of the longstanding barrier separating Kosovo and Albania, a partition that had endured for nearly a century. The Battle of Koshare serves as a reminder of the profound sense of solidarity shared by Kosovo and Albania. This sentiment of shared purpose and unity is annually underscored through the commemorative event of the battle, where political representatives deliver speeches that highlight the enduring bond between the two countries. Regarding this, during the 2023 commemorative event, PM Kurti stated: *“The Battle of Koshare secured one of the most remarkable achievements of the KLA, that of breaking down the border between the Republic of Albania and Yugoslavia. This border, established in 1913 and repeatedly reinstated over the years, had kept Albanians divided for almost a century. Since the time of the war, this breakthrough facilitated the passage of weaponry and KLA volunteer forces from the territory of the Republic of Albania to Kosovo. Moreover, following its simultaneous conclusion with the war itself, this battle managed to physically unite all Albanians.”*<sup>125</sup> Similarly, in 2022, President Osmani also emphasised the profound sense of solidarity and unity among Albanians during the Battle of Koshare. *“Koshare stirred hope for freedom and epitomised the symbolism of the definitive removal of iron barriers in 20th-century Europe. Koshare represented the missing link of freedom in Albanian lands. The sacrifice of Albanian sons and daughters from all territories testified to their indomitable spirit and unwavering readiness to fight against the injustices inflicted upon them throughout many centuries.”*<sup>126</sup> Moreover, in 2019 former PM Ramush Haradinaj also emphasised this Albanian unity: *“To be here on the anniversary of the heroic Battle of Koshare, to pay homage to all these martyrs and freedom fighters from the 138<sup>th</sup> Brigade, represents in the national memory s the breaking-down of the inter-Albanian border and signifies the unity of Albanian warriors.”*<sup>127</sup> Likewise, in 2017, former President Thaçi said that the Battle of Koshare bolstered the tested self-confidence of the KLA, by forcefully breaking through the border between Kosovo and Albania for the first time and defeating the Serbian army.<sup>128</sup>

When analyzing the political speeches, one can also observe their praise for the international community, especially for the support provided by NATO during the operation. In 2023, PM Kurti underscored that the triumph of the Battle of Koshare can be attributed to the significant role played by NATO during the operation. *“The soldiers of the KLA, who fought for the liberation of Kosovo from Serbia, were aided by their brethren from Albania, as well as gaining support from foreign volunteers in this just fight for freedom. Above all, the NATO alliance played a crucial role in expediting the full liberation of Kosovo.”*<sup>129</sup> Likewise, during the commemorative event of 2022, President Osmani made the following statement regarding cooperation with international allies: *“Koshare testified to our early alliance with the West and democratic nations worldwide. The West stood alongside our struggle for freedom during a challenging moment in history, when the Albanian people faced genocide perpetrated by a murderer regime. Coordinating with NATO experts to accurately pinpoint the Serbian forces’ positions within Kosovo territory marked the first collective step toward realising our aspirations for membership and joint participation in military operations with NATO, which the Kosovo Security Force is now actively*

125 Transcript 2023.

126 Transcript 2022.

127 Transcript 2019.

128 Transcript 2017.

129 Transcript 2023.



*pursuing on a daily basis.*<sup>130</sup> Former PM Haradinaj consistently acknowledges the support of Western allies and expresses deep gratitude for their contributions during various war commemorations. In 2019, during his speech commemorating the Battle of Koshare, he emphasised: “Today, we honour those foreigners who stood alongside us, who championed the ideals of freedom and defended humanity and our shared values. Many generations have sacrificed for Kosovo, but our generation is fortunate because we had NATO by our side, united against evil.”<sup>131</sup> Furthermore, in 2016 former PM Mustafa expressed that “April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1999 marks the beginning of the strategic partnership between Albanians and their natural allies, engaged under the umbrella of NATO, the most powerful military and political alliance in human history.”<sup>132</sup> Political figures have consistently praised and recognised the efforts of the international community during the Kosovo-Serbia conflict, as evidenced by the frequent acknowledgment over the past decade during commemorative events of various war-related events, including here with the Battle of Koshare.

### 6.3. Conclusion

The Battle of Koshare stands apart from other war events commemorated in Kosovo on account of its unique characteristics, distinguishing it as a significant occurrence in the analysis of war events. Unlike many other events, the Battle of Koshare took the form of a battlefield where both Kosovo and Serbia incurred military casualties. Moreover, the Battle of Koshare holds additional importance in the eyes of Kosovar society owing to two key factors. Firstly, it is considered a victory because it involved the breaking down of the border with Albania, which enabled the safe passage of volunteers and the transportation of weapons from Albania to Kosovo. Secondly, the aftermath of the Battle of Koshare played a pivotal role in shaping the perception of victory. The signing of the Kumanova Agreement between NATO and the FRY, on June 9, 1999, coincided with the conclusion of the battle. This agreement compelled Serbia to withdraw its police and military forces from Kosovo. In 2019, former PM Haradinaj described the agreement as the one which “ultimately granted us the right to live in freedom.”<sup>133</sup> Consequently, Kosovar society has seen the Battle of Koshare as a victorious event, not least because it contributed directly to the achievement of their strategic goals. When considering the collective narrative of the past, remembrance, and historical significance, the convergence of these elements underscores the profound importance of the Battle of Koshare for Kosovo society. In the realm of remembrance, the Battle of Koshare’s distinction as a major triumph further contributes to the collective memory of the war. It challenges the narrative of victimhood often associated with Kosovo Albanians and highlights their active participation and resilience. This shift in the politics of remembrance serves to reshape the perception of Kosovo Albanians from passive victims to active agents in the struggle for self-determination and recognition.

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130 Transcript 2022.

131 Transcript 2019.

132 Transcript 2016.

133 Kastrati, D. (2019). “Thaçi: Marrëveshja e Kumanovës, fundi i gjenocidit të Serbisë në Kosovë.” *Kallxo*, June 9, 2019, available at: <https://kallxo.com/shkurt/thaci-marreveshja-e-kumanoves-fundi-i-gjenocidit-te-serbise-ne-kosove/>.



## 7. The Dubrava Prison Massacre

### 7.1. Introduction

One of the gravest crimes during the Kosovo War was committed in the Dubrava Prison, which served as the largest detention facility in Kosovo. Following a NATO bombing attack on the prison, Serbian security forces carried out a massacre of the prisoners. In the aftermath of the massacre, all survivors were transferred to prisons in Serbia, which hindered the emergence of reliable accounts regarding the killings until after the war, when some of the prisoners were released. NATO conducted airstrikes on the prison on May 19<sup>th</sup> and again on May 21<sup>st</sup>, 1999, targeting military activities of the Serbian forces. On May 22<sup>nd</sup>, Serbian prison officials commanded approximately 1,000 prisoners to assemble in the prison yard.<sup>134</sup> After a short moment, they were subjected to gunfire from machine guns and grenades originating from the prison walls and guard towers, resulting in the deaths of more than 130 individuals. Subsequently, over the following twenty-four hours, prison guards, special police, and possibly paramilitary forces targeted prisoners who were hiding within the prison's structures, basements, and sewers, leading to the deaths of more inmates.<sup>135</sup>

After the beginning of the NATO bombing of the FRY, Serbian authorities transferred all Albanian prisoners from prisons in Serbia to the prison in Dubrava. Among them were political prisoners, including Ukshin Hoti and 142 individuals convicted in the criminal case known as the Đakovica Group. According to witnesses' statements, Hoti was released from Dubrava on May 16<sup>th</sup>, a day before his prison sentence was due to end, and since then, he has been considered a missing person. It is believed that he was killed by Serbian forces upon his release.<sup>136</sup>

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The prevailing belief in Kosovo is that Serbian forces exploited the NATO bombings to carry out a systematic execution of all ethnic Albanian prisoners in Dubrava. Furthermore, the massacre stands out from other war events due to its targeting of defenceless prisoners who lacked the means to defend themselves. Moreover, at least 150 of them were detained for political reasons. And thus, by emphasising the specific category of Albanian political prisoners and underlining their contributions to Kosovo's liberation, political leaders construct a narrative that reinforces the collective struggle for freedom and statehood. Remembering Albanian political prisoners becomes an integral part of shaping a collective identity rooted in the shared history of oppression and resistance. Their stories and sacrifices contribute to the formation of a collective memory that testifies to the enduring spirit of the Kosovo Albanians and their unwavering commitment to political activism. Consequently, the commemorative discourse surrounding the massacre reinforces the notion that the victims were not mere casualties, but individuals who played a pivotal role in shaping Kosovo's political landscape.

134 Human Rights Watch (2001). "Under Orders – War Crimes in Kosovo", available at: [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/Under\\_Orders\\_En\\_Combined.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/Under_Orders_En_Combined.pdf)

135 Human Rights Watch (2001). "Under Orders – War Crimes in Kosovo", available at: [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/Under\\_Orders\\_En\\_Combined.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/Under_Orders_En_Combined.pdf)

136 Wikipedia (2023). "Ukshin Hoti", 1 April 2023, available at: [https://sq.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ukshin\\_Hoti](https://sq.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ukshin_Hoti)



## 7.2. Commemorative Practices

The commemoration of Dubrava serves as a stark reminder of the terror that engulfed the prison during a five-day period in late spring, both with bombings and executions. Every year, usually on May 22<sup>nd</sup>, the Dubrava Prison Massacre is solemnly commemorated. On this occasion, political figures, both from the government and opposition parties, visit the Dubrava prison facilities and deliver speeches or publish statements on their social media accounts to honour the memory of the political prisoners who lost their lives, and those who managed to survive. Additionally, the Agency for the Maintenance of Memorial Complexes in Kosovo (AMKMK) embarked on a project titled “The Memorial of the Dubrava Prison Massacre”. The project was completed in 2021, with an approximate construction cost of 160,000 Euros.<sup>137</sup> As part of this initiative, a memorial stone was erected, engraved with the names of all those affected, grouped into three categories: martyrs, wounded individuals, and survivors.<sup>138</sup>

The commemorative speeches delivered by political figures often underscore the significance of recognising political prisoners in Yugoslavia as a distinct category that cannot be disregarded or overlooked. This distinction became particularly evident during the last war, when the Serbian state rounded up several hundreds of Albanian prisoners from various prisons in Serbia and Kosovo and assembled them in Dubrava Prison. A prevalent narrative observed in the speeches delivered over the course of the year is to be found in the consistent acknowledgement of the political prisoners and their significant role in the emancipation of Kosovo. The individuals most prominently mentioned and remembered are Adem Demaçi, who endured 28 years of imprisonment in prisons in Serbia from the late 1950s until 1990, and Ukshin Hoti, who was incarcerated from 1981 until 1999 and disappeared on May 16<sup>th</sup>, 1999.<sup>139</sup> During his most recent remembrance speech of 2023 at the Dubrava facilities, Prime Minister of Kosovo Albin Kurti, began by posing a series of reflective questions and offering an analysis of historical events and their impact on the collective consciousness. These questions prompt us to consider how historical events should be interpreted, and how the collective consciousness of a nation – in this case, of ethnic Albanians – is shaped by their history and pursuit of freedom. PM Kurti delved into the realm of interpretation, reflection, and analysis, by posing the following questions: “*How should we interpret all these histories of massacres, wars, imprisonments, deportations, and political battles? What nourishes and cultivates the collective consciousness of a nation that, for centuries, strives tirelessly to achieve freedom?! Or, articulated slightly differently: how can the historical consciousness of the Albanian people be defined?*”<sup>140</sup> He further elaborated that one of the ways to understand the political history of Albanians during the period of Yugoslavia is by tracing the fates of generations and groups of political prisoners, as well as by reading about their imprisonments in chronological order. During the lengthy period of over half a century which followed the Second World War, when Albanians in Yugoslavia were the ethnic community in Europe most oppressed and politically discriminated against, political prisoners were responsible for the development of two major political ideologies, one at the beginning and one at the end of the existence of post-World-War-Two Yugoslavia. In the same speech, Kurti stated: “*Albanian political prisoners in Yugoslavia,*

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137 AMKMK (n.d.). “Lapidari i Masakres se Dubraves”, available at: [https://amkmk.rks-gov.net/acadp\\_listings/lapdari-i-masakres-se-dubraves-dubrave-istog/](https://amkmk.rks-gov.net/acadp_listings/lapdari-i-masakres-se-dubraves-dubrave-istog/)

138 Ibid.

139 Transcript 2023.

140 Ibid.



who generally represented the pinnacle of national political activism at the time, were a distinct category that could not be ignored or avoided. Their spirit and work were inherited and passed on from one group to another, from one underground organisation to another, producing the political and military organisation that brought about the liberation of Kosovo. Their personal fate was so deeply intertwined with the political fate of Albanians at that time that their autobiographies and biographies can be read as the political history of Albanians in Yugoslavia. Works such as *'The Book of Self-Denial'* and *'The Quantum Love of So-and-So'*, by Adem Demaçi, or *'The Political Philosophy of the Albanian Issue'* and *'Conversation Through Bars'* by Ukshin Hoti, are essential and fundamental reference sources for understanding the lives of Albanians under the repressive and fascist regimes of Yugoslavia in general, and of Serbia in particular.<sup>141</sup>

In the same year, President Vjosa Osmani paid tribute to those who endured imprisonment in Dubrava on account of their political beliefs. *"On this anniversary, we remember the sacrifices, sufferings, and hardships of those political prisoners who contributed to the national cause, standing steadfast and unbroken until the very end. We have a lasting memory and tribute for them, as well as an unwavering commitment to bring the perpetrators of this crime to justice."*<sup>142</sup> Likewise, former PM Ramush Haradinaj, during the commemorative event of 2021, expressed sorrow and anger that many Albanians had spent most of their lives in prisons, mentioning the lives and sacrifices of Adem Demaçi and Smajl Haradinaj, and stating that this massacre was not the beginning of the hardships faced by Albanians in prisons.<sup>143</sup> In 2020, former President Hashim Thaçi also made a statement regarding the political prisoners of Dubrava: *"The massacre in Dubrava Prison is among the most heinous, as it was committed against unprotected prisoners, which is in violation of every international convention and law."*<sup>144</sup> And in 2019, he once again paid tribute to the political prisoners: *"Adem Demaçi, the symbol of Albanian resistance, the man who became our national conscience through 28 consecutive years in Yugoslav prisons, and Rexhep Mala, one of the most resilient political prisoners, who endured inhumane torture. Furthermore, following his imprisonment, during his judicial process of 1984, Enver Topalli presented his patriotic ideas before the court and vigorously defended the demand for a Republic of Kosovo."*<sup>145</sup> He continued that Enver Topalli – also one of the political prisoners who lost his life during the bombings and executions – stood out as an indefatigable and unwavering activist.<sup>146</sup>

Another notable theme explored in the commemorative speeches of political representatives regarding the Dubrava Prison Massacre is the testimonies of the survivors from among the political prisoners, which shed light on the experiences they endured. In 2022, PM Kurti stated: *"Dubrava is one of the darkest events of the second half of the century. We refer to the testimonies of the prisoners, Enver Dugolli's book, the narratives of Liburn Aliu, Nait Hasani, and many others. That prison should be preserved as the site of an extraordinary crime. The traces of all kinds of bullets should not be erased from the prison walls. Everything happened in that event. Just as described in Enver Dugolli's book, 'The Closed Circle of Prisons', death loomed over people, death spread alongside the living, death was expected from the sky."*<sup>147</sup> In 2019,

141 Ibid.

142 Ibid.

143 Transcript 2021.

144 Transcript 2020.

145 Transcript 2019.

146 Ibid.

147 Transcript 2022.





Liburn Aliu, a former prisoner and current Minister of Environment, Spatial Planning and Infrastructure, recalled the moments of terror during the bombings and executions. In an interview, he remembered moments where he was directly at risk of being killed. *“I survived because I was lucky. Even my friends who survived are alive only because they were fortunate. In the initial NATO attacks, there were four people who died very close to me. Then, in the second attack, when they lined us all up and started shooting at us, I laid down and rolled over. Again, it was only because I was lucky”*<sup>148</sup>, said Minister Aliu. Similarly, in the same year, former prisoner and Member of Parliament from the AAK Party, Rasim Selmanaj, also recounted his experience: *“Despite all this massacre, the survivors’ morale was not broken. In those tragic circumstances, the efforts of help and rescue among comrades was unparalleled. The surviving prisoners became doctors in order to save the lives of those wounded.”*<sup>149</sup> During the anniversary of the Dubrava Massacre in 2018, PM Kurti offered the following as part of his own experience as a former prisoner: *“Those who survived were transferred to prisons and hospitals on May 24<sup>th</sup>, where there were others who also lost their lives. One of them, whose name I do not know, died on the evening of June 10<sup>th</sup>, 1999, in Pozarevac Prison, in Pavilion VI, where I was also being held, as we were all being beaten, without sparing even the wounded. Today, we are fortunate to still have some of the survivors of that massacre among us, who can testify and tell us about the inhumane horrors they witnessed and experienced.”*<sup>150</sup> Moreover, the former political prisoner and member of the KLA, Sadik Zeqiri, in 2017 expressed his concerns about the government’s negligent approach towards properly commemorating both the victims and survivors of the Dubrava Prison Massacre. *“The authorities do not deal with this issue, even though the institutional organisation of this anniversary and past anniversaries should have been carried out in an institutional manner. But, up till now, it has never happened. In fact, they do not consider it important to come and show solidarity with us, to visit the spaces in Dubrava Prison where a state massacre was committed against the prisoners by the Serbian authorities.”*<sup>151</sup> This unequivocally demonstrates that the experiences endured during the bombings and killings in the prison continue to be vividly recalled and preserved by those who survived the massacre, some of whom remain actively engaged in the political landscape of Kosovo to this day.

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In an examination of the commemorative speeches delivered by political leaders regarding the Dubrava Massacre, it becomes evident that there exists a shared apprehension regarding the lack of accountability for those responsible for the massacre. In 2023, during his visit on the anniversary of the massacre, PM Kurti made the following statement: *“The surviving prisoners have recounted the story of the massacre in Dubrava prison, sometimes in great detail, day after day and hour after hour, along with the names of those who committed this war crime, for which they have not yet been brought to justice, despite the evidence and witnesses.”*<sup>152</sup> He further added that these detailed testimonies can be found in Enver Dugolli’s book, “A Circle of (Un)closed Prisons”, Nait Hasani’s work “I am Still Alive”, Ukë Thaçi’s book on the scenarios of the massacre in Dubrava Prison, and, most recently, in Asllan Selimi’s newly published book, “Terror Has a Name”.<sup>153</sup> Likewise, in 2022, President Osmani said: *“This macabre crime remains unpunished. There are surviving*

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148 Transcript 2019.

149 Ibid.

150 Transcript 2018.

151 Transcript 2017.

152 Transcript 2023.

153 Ibid.



witnesses, so justice must do its job by bringing the perpetrators of the crime to accountability. Our struggle for freedom and statehood will be sealed when justice is served for all the crimes committed by the Serbian regime.<sup>154</sup> During the 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the Dubrava Prison Massacre, former President Taçi demanded justice for the victims, not only those of Dubrava, but of those all-around Kosovo. “Kosovo will not stop until justice is served for over 13,000 civilian victims killed by the Serbian state, over 400 committed massacres, and over 20,000 women raped by the Serbian state apparatus. Serbia must face justice for the genocide it has committed in Kosovo against the civilian population, and for all these massacres that have occurred to the citizens of Kosovo.”<sup>155</sup> In 2018, PM Kurti, at that time only the leader of the Lëvizja Vetëvendosje (LVV) Party, stated: “So far – not to mention the lack of will and interest – both domestic and international justice have completely failed to pursue and condemn the criminals who organised and executed the morbid plan of this massacre.”<sup>156</sup> It has been 24 years since the massacre in Dubrava Prison, and despite the existence of a criminal complaint that includes the names of the Serbian perpetrators of the crime and the names of the Albanian victims, no legal actions have been taken thus far regarding this event. However, in 2022, the Kosovo police announced the apprehension of one individual belonging to the ethnic Serb community in Kosovo, who is believed to have been involved in war crimes in the Dubrava Prison.<sup>157</sup>

### 7.3. Conclusion

Political figures in Kosovo, both from the government and opposition parties, play a significant role in commemorating the victims of Dubrava and honouring their memory. The annual commemorative events provide a platform for political leaders to acknowledge the sacrifices of the political prisoners and highlight their crucial role in the emancipation of Kosovo. By highlighting the distinct category of Kosovo Albanian political prisoners, political leaders construct a narrative that reinforces the collective struggle for statehood. The commemorative discourse becomes a means to assert the agency and resilience of the oppressed Albanians, reinforcing their commitment to political activism and resistance against repressive regimes. In this context, the commemorative discourse serves as a political tool for mobilisation and solidarity, fostering a sense of collective identity among the ethnic Albanian population. The stories and sacrifices of the political prisoners contribute to the formation of a collective memory that emphasises the resilience, bravery, and dedication of Kosovo Albanians in their pursuit of freedom. On the other hand, the absence of accountability for the perpetrators perpetuates a culture of impunity, which the political leaders seek to challenge through their commemorative rhetoric. By demanding justice and advocating for the prosecution of those responsible, they aim to ensure that the memory of the victims is not only honoured but also that the atrocities committed are not forgotten or repeated. However, it is important to note that despite the powerful rhetoric and symbolic value of these commemorative events, the practical implementation of justice and accountability in Kosovo remains limited. The continued lack of legal action against the perpetrators of the 1998-99 conflict undermines the pursuit of justice and hinders the full realisation of the aspirations of the commemorative discourse.

154 Transcript 2022.

155 Transcript 2020.

156 Transcript 2018.

157 Bami, Xh. (2022). “Kosovo Police Arrests Suspect for Dubrava Prison Massacre.” *Balkan Insight*, 2 December 2022, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/12/02/kosovo-police-arrests-suspect-for-dubrava-prison-massacre/>.



## 8. Conclusion

In the aftermath of war, the process of remembering and understanding the past assumes a crucial role in a country's efforts to rebuild itself. Delving into history and historical accounts becomes necessary, if we are to grasp how a sense of national identity unfolds.<sup>158</sup> Political leaders play a pivotal role in crafting a collective narrative of the past, emphasising shared roots and experiences to foster unity among the people and instill a sense of belonging to the nation. Importantly, the impact of this remembrance and interpretation of historical events extends far beyond the confines of the past; it permeates public life and exerts a profound influence on the nation's history as a whole. This collective memory surpasses mere factual details; it encapsulates how individuals remember and interpret those events, shaping a shared understanding of the country's past.<sup>159</sup> Consequently, this process assists in shaping the nation's identity, providing valuable insights into its origins and development. In the case of Kosovo too, these dynamics play a significant role.

An analysis of the events related to the last conflict reveals a continuous pattern in commemoration practices. The majority of these events adhere to a standardised structure and narrative, resulting in limited variation in their discourses. Additionally, each conflict event typically has its own memorial dedicated to honouring the victims. However, what sets them apart is the varying degrees of attention and duration accorded to their commemoration. Some events are granted significant attention and are commemorated over extended periods, often lasting for two to three days. These occasions involve elaborate ceremonies and activities to remember and honour the fallen. Conversely, other events receive more modest remembrance memorials, and conclude within a few hours, with relatively simpler and shorter ceremonies. This contrast in the intensity and duration of commemorative practices underscores the diverse ways in which the collective memory is preserved in Kosovo. It also raises questions about the factors influencing the allocation of government attention and resources to different events, and how these choices shape the overall narrative of the conflict's remembrance.

These commemoration events serve as a crucial arena where the complex interplay between accountability and memory preservation unfolds. On the one hand, these events provide an opportunity to remember and honour the past, ensuring that the sacrifices and struggles of those who endured the conflict are not forgotten. On the other hand, they also raise pertinent questions about the efficacy of post-conflict justice mechanisms, as a significant number of cases and justice issues remain unresolved, leaving many yearning for a sense of closure and justice.

Central to the memory politics in Kosovo is the prevailing emphasis on commemorating the KLA. This dominant memory practice is observed in both institutional and private remembrance activities.<sup>160</sup> The narrative surrounding the KLA portrays them as the vanguards of security and peace for Kosovo Albanians during the most challenging times. They are revered as the "founding fathers" who fought for liberation, instilling a strong sense of ethnic national belonging and pride among the people.<sup>161</sup> Furthermore, this KLA narrative has been continuously used by the

158 <https://hrcak.srce.hr/file/342030>

159 Ibid.

160 <https://www.recom.link/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/HLC-brochure-ENG-The-Politics-of-Memory-and-Remembrance-Practices.pdf>.

161 Ibid.



major political parties in Kosovo, who have built numerous monuments to honour the KLA, and with many KLA members becoming influential leaders within these parties over the last decade.<sup>162</sup> However, this portrayal has not been without controversy, as some former members of the KLA who have also been prominent political leaders in Kosovo, currently find themselves facing war crimes charges, and are being held in the Kosovo Specialist Chambers in The Hague. Hence, the juxtaposition of commemorating the KLA's historical significance with the ongoing judicial proceedings exemplifies the tensions between preserving memory and pursuing justice.

Moreover, the politics of remembrance in Kosovo are not confined to within its borders. They are intricately entwined with international dimensions, owing to the involvement of the international community during and after the war. This external influence has shaped how the commemoration events are organised and carried out. Furthermore, it has had a profound impact on the narratives surrounding these events, as well as the formation of the national identity of Kosovo Albanians. The interactions with international actors have both amplified and shaped the memory practices, leading to multifaceted perceptions of the past and its interpretation.

On the other hand, this analysis of political remembrance in Kosovo also reveals a clear memory dominance, where certain groups hold more prominence in the act of remembering than others. For instance, ethnic minorities, and women, as well as other political movements and resistances that operated outside the scope of the KLA, are notably less visible in the commemorative landscape.<sup>163</sup> In essence, the observed memory dominance reflects an imbalanced representation of different groups and their contributions during the conflict and post-conflict periods in Kosovo. This raises important questions about the inclusivity of the remembrance process and the need to recognise and honour the diverse experiences and contributions of all individuals and groups involved in shaping the nation's history. By acknowledging and addressing these disparities, Kosovo can strive for a more comprehensive account of its past, fostering a more inclusive and equitable collective memory. By cultivating a more balanced representation of the past, the country can fortify its national identity, foster unity among all communities, and pave the way for societal reconciliation.

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162 Ibid.

163 Ibid.



# VI. Decade of Remembrance in Montenegro

## VI. Decenija sjećanja u Crnoj Gori

by Bojan Baća

### 1. General Introduction

During the Yugoslav Wars, Montenegro became entangled in several military engagements that left a lasting impact on the Region and tainted its role in the conflicts. Despite war crimes implicating certain Montenegro officials, neither international nor domestic courts recognised the country's responsibility, particularly when it came to the most accountable political party in Montenegro – the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) – which was in power uninterruptedly from 1989 until 2020. During its reign, Montenegro's approach to dealing with its involvement in the wars resembled Austria's actions after World War II. Like Vienna with its post-war stance, Podgorica often shifted blame for war crimes onto its 'Germany' (i.e. Serbia), even though it blindly followed the political direction set by its 'Berlin' (Belgrade). This tendency to deflect responsibility and place the burden of guilt on external actors has posed significant challenges for Montenegro in acknowledging its role in the Yugoslav wars and addressing the war crimes committed during that tumultuous period. The country's politics of remembrance have thus been thus characterised by a reluctance to fully confront the past, resulting in a culture of collective amnesia regarding Montenegro's involvement in the conflicts. This selective amnesia has allowed the nation's political elites to evade genuine accountability for their actions during the wars, perpetuating a narrative that absolves them of responsibility. Consequently, the process of coming to terms with the past has been hindered, impeding Montenegro's progress towards genuine reconciliation and healing. One of the key issues in addressing the Yugoslav wars' aftermath is the lack of genuine accountability for war crimes committed on Montenegrin soil. The country's judicial system has encountered obstacles in pursuing cases related to war crimes, and convictions have been rare. The challenges in holding perpetrators accountable have, in turn, contributed to a sense of impunity, where those responsible for heinous acts during the wars have escaped justice.

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Another aspect of the situation contributing to the challenges of remembrance is the criticism levelled at Montenegro's education system for downplaying or omitting certain aspects of the Yugoslav wars from history textbooks. This selective approach to teaching history has effectively sanitised Montenegro's role in the conflicts and contributed to a skewed understanding of historical events among the younger generations. As a result, there is a risk of perpetuating a distorted narrative of the past, hindering the development of a collective memory that reflects the nation's full history. Moreover, the persistent influence of political elites from the DPS era has complicated efforts to address Montenegro's involvement in the wars. Figures associated with the DPS, who held power for several decades, have faced accusations of evading genuine accountability and manipulating the narrative surrounding the conflicts to serve their political interests. This influence has perpetuated a culture of resistance to fully confronting the past, preventing a comprehensive reckoning with historical truths.

Amidst these challenges, non-governmental organisations, civil society activists, and independent media have played a pivotal role in advocating for truth-seeking and accountability. Their tireless efforts to bring war crimes to light and demand justice have been commendable. However, their endeavours have often encountered resistance from state institutions and the



entrenched political establishment. The lack of political will to confront the past and ensure justice for war crimes has further strained the process of reconciliation and healing within Montenegrin society.

In summary, Montenegro's involvement in the Yugoslav wars and its subsequent struggles in coming to terms with this history have left deep scars on the nation's collective memory. The politics of remembrance have been marked by a reluctance to fully confront the past, contributing to a culture of collective amnesia regarding Montenegro's role in the conflicts. The lack of genuine accountability for war crimes, selective education on the topic, and the persistent influence of past political elites have all complicated efforts to address the nation's involvement in the wars. While civil society organisations and activists have championed truth-seeking and accountability, their endeavours have faced resistance from state institutions and the political establishment. Overcoming these challenges will require a genuine commitment from the authorities to acknowledge the past fully and pursue justice for war crimes, laying the groundwork for genuine reconciliation and healing within Montenegrin society.

### 1.1. History of the Cases

166 Montenegro actively participated in all four wars of the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo/NATO.<sup>1</sup> Montenegro's role in these conflicts was shaped by its *de facto* political power within the participating state entities, particularly the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), where the Republic of Montenegro officially held a 50% stake. Throughout the first three conflicts in Yugoslavia's breakup, Montenegro acted as a satellite of the regime of Slobodan Milošević, who served as the President of the Republic of Serbia and later the FRY. Montenegro strongly advocated for the conflicts, notably during the war operations in Croatia, and its mobilisation surpassed that of Serbia. As time passed, however, the internal political dynamics within the state union led to a significant shift in Montenegro's position. After the conclusion of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Montenegrin leadership distanced itself from Milošević's war policy and had entered into open political conflict with his regime by the end of 1997. However, the Yugoslav Army – present on the Montenegrin territory and under effective control of Belgrade – played a significant role in attempting to keep Montenegro within the gradually collapsing Yugoslav Federation, which led to war crimes being committed even during wars in which Montenegrin government refused to participate.

One notable conflict was the Siege of Dubrovnik. Commencing in October 1991, the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) advanced, capturing much of the land along the Adriatic coast, except for the city of Dubrovnik itself. The siege culminated in the JNA's bombardment of Dubrovnik, including its UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Old Town, on December 6, 1991. This ruthless attack drew international condemnation and severely affected Montenegro's reputation, leading to diplomatic and economic isolation and the international recognition of Croatia's independence. The siege resulted in the deaths of 194 Croatian military personnel and 116 civilians, with over 11,000 buildings suffering damage.<sup>2</sup> During the same period, the Morinj Camp (Logor

1 <https://www.hraction.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/The-entire-text-2.pdf>

2 <https://www.aktuelno.me/english/operation-dubrovnik-death-of-the-myth-of-heroic-montenegro/>; <https://purede-tour.com/post/dubrovnik-croatia-everything-you-need-to-know-about-visiting-the-old-town/>



Morinj) near Kotor operated as a detention facility, holding around 300 Croatian prisoners of war and civilians under the Montenegrin authorities' control within the JNA.<sup>3</sup>

On May 25, 1992, the Montenegrin police illegally arrested Muslims refugees from the Bosnian War. A group extradited from Herceg Novi on May 27, 1992, met an immediate grim fate, while only a few survived from another group sent to the Foča concentration camp, which was controlled by Bosnian Serb forces, on May 25, 1992. Tragically, 83 individuals never returned – they were killed in improvised camps in the territory of Republika Srpska.<sup>4</sup> The bodies of all the victims deported from Herceg Novi have yet to be found, leaving the exact location of their deaths uncertain. Furthermore, the rural area of Bukovica, situated approximately 60 km from the town of Pljevlja in northern Montenegro, witnessed significant turmoil in the early 1990s. Although the region was primarily inhabited by Bosniaks/Muslims, it became a focal point for JNA reservists, paramilitary groups, and Montenegro's police forces. Officially stationed to guard the border from potential incursions by Bosniak paramilitary units from Bosnia and Herzegovina, these forces committed crimes on Montenegrin territory. The atrocities included the displacement of 24 villages in early 1992, resulting in the deaths of six civilians, the abduction of 11 people to Čajniče prison, physical torture of around 70 civilians, and the destruction of houses and a mosque. Approximately 125 families, totalling 330 members, were displaced from the area.<sup>5</sup> Another tragic event occurred several years later on April 18, 1999, in the village of Kaluderski Laz near Rožaje, where members of the Yugoslav Army killed Albanian civilian refugees fleeing the conflict in Kosovo. The reported number of victims initially stood at 23, but during the court proceedings, it was confirmed to be 15, including women and children.<sup>6</sup>

These selected cases reveal the troubling pattern of a lack of a proper legal epilogue in Montenegro. The Dubrovnik siege exemplifies this insofar as, despite two court verdicts in the Hague against Pavle Strugar and Miodrag Jokić, Montenegrin courts have remained silent.<sup>7</sup> Even in the country's education policy, information about the wars of the 1990s and those responsible for them have been systematically suppressed, with only a vague mention of Montenegrin reservists' involvement in the attack on Dubrovnik.<sup>8</sup> The state prosecutors, controlled by the DPS, remained passive, and suspicions arose regarding their own involvement in war crimes. Regarding the Morinj Camp, a verdict was reached in July 2013 against four JNA soldiers found guilty of war crimes against civilian prisoners.<sup>9</sup> However, the trial faced criticism, and international legal expertise confirmed the sentences were inadequate.<sup>10</sup> This highlights the shortcomings in the Montenegrin judicial system and the need for proper accountability for war crimes.

In the case of the 1992 deportation of Bosnian refugees, the Montenegrin government made a decision to reach a judicial settlement with the victims' families, paying compensation as an

3 <https://balkaninsight.com/2010/04/21/closing-statements-in-morinj-war-crimes-trial/>

4 <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/05/23/strasbourg-court-to-decide-on-montenegro-war-deportation-case-05-23-2018/>

5 <https://cgo-cce.org/en/2023/02/15/bukovica-is-no-home-of-justice/>

6 <https://www.cdm.me/english/final-verdict-all-the-accused-in-the-case-of-kaludjerski-laz-freed/>

7 <https://www.vijesti.me/eu-vijesti/103540/zatiranje-istorije-i-sjecanja-25-godina-od-napada-na-dubrovnik>

8 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/53032/uljarevic-pohod-na-dubrovnik-poraz-svijesti-i-savjesti-crne-gore>

9 <https://www.vijesti.me/zabava/247855/apelacioni-sud-razmatrace-zalbe-odbrane-na-presudu-za-morinj>; <https://www.vijesti.me/eu-vijesti/179567/tamne-mrlje-zlocina-na-putu-ka-eu>

10 <https://www.vijesti.me/zabava/203965/salustro-pazili-ste-mucitelje-jer-su-porodicni-ljudi>



acknowledgment of the crime.<sup>11</sup> However, in a surprising turn of events, nine former police officers and state security officials charged with the deportation were acquitted in 2011. The court stated that, although the arrests were illegal, they did not constitute a war crime, since the officers were not part of the conflicting parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>12</sup> This verdict was a failure of justice, leaving the victims without proper recognition and the perpetrators without accountability. Bukovica, on the other hand, is a stark example of the politics of collective amnesia prevailing in Montenegro. The war crimes committed there have not been officially acknowledged or commemorated, leaving the victims and their families without justice.<sup>13</sup> The political elites conveniently downplay atrocities like Bukovica, allowing those responsible to escape accountability. Similarly, the massacre at Kaluderski Laz suffered from an ineffective investigation, resulting in the acquittal of the accused in 2013.<sup>14</sup> Appeals were dismissed, and there was a failure to establish whether a crime was even committed in Kaluderski Laz.<sup>15</sup> The need to reopen the investigation and hold superior officers accountable remains urgent.

Overall, these cases demonstrate a serious lack of proper legal closure in Montenegro for war crimes committed during the Yugoslav Wars. The failure to acknowledge and prosecute these crimes perpetuates a culture of impunity and denies justice to the victims and their families. Montenegro must confront its past and ensure that proper accountability is achieved, not only for these cases but for all war crimes committed on its territory. The establishment of functional and diligent judicial bodies is essential to bring justice to the victims and move towards building a state and society that truly addresses its historical legacy.

## 1.2. Methodology

The case selection for document analysis has been on the basis of three key criteria: historical relevance, public visibility, and the absence of a proper legal epilogue. The focus is on the Yugoslav Wars and Montenegro's involvement, as these events have had a profound impact on the region's history and post-conflict developments. The cases chosen for analysis include the Siege of Dubrovnik, the Morinj Camp, the deportation of Bosniak/Muslim refugees, and the massacres in Kaluderski Laz and in Bukovica. These cases have significant historical importance, reflecting pivotal moments in the Yugoslav Wars and highlighting Montenegro's role in the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Moreover, these events were and are widely covered in the media, making them highly visible in the public sphere and drawing attention to the complexities of ethnic relations during the war. Despite their historical significance and public visibility, these cases have not received a proper legal conclusion. The lack of justice and accountability perpetuates a sense of injustice, hindering the region's reconciliation efforts and impeding progress toward stability and peace.

To conduct this research, a comprehensive desktop analysis and document review were employed, focusing on available online newspaper sources, with *Vijesti* being a primary data source due to its status as the oldest news portal in Montenegro and its consistency in covering events from 2011 to 2023. The document analysis primarily involved a thorough examination

11 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/29965695.html>

12 <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/04/06/strasbourg-court-rejects-wartime-deportation-case-against-montenegro/>

13 <https://www.vijesti.me/kolumne/643474/pravda-ne-zivi-u-bukovici>

14 <https://www.vijesti.me/zabava/251291/strugar-i-vojnici-oslobodeni-optuzbe-u-procesu-kaluderski-laz>

15 <https://gamn.org/kaluderski-laz-zlocin-bez-kazne/>





of articles, reports, and opinions published in *Vijesti* and other relevant online sources. These sources were selected on the basis of their significance in shaping public opinion and their extensive coverage of the selected cases. By scrutinising how the cases were presented, discussed, and analysed in the media, the study has aimed to gain valuable insights into public perceptions and attitudes towards these events, as well as their potential legal ramifications. Additionally, systematic reviews of online archives were conducted to trace the chronological development of media coverage and public reactions, facilitating the identification of patterns in how the cases were reported and debated over time. Understanding how the media framed these cases and the narratives they constructed have played a crucial role in interpreting the broader societal response and impact. Moreover, by examining the perspectives of journalists and experts who covered these cases, the research has sought to gain a comprehensive understanding of the complexities involved and the nuances of each situation.

Desk research proved to be a valuable methodology for this study, as it allowed the researcher to access a wide array of information and perspectives. It also facilitated the examination of events over an extended period, enabling the identification of trends and changes in public opinion and media coverage over time. However, it is essential to acknowledge that relying solely on desktop research and document analysis has its limitations. The lack of direct interaction with some of the individuals and communities involved in these cases may have limited the depth of understanding of certain nuances and emotions surrounding these events. Additionally, there is the possibility of sometimes undetected biased reporting or information gaps in the selected sources, which could have influenced the research outcomes. Despite these limitations, the document analysis through desktop research remains a valuable approach for studying media coverage, public perceptions, and societal attitudes towards the selected cases in Montenegro. It offers a systematic and structured means of examining a large corpus of information, providing valuable insights into the dynamics of memory, politics, and justice in the aftermath of conflict-related events. By adopting this methodology, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the challenges the nation faces in confronting its past and establishing a collective memory that fosters reconciliation and justice.

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In conclusion, the chosen cases for qualitative content analysis hold immense historical relevance, are highly visible in the public sphere, and lack a proper legal epilogue. The research seeks to contribute to ongoing efforts for truth, justice, and reconciliation in the Yugoslav region. By examining media coverage and public discourse surrounding these cases, it aims to emphasise the importance of addressing war crimes, promoting accountability, and facilitating healing and stability in the region's post-conflict journey.

### **1.3. Summary of Politics of Remembrance in Montenegro**

The politics of remembrance in Montenegro regarding war crimes are characterised by complexity, reluctance, and selective memory. The nation's collective memory and identity have been shaped by the struggle to confront painful truths and reconcile with its past, which is heavily influenced by political interests, state-controlled narratives, and a lack of genuine accountability.

In the case of the Siege of Dubrovnik, Montenegro's official position has been marred by apologies without genuine accountability. The state-controlled media and education policies have perpetuated collective amnesia, sanitising the nation's role in the siege, and absolving political figures of their culpability. This lack of a comprehensive politics of remembrance has preserved political power for those at the helm during the siege, hindering genuine reconciliation and



healing. Similarly, the Morinj Detention Camp exemplifies the challenges of confronting a painful past. The delayed acknowledgment and recognition of the crimes, as well as resistance to adequate commemoration, demonstrate the intricate interplay between memory, history, and politics in Montenegro.

The deportation of Bosnian refugees from Montenegro in 1992 and the war crimes in Bukovica also reflect the complexities surrounding the politics of remembrance. The Montenegrin state's promises to acknowledge the crime and establish memorials have remained unfulfilled. The lack of official commemorations perpetuates a culture of forgetting and hinders reconciliation. Similarly, the case of Kaluđerski Laz further exposes the troubling politics of collective amnesia in Montenegro. The lack of political will to confront the past and seek justice for the victims undermines the process of healing and reconciliation. The absence of a comprehensive politics of remembrance perpetuates impunity and makes it difficult for the nation to move forward collectively. Civic sector activists play a crucial role in advocating for justice and commemoration, but their efforts cannot fully compensate for the state's failure to assume its responsibilities.

To address these challenges, Montenegro must prioritise truth-seeking and accountability. The fall of the DPS regime and the changing political discourse offer a potential turning point, but genuine commitment to facing the past is crucial. Revising history textbooks, engaging in public deliberation of the past, and establishing memorials are vital steps towards a more inclusive and equitable society. By acknowledging historical truths and fostering transparency, Montenegro can pave the way towards genuine reconciliation and a more just and compassionate future. Confronting the past is not an act of dwelling on grievances, but a critical step towards healing and unity, affirming the nation's commitment to human rights and justice. Only through such honest self-reflection can Montenegro aspire to a future free from the burden of its past.



## 2. The Siege of Dubrovnik

### 2.1. Introduction

The Siege of Dubrovnik is widely considered to be a “dark stain”, a “shameful page”, and an “unacceptable act” in Montenegro’s recent history.<sup>16</sup> Yet, this relatively wide-ranging acknowledgement of (collective) guilt is so clearly articulated only within Montenegrin (civil) society. The Montenegrin state, however, has settled for an *apology*. The confession of the former President of Montenegro, Milo Đukanović – who was a (warmongering) prime minister during the aggression on Dubrovnik – was formulated on 25 June 2000 as an expression of *remorse* for “all the suffering and all the material losses caused by any representative of Montenegro in the Yugoslav National Army (JNA) in these tragic events”.<sup>17</sup> He defended himself by claiming that he was “uninformed” of what was going on during the war in Croatia.<sup>18</sup> However, it was not the JNA that drafted the Montenegrin citizens who besieged Dubrovnik, but the Government of Montenegro.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, the official position of the government – which was ruled by Đukanović’s Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) from December 1990 (*de facto* from January 1989) until August 2020 – on Montenegro’s role in the aggression on Dubrovnik can be summarised as *apology without acceptance of responsibility*. Moreover, it seems that this public act of regret remains acceptable to Croatian officials even 20 years after.<sup>20</sup> While the official expression of remorse is praiseworthy, it has nonetheless allowed for whitewashing of the political biographies of individuals who were responsible for the bombing of Dubrovnik and, as such, has prevented an adequate dealing with the past – both in political and legal terms.

The siege started on 1 October 1991 and lasted for nine months. Even before it began, the state propaganda – most notably from the state-owned *Pobjeda* and *Radio and Television of Montenegro* (RTCG) – falsely claimed that “30,000 thousand Ustaša” were just waiting to invade Montenegro.<sup>21</sup> For this reason, the key DPS ideologue, Svetozar Marović, called this aggression a “War for Peace” (“Rat za mir”), implying it was a preventive attack to defend peace in Yugoslavia from those who wanted to endanger it.<sup>22</sup> In 2004, a definitive take on the role of the Montenegrin government in the siege of Dubrovnik was produced – a documentary entitled *War for Peace* by Koča Pavlović – but its screening on the public service broadcaster RTCG was strictly forbidden by the DPS (showing instead in 2011 an in-house product, the documentary series *War for Dubrovnik*, whose primary aim was the whitewashing of Đukanović’s and the state-owned media’s role in the neighbouring war).<sup>23</sup> On 1 October 2022, Pavlović’s critical documentary finally made its debut on the RTCG, in prime-time.<sup>24</sup> This was one way for the state-

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16 <https://www.vijesti.me/zabava/151341/cgo-hra-i-documenta-istrajati-na-pronalazenju-odgovornih-za-dubrovnik>, <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/338000/rat-za-mir-20-godina-kasnije-jos-daleko-od-pravde>, <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/623859/yjhr-napad-na-dubrovnik-ostavio-brojne-zrtve-i-zlocine-za-koje-crnogorsko-pravo-sudje-nema-sudskih-epiloga>

17 [https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2000&mm=06&dd=24&nav\\_category=1&nav\\_id=8216](https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2000&mm=06&dd=24&nav_category=1&nav_id=8216)

18 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/345662/proslo-je-20-godina-zasto-nema-nijedne-istrage>

19 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/338000/rat-za-mir-20-godina-kasnije-jos-daleko-od-pravde>

20 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/445185/milanovic-djukanovic-se-jednom-izvinio-za-dubrovnik-ne-mora-dvaput>

21 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/303185/proslo-je-21-godina-od-napada-na-dubrovnik>

22 <https://www.vijesti.me/kolumne/473739/tamne-sjenke-dubrovnika>

23 <https://balkaninsight.com/sr/2022/10/05/nestali-snimci-kriju-punu-sliku-ratne-televizijske-propagande-u-crnoj-gori>

24 <https://www.rtcg.me/cir//tv/Izdvajamo/379910/rat-za-mir-na-tvcg1.html>



owned media house to admit its shameful and unprofessional involvement in warmongering propaganda during the aggression on Dubrovnik.

Despite recent changes, this poignant episode of violence in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s has left a profound mark on Montenegro's contemporary historical narrative, culminating in a tug-of-war between confronting the past and preserving a sanitised national image. Within Montenegrin society, there exists a multifaceted dynamic surrounding the politics of remembrance. While certain segments have come to acknowledge collective guilt, the official state position, heavily influenced by the DPS, oscillates between remorseful apologies and evasive attempts to avoid full responsibility. The grip of the DPS regime on power exacerbated this refusal to confront the past honestly, with state prosecutors remaining passive and, in certain instances, even allegedly complicit in war crimes. As the dominant political force for three decades, the DPS exerted significant influence over shaping the historical narrative, stifling efforts to face the past transparently. Despite Montenegro's government attributing the siege to the JNA, it remains evident that the state was complicit, having actively drafted Montenegrin citizens who participated in the aggression on Dubrovnik. This behaviour has garnered criticism from both domestic civil society and the international community, who perceive it as a missed opportunity to confront the past candidly. Moreover, the civil society emerged as a powerful driving force in pushing for accountability and truth-seeking regarding Montenegro's involvement in the Siege of Dubrovnik. However, the path to truth and justice faced significant resistance, with state-controlled media contributing to narratives that obscured political accountability and whitewashed historical events. The education system in Montenegro emerged as another crucial battleground in the politics of remembrance, laying bare the systematic suppression of information concerning the wars of the 1990s and those responsible for them. This lack of a comprehensive narrative facilitated collective amnesia, shielding political figures from accountability and obfuscating the nation's shared guilt.

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## 2.2. Chronological analysis

As with many other post-Yugoslav states, the pressure for society to deal with the past came from civil society, initiated by some of the most prominent non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which held numerous info-sessions and awareness-raising activities on the issue (most notably, Centre for Civic Education, Human Rights Action, Anima, and the Youth Initiative for Human Rights). It did not come out of the blue, as their activism had deep roots in the Anti-War Movement of the 1990s, which was comprised of diverse social, political, and cultural (both individual and collective) actors. For instance, the country's first public commemoration of the aggression on Dubrovnik occurred on 2 December 2011, in the form of a symposium, *War for Peace: 20 Years After*.<sup>25</sup> Participants at the conference expressed an outrage that still stands: the roles of Đukanović and Marović, among others, in the aggression on Dubrovnik was never placed under scrutiny by the state institutions (nor even by the international community); instead, they were awarded prizes for peace.<sup>26</sup> This wide-ranging acceptance of the official Montenegrin narrative on its role in the siege of Dubrovnik was best illustrated when the Croatian national public broadcaster HRT decided to broadcast in March 2011 *War for Dubrovnik* instead of *War for Peace*, which prompted one of most prominent anti-war politicians, Slavko Perović,

25 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/338000/rat-za-mir-20-godina-kasnije-jos-daleko-od-pravde>

26 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/338000/rat-za-mir-20-godina-kasnije-jos-daleko-od-pravde>



to express his outrage at such a move.<sup>27</sup> In the same month, he accused the HRT of being an accomplice in the whitewashing of Đukanović's political biography, claiming that, even after two decades, "instead of facing the truth, [the public] is being confronted with a forgery" that has transformed warmongers (responsible for the Siege of Dubrovnik) into peaceniks.<sup>28</sup>

This sentiment is at the core of Montenegro's issue with dealing with its dark past – that those responsible for that dark past, i.e. its orchestrators, have never been prosecuted. However, many engaged Montenegrin intellectuals have stated on numerous occasions that precisely for that reason Dubrovnik should not be erased from the collective memory, but instead serve as a reminder.<sup>29</sup> For similar reasons, on 1 October 2012 numerous NGOs petitioned the authorities to open public deliberations on the issues, yet without success. Their goal was to abolish "the code of silence" about war crimes, for people to be told the truth, and in the process to initiate "the process of moral renewal and dignified life" that would be based on "serving justice for victims".<sup>30</sup> Calls were addressed to the Supreme State Prosecutor's Office (SSPO) to start processing those responsible for war crimes of the Dubrovnik battlefield, as it would be a good way for Montenegro to come to terms with its guilt.<sup>31</sup> Four years later, these NGOs continued with appeals to official institutions to become more proactive in investigating war crimes in practice, instead of simply adopting supposedly well-intentioned documents expressing the will to do so.<sup>32</sup> However, owing to the same political establishment being in power for three decades, the goal was to convince the public that everything was orchestrated by Slobodan Milošević and that the Montenegrin establishment was simply uninformed and manipulated. The narrative claimed that it was shameful, what had happened in Dubrovnik – "It was a great historical misunderstanding that, unfortunately, ended in blood", claimed the officials<sup>33</sup> – but ultimately it was the fault of those who were on the battlefield, not of the politicians who send them there to fight.<sup>34</sup> This made political and command responsibility obsolete: the victims and crimes were there, but no one was responsible for them. It seemed as if everything was left to the ravages of time to erase evidence and witnesses, thus not allowing for an adequate epilogue.

Refusal to deal with the events in Dubrovnik was a systemic feature of the DPS regime.<sup>35</sup> Despite two court verdicts in The Hague, for Pavle Strugar and Miodrag Jokić, Montenegrin courts remained silent on the issue.<sup>36</sup> This refusal to deal with the past was nowhere more evident than in the country's education policy. For instance, the 2016 analysis of history books in Montenegro demonstrated that the information on the wars of 1990s – and those responsible for them – was being systematically suppressed. The only sentence in the history books is: "Reservists

27 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/368865/slavko-perovic-uputio-protestno-pismo-htv-u>; <https://www.vijesti.me/svijet/balkan/285461/slavko-perovic-ja-sam-ratni-huskac-milu-podignite-spomenik>

28 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/338000/rat-za-mir-20-godina-kasnije-jos-daleko-od-pravde>

29 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/53253/prije-26-godina-zagrmjele-su-po-dubrovackim-zidina-ma-crnogorske-puske-iz-noci-bratske-krvotnutnje>

30 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/303185/prosla-je-21-godina-od-napada-na-dubrovnik>

31 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/303109/hra-suditi-odgovornima-za-ratne-zlocine-u-dubrovniku>

32 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/112017/cgo-bez-utvrdenih-cinjenica-i-odgovornosti-za-napad-na-dubrovnik>;  
<https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/103020/hra-cgo-i-documenta-cetvrt-vijek-a-zlocina-bez-kazne>

33 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/112017/cgo-bez-utvrdenih-cinjenica-i-odgovornosti-za-napad-na-dubrovnik>

34 <https://www.vijesti.me/eu-vijesti/179567/tamne-mrlje-zlocina-na-putu-ka-eu>

35 <https://www.vijesti.me/eu-vijesti/103540/zatiranje-istorije-i-sjecanja-25-godina-od-napada-na-dubrovnik>

36 <https://www.vijesti.me/eu-vijesti/103540/zatiranje-istorije-i-sjecanja-25-godina-od-napada-na-dubrovnik>



from Montenegro also took part in the JNA attack on the Dubrovnik region.<sup>37</sup> Overall, there was no narrative, beyond those coming from the NGOs and opposition parties, that Montenegrins did something wrong – no individualisation of guilt, no publication of documents implicating decision-makers.<sup>38</sup> On 1 October 2021, one year after the regime change, even the DPS's former coalition partners blamed the strongest political party for not dealing with the past adequately.<sup>39</sup> The DPS-controlled state prosecutors remained not only passive, but there were suspicions that one of them, Milivoje Katnić, was directly involved in war crimes.<sup>40</sup> In a word, Montenegrin society feels guilt for its “urbicide” and “culturicide” in Dubrovnik, and clearly states each year that silence on the issue must stop.<sup>41</sup> Preferably, by changing the school history books.<sup>42</sup>

Professor Žarko Puhovski once rightly compared today's Montenegro to Austria after War World 2: all the blame for war crimes was placed on Germany/Serbia, despite Vienna/Podgorica blindly following the politics of Berlin/Belgrade.<sup>43</sup> With the fall of the DPS in 2020, political discourse on Montenegro's roles in the wars of the 1990s started to changed. While Zdravko Krivokapić used the war crimes committed in Dubrovnik to score political points in March 2022,<sup>44</sup> Dritan Abazović in August 2022 clearly called it “Montenegro's greatest shame in its modern history”, as it was “captive to the clutches of nationalism, hatred and war profiteering”.<sup>45</sup> Despite the calls from civil society for identifying and prosecuting the responsible, it remains to be seen if this will become the priority of the new government(s).<sup>46</sup> However, some strides were made in the related case of the detention camp Morinj, where Croatian prisoners of war and civilians were held during the siege of Dubrovnik.

### 2.3. Conclusion

The Siege of Dubrovnik stands as a haunting testament to the complexities of memory, guilt, and accountability in Montenegro's historical narrative. Within this context, the politics of remembrance have played a pivotal role in shaping the nation's collective memory and identity. The struggle to confront painful truths and reconcile with the past has been deeply intertwined with political interests, state-controlled narratives, and a reluctance to fully acknowledge responsibility. As this report has demonstrated, Montenegro's politics of remembrance regarding the Siege of Dubrovnik encompass a wide spectrum, ranging from civil society's fervent advo-

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37 <https://cgo-cce.org/2016/06/22/sto-skrivaju-i-otkrivaju-crnogorski-udzbenici-o-savremenoj-istoriji-crne-gore-2/>

38 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/53032/uljarevic-pohod-na-dubrovnik-poraz-svijesti-i-savjesti-crne-gore>

39 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/568852/vujovic-dps-najodgovorniji-sto-nije-zavijelo-suocavanje-sa-ratnom-proslomcu>

40 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/206105/ocekujemo-da-novi-vdt-saopsti-istrazuju-li-zlocine-na-dubrovackom-ratistu>; <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/545079/gorjanc-prelevic-nije-bilo-logicno-ocekivati-da-ce-se-katnic-pozabaviti-dubrovackim-ratistem>; <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/492365/godisnjica-granatiranja-dubrovnicka-katnic-i-stankovic-nijesu-pokrenuli-nijednu-istragu-povodom-ratnih-zlocina>

41 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/623859/yihr-napad-na-dubrovnik-ostavio-brojne-zrtve-i-zlocine-za-koje-crnogorsko-pravosudje-nema-sudskih-epiloga>; <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/474233/prekinuti-cutanje-o-napadu-na-dubrovnik>; <https://www.vijesti.me/kolumne/614007/slon-u-prostoriji>

42 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/568696/informacije-o-ratnim-zlocinima-tokom-devedesetih-uvrstiti-u-udzbenike>

43 <https://www.vijesti.me/kolumne/473739/tamne-sjenke-dubrovnika>

44 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/594685/kabinet-krivokapica-dps-u-prisjetimo-se-ko-je-mrzio-sah-zbog-sahovnice-ko-je-podrzavao-granatiranje-dubrovnika>

45 <https://www.danas.rs/svet/dritan-abazovic-bombardovani-dubrovnik-najveca-sramota-crne-gore-tada-zarobljene-drzave>

46 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/579256/sistemska-suocavanje-sa-proslomcu-da-konacno-postane-prioritet-vlasti>



cacy for truth-seeking and accountability to the state's persistent evasion and refusal to delve into the darker chapters of its history.

At the heart of Montenegro's politics of remembrance lies a stark dichotomy between public sentiment and official state narratives. While Montenegrin society, particularly through the NGOs, has taken significant strides in acknowledging collective guilt and pushing for truth-seeking, the Montenegrin state's official position has been marred by apologies without genuine accountability. The confession by the then Prime Minister Milo Đukanović in 2000, although a formal apology, was couched in claims of ignorance regarding the extent of the aggression against Dubrovnik. This selective display of remorse allowed for the whitewashing of political biographies of those responsible for the bombing of Dubrovnik, evading adequate political and legal accountability. Despite calls from civil society for identifying and prosecuting the responsible parties, the DPS-led government, in power for several decades, remained steadfast in its refusal to confront the past transparently.

The impact of the politics of remembrance on Montenegro's collective memory is profound. While civil society has endeavoured to ensure that the siege remains etched in the nation's memory as a cautionary tale and reminder of the past, state-controlled and the DPS-adjacent media and education policies have perpetuated a collective amnesia that absolves political figures of their culpability. The suppression of information in history books and a lack of comprehensive narratives surrounding the wars of the 1990s, including the Siege of Dubrovnik, has effectively sanitised the nation's role, contributing to a skewed understanding of historical events. The consequences of the lack of a comprehensive politics of remembrance are multi-faceted and far-reaching. One of the most significant impacts is the preservation of political power for those who were at the helm during the siege. The DPS-led government skillfully maneuvered to avoid accountability, thus perpetuating a cycle of political hegemony. This refusal to fully confront the past has impeded Montenegro's ability to foster genuine reconciliation, heal old wounds, and move towards a more equitable and just society. By clinging to a narrative of innocence and deflecting responsibility, the DPS preserved its political legitimacy but undermined the nation's collective conscience.

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Furthermore, the lack of a robust politics of remembrance has not only hindered the nation's internal healing but also strained diplomatic relations in the long run. Croatia's acceptance of Montenegro's apology without demanding genuine accountability allowed the DPS-led government to escape full scrutiny for its role in the siege. This incomplete reckoning has the potential to sow seeds of mistrust between neighbouring countries on the societal level and impede regional cooperation in addressing shared historical challenges. A sincere and transparent engagement with the past could have fostered an environment of mutual understanding and trust-building. To overcome the politics of remembrance impasse, Montenegro must prioritise truth-seeking and accountability. The fall of the DPS regime in 2020 and the changing political discourse signify a potential turning point. However, the genuine commitment to facing the past and acknowledging collective guilt must extend beyond political rhetoric. The voices of civil society must continue to be amplified, emphasising the importance of transparent historical narratives and comprehensive education. By revising history textbooks and actively engaging in a public deliberation of the past, Montenegro can pave the way towards a more inclusive and equitable society.



In conclusion, the politics of remembrance surrounding the Siege of Dubrovnik in Montenegro have underscored the intricate relationship between truth, accountability, and national identity. The lack of a comprehensive approach to confronting the past has allowed political interests to obscure the nation's role in the siege, undermining reconciliation and perpetuating power structures. Civil society's unwavering advocacy for truth-seeking remains a beacon of hope in the nation's journey towards confronting its dark past. Montenegro's politics of remembrance must evolve to prioritise transparent historical narratives, comprehensive education, and genuine accountability to foster genuine reconciliation and pave the way towards a more equitable and just future. Only by confronting the past with honesty and responsibility can Montenegro lay the foundation for a united and resilient society that learns from its history rather than repeating it.





### 3. The Morinj Detention Camp

#### 3.1. Introduction

The Morinj Camp (Logor Morinj) was a detention facility near Kotor that operated from 3 October 1991 until 18 August 1992. About 300 Croatian prisoners of war and civilians were kept by the Montenegrin authorities in the Yugoslav People's Army during this period. While it had its legal epilogue in the Montenegrin verdict of July 2013, that found four JNA soldiers guilty for war crimes against civilian prisoners, sentencing them for 12 years in total (which was deemed to be a light punishment by the European Commission),<sup>47</sup> on 24 March 2013, former prisoners of the Morinj Camp protested against the trial, claiming it was a farce.<sup>48</sup> In December 2014, international legal expertise confirmed that the sentences were inadequate and below the legal minimum.<sup>49</sup>

The case of the Morinj Detention Camp offers a powerful lens through which to examine the intricate politics of remembrance in the context of war crimes committed during the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s. As an emblematic example of the struggles surrounding transitional justice, the Morinj Camp highlights the complexities and challenges of commemorating victims and acknowledging responsibility in post-conflict societies. From its operation between 1991 and 1992, when around 300 Croatian prisoners of war and civilians endured many atrocities, to the aftermath marked by the inadequate legal response and dearth of official recognition, the Morinj Camp's historical significance reflects the intricacies of confronting a painful past. The delay in acknowledging the crimes committed within its walls and the subsequent push for commemoration by civic sector activists underscore how political interests, shifts in power dynamics, and regional relationships have all played pivotal roles in shaping the trajectory of remembrance. This chapter delves into the evolving discourse of remembrance surrounding the Morinj Camp, shedding light on the underlying tensions that continue to influence Montenegro's approach to confronting its past and fostering a culture of remembrance that is both honest and comprehensive. It underscores the importance of acknowledging historical truths, the significance of collective healing, and the potential consequences of political manoeuvring in the pursuit of reconciliation and peaceful coexistence.

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#### 3.2. Chronological analysis

Once again, it was the civic sector activists who initiated the commemoration and awareness-raising activities regarding the Morinj Camp. For instance, on the occasion of Montenegro's Independence Day, on 21 May 2014, feminist activists from the Anima NGO started honouring victims of war crimes that took place on the territory of Montenegro during the wars of the 1990s. Ever since Montenegro's statehood independence, this NGO has used performances and info-sessions to point out the importance of a culture of remembrance – to remind the Montenegrin public of the war crimes and to emphasise the absence of transitional justice.<sup>50</sup> On 3 October 2022, Anima continued its contentious performances in the wake of the political

47 <https://www.vijesti.me/zabava/247855/apelacioni-sud-razmatrace-zalbe-odbrane-na-presudu-za-morinj>; <https://www.vijesti.me/eu-vijesti/179567/tamne-mrlje-zlocina-na-putu-ka-eu>

48 <https://www.vijesti.me/svijet/balkan/282963/nezadovoljni-sudskim-postupkom-protest-logorasa-iz-morinja>

49 <https://www.vijesti.me/zabava/203965/salustro-pazili-ste-mucitelje-jer-su-porodicni-ljudi>

50 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/180528/aktivistkinje-anime-obilaze-mjesta-zlocina-i-1990-ih>



changes in 2020, especially in regard to their institutionally ignored November 2019 petition for the building of a memorial in Morinje and establishing a School of Peace and Memory Museum (with the Peace Center), that were supposed to educate new generations on what happened in the 1990s so that it does not happen ever again – and thus, through such actions, “to restore Kotor’s dignity”.<sup>51</sup> All of their attempts at creating institutional mechanisms for honouring the victims of the Morinj Camp were systematically ignored by the local and national authorities.

This kind of behaviour began to change with the political changes of 2020: on 3 October 2021, for the first time in 30 years, delegations from Montenegro and Croatia laid a wreath at the entrance of the Morinj Camp. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Montenegro, Đorđe Radulović, talked about this event in terms of a betrayal of “traditional Montenegrin heroism”, and emphasising the need for neighbourly unity as a way of coming to terms with the past. Citing Willy Brandt’s gesture in Warsaw, Radulović said that Montenegro “should show [the same] respect to the innocent victims in [the Morinj Camp]”, emphasising that the “spirit of a new Montenegro” was being expressed through such gestures, that Morinj was “a reminder to never forget that [events like this] must not be repeated”, and that the European future of Montenegro would be built through cooperation with its neighbours.<sup>52</sup> On 7 December 2021, during Radulović’s official visit to Croatia, the host country’s state officials expressed their gratitude to the Montenegrin minister for honouring the prisoners of war in the Morinj Camp, stressing that Croatia and Montenegro would resolve everything in the future “through dialogue, in the spirit of good neighbourliness and friendly relations”.<sup>53</sup> The joint commemoration action of the two governments received praise from NGO activists, but also the demand that the two states be more proactive and cooperative in investigating war crimes on both sides. Moreover, they requested the permanent memorialisation of the place where the Morinj Camp was located, as it would initiate a strategic approach to the commemoration of all victims of all war crimes in Montenegro.<sup>54</sup> They also called upon the State Prosecutor’s Office to fundamentally change its approach to the investigation and prosecution of war crimes, with the focus shifted to political and command responsibility, since the public needed to know who had created an organised “system of abuse” of prisoners in Morinj.<sup>55</sup>

Eventually, the detention camp memorial plaque was installed in Morinj on 10 October 2022, but not without controversy. Despite locals blocking the access roads to the former location of the camp, the memorial was unveiled by Montenegrin and Croatian delegations: the Montenegrin ministers of foreign affairs and defence, Ranko Krivokapić and Raško Konjević, with their Croatian counterparts, Tomo Medved and Gordan Grlić-Radman.<sup>56</sup> The inscription on the plaque read: “We remember the crimes committed to the disgrace of the name and spirit of Montenegro. We express our regret for all the suffering endured by the detainees. May it never happen again!” During the speeches, the “Greater Serbian aggression” was solely blamed for the aggression against Dubrovnik, thus cementing the narrative of Montenegro’s victimhood.

51 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/624142/anima-neophodno-spomen-obilježje-u-morinju>

52 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/569147/prvi-put-u-30-godina-delegacije-crne-gore-i-hrvatske-položile-vijenac-na-ulaz-u-logor-morinj>

53 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/579551/radulovic-u-zvanicnoj-posjeti-hrvatskoj-dijalog-prijateljstvo-i-evropske-vrijednosti-temelj-nasih-medjdrzavnih-odnosa>

54 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/569444/hra-vlada-da-zauzme-strateski-pristup-suocavanju-sa-svim-ratnim-zlocinima>

55 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/569444/hra-vlada-da-zauzme-strateski-pristup-suocavanju-sa-svim-ratnim-zlocinima>

56 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/625287/u-morinju-otkrivena-spomen-ploca-tokom-velikosrpske-agresije-na-hrvatsku>



Within days, Montenegro's Directorate for Inspection Affairs stated that the memorial plaque must be removed. According to Montenegro's Law on Memorials, monuments should only be installed in accordance with the local authority's programme, adopted by the municipal assembly; the law also prohibits the installation of monuments until 50 years after a historical event has happened.<sup>57</sup> In a word, the Morinj Camp memorial was installed at the former army facility without the permission of the local authorities.<sup>58</sup> On 18 October 2022, the local authorities of Kotor claimed that the memorial plaque was installed without previous consultations with them, and that they would initiate a legal process against Krivokapić and Konjević for violating the law.<sup>59</sup> They were not against the memorial plaque *per se*, and only questioning the legality of the one installed.<sup>60</sup> On 25 October 2022, the army officers refused to comply with the law and defended the memorial site, which furthered the controversy.<sup>61</sup> Before that, on 19 October 2022, the Prime Minister, Dritan Abazović, had accused members of his cabinet, Konjević and Krivokapić, of misleading the Croatian state delegation and of creating an immense diplomatic scandal, as they did not inform the government, nor any other competent authority, of their plan of installing the memorial plaque in Morinj.<sup>62</sup> The two ministers defended themselves by claiming that the memorial plaque was not placed in public space, but instead on military land.<sup>63</sup> The NGO activists who had lobbied for the Mornji Camp memorial in the previous decade welcomed the memorial plaque, but expressed their regret at such an important event being done in a short-cut manner, without timely informing of the public or inviting NGO representatives and peace activists, who would have shown that there is significant support for this kind of gestures.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, they claimed that the illegal way in which the memorial was installed was not helping but rather obstructing the culture of remembrance.<sup>65</sup>

The bottom line was that no one from the local and national authorities objected to honouring the victims of the Morinj Camp, but they instead wanted the memorial to be within the legal framework of the country, with an inscription that would not be a cheap revision of the past. Formally, since the memorial plaque was not placed on public land, but rather on the military ground, as the ministers claimed, it could not be treated as a memorial according to the Law on Monuments. Accordingly, the Croatian delegation was misled in thinking they were unveiling a memorial plaque to the prisoners of war. Moreover, it also meant that the memorial plaque was in the same rank as, for example, a cannon placed on military land, which further degraded the

57 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/625410/ploca-u-morinju-mimo-zakona-i-bilo-cijeg-znanja>

58 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/626572/inspekcija-nalozila-uklanjanje-spomen-ploce-u-morinju>; <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/626842/krivokapic-put-crne-gore-u-evropu-mora-ici-preko-morinja>

59 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/626916/konjevic-i-krivokapic-vojni-objekat-se-koristi-bez-prethodno-pribavl-jene-saglasnosti-opstine>

60 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/628571/jokic-o-ploci-u-morinju-ulozene-zalbe-na-sva-rjesenja-inspekci-je-formiran-predmet-protiv-krivokapica-i-konjevica>

61 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/627673/vojnici-sprijecili-uklanjanje-spomen-ploce>; <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/626906/komunalna-stize-u-ponedjeljak-vojska-cuva-objekat>

62 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/626760/abazovic-konjevic-i-krivokapic-napravili-diplomatski-skandal>

63 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/626916/konjevic-i-krivokapic-vojni-objekat-se-koristi-bez-prethodno-pribavl-jene-saglasnosti-opstine>

64 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/625344/hra-i-cgo-o-postavljanju-spomen-ploce-u-morinju-zalimo-sto-se-ova-ko-vazni-dogadjaji-sprovode-na-precac>

65 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/625902/hra-cgo-i-anima-konjevic-i-krivokapic-da-saopste-pravni-osnov-za-postavljanje-spomen-obilježja-u-morinju>; <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/624301/yjhr-jos-uvijek-se-ceka-prav-da-za-zlocine-u-logoru-morinj-neadekvatno-vodjenje-istraga-za-ratne-zlocine>



victims of the Morinj Camp. It was also important to note that the memorial plaque provided incomplete information about the events that led to the formation of the Morinj Camp. There were several reactions to this memorial plaque from prominent journalists and public figures during October 2022. As Ratka Jovanović-Vukotić stated in her column, “[the war crimes in Morinj and Dubrovnik] were not committed by someone else ‘in order to disgrace the name and spirit of Montenegro’, they were committed by Montenegro. Nor did ‘Montenegro go to war to kill itself’ - quite the opposite, it went unprovoked to the most shameful and only campaign of occupation in its four hundred years of military history.”<sup>66</sup> In other words, instead of communicating remorse and reconciliation, the installed plaque absolved the then Montenegrin leadership of any responsibility. As Jovana Kolarić explained, “with this memorial plaque, Montenegro did not accept its responsibility and did not apologise to the victims. With this self-apology, Montenegro has accepted only its alleged naivety as its responsibility and reprimanded itself for that. Montenegro did not address the Croatian civilians and soldiers detained in Morinje, it addressed and forgave itself, and transferred the entire responsibility exclusively to Serbia.”<sup>67</sup> Jadran Kapur from Croatia also criticised the inscription on the plaque, as it wrongly stated that “these crimes were not committed in an attempt to conquer part of the Croatian territory (of which Montenegro still disputes the Prevlaka and the sea belt), but that these crimes – and the plaque says that they were ‘Greater Serbian’ – were committed to harm Montenegro. Which is absolutely not true! On October 22 1991, the current president, then prime minister of Montenegro, explained to *Pobjeda* readers that ‘Montenegro was attacked by the Ustaša.’”<sup>68</sup> Indeed, the memorial plaque read as if Montenegro had attacked Dubrovnik to harm itself (and its glorious tradition), rather than to harm Dubrovnik (and conquer its territory). Montenegrin writer Ilija Đurović rightly noticed how the “first sentence, the largest letters and the central place on the plaque are reserved not for real, human victims, but for the metaphorical victim of the aggressor, for the ‘name and spirit of Montenegro’, which allegedly suffered in that camp equally as much as the tortured Croats.”<sup>69</sup> Montenegro still needs to face the past with *odgovornost* – which translates as responsibility, accountability, and answerability – in a context in which the whitewashing of political biographies has become a norm.

### 3.3. Conclusion

The politics of remembrance surrounding the Morinj Detention Camp in Montenegro exemplify the complexities and challenges of confronting a painful past and acknowledging responsibility in post-conflict societies. The case study sheds light on how transitional justice and collective memory are deeply intertwined with political interests, power dynamics, and regional relationships. The delayed acknowledgment and recognition of the crimes committed at the Morinj Camp, the struggles of civic sector activists in their pursuit of commemoration, and the controversies surrounding the installation of the memorial plaque demonstrate the intricate interplay between memory, history, and politics in Montenegro. This conclusion seeks to present a dense argument about the politics of remembrance, or lack thereof, in the context of Montenegro’s approach to confronting its past.

66 <https://www.vijesti.me/kolumne/625899/dzaba-su-krecili>

67 <https://nomad.ba/kolaric-samoizvinjenje-u-morinju>

68 <https://dubrovacki.slobodnadalmacija.hr/dubrovnik/vijesti/hrvatska-i-svijet/ministar-diplomatskog-skandala-i-zlo-upotreba-dubrovackih-branitelja-1233772>

69 <https://normalizuj.me/praxis/ciji-je-nas-logor-morinj>



The Morinj Detention Camp's existence from 1991 to 1992 represents a dark chapter in Montenegro's history during the tumultuous period of the Yugoslav Wars. The detention facility's role in holding around 300 Croatian prisoners of war and civilians and subjecting them to war crimes highlights the grave human rights abuses that occurred on Montenegrin soil. However, in the aftermath of the conflict, there was a notable lack of acknowledgment and accountability for the atrocities committed within the camp. This absence of acknowledgment can be attributed to various factors, including political considerations, regional alliances, and the state's reluctance to address its role in the conflict fully. Montenegro's struggle for independence and statehood has further complicated the politics of remembrance regarding the Morinj Camp. The early years after gaining independence were marked by attempts to establish a national identity separate from the former Yugoslav federation. As part of this process, Montenegro's political leaders may have been hesitant to confront the country's involvement in war crimes, fearing that it could tarnish the image of the newly independent state and hinder efforts to build a positive national narrative. This tendency to prioritise nation-building over truth and reconciliation has contributed to the lack of official acknowledgment and accountability for the crimes committed in Morinj.

Moreover, the influence of regional relationships and geopolitical considerations cannot be underestimated in shaping Montenegro's approach to remembrance. Montenegro shares a complex history with neighbouring Croatia, with both countries experiencing conflict and intermingling throughout the years. In the aftermath of the Yugoslav Wars, it became crucial for Montenegro to navigate its relationship with Croatia carefully. The political leaders' reluctance to confront the past fully may have been influenced by a desire to maintain a delicate balance with its neighbour, avoiding actions that could strain diplomatic ties. As a result, the politics of remembrance surrounding the Morinj Camp were intricately tied to regional diplomacy, further complicating the pursuit of truth and justice.

Throughout the years, civic sector activists have played a pivotal role in pushing for commemoration and acknowledgment of the victims of the Morinj Camp. Their persistent efforts to raise awareness and advocate for institutional mechanisms of remembrance have sought to challenge the prevailing culture of silence and omission. These activists have recognised the significance of acknowledging historical truths as an essential step towards reconciliation and the prevention of future atrocities. Their calls for the establishment of a memorial, a School of Peace, and the Memory Museum have been rooted in a genuine desire to educate future generations about the horrors of war and to ensure that such atrocities are never repeated. However, the activists' struggle for acknowledgment and commemoration have faced resistance from the local and national authorities. The initial disregard of their petitions and the subsequent controversies surrounding the installation of the memorial plaque reflected the persistent unwillingness of those in power to confront the painful past. The legal and bureaucratic obstacles encountered by the activists highlight how the politics of remembrance can be manipulated to downplay the significance of past atrocities. By resisting the establishment of a permanent memorial, the authorities have inadvertently perpetuated a culture of forgetting, hindering the nation's ability to come to terms with its past fully.

The controversies surrounding the memorial plaque also revealed the complexities of historical narratives and their representation. The wording on the plaque and the attempt to shift responsibility for the crimes committed in Morinj onto external actors served to whitewash the country's past and reinforce a narrative of victimhood. This manipulation of historical



facts for political purposes highlights the dangers of instrumentalising remembrance to suit the present political agenda. Instead of fostering genuine reconciliation, such practices hinder the development of a culture of remembrance that acknowledges the truth and fosters understanding and empathy.

In conclusion, the case of the Morinj Detention Camp encapsulates the intricate politics of remembrance in Montenegro. The delayed acknowledgment, resistance to commemoration, and manipulation of historical narratives are indicative of the challenges that post-conflict societies face in confronting their past and seeking reconciliation. The politics of remembrance in Montenegro are deeply entangled with political interests, regional dynamics, and the pursuit of a positive national identity. However, the efforts of civic sector activists highlight the importance of acknowledging historical truths as a necessary step towards healing and reconciliation. A comprehensive and honest reckoning with the past is essential for Montenegro to move forward as a nation and build a culture of remembrance that promotes peace, justice, and understanding. By acknowledging the atrocities committed in Morinj and other sites during the Yugoslav Wars, Montenegro can break free from the politics of forgetting and embrace a future built on the collective memory, acceptance of responsibility, and the pursuit of a more just and harmonious society.

## 4. Deportation of Bosnian Refugees

### 4.1. Introduction

It has been almost three decades since the deportation of Bosnian refugees from Montenegro, and no one has been convicted for that war crime, nor have the families of the victims been offered the full truth about what happened to their loved ones on 25 May 1992 at the police station in Herceg Novi, from where they were taken to detention camps in Republika Srpska. On that day, the Montenegrin police illegally arrested at least 66 civilians, mostly Muslims, aged between 18 and 66 years, who had sought refuge in Montenegro from the ongoing war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>70</sup> In other accounts, the Montenegrin police arrested 150 Bosnian refugees and subsequently deported them from Montenegro to a camp in Foča, which was controlled by Bosnian Serb forces; eighty-three of these individuals never returned to their families. Instead, they were killed in improvised camps in the territory of Republika Srpska.<sup>71</sup> They were handed over as hostages to the Bosnian Serb army under the leadership of Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić, to be used for the exchange of prisoners of war. However, all those extradited from Herceg Novi on May 27, 1992, were immediately killed, whilst of another group sent to the concentration camp in Foča on May 25, 1992, only a few survived. The bodies of all the victims deported from Herceg Novi on May 27, 1992, have not yet been found, and the exact location of their deaths is still uncertain. Furthermore, at least 33 individuals of Serbian nationality from Bosnia and Herzegovina were also arrested and handed over to the Army of the Serbian Republic (later known as Republika Srpska) for the purpose of mobilisation. It is still unknown as to whether any of them perished.<sup>72</sup>

On December 25, 2008, the Government of Montenegro made a decision to reach a judicial settlement with the families of the dead victims and the surviving victims of the 1992 deportation. The state paid compensation to the amount of four million one hundred and thirty-five thousand euros to the survivors and the families of the victims. In this way, Montenegro acknowledged the fact that the crime had occurred.<sup>73</sup> In March 2011, the Higher Court in Podgorica acquitted nine former police officers and state security officials who were charged with the deportation of the Bosnian refugees. The court stated that the criminal offence of war crimes against civilians could not be applied to members of the Montenegrin police who had deported the refugees because, as stated, they were not part of the conflicting parties in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In other words, these policemen were acquitted because the court ruled that while the arrests were illegal, they did not constitute a war crime and the nine men were not a party to any side in the Bosnian war.<sup>74</sup>

The crime of deporting Bosnian refugees from Montenegro is considered to be “the most horrifying episode in Montenegro’s recent history”, but the trial for this war crime, like many other

70 <https://www.pobjeda.me/clanak/crna-gora-nema-snage-da-kazni-razne-zlocince>

71 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/436674/deportacija-muslimanskih-izbjeglica-jedna-od-najsramnijih-stranica-u-istoriji-cg-ni-kazne-ni-spomemika>

72 <https://www.pobjeda.me/clanak/crna-gora-nema-snage-da-kazni-razne-zlocince>

73 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/29965695.html>

74 <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/04/06/strasbourg-court-rejects-wartime-deportation-case-against-montenegro/>



similar cases, “ended as a complete failure of justice”.<sup>75</sup> Yet, it tends to be discussed in public only on the anniversary of the deportation, with only the descendants of the victims, a few representatives of non-governmental organisations and individuals speaking out. And this was the situation until relatively recently. Moreover, when it comes to honouring the victims, there is still no memorial that would serve as a reminder of the atrocities committed and show respect for the victims. Despite numerous appeals for this finally to be done, nothing has been accomplished thus far.<sup>76</sup> It has been established through a final criminal verdict in Montenegro and a verdict of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in the Case of Krnojelac (the camp warden in Foča), that they were unlawfully arrested in Montenegro and handed over as hostages, yet the courts in Montenegro have failed to recognise and punish the crime as a war crime.<sup>77</sup>

## 4.2. Chronological analysis

Back in 2011, the Montenegrin state authorities promised that a monument would be erected within the premises of the police station in Herceg Novi to commemorate the victims of the deportation, pledging also to declare May 27 as the Day of Remembrance for the deported, yet these promises have not been fulfilled to this day.<sup>78</sup> The NGOs HRA, CGO, among ANIMA, among others, submitted three initiatives to the authorities at that time, with only one being accepted – that is, the request for a public apology from the Montenegrin police for the unlawful arrest and extradition of refugees to the enemy forces of the Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The initiatives to declare a Day of Remembrance for the victims of the deportation crime in 1992, and to erect a memorial monument for the victims of the refugee deportation in 1992 in front of the Police Administration building in Herceg Novi, have still not been accepted.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, a theatre play depicting the fate of the victims of the deportation, simply called *Deportation*, has never been staged in any professional theater in Montenegro to this day.<sup>80</sup>

To this day, no one has been convicted for the crime of deporting refugees from Herceg Novi. In 2012, the Court of Appeal acquitted nine former policemen after the domestic courts falsely claimed that Montenegro was not officially involved in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The outcome of this trial was met with strong criticism from the Bosniak Council, which demanded that the state be held accountable for the deportation of Bosnian refugees and urged the authorities to address and conclusively resolve this case, as well as other instances of war crimes. Despite compensating the families of the victims, the Montenegrin government has failed to ensure criminal justice by identifying the instigators and direct perpetrators, as emphatically requested by the HRA, CGO, and ANIMA NGOs. The settlement agreement in 2008 resulted in compensation being paid for the majority of the victims of this war crime, but the lack of accountability remains concerning. These NGOs have tirelessly advocated for criminal justice for

75 <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/opinions/2022/5/12/deportacija-bosanskih-izbjeglica-iz-crne-gore-1992-dani-ka-da-smo-se-ispisali-iz-civilizacije>

76 <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/opinions/2022/5/12/deportacija-bosanskih-izbjeglica-iz-crne-gore-1992-dani-ka-da-smo-se-ispisali-iz-civilizacije>

77 <https://www.pobjeda.me/clanak/crna-gora-nema-snage-da-kazni-razne-zlocince>

78 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/29965695.html>

79 <https://www.dan.co.me/vijesti/drustvo/nvo-obiljezile-31-godinu-nekaznenog-ratnog-zlocina-deportacije-bosansko-hercegovačkih-izbjeglica-5179651>

80 <https://www.pobjeda.me/clanak/sve-zivo-pociva>





the victims, the establishment of a memorial, the official declaration of a day of remembrance, and an official apology from the Montenegrin police to the survivors and the families of the deceased.<sup>81</sup> The President of the Montenegrin Committee of Lawyers for Human Rights, Velija Murić, stated that “verdicts for war crimes in Montenegro are being undermined owing to superficial investigations and the state’s weak determination to confront the past”, as was evidenced by the Higher Court acquitting nine former officials of the Ministry of Internal Affairs who were accused of deporting Bosnian refugees.<sup>82</sup> These trial outcomes, or the lack thereof, are closely intertwined with the ongoing struggle for commemorations, and underscore the complexities of the politics of remembrance in Montenegro.

In 2013, the Court of Appeals upheld the first-instance verdict by which the Higher Court in Podgorica acquitted nine former officials of the Ministry of Internal Affairs who were accused of deporting Bosnian refugees to the authorities of Republika Srpska in 1992. The Court of Appeals reviewed the appeals filed by the Supreme State Prosecutor’s Office, as well as by several injured parties. However, “the court dismissed the appeals as unfounded and upheld the first-instance verdict”.<sup>83</sup> This outcome triggered a strong reaction from representatives of several Montenegrin NGOs, who argued that the war crime of deportation had not been punished in accordance with international and domestic law. They asserted that “instead of seeking justice, the authorities are promoting a ‘projected forgetfulness’”, mentioning also that “those who ordered and those who could have prevented the crime were never prosecuted, despite the former President of the country, Momir Bulatović, admitting in court that it was a state error”.<sup>84</sup> This verdict, widely condemned by almost all political and civil society actors, with the exception of the DPS, highlights the continued struggle to ensure accountability and recognition for the victims of the deportation crime.<sup>85</sup> The trial’s outcome intersects with the politics of remembrance in Montenegro, where the lack of decisive action to hold perpetrators accountable perpetuates a culture of impunity and hinders the establishment of a collective memory that honestly confronts the past.

The commemoration of the deportation was continued in the subsequent years, predominantly by the NGOs HRA, CGO and ANIMA in front of the Herceg Novi Security Center building, whence the majority of refugees were unlawfully deported. They would lay flowers and collectively pay tribute to the victims.<sup>86</sup> Floral tributes were placed as a reminder of the crime. In 2018, the HRA representative stated that they “demand justice for the victims of the crime, who deserve a day of remembrance and a monument at the place from which they were sent to their deaths, with those responsible being criminally prosecuted”; further noting that they were “marking the 26th anniversary of the deportation without criminal justice, a Day of Remembrance, or a monument”, and that they did not want “to live in a society that lacks the strength to acknowledge an obvious crime and condemn it”, since “nothing has changed in Montenegro; there is still no courage to confront what happened”, because “the authorities

81 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/crna-gora-deportacija-policija-izvinjenje/31867362.html>

82 <https://www.vijesti.me/zabava/297153/muric-optuzeni-oslobodeni-zbog-povrsne-istrage-i-slabe-volje-da-se-rascisti-sa-proslocu>

83 <https://www.vijesti.me/zabava/275267/begovic-presuda-je-ocekivana-drugi-da-odgovaraju-za-deportacije>

84 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/275802/zlocin-jos-nije-kaznjen-da-deportacije-ne-budu-zaboravljene>

85 <https://www.vijesti.me/zabava/297273/ostaje-stid-za-cijelu-drzavu>

86 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/180151/23-godine-od-nekaznjenog-ratnog-zlocina-deportacije-izbjeglica>



are still the same”.<sup>87</sup> Nedžiba Bajrović, whose husband Osman was taken from their home in Bijela 25 years ago, still has no knowledge of what happened to him. She criticised the representatives of the embassies of EU member countries for not attending the commemoration in Herceg Novi today. “Every silence implies approval of the crime”, she stated, emphasising that in this way, all the values on which the EU is based were being undermined, with the observation that the government in Montenegro was the same then as it was before.<sup>88</sup> Moreover, the Mayor of Plav, Orhan Šahmanović, emphasised that those from the Bosniak community who support the current government are responsible for this crime and have no right to remain silent about it in the interests of Montenegro. “The deportation of refugees is the worst crime in the history of Montenegro. The perpetrators and instigators are known, and the reason why no one has been convicted lies in the fact that those same criminals are still in power, receiving high honours in their home country”, asserted a representative of the NGO 19.<sup>89</sup> Despite starting an initiative, the Herceg Novi Municipal Assembly has not made a decision to erect a memorial as a sign of remembrance for the victims. The NGOs stated that they did not wish “to live in a society that lacks the strength to acknowledge an obvious crime and condemn it”.<sup>90</sup>

186 Finally, on 25 May 2022, the eighteenth memorial gathering – and the thirteenth to be held in front of the police building in Herceg Novi – to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the deportation of Bosnian refugees from Montenegro in 1992, was held jointly by the aforementioned NGOs, representatives from the Civic Alliance, family members of the three victims, and for the first time, by the Minister of Internal Affairs in the Government of Montenegro, Mr. Filip Adžić, and the Director of the Police Administration, Mr. Zoran Brđanin, the Minister of Justice, Marko Kovač, and the Minister of Labour, Admir Adrović.<sup>91</sup> This is the first time that officials from the Government of Montenegro have attended the commemoration of the deportation anniversary. Brđanin issued an apology to the victims and members of the families of Bosnian-Herzegovinian refugees who were deported in 1992. He made his statement at a memorial gathering in Herceg Novi commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of that event. Brđanin, in front of the building of the Herceg Novi police station, stated that the current leadership of the Police Administration is distancing itself from what happened in that building 30 years ago, “...in light of the terrible consequences of such actions for the victims, to whom I pay tribute today.”<sup>92</sup>

Minister Adžić, while paying tribute to the victims, stated that none of the perpetrators of the crime should be absolved: “Unfortunately, over the past three decades, there has been no political will or readiness to acknowledge and name this crime for what it is, and to fully investigate it. Regardless of the circumstances at the time, none of the perpetrators should be absolved of responsibility.” Adžić expressed his support for the construction of a memorial monument in front of the police station in Herceg Novi, stating that “it is not only a professional obligation but, above all, a human and moral duty”. The HRA added that “this anniversary is quite exceptional. Today, for the first time in the history of commemorating the deportation crime, we have govern-

87 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/31820/obiljezjeno-26-godina-od-deportacije-izbjeglica-iz-herceg-novog>

88 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/31820/obiljezjeno-26-godina-od-deportacije-izbjeglica-iz-herceg-novog>

89 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/31820/obiljezjeno-26-godina-od-deportacije-izbjeglica-iz-herceg-novog>

90 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/31820/obiljezjeno-26-godina-od-deportacije-izbjeglica-iz-herceg-novog>

91 <https://www.pobjeda.me/clanak/crna-gora-nema-snage-da-kazni-razne-zlocince>

92 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/crna-gora-deportacija-policija-izvinjenje/31867362.html>



ment ministers with us, and for the first time, the head of the Montenegrin police is here". This commemoration has been held for almost two decades as a "fight against forgetting".<sup>93</sup>

Later also, on 25 May 2023, a memorial gathering was held in front of the police building, the Security Center of Herceg Novi, marking the 31st anniversary of the war crime of deporting Bosnian refugees. The event was once again organised by HRA, CGO, and ANIMA, in the presence of the families of the victims and officials from the Government of Montenegro. According to the joint statement by these organisations, "we have reached this anniversary without the reopening of a criminal investigation, without a memorial, and without a day of remembrance for the victims". Among the attendees were Alen Bajrović, the son of the deceased Osman Bajrović, as well as representatives from the Government, including the Prime Minister of Montenegro, Dritan Abazović, and his advisor, Đorđe Radulović, the Minister of Justice, Marko Kovač, the Minister of Labour and Social Welfare, Admir Adrović, the Deputy Prime Minister for Regional Development and Minister of Capital Investments, Ervin Ibrahimović (President of the Bosniak Party), and the State Secretary in the Ministry of the Interior, Mersudin Gredić, the Acting Chief of the Security Center in Herceg Novi, Slobodan Đokić, and the State Secretary in the Ministry of Defence, Krsto Perović. "For years, we have been advocating for criminal justice, a memorial for the victims, a Day of Remembrance, and an apology from the Montenegrin police. We received the apology last year, but nothing else. We are doing all of this to ensure that nothing similar happens again – and it won't happen again only if the authorities decide through their actions to prevent it. When they go from words to actions – when they create a memorial, declare a Day of Remembrance, and make additional efforts to punish this crime, then we can say progress has been made", concluded the HRA.<sup>94</sup>

In April 2023, the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg rejected as inadmissible a case brought by seven relatives of the people who were deported in May 1992 from Montenegro to a detention camp in a Serb-controlled part of Bosnia.<sup>95</sup> In their case, they complained that the Montenegrin authorities did not mount an effective investigation and did not probe all of those who were responsible for the crime, including top officials. However, the ECHR said in its ruling that the Montenegrin authorities "acknowledged in substance a breach of the European Human Rights Convention in both criminal and civil proceedings" connected to the crime. "The authorities provided the applicants with redress in the form of compensation amounting to a total of 165,000 euros, following which the applicants confirmed that they had thereby been completely compensated for all damage caused by the death of their next-of-kin and had waived all other possible future claims for compensation on those grounds", pointing to the December 2008 court settlement with 200 relatives of the victims and several survivors, in which Montenegro paid a total of 4,135,000 euros in compensation to the families for the illegal actions of the police in deporting their relatives.<sup>96</sup>

While the deportation of refugees continues to be a troubling chapter in Montenegro's recent history, and universally condemned by social and political figures, the state's handling of the

93 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/crna-gora-deportacija-policija-izvinjenje/31867362.html>

94 <https://www.dan.co.me/vijesti/drustvo/nvo-obiljezile-31-godinu-nekaznjenog-ratnog-zlocina-deportacije-bosansko-hercegovackih-izbjeglica-5179651>

95 <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2023/4/5/sud-u-strasbourgju-o-deportacijama-muslimana-iz-crne-gore>

96 <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/04/06/strasbourg-court-rejects-wartime-deportation-case-against-montenegro/>



issue reveals a willingness to acknowledge the war crime without formally recognising it as such. This approach ultimately protects those responsible for instigating and carrying out the deportation.

### 4.3. Conclusion

The tragic deportation of Bosnian refugees from Montenegro in 1992 stands as a harrowing testament to the complexities of the politics of remembrance in the nation. For almost three decades, the struggle for justice, truth, and commemoration has been met with disappointments, impunity, and a lack of official recognition, revealing the challenges Montenegro faces in confronting its past and establishing a collective memory that reflects the nation's values and aspirations. The event's relation to the overall politics of remembrance in Montenegro highlights a paradox that the country grapples with. The Montenegrin state authorities made promises in 2011 to acknowledge the crime through the erection of a memorial monument and the declaration of a Day of Remembrance for the victims. However, these promises remain unfulfilled to this day, raising questions about the state's commitment to acknowledging historical injustices and honouring the memory of the victims.

The judicial response to the deportation further exemplifies the complexities surrounding the politics of remembrance. The acquittal of nine former policemen in 2012 and the Court of Appeals' subsequent upholding of the verdict sent a disheartening message to the victims' families and the wider public. The lack of accountability for those responsible for the crime reinforces a culture of impunity, hindering genuine efforts to confront the past and establish a truthful narrative of Montenegro's history. However, the struggle for justice and commemoration led by NGOs, including HRA, CGO, and ANIMA, sheds light on the resilience of civil society in Montenegro. These organisations have tirelessly advocated for criminal justice, a memorial monument, a Day of Remembrance, and an official apology from the Montenegrin police. Their dedication to the victims' cause underscores the importance of acknowledging historical crimes and ensuring they are not forgotten.

The recent attendance of government officials at the memorial gathering in May 2023 marks a noteworthy development in the politics of remembrance in Montenegro. The presence of the Minister of Internal Affairs, Filip Adžić, and the Director of the Police Administration, Zoran Brđanin, who issued an apology to the victims and their families, signifies a growing recognition of the need to address the past and acknowledge historical injustices. However, this must be accompanied by concrete actions, to ensure that the apology is not a mere token gesture but an earnest commitment to justice and remembrance. Despite the positive steps referred to above, Montenegro's overall politics of remembrance still face challenges. The European Court of Human Rights' rejection of the case brought by the victims' relatives highlights the need for a more comprehensive and systematic approach to addressing historical crimes. While compensation is an important aspect of acknowledging the victims' suffering, it should not be a substitute for criminal accountability and formal recognition of the deportation as a war crime.

The lack of a memorial monument and an official Day of Remembrance for the victims also reflects a broader issue concerning how the country grapples with its historical past. The absence of a collective memory and the failure to establish spaces for commemoration hinder the nation's ability to confront its past, learn from it, and strive for a more just and compassionate future. Moving forward, Montenegro must commit to a more proactive and transparent approach

to the politics of remembrance. Acknowledging historical crimes, establishing memorials, and declaring official Days of Remembrance are crucial steps in this process. Furthermore, the government and civil society must work together to ensure that criminal investigations are pursued diligently and that those responsible for past atrocities are held accountable for their actions.

It is vital for Montenegro to recognise that addressing its historical past is not an act of self-deprecation or a threat to its identity. On the contrary, it is an opportunity for the nation to demonstrate its commitment to human rights, justice, and a future free from violence. By confronting its past with honesty and humility, Montenegro can create a society that values truth, reconciliation, and collective remembrance. Ultimately, Montenegro's ability to acknowledge and confront its past will shape its future. By fostering a culture of accountability, transparency, and compassion, the nation can move towards a future that embraces its history and learns from it. Only through these efforts can Montenegro honour the memory of the victims and create a society that upholds the values of truth, justice, and remembrance.



## 5. Bukovica

### 5.1. Introduction

Two decades have passed since war crimes were committed in Bukovica, yet there still is “no remembrance day, no memorial, no established criminal responsibility of the perpetrators, no responsibility of the judicial authorities for failures in processing the cases, and no justice for the victims”.<sup>97</sup> The Bukovica Case does not exist in school textbooks, nor is it a part of the collective memory or culture of remembrance in Montenegro. The war crimes committed in Bukovica serve as a paradigmatic example of the politics of collective amnesia prevailing in Montenegro. As a small-scale event in rural Montenegro, Bukovica lacks the political significance and potency that more high-profile atrocities like the bombing of Dubrovnik might have garnered. Consequently, it highlights how political elites are eager to forget and downplay atrocities that cannot be easily leveraged for political gain. Unlike the attention-grabbing incidents, Bukovica slips through the cracks of the public consciousness, enabling politicians to conveniently evade responsibility and accountability for the heinous acts committed during the Yugoslav wars. Moreover, Bukovica, much like the lesser-known massacre at Kaluđerski laz, remains a non-event within the Montenegrin public sphere. Despite its tragic significance, it exists as a mere footnote in the country’s contemporary history. However, Bukovica serves as an important reminder of Montenegro’s shameful involvement in the Yugoslav wars and the DPS’s warmongering regime. The state’s overall willingness to marginalise and forget the memory of Bukovica is glaringly evident in the absence of any official commemorations. The failure to acknowledge and remember the victims further perpetuates a culture of impunity, allowing those responsible for war crimes to evade justice and continue in their positions of power.

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Given the lack of an official politics of remembrance regarding the war crimes committed in Bukovica, this chapter focuses on the practices within civil society in Montenegro, particularly those followed by selected NGOs that have been more persistent and vocal in keeping the memory of Bukovica alive. These dedicated civil society actors play a crucial role in challenging the state’s collective amnesia and demanding accountability for the atrocities committed. By relentlessly reminding the Montenegrin public about the events in Bukovica, they seek to disrupt the state’s narrative of forgetfulness, and call for truth, justice, and reconciliation. These NGOs have taken it upon themselves to shed light on the forgotten chapters of Montenegro’s history and advocate for the recognition of Bukovica’s victims. Their documentation, publications, and commemorative events have become crucial tools for breaking the silence surrounding the war crimes and the state’s inadequate response.

Bukovica is a rural area, about 60 km away from the town of Pljevlja in northern Montenegro. In the early 1990s, this region was predominantly inhabited by Bosniaks/Muslims. During the neighbouring war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a large number of reservists of the Yugoslav Army, paramilitary groups, and the police forces of the Republic of Montenegro, led by Veselin Veljović, were concentrated on the territory of Bukovica. Officially, these forces were stationed in Bukovica to guard the border from the potential incursion of Bosniak paramilitary units from Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, crimes were committed on the territory of Montenegro. According to available information, at the beginning of 1992, 24 villages were displaced. From 1992

<sup>97</sup> <https://www.vijesti.me/kolumne/643474/pravda-ne-zivi-u-bukovici>



to 1995, six civilians were killed and 11 people were abducted and then taken to prison in Čajniče, two of whom committed suicide as a result of the torture. Moreover, another 70 civilians were subjected to physical torture, including extreme forms of humiliation and rape. At least eight houses and the village mosque were set on fire, other houses were destroyed, etc. About 125 families, numbering 330 members in total, were displaced. Only the death of the local road maintenance worker, Džafer Đog, reached the court, but it was qualified as a murder, not a war crime. Majoš Vrečo was convicted, but later pardoned by the then President Milo Đukanović, while his accomplice Dragomir Krvavac was acquitted on grounds of insanity.<sup>98</sup>

## 5.2. Chronological analysis

Despite promises made by then ruling Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) to the European Commission that the case of Bukovica would be reviewed, the Prosecutor's Office did not move an inch to seek justice for the victims. The court process was marred with irregularities and was conducted under the veil of secrecy from its very beginning in 2007.<sup>99</sup> The accused were acquitted owing to a lack of evidence in 2011.<sup>100</sup> The civic sector has accused the state of inadequate investigation during the court proceedings and the prosecutor of obstructing the case, and insisted that the whole trial was marred by a wrong application of the law (which was also contrary to international humanitarian law).<sup>101</sup> In the meantime, a painful reminder of this fact was that the person who should have been among the accused, Veselin Veljović, as he was identified by numerous witnesses, ended up being appointed Director of the Police Directorate and then an advisor to the President of Montenegro, Milo Đukanović.<sup>102</sup> Ultimately, the state of Montenegro accepted and expressed regret for its responsibility, paying millions in damages and building new houses in Bukovica, to which no one has returned (except during the elections).<sup>103</sup>

In 2011, immediately after the trial, the Reis of the Islamic Community in Montenegro, Rifat Fejzić, expressed his dissatisfaction with the court's decision to acquit former members of the Yugoslav Army of war crimes in Bukovica. Questioning the general trust in the judicial system, he stated that, according to the state institutions in Montenegro, everything was fine in the "ethnically cleansed area": "It seems that nothing happened in Bukovica, that everything was fine. It turns out that the religious buildings there set fire to themselves and collapsed on their own. It turns out that people left their homes because they didn't want to live in that area, because they didn't like their houses, and that foreign countries were better than their own homes. It turns out that people were killed after leaving police stations because they liked it there."<sup>104</sup> Furthermore, the Bukovica Citizens' Association shared the same sentiment in 2011, by stating:

98 <https://www.vijesti.me/kolumne/643474/pravda-ne-zivi-u-bukovici>

99 <https://www.monitor.co.me/istraga-na-etvrtom-popravnomo/>

100 <https://www.monitor.co.me/sjeme-novog-zloina/>; <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/375555/rastoder-presuda-nije-u-skladu-sa-argumentima>

101 <https://www.vijesti.me/zabava/242544/ga-insistira-na-razrjesenju-tuzioca-u-slucaju-bukovica>; <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/crna-hronika/640838/zrtve-jos-cekaju-na-pravdu>; <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/140970/cgo-pravosnazne-odluke-bez-utvrdivanja-odgovornosti-ne-donose-pravdu>

102 <https://www.monitor.co.me/ko-je-glavni-pendrek/>; <https://www.monitor.co.me/sluaj-veselina-veljovicia-karijera-od-afera/>; <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/crna-hronika/395990/pravda-ceka-veljovic-napreduje>

103 <https://www.vijesti.me/kolumne/643474/pravda-ne-zivi-u-bukovici>

104 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/375386/glasali-smo-jer-se-procluo-da-je-milo-dobar-čovjek>



*"It seems that Bukovica residents were killing themselves, burning their own houses and mosques, since Deputy Commander of the Second Army, General Damjanović, said in an interview with Pobjeda in September 1992 that 'Muslims in Pljevlja burned down their own shops just to accuse Serbs of it'. Why is Bukovica being rebuilt if nothing happened? Is this a preparation for new crimes in the future? It was very easy to determine the perpetrators of events from that period by following the chronology of events, knowing which individuals held responsible positions at the time; and it is still not difficult today."*<sup>105</sup>

This organisation also called Bukovica "Montenegro's very own Srebrenica".<sup>106</sup>

In 2011, the Montenegrin politician and President of the parliamentary party Movement for Changes, Nebojša Medojević, harshly accused the Muslims from Pljevlja of being the "main culprits for the acquittal of those accused of crimes in Bukovica, as they agreed to absolve their former persecutors for money". Medojević believed that such a decision could be expected in a country where institutions do not function, but that the blame is not on them. "The exclusive and only guilty parties are the Pljevlja Muslims who, for a handful of narco-Euros, accepted lies as the truth and accepted their own executioners as saviours, heroes, and moral giants", continued Medojević, pointing to the dominant support of Muslims/Bosniaks in Montenegro for the DPS regime.<sup>107</sup> In the same year, civic activist and publicist Ibrahim Cikić reacted:

*"The fact that not a single Bosniak lives in Bukovica eighteen years later speaks volumes about the nature of this crime. Displaced around the world, they had hoped that Montenegrin justice would bring the case to a close and prosecute the direct perpetrators of the crime. Cheated and humiliated by the state, they were left to weep over their naivete for the votes they had given to the ruling regime in Montenegro for years. The problem lies in the victim's foolishness, not in the executioner. As a victim of a terrible crime organised by the state, I have a moral obligation to express my opinion on this shameful trial and ask a few questions for which I seek answers. Why did the state deliberately delay the prosecution of the crime? Why were Bosniak representatives not allowed to participate fully in the proceedings? What are the reasons for the acquittal of the perpetrators, and who bears responsibility for the injustice inflicted on the victims and their families?"*<sup>108</sup>

In 2011, historian Šerbo Rastoder stated that the whole trial was meaningless, thus undermining the rule of law. "Montenegro is still a lawless country where you have a crime, but not those responsible for it?", he claimed.<sup>109</sup> The Bosniak Party also expressed its outrage at the acquittal verdict in the Bukovica Case, considering such a decision absurd. "Once again, the case where the crime exists but the criminals are not there has occurred. What is the point and who does the programme of the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare for the return of people to Bukovica serve, if the High Court in Bijelo Polje has established that the accused are not guilty and that the crime did not happen".<sup>110</sup> Unfortunately, the then ruling DPS only recalled Bukovica during

105 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/pravda-pala-na-ispitu/>

106 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/pravda-pala-na-ispitu/>

107 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/375467/za-saku-narkoeura-su-laz-prihvatili-kao-istinu>; <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/375299/placali-smo-samo-studentima-da-dodu-na-izbore>

108 <https://www.vijesti.me/kolumne/375183/bukovica-masovna-grobnica-istine>

109 <https://www.vijesti.me/zabava/345265/rastoder-je-li-crna-gora-besudna-zemlja-sa-zlocinima-i-bez-odgovornih>

110 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/345233/bs-ogorcena-presudom-u-slucaju-bukovica-zlocin-postoji-zlocinaca-nema>





an election campaign, specifically when its high official and then President of Montenegro, Filip Vujanović, visited Bukovica merely 12 days before parliamentary elections. This visit coincided with the DPS's need to secure Bosniak votes, highlighting the strategic and opportunistic nature of their interest in the event.<sup>111</sup>

While state officials rarely commemorate this event, only doing so for the sake of scoring political points among Bosniak voters, the civil sector has taken a more proactive approach, organising a series of events to honour and remember the victims of the war crimes in Bukovica. In 2014 and 2015, on the occasion of Montenegro's Independence Day, activists from ANIMA's Center for Women's and Peace Education visited the sites of crimes that occurred on the territory of Montenegro during the 1990s wars, to commemorate the victims. Among them was Bukovica. They stated that their actions were intended "to remind the Montenegrin media, political, and social public of the crimes and point out the policies of impunity, so that steps can be taken towards the implementation of the social justice at present absent." But as they assessed, nothing has been done. ANIMA activists explained that by visiting the sites of crimes, they were paying tribute to the victims and, in particular, respect to the dignity of those who were victims in the 1990s. They called on state institutions to establish the rule of law for all and to take measures that ensure transitional justice, safety, and security for all residents, as well as to affirm the need to confront the past to prevent abuses of people and crimes in the future. "We demand that the state commemorate appropriately the sites of crimes with a memorial, so that contemporary and future generations develop a culture of remembrance", ANIMA activists stated.<sup>112</sup> In 2017, the reconstructed mosque in the village of Bukovica in Pljevlja was officially opened. Rifat Fejzić, the Reis of the Islamic Community, stated that "this is a victory of good over evil, a victory of constructiveness over those who love to destroy", stating that the mosque will serve as a symbol of the suffering of his people and as a memorial to an attempt at its total extermination.<sup>113</sup>

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In 2018, the NGO Civic Alliance prepared the publication *Bukovica – A Perfect Crime*. According to this organisation, the goal of the publication was to introduce to the public and decision-makers all the facts related to war crimes in the Bukovica region which occurred from 1992 to 1995, and how Montenegrin judicial institutions have prosecuted the crime. "The investigations took a long time to start, and when they did, they were conducted slowly and with obvious omissions. Only the direct perpetrators were included in the judicial proceedings", stated the organisation, pointing to the fact that the prosecution did not raise the issue of command responsibility and thus did not identify the masterminds behind the war crimes. "Above all, it implies the responsibility of superiors, because they did nothing to prevent the crimes that they, as superiors, had to know about".<sup>114</sup> In 2020, the NGO Center for Civic Education stated that confronting the past is an urgent need for Montenegrin society. This organisation published materials from the court proceedings in the Bukovica cases. The goal of such a move was to contribute to ending the negative practice of inadequate prosecution of war crimes, building the necessary institutional framework, and encouraging constructive confrontation with the past. "It is difficult to overstate how crucial the final processing of the Bukovica Case is for the sustainable future of

111 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/303003/vlast-se-prognanih-bukovcana-sjeti-samo-pred-izbore>

112 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/180528/aktivistkinje-anime-obilaze-mjesta-zlocina-i-1990-ih>

113 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/68728/obnovljena-dzamiya-u-bukovici-povod-da-se-ljudi-vracaju-u-ovaj-kraj>

114 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/12540/ga-odnos-drzave-u-procesiranju-zlocina-u-bukovici-bio-pasivan>



Montenegro. Its unresolved nature represents a particular weight for Montenegrin society as a whole, because it burdens the entire society with responsibility for the war crime. Confronting the past is an urgent need for Montenegrin society, not only because of the obligations assumed through international documents and the process of accession to the European Union, but as the basis for solid and long-lasting interfaith and interethnic reconciliation within the state”, the organisation claimed.<sup>115</sup>

Whereas NGOs have tried to remind the public about the war crimes in Bukovica on a regular basis, for political parties it has become a buzzword, just one of many “tragic events in our history” that are used to score political points. For example, the Democratic Montenegro party stated: “There have been many [crimes] in our past and the most important task facing us and all future generations is not to allow them to happen again - Srebrenica, Bukovica, Štrpci, Murino, Vukovar, Bratunac, Dubrovnik, or any other tragic event. From this historical distance, when we look each other in the eye, we can see best how senseless war is and that the only things we need are peace, love, understanding, and life in a better, happier, wiser, more stable, and economically prosperous reality.” The party added that crimes and victims do not recognise names, religion, or nationality. “Human lives are priceless. Love among people of all faiths and nations is the greatest value and a guarantee of a bright future for our children, and those who promote hatred deserve only contempt and condemnation”.<sup>116</sup>

### 5.3. Conclusion

The Bukovica Case serves as a stark example of the challenges Montenegro faces in coming to terms with its painful past and seeking justice for war crimes committed during the Yugoslav wars. Despite the passing of two decades, Bukovica remains an event shrouded in collective amnesia, with no official commemorations, memorials, or established criminal responsibility for the perpetrators. This lack of action on the part of the Montenegrin state is indicative of its unpreparedness and unwillingness to confront the shameful role it played during those tumultuous years. The politics of remembrance in Montenegro come into sharp focus through the lens of Bukovica, revealing a troubling pattern of selective amnesia and a reluctance to hold those responsible for war crimes accountable.

The state’s unwillingness to confront the past and ensure justice was further exemplified by the presence of Veselin Veljović in prominent positions within the government. His elevation to Director of the Police Directorate and advisor to the President of Montenegro, Milo Đukanović, despite being identified as one of the perpetrators by numerous witnesses, showed a blatant disregard for the victims’ rights and was a painful reminder of the state’s failure to protect its citizens. Moreover, the failure to address the war crimes in Bukovica was a clear reflection of the Montenegrin state’s disregard for the victims and their families. Despite promises made to the European Commission, the Prosecutor’s Office showed no real intent to seek justice, and the court process was marred with irregularities, conducted in secrecy, and resulted in acquittals due to a lack of evidence. This lack of action and accountability sends a message of indifference

115 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/423611/cgo-nerjesavanje-bukovice-i-deportacije-opterecuje-odgovornos-cu-za-ratne-zlocine>

116 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/450281/demokrate-ne-dopustiti-da-se-ponove-srebrenica-bukovica-strpci-murino-vukovar-bratunac-dubrovnik>



to the victims, perpetuating their suffering and marginalising their plight within the broader Montenegrin society.

The politics of remembrance in Montenegro are intricately linked to the state's political dynamics and the interests of the ruling elite. The lack of official commemoration for the war crimes in Bukovica is not merely an oversight but a calculated decision to downplay the state's responsibility and avoid holding the perpetrators accountable. The DPS's use of Bukovica as a mere talking point during election campaigns to gain Bosniak votes highlights the instrumentalisation of a painful past for political gain without a genuine commitment to truth and justice. Moreover, the dominant support of Muslims/Bosniaks for the DPS regime has potentially contributed to the reluctance to seek justice for the Bukovica victims. The fear of jeopardising political support and securing votes might have influenced the state's approach to addressing war crimes, prioritising short-term political gains over long-term societal healing and reconciliation.

The civic sector's calls for accountability, transparency and a true confrontation with the past have largely fallen on deaf ears within the corridors of power. Nevertheless, their efforts to honour the victims, demand justice, and build a culture of remembrance stand in stark contrast to the state's neglectful approach. They have provided invaluable documentation, publications, and materials to shed light on the crimes committed in Bukovica and the shortcomings of the judicial process. Their endeavours to keep the memory of Bukovica alive serve as a testament to their dedication to truth, justice, and reconciliation. However, the reliance on civil society organisations to remember and commemorate Bukovica reflects a troubling aspect of Montenegro's politics of remembrance. The state's reluctance to undertake this responsibility perpetuates a climate of denial and avoidance, hindering true reconciliation and healing. The absence of an official politics of remembrance leaves victims and their families without the closure and justice they deserve. The state's indifference further deepens the wounds of the past, potentially leading to a perpetuation of grievances and animosities, hindering Montenegro's progress toward a more inclusive and united society.

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In conclusion, the war crimes in Bukovica epitomise the politics of collective amnesia in Montenegro, as political elites conveniently overlook atrocities that do not serve their political agendas. The lack of official commemorations and the marginalisation of Bukovica's memory underscore the state's unwillingness to confront its shameful past and seek justice for the victims. Civil society organisations play a vital role in challenging this forgetfulness and demanding accountability, but their efforts cannot fully compensate for the state's failure to assume its responsibilities. Montenegro must address its politics of remembrance to ensure genuine reconciliation and progress toward a more just and unified society. Only by acknowledging and remembering the atrocities of the past can Montenegro pave the way for a more enlightened and responsible future.



## 6. Kaluđerski Laz

### 6.1. Introduction

On April 18 1999, in the village of Kaluđerski Laz near Rožaje, members of the Yugoslav Army killed Albanian civilian refugees who were fleeing from war-torn Kosovo. Initially, the reported number of victims was 23, but during the court proceedings, it was determined that there were 15 victims, including women and children.<sup>117</sup> The perpetrators of this crime were never identified. The first indictment was brought in 2008, and eight former members of the Yugoslav Army were accused of inhumane treatment of the civilian population of Albanian nationality, in violation of international law. The primary defendant in the Kaluđerski Laz trial, Lieutenant-Colonel Predrag Strugar, has stated his innocence regarding the charges against him. Speaking at the Higher Court, he firmly refused to answer any questions pertaining to what he considered to be a false accusation. He asserted that he is the true victim of a politically motivated defamation. Furthermore, he has emphasised that throughout his entire professional career as an officer, he has never issued orders to kill civilians or prisoners.<sup>118</sup> In December 2013, the accused were acquitted of the charges relating to the crime against the civilian population.<sup>119</sup> Appeals were filed by the prosecution and the lawyers of the victims with the Court of Appeals. One year later, the Court of Appeals dismissed the appeals as unfounded, thus confirming the acquittal judgment of the Higher Court.<sup>120</sup> Overall, the ineffective investigation failed to provide sufficient material evidence of the use of firearms in the area where the civilians were killed, revealing serious flaws and weaknesses in the judicial system. This is exemplified by the fact that the Higher Court did not establish whether a crime was even committed in Kaluđerski Laz.<sup>121</sup>

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The need to reopen the investigation and examine the potential responsibility of superior officers for any involvement or command responsibility remains essential. Unfortunately, in the case of Kaluđerski Laz, there is a lack of institutional commemoration for the victims. As stated by the NGO Civic Alliance during their April 2021 commemoration of this war crime: “The civil and European state we aspire to build must undergo a proper confrontation with the past, with functional judicial bodies that will diligently and thoroughly investigate not only this, but all other war crimes committed in the territory of Montenegro. The victims of these crimes, as well as their families, should be provided with the status of civilian war victims.”<sup>122</sup>

The politics of remembrance in Montenegro has been marked by a troubling lack of efficacy and commitment, particularly evident in cases like the Kaluđerski Laz massacre. Despite the gravity of this war crime, the lack of political will and institutional capacity to give it appropriate closure is striking. The failure to identify and hold the perpetrators accountable demonstrates a disconcerting reluctance to confront the nation’s wartime past earnestly. This selective memory and neglect of commemoration have left the victims and their families without the justice and recognition they deserve. The absence of comprehensive efforts to acknowledge and remember such atrocities perpetuates a cycle of impunity and denies the nation the opportunity to heal collec-

117 <https://www.vijesti.me/zabava/256910/broj-stradalih-u-kaluderskom-lazu-pao-na-15>

118 <https://www.vijesti.me/zabava/304823/strugar-dobio-sam-bitku-za-mir-pobijedicu-i-lazne-optuzbe>

119 <https://www.vijesti.me/zabava/251291/strugar-i-vojnici-oslobodeni-optuzbe-u-procesu-kaluderski-laz>

120 <https://www.vijesti.me/zabava/202205/potvrdena-oslobadajuca-presuda-za-kaluderski-laz>

121 <https://gamn.org/kaluderski-laz-zlocin-bez-kazne/>

122 <https://gamn.org/kaluderski-laz-zlocin-bez-kazne/>



tively. The lack of a proactive and coordinated approach to integrating educational content on war crimes in the curriculum also contributes to declining awareness among the younger generation. As a result, the victims of Kaluđerski Laz, and other similar atrocities, remain consigned to the margins of historical memory, further underscoring the pressing need for Montenegro to reevaluate its politics of remembrance and embrace a more robust and inclusive approach that upholds justice, reconciliation, and the restoration of dignity to the victims and their families.

## 6.2. Chronological analysis

15 years after crimes were committed in Kaluđerski Laz, the NGO Civic Alliance held a press conference in front of the Supreme Prosecution Office in April 2014, where they presented what they described as “shocking findings”. According to their survey, 50% of the law students surveyed from state and two private universities were unaware of the war crimes that had been committed in Montenegro. As representatives of the Civic Alliance stated: “There has been a superficial approach to this issue, with the lowest ranks in the chain of command being accused, while the question of command responsibility has not been raised.” They also emphasised that “the first step in healing society must be taken through the judicial system, and even after 20 years, we have not succeeded in doing so”. They concluded that “this means that Montenegro has not initiated a serious and responsible process of confronting its wartime past that would lead to the clarification of crimes, the sanctioning of those responsible, and the restoration of dignity to the victims and their families”. The Civic Alliance urged the Ministry of Education and the University to integrate educational content on war crimes in Montenegro into the curriculum, highlighting the concerning decline in students’ awareness of these crimes.<sup>123</sup>

Starting in April 2014 and in the following years, activists from the NGO Center for Women’s and Peace Education ANIMA visited the sites of crimes that occurred in Montenegro during the 1990s wars. On Independence Day, they paid their respects by laying flowers. Among other places, they visited Kaluđerski Laz to “pay tribute to the victims and particularly honour the dignity of those who suffered in the 1990s”, while calling on state institutions to establish the rule of law for all and take measures to ensure transitional justice, security, and safety for all residents, as well as emphasising the need to confront the past to prevent future abuses and crimes. They stated that they did this “to remind Montenegro’s media, political, and social public of the crimes and policies of impunity, and to point out the absence of transitional justice, urging steps towards its implementation.” But, as they assessed, nothing has been done. They also demanded that the state “properly marks the sites of the crimes with memorial monuments, so that contemporary and future generations can develop a culture of remembrance”.<sup>124</sup> Moreover, in 2015, the book *Hronika zločina (1991–2001)* by Rifat Rastoder, a Member of Parliament, was published. It covered cases such as Morinj, the murder of the Klapuh family, refugee deportations, torture of Bukovica residents, terrorism in Pljevlja, an attack on a van carrying workers, Štrpci, the trial of SDA leaders and activists, and Kaluđerski Laz.<sup>125</sup>

In April 2021, the NGO Center for Civic Education expressed reverence for all the victims of that crime and called on the new ruling majority to contribute to ending the practice of inadequate

123 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/237848/vise-od-pola-buducih-pravnika-ne-zna-da-je-u-crnoj-gori-pocinjen-ratni-zlocin>

124 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/180528/aktivistkinje-anime-obilaze-mjesta-zlocina-i-1990-ih>

125 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/157613/rifat-rastoder-promovise-knjigu-o-morinju-strpcima-i-kaluderskom-lazu>



prosecution of war crimes and to encourage constructive confrontation with the past. They stated that it is “disturbing that the case concluded without establishing accountability for the terrible suffering of innocent civilians who sought refuge in Montenegro, which extended them a welcome invitation. It is unacceptable that victims, refugees, and families of the missing are still being manipulated for political gain, instead of being recognised as civilian war victims, by implementing a comprehensive and rational reparations programme, and building memory through monuments commemorating such events, as emphasised by relevant non-governmental organisations.” The Center for Civic Education appealed to the Government to work diligently on resolving cases of war crimes and establishing justice for the victims of this and any other armed action that claimed innocent lives and generated unstable relations in the region, rather than downplaying some of the most heinous crimes.<sup>126</sup>

In April 2021, the Justice and Reconciliation Party commemorated the crime in Kaluderski Laz with a press release. They called on the relevant institutions in Montenegro to initiate the process of clarifying the war crimes committed in the 1990s and determining the command responsibility and involvement of Montenegrin political and security organs in those crimes, on the occasion of April 18, the day when the events in Kaluderski Laz took place in 1999. They stated that Montenegro bears the burden of war crimes:

198 *“Not all those responsible for war crimes have been prosecuted, except for a few low-ranking individuals, nor has command responsibility been established, even though Montenegro directly participated in various ways in the war activities in the region. Numerous international organisations and bodies have been warning the officials in Podgorica for years that the lack of political will is the main obstacle to facing the dark past. The European Commission, the UN Human Rights Committee, and Amnesty International have been warning the Montenegrin state authorities about the incalculable harmful consequences precisely due to the impunity of war crimes.”*<sup>127</sup>

They added that the absurdity is even greater considering that the state of Montenegro has paid compensation of five and a half million euros to the victims of war crimes, while the perpetrators and their instigators have not yet been prosecuted, although, as they claim, the perpetrators and instigators are known, as reported by the independent media for years.

*“What is concerning is the forgetfulness and manipulation used to cover up the crimes. Of course, crimes cannot be forgotten, and the criminals will certainly be brought to justice, but the problem remains – society’s confrontation with that dark past. By focusing on crimes committed in neighbouring countries, they are trying to cover up those committed on Montenegrin territory, ordered from Montenegrin offices and carried out under the command of Montenegrin institutions.”*<sup>128</sup>

126 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/530973/cgo-rasvjetljavanje-zlocina-u-kaludjerskom-lazu-je-obaveza-i-nove-vlade>

127 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/531229/spp-drzanjem-fokusa-na-zlocine-iz-susjednih-drzava-pokusava-ju-se-prekriti-pepelom-oni-pocinjani-na-cg-teritoriji>

128 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/531229/spp-drzanjem-fokusa-na-zlocine-iz-susjednih-drzava-pokusava-ju-se-prekriti-pepelom-oni-pocinjani-na-cg-teritoriji>



They also stated that it is a shared, civilisational obligation of all actors in society to constantly emphasise the necessity of facing the past and bringing the responsible individuals, both perpetrators and instigators, to justice.

*“This is the way to leave a clean space and a clear message and lesson to future generations: crimes and criminals must not go unpunished, because that is the only way to close the doors to suffering in these regions. Clear condemnation and a distancing from those dark forces and ideas are the only civilised path for Montenegro. Everything else is just prolonging and beautifying the bloody circle of suffering. The victims of Dubrovnik and Sarajevo, Morinj and Bukovica, Štrpci and Pljevlja, brutally murdered refugees from Bosnia and Kosovo – this is the bloody circle of suffering that is being relativised and concealed.”<sup>129</sup>*

They also mentioned that we witness how the relativisation and concealment of war crimes can boomerang on society, by keeping it in darkness. This in addition to the human and civilisational impulse, is an additional motivation for the Montenegrin Assembly and the government to throw light on the darkness of the past and turn towards coexistence in a European future.<sup>130</sup>

In April 2022, on the occasion of the 23<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the war crime in Kaluđerski Laz, the Bosniak Party expressed its respect for the victims. In a press release, they called on all political actors in Montenegro to provide full political support to the competent state authorities, and to “intensify efforts to conduct an effective investigation into the war crime in Kaluđerski Laz, to prosecute, try, and punish the perpetrators of this crime”. They also stated that

*“the State of Montenegro must demonstrate full responsibility and dedication in the Case of Kaluđerski Laz, as well as in other similar cases, to show through effective investigation, prosecution of war crimes, and the fight against impunity that it is ready to take another step towards a better, fairer, and more prosperous future through the process of confronting the past. Confronting the past through the prosecution and punishment of perpetrators and raising awareness of the unacceptability of such acts are key mechanisms for preventing new crimes, and the prerequisites for creating a prosperous society.”<sup>131</sup>*

In April 2023, the NGO Center for Civic Education emphasised that the fact remains that no one has been held accountable for the murders in Kaluđerski Laz. They called on the Special State Prosecutor’s Office to adequately conduct an investigation and establish all the facts of this crime. They pointed out that although certain changes have been made in the Special State Prosecutor’s Office, unfortunately, when it comes to war crimes, the old bad practices persist, accompanied by a lack of readiness to properly and thoroughly handle these cases. The CGO highlights that the proper prosecution of war crimes is one of the key obligations of Chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) in the negotiation process, which the European Commission also assesses in Montenegro’s EU accession talks. They stated that there are other binding documents, such as the Memorandum of Understanding with the International Residu-

129 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/531229/spp-drzanjem-fokusa-na-zlocine-iz-susjednih-drzava-pokusava-ju-se-prekriti-pepelom-oni-pocinjani-na-cg-teritoriji>

130 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/531229/spp-drzanjem-fokusa-na-zlocine-iz-susjednih-drzava-pokusava-ju-se-prekriti-pepelom-oni-pocinjani-na-cg-teritoriji>

131 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/600545/bs-drzavni-organi-da-pojacaju-napore-u-cilju-sprovedjenja-efikasne-istrage-u-vezi-sa-ratnim-zlocinom-u-kaludjerskom-lazu>



al Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals, about which the Special State Prosecutor's Office has not informed the public of their cooperation results to this day. The CGO acknowledged

*“the fact that the Montenegrin Prosecution faces many challenges, but the issue of inadequate confrontation with the wartime past, starting from establishing criminal responsibility, must not be marginalised precisely for the stable future of Montenegro. However, as war crimes do not expire, there is still a chance for the Special State Prosecutor's Office to demonstrate determination and, through concrete indictments, pursue justice for the victims of war crimes and for Montenegrin society.”*<sup>132</sup>

In April 2023, the NGO Human Rights Action called on the Special State Prosecutor's Office to act in accordance with its strategic obligation and reconsider the case of the killings and injuries of refugees and locals in Kaluđerski Laz. They added that due to a poorly conducted investigation and a lack of evidence, no one has been held accountable for this crime to date, and it is unknown what has been done regarding the criminal complaint filed eight years ago by lawyer Velija Murić. They stated that “due to the poorly conducted investigation in this case, according to the verdict of the Higher Court in Bijelo Polje, it was not possible to determine who shot at civilians, and all accused members of the Yugoslav Army were acquitted in 2014 due to a lack of evidence. In this case, the Higher Court in Bijelo Polje did not even address the question of whether a war crime was committed in the area of Kaluđerski Laz. This diminished the possibility of establishing the responsibility of superiors for the direct perpetrators on the basis of command responsibility.”<sup>133</sup>

### 6.3. Conclusion

200 In conclusion, the harrowing events that unfolded in Kaluđerski Laz near Rožaje in 1999 continue to haunt the collective memory of Montenegro. This tragic incident, where Albanian civilian refugees fleeing from the war-torn region of Kosovo were mercilessly killed, represents yet another dark chapter in the nation's history, one that remains largely forgotten and unaddressed by the state institutions. Despite the passage of almost a quarter of a century, the crime in Kaluđerski Laz remains unresolved, haunting the conscience of the nation and exposing the disturbing lack of political will and institutional capacity to confront the past and deliver justice. The disconcerting reality is that the memory of Kaluđerski Laz only persists among dedicated civil activists, the civic sector, and ethnonational minority national parties whose compatriots were among the victims. It is the voice of these determined few that continues to keep the memory of this atrocity alive, advocating for justice, and demanding a proper commemoration of the victims. However, the broader political landscape in Montenegro seems to be marked by an unsettling politics of remembrance which allows such heinous crimes to fade into obscurity without holding the perpetrators accountable.<sup>134</sup>

The lack of political will to confront the past is a distressing reflection of the broader societal attitudes towards remembering and acknowledging wartime atrocities. The failure to address Kaluđerski Laz adequately is symptomatic of the overall reluctance to engage in an earnest

132 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/652655/milas-jos-niko-nije-odgovarao-za-ubistva-u-kaludjerskom-lazu-sdt-da-utvrđi-sve-cinjenice-zlocina>

133 <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/652794/hra-sdt-ponovo-da-razmotri-ubistva-i-ranjavanja-u-kaludjerskom-lazu>

134 <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/opinions/2022/4/18/zlocin-u-kaludjerskom-lazu-23-godine-poslije-zlocin-bez-zlocinaca>





confrontation with Montenegro's recent past. This selective memory, which tends to overlook the more uncomfortable and painful aspects of the past, not only perpetuates impunity but also undermines the process of healing and reconciliation within society. The changes in the seat of power, marked by shifts in government over the past thirty years, has not translated into a genuine commitment to seeking justice for the victims of Kaluđerski Laz and other war crimes.<sup>135</sup> Political leaders have failed to muster the necessary political will to undertake thorough investigations, hold perpetrators accountable, and establish command responsibility for these acts of violence. As a result, the families of the victims and the survivors continue to be denied closure and the solace that comes from knowing that justice has been served.

The lack of institutional capacity to address the crimes in Kaluđerski Laz further compounds the problem. Despite the efforts of dedicated activists and NGOs, the judicial system has demonstrated serious flaws and weaknesses, leading to ineffective investigations and acquittals. The inadequacies in the investigative process have contributed to the failure to identify and prosecute the perpetrators, leaving the victims and their families without the justice they deserve. Furthermore, the absence of a comprehensive politics of remembrance exacerbates the already deep wounds left by war crimes. The failure to properly remember and commemorate the victims undermines the process of national healing and reconciliation. By neglecting to create institutional mechanisms for remembering and acknowledging the past, Montenegro risks perpetuating a cycle of violence and suffering, making it difficult for the nation to move forward collectively.

The aftermath of the Kaluđerski Laz massacre highlights the pressing need for Montenegro to reckon with its wartime past and establish a politics of remembrance that fosters accountability, empathy, and healing. To achieve this, the government must demonstrate unwavering political will to address war crimes genuinely. This includes ensuring that the judiciary has the necessary resources, independence, and expertise to conduct thorough investigations and prosecutions. Moreover, there must be an active effort to integrate educational content on war crimes into the curriculum to raise awareness among the younger generations and instill a culture of remembrance that rejects violence and intolerance. By equipping future leaders and citizens with an understanding of the past, Montenegro can build a more compassionate and just society that values human rights and dignity.

The government should also collaborate with civil society organisations to establish memorial sites and monuments that pay tribute to the victims of Kaluđerski Laz and other war crimes. These monuments serve as a powerful reminder of the past and help create a sense of shared history that transcends ethnic and political divisions. Ultimately, confronting the past is not an act of dwelling in grievances, but rather a critical step towards healing and unity. Acknowledging the crimes in Kaluđerski Laz and elsewhere in Montenegro is an affirmation of the nation's commitment to human rights, justice, and reconciliation. It is only through such honest and courageous self-reflection that Montenegro can aspire to a future free from the burden of the past.

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135 <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/opinions/2022/4/18/zlocin-u-kaludjerskom-lazu-23-godine-poslije-zlocin-bez-zlocinaca>



## 7. General Conclusion

The politics of remembrance in Montenegro presents a multifaceted and intricate web of historical revisionism, political interests, and collective guilt. This concluding chapter offers a comprehensive analysis of the five case studies related to wartime atrocities during the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s which have been the main focus of our attention. They provide valuable insights into the dynamics shaping Montenegro's remembrance of wartime atrocities, as well as a nuanced understanding of the ways in which Montenegro has grappled with acknowledging and commemorating this historical crime over the years. This analysis reveals both the flaws and advances in the country's approach to acknowledging historical crimes, accountability, and establishing a collective memory.

In each case, one can identify a distinct topic on the issue of politics of remembrance. The Siege of Dubrovnik exemplifies the existence of dual narratives in Montenegro's politics of remembrance. While NGOs pushed for truth-seeking and accountability, the official state position, particularly under the DPS, oscillated between remorseful apologies and evasive tactics to avoid full responsibility. This duality created a tension in the nation's collective memory and perpetuated a narrative of innocence, shielding political figures from culpability. The DPS regime's control over state media and education policies further exacerbated this divide by disseminating propaganda and censoring information, leading to a skewed understanding of historical events and absolving political figures of their accountability. Similarly, the Morinj Detention Camp Case highlights the challenges faced by post-conflict societies in acknowledging past atrocities. Montenegro's delayed acknowledgment and inadequate response reveal a prioritisation of nation-building over truth and reconciliation. Geopolitical considerations, particularly diplomatic ties with neighbouring countries like Croatia, play a significant role in shaping the politics of remembrance, leading to a reluctance to confront wartime involvement fully. Once again, civil society's role emerged as a driving force in advocating for justice, truth, and commemoration, and challenging the culture of silence perpetuated by the authorities.

The Bukovica Case exemplifies how political elites engage in selective amnesia when confronting their country's involvement in war crimes. The absence of official commemorations and institutional accountability reflects a calculated decision to prioritise political gains over acknowledging historical injustices. The failure to commemorate the victims further marginalises them, perpetuating a sense of injustice and impeding collective healing and reconciliation. Similarly, the Kaluderski Laz Massacre Case sheds light on the ineffective investigation and lack of political will in confronting historical crimes. The failure to identify and hold perpetrators accountable perpetuates a culture of impunity, hindering genuine efforts to address the past. The absence of institutional commemoration denies the victims and their families the recognition they deserve, preventing the establishment of a collective memory that promotes reconciliation. In both cases, NGOs have been instrumental in confronting this selective amnesia, advocating for justice, and educating future generations about the horrors of war.

Finally, the case of the deportation of Bosnian refugees highlights the complexities of Montenegro's (desired) contemporary identity and its impact on the broader region. Incomplete acknowledgment and unfulfilled promises by the state reflect a reluctance to fully confront past crimes, potentially owing to political sensitivities. The lack of accountability for war crimes contributes to a culture of impunity and hinders the establishment of a truthful historical narrative, but a more robust and transparent approach to investigating historical crimes is necessary, ac-



accompanied by concrete actions from the government. Moreover, the rejection of the case by the European Court of Human Rights raises concerns about Montenegro's comprehensive approach to addressing historical crimes.

Having said that, four key topics can be identified in these case studies:

**Selective amnesia and political interests:** One prominent flaw in Montenegro's politics of remembrance is the practice of selective amnesia, particularly by political elites seeking to prioritise political interests over confronting historical injustices. Political considerations often influence the extent to which wartime atrocities are acknowledged, leading to a reluctance to fully address the nation's involvement in war crimes. This approach perpetuates a culture of impunity and hinders the pursuit of justice and genuine reconciliation.

**Inadequate judicial response:** The lack of meaningful accountability for war crimes is another significant flaw in Montenegro's politics of remembrance. Ineffective investigations and acquittals of perpetrators not only perpetuate a culture of impunity, but also undermine efforts to establish a truthful historical narrative. The failure to hold those responsible for wartime atrocities accountable diminishes the sense of justice for victims and impedes the healing process.

**Absence of institutional commemoration:** The absence of institutional commemorations for victims of war crimes in Montenegro is a significant flaw in the country's approach to remembrance. The lack of official acknowledgment perpetuates a sense of marginalisation for victims and their families, hindering collective healing and reconciliation. It also prevents the establishment of a cohesive and empathetic collective memory that could foster a more united and resilient society.

**State-controlled narratives and media manipulation:** The three-decades-long DPS control of the narratives, through media censorship and the manipulation of historical facts, further erodes Montenegro's politics of remembrance. The dissemination of skewed historical narratives obscures the nation's role in the conflict, fostering a distorted understanding of historical events and preventing genuine accountability. This manipulation undermines efforts to establish an honest and transparent historical account.

On the other hand, there are two positive aspects regarding the politics of remembrance in Montenegro. First, despite the flaws in Montenegro's politics of remembrance, civil society organisations have emerged as a driving force in advocating for justice, truth, and commemoration. Some NGOs have persistently challenged the culture of silence and demanded accountability for wartime atrocities. Their resilience and advocacy efforts have shed light on the need for a more comprehensive and transparent approach to confronting the past. Second, after the fall of the DPS, there have been some positive developments in government involvement in recent years, as evidenced by the presence of high-ranking officials at memorial gatherings and official apologies for past crimes. This signals a growing recognition of the need to address historical injustices and confront the nation's wartime past. While actions must accompany words to ensure sincerity, these developments indicate a potential shift in the government's approach to remembrance.

The selected case studies demonstrate the complexities and challenges faced by post-conflict societies in confronting their past and acknowledging historical crimes. The existence of dual narratives, state-controlled narratives, delayed acknowledgment, inadequate responses,

and selective amnesia reflects the complex web of factors that shape the nation's collective memory. NGOs and activists have persistently challenged the culture of silence perpetuated by the state, pressing for accountability and transparency. However, the lack of political will and institutional barriers hinder the progress toward genuine reconciliation and historical acknowledgment. To move forward, Montenegro must prioritise truth-seeking, accountability, and genuine reconciliation. Embracing a culture of remembrance that promotes honesty, empathy, and responsibility is essential to fostering a united and resilient society that learns from its history rather than repeating it. By addressing the complexities of historical memory, Montenegro can aspire to a future free from the burden of the past and build a more just, responsible, and compassionate society.



# VII. Decade of Remembrance in North Macedonia

## VII. Decenija sećanja u Severnoj Makedoniji

## VII. Деценија спомени во Северна Македонија

by Elena Stavrevska

### 1. Summary

The Republic of Macedonia, or, as the country has been known since the change of its constitutional name in 2019, North Macedonia, declared its independence from Yugoslavia on 8 September 1991. A decade later, “[t]he systemic state denial of the rights of ethnic Albanians, including the possibility to study in their mother tongue and be included in state institutions, along with the developments in the region and number of incidents in the country,” jointly led to the 2001 armed conflict between the state security forces, including the Army of the Republic of Macedonia (ARM), and the ethnic Albanian National Liberation Army (NLA).<sup>1</sup> The armed conflict lasted between January and August 2001, and primarily unfolded in the Polog region, the North-Eastern part of the country, near Kumanovo, and near Skopje, the capital. The 2001 armed conflict resulted in over 171,000 displaced persons,<sup>2</sup> which was roughly around 8.5% of the population at the time. The armed hostilities were concluded with the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA), signed on 13 August 2001.

The OFA includes provisions about the termination of hostilities, total voluntary disarmament of the ethnic Albanian armed groups, establishment of a decentralised administration, the guarantee of political and cultural rights for minorities, as well as the constitutional amendments to establish those rights.<sup>3</sup> Importantly, however, beyond the constitutional, legal, and institutional changes introduced as a result of the OFA, there have been no state efforts to determine the facts of the period leading up to the armed conflicts and the facts of the armed conflict itself, which has effectively disabled the society from collectively dealing with this part of its past. This has also led to the lack of a national discourse about the armed conflict, which has contributed to a “notable invisibility of the armed conflict legacy, giving the false impression of a closed chapter in the country’s history, while this legacy still impacts and shapes social relations between different ethnic groups today.”<sup>4</sup> Related to this, and perhaps as a result, there are two separate narratives at the level of ethnic communities (primarily the ethnic Albanian and the ethnic Macedonian communities, even though the narratives are not in every case entirely accepted by each community), which view the reasons for the armed conflict, its essence, and its outcomes in diametrically opposing ways,<sup>5</sup> and which have then been reflected in the politics of remembrance in the past decade.

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1 <https://paxvoorvrede.nl/wp-content/uploads/import/2023-01/PAX%20rapport%20oorlogsslachtoffers%20Balkanoorloggen%2018%20januari%2023.pdf>, 80–81.

2 Norwegian Refugee Council (2004) “Profile of Internal Displacement: Macedonia,” available [here](#), 7.

3 <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/3fbcdf7c8.pdf>

4 <https://paxvoorvrede.nl/wp-content/uploads/import/2023-01/PAX%20rapport%20oorlogsslachtoffers%20Balkanoorloggen%2018%20januari%2023.pdf>, 81.

5 <https://paxvoorvrede.nl/wp-content/uploads/import/2023-01/PAX%20rapport%20oorlogsslachtoffers%20Balkanoorloggen%2018%20januari%2023.pdf>, 107–108.



For this report, four events were selected, including (1) the unofficial start of the conflict, marked by the 22 January 2001 armed attack on the police station in Tearce, in the north-western part of Macedonia,<sup>6</sup> selected as a way of analysing who does or does not commemorate the start of the armed conflict, and why; (2) the start of armed clashes in the Karadak – Lipkovo region, marked by the 2 May overnight ambush by the NLA and their declaration of the Karadak - Lipkovo region near Kumanovo a ‘free zone’ or ‘liberated territory,’<sup>7</sup> selected as a way of analysing commemorations of important dates marked by the NLA veterans; (3) the Karpalak massacre or the Karpalak ambush, which refers to an NLA attack on an ARM convoy, and took place on 8 August 2001 in the area known as Karpalak, on the highway between Skopje and Tetovo,<sup>8</sup> selected as a way of analysing the commemoration of the single deadliest incident of the 2001 armed conflict in which the ARM suffered losses; and (4) the signing on 13 August in Skopje of the Ohrid Framework Agreement and with that, the official end of the armed hostilities, selected not only owing to its significance in the development of the armed conflict, but also as the only event related to 2001 that has been commemorated by the highest state representatives.

The report shows that the overarching politics of remembrance in the country in the last decade have been characterised by two main features. The first one is an active effort at the state level to either ignore or minimise most of the commemorations related to the 2001 armed conflict. This, the report argues, is the result of the country never having dealt with the past surrounding the armed conflict, including what exactly led up to it, what happened during the conflict, and what its outcome means for the country. In such a context, the political parties in power, smaller coalition parties notwithstanding, have taken one of two approaches. Namely, the senior government coalition partners – usually the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation–Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) or the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) – have until very recently traditionally ignored or minimised everything related to 2001, treating it as a closed chapter without any need to be addressed again and, alongside that, without the facts of 2001 having to be determined. Meanwhile, the junior government coalition partner – that is, the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) for nearly the entirety of the period since the armed conflict – which in many ways draws legitimacy from the armed conflict and the NLA, has mainly focused on commemorating events that relate to the NLA and the signing of the OFA, framed as a victory in their struggle. At the same time, the DUI has ignored or barely acknowledged the commemoration of the victims from the state security forces, as such an acknowledgement would also entail reopening the chapter regarding the responsibility for those deaths, which in many ways was made impossible by the so-called ‘authentic’ interpretation of the Amnesty Law in July 2011. Both approaches essentially reflect what each party in power considers most politically beneficial for themselves. The most notable exception to this aspect of the politics of remembrance in the country has been the commemoration of the signing of the OFA. This is the only event for which we have witnessed big changes in terms of the politics of remembrance surrounding its commemoration in the past decade, which include changes in the format, in the organising institutions, and lastly but perhaps most importantly, in the overall approach to the OFA and its framing in the public discourse.

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6 <https://reliefweb.int/report/serbia/macedonia-fyrom-amnesty-international-urges-respect-human-rights-all-communities>

7 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/1310372.stm>

8 <https://kanal5.com.mk/vo-prilep-se-odbelezhuvaat-12-godini-od-zagijnuvanjetu-na-rezervistite-kaj-karpalak/a180602>



The second feature that has characterised the politics of remembrance in Macedonia (later, North Macedonia) in the last decade is the ethnicisation and localisation of the few other 2001 armed conflict-related events that are being commemorated. Ethnicisation, and the related ethnic spatialisation, here refer to the tendency to separate and isolate, including spatially, different ethnicities, and relatedly, to approach ethnicity as a category with spatial characteristics. In the context of North Macedonia, while there is no formal or strict separation of the different ethnicities, there is, broadly speaking, a general understanding as to which ethnic community is predominant in which space. For commemorations this means that: (1) the events are being marked in a particular space where the ethnic community of (most of) the victims is likely predominant, even if they have been killed elsewhere, (2) the commemorations are in a particular language and contain particular symbols, and (3) they are primarily attended or issued statements about by the politicians from the ethnic community in question, which in turn is related to the other aspect of the politics of remembrance, discussed above. Localisation, on the other hand, refers to the spatial and sometimes political dislocation of the commemoration to the hometowns or villages of the victims. This goes hand-in-hand with the local municipalities, when they are involved by working closely with the victims' families and/or veterans' associations in organising the commemorations and keeping the event in the public discourse, even if with a limited reach and for a limited time.

Overall, both of these aspects of the politics of remembrance connect to the lack of political will of the country's leadership, who fear destabilising their own position and/or that of the ruling government, to discuss any issues that are related to the 2001 armed conflict and thus allow the society to deal with its past. Instead, especially with the current Government declaring OFA fully implemented in 2019, the political parties in power approach the 2001 armed conflict as a closed topic, although as one that has paved the way for its future. In such a context, it can be argued that unless there is a political upset at the next parliamentary elections, it is unlikely that we will see any more significant changes in the politics of remembrance in the country in the foreseeable future.



## 2. General Introduction

### 2.1. History

The Republic of Macedonia, or, as the country has been known since the change of its constitutional name in 2019, North Macedonia, declared its independence from Yugoslavia on 8 September 1991. Unlike most of the other republics of the former federation, this declaration of independence was not accompanied by an outbreak of violence, which contributed to the country's leadership dubbing the country an "oasis of peace."<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, that expression obscures the internal politics around the declaration of independence and the realities of the minoritised ethnic communities in the country. On the first point, the Preamble of the new Constitution declared the Republic of Macedonia to be "a national state of the Macedonian people, in which full equality as citizens and permanent coexistence with the Macedonian people is provided for Albanians, Turks, Vlachs, Roma and other nationalities living in the [country];"<sup>10</sup> which implies a two-tier involvement in the statehood of the newly independent country. Additionally, the Macedonian language was foreseen as being the official language of the state.<sup>11</sup> It is critical to note that all the ethnic Albanian members of parliament boycotted the voting on the Constitution,<sup>12</sup> and "a vast majority of Macedonian Albanians refused to participate in the independence referendum and the first post-Yugoslav census in Macedonia."<sup>13</sup> Even though a multi-ethnic coalition was formed in 1992,<sup>14</sup> the formulation of the Constitution, which resulted in "rigid solutions for language [and] higher education," along with the approach to decision-making in the Parliament, led to further mistrust among ethnic Albanians in the country<sup>15</sup> about what life in an independent Macedonia might look like. In reality, the country's independence meant for ethnic Albanians that the discrimination and violation of the rights that their community experienced during the time of Yugoslavia were now continued, even if through slightly different means.<sup>16</sup>

"The systemic state denial of the rights of ethnic Albanians, including the possibility to study in their mother tongue and be included in state institutions, along with the developments in the region and number of incidents in the country," jointly led to the 2001 armed conflict between the state security forces, including the Army of the Republic of Macedonia (ARM) and the ethnic Albanian National Liberation Army.<sup>17</sup> The armed conflict lasted between January and August

9 Karajkov, Risto (2004) "The Oasis of Peace," *Osservatorio Balcani Caucaso Transeuropa*, available at: <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/North-Macedonia/The-Oasis-of-Peace-27557>.

10 The Preamble of the 1991 Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia, <https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/36714/70972/F511737559/MKD36714%20Eng.pdf>.

11 Ibid.

12 Shasivari, Jeton (2013) "The past and the present of the constitutional systems of the Republic of Macedonia in terms of the position of Albanians." *European Scientific Journal* 9(17): 190–206, 191.

13 [https://www.hlc-rdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Publikacija-Oruzani\\_Sukob\\_u\\_Makedoniji-en.pdf](https://www.hlc-rdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Publikacija-Oruzani_Sukob_u_Makedoniji-en.pdf), 10–11.

14 Ibid.

15 Shasivari, Jeton (2013) "The past and the present of the constitutional systems of the Republic of Macedonia in terms of the position of Albanians." *European Scientific Journal* 9(17): 190–206, 191.

16 It is worth noting that this also meant varying levels of discrimination and rights violations being faced by different ethnic minorities, with the Roma community being the most systematically discriminated against, both during the Yugoslav period and its aftermath, up to this day.

17 <https://paxvoorvrede.nl/wp-content/uploads/import/2023-01/PAX%20rapport%20oorlogsslachtoffers%20Balkanoorloggen%2018%20januari%2023.pdf>, 80–81.





2001 and unfolded primarily in the Polog region, the North-Eastern part of the country, near Kumanovo, and near Skopje, the capital. The 2001 armed conflict resulted in over 171,000 displaced persons,<sup>18</sup> which was roughly around 8.5% of the population at the time. The armed hostilities were concluded with the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA), signed on 8 August 2001 by the country's president and representatives of the two biggest ethnic Macedonian political parties – the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation–Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE), and the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) – and the two biggest ethnic Albanian parties – the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA) and the Party for Democratic Prosperity (PDP) – with EU and USA representatives as witnesses.<sup>19</sup> The NLA was not present, but was considered represented by the ethnic Albanian parties. Soon after, the NLA gave rise to a new political party in the country – the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), which has been in power since 2002, except for a period of two years.

The OFA includes provisions about the termination of hostilities, total voluntary disarmament of the ethnic Albanian armed groups, establishment of a decentralised administration, the guarantee of political and cultural rights for minorities, as well as constitutional amendments to establish those rights.<sup>20</sup> Importantly, however, beyond the constitutional, legal, and institutional changes introduced as a result of the OFA, there has been no state effort to determine the facts of the period leading up to the armed conflicts and the facts of the armed conflict itself, which has effectively disabled the society from collectively dealing with this part of its past. The so-called authentic interpretation of the Amnesty Law, which allowed an amnesty to be applied to all cases that had been returned to the country's judiciary by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY)<sup>21</sup>, only added to the impression given of an evasion of the need to determine the truth around the armed conflict. This has also led to a lack of national discourse about the armed conflict, which has contributed to the “noticeable invisibility of the armed conflict legacy, giving the false impression of a closed chapter in the country's history, despite the fact this legacy still impacts and shapes social relations between different ethnic groups today.”<sup>22</sup> Relatedly, or perhaps as a result, there are two separate narratives at the level of ethnic communities (primarily the ethnic Albanian and the ethnic Macedonian communities, even though the narratives are not in every case entirely accepted by each community), which view the reasons for the armed conflict, its essence, and its outcomes in diametrically opposing ways,<sup>23</sup> which has then been reflected in the politics of remembrance over the past decade, as detailed in this report.

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18 Norwegian Refugee Council (2004) “Profile of Internal Displacement: Macedonia,” available [here](#), 7.

19 <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/3fbcdf7c8.pdf>

20 <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/3fbcdf7c8.pdf>

21 Kulašić, Emina (2012) *Transitional Justice in Macedonia and its relations with Democracy*. Skopje: Centre for Research and Policy Making, 4.

22 <https://paxvoorvrede.nl/wp-content/uploads/import/2023-01/PAX%20rapport%20oorlogsslachtoffers%20Bal-kanoorloggen%2018%20januari%2023.pdf>, 81.

23 <https://paxvoorvrede.nl/wp-content/uploads/import/2023-01/PAX%20rapport%20oorlogsslachtoffers%20Bal-kanoorloggen%2018%20januari%2023.pdf>, 107–108.



## 2.2. Methodology

It is within the above context that the politics of remembrance of the past decade have been traced, with reference to four events. It is worth noting, however, that even selecting these four events was a difficult task because, with the exception of one event, all other events surrounding the 2001 armed conflict are either not commemorated at all or commemorated primarily locally. All this, of course, speaks tellingly of the politics of remembrance in the country. The four events that were selected were:

1. The unofficial start of the conflict, marked by the 22 January 2001 armed attack on the police station in Tearce in the north-western part of Macedonia,<sup>24</sup> in which one police officer was killed. This event was selected as a way of analysing whether and who commemorates the start of the armed conflict;
2. The start of armed clashes in the Karadak – Lipkovo region, marked by the 2 May overnight ambush by the NLA and their declaration of the Karadak – Lipkovo region near Kumanovo a “free zone” or a “liberated territory.”<sup>25</sup> The clashes in this area between the ARM and NLA lasted until 11 June<sup>26</sup>, and resulted in a number of military and civilian victims.<sup>27</sup> This event was selected as a way of analysing commemorations of important dates marked by the NLA veterans;
3. The Karpalak Massacre or the Karpalak ambush, which refers to an NLA attack on an ARM convoy, that took place on 8 August 2001 in the area known as Karpalak, on the highway between Skopje and Tetovo, in which ten army reservists lost their lives.<sup>28</sup> This event was selected as it was considered the single deadliest incident of the 2001 armed conflict in which the ARM suffered losses, although it is worth noting that another significant ambush took place earlier in the year, on 28 April near Vejce, a village in the Shar Mountains, when eight ARM soldiers were killed,<sup>29</sup> and also the Ljubotenski Bacila incident, on 10 August, when eight army reservists were killed when their truck convoy ran over a landmine.<sup>30</sup>
4. The signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement and with that, the official end of the armed hostilities, which was signed on 13 August in Skopje by the country’s then president, representatives of VMRO-DPMNE, SDSM, DPA, and PDP, with the latter two assumed to be representing the Albanian community (and with that, the NLA too), and witnessed by special USA and EU representatives.<sup>31</sup> This event was selected not only due to its significance in the development of the armed conflict, but also as the only event related to 2001 that has been commemorated by the highest state representatives.

24 <https://reliefweb.int/report/serbia/macedonia-fyrom-amnesty-international-urges-respect-human-rights-all-communities>

25 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/1310372.stm>

26 <https://www.rferl.org/a/1096658.html>

27 <https://360stepeni.mk/vojnata-nikogash-ne-e-optsiija/>

28 <https://kanal5.com.mk/vo-prilep-se-odbelezhuvaat-12-godini-od-zaginuvanjeto-na-rezervistite-kaj-karpalak/a180602>

29 <https://kanal5.com.mk/oddadana-pochit-za-ubienite-braniteli-kaj-vejce-vo-2001-godina/a472442>

30 <https://makfax.com.mk/makedonija/227356/>

31 <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/3fbcdf7c8.pdf>



Another event that was considered was the Ljuboten Massacre, which was in response to the Ljubotenski Bacila incident mentioned above and took place between 10-12 August 2001 in the village of Ljuboten. This was an operation by the Macedonian police against civilians in this predominantly ethnic Albanian village, which saw ten civilians dead, including one child, and more than 100 men arrested and then beaten in police custody.<sup>32</sup> The abuses committed by the Macedonian police during this operation were considered amongst the most serious that took place during the armed conflict, and led to investigation by the Office of the Prosecutor at the ICTY against the former Minister of Internal Affairs, Ljube Boshkovski, and a former police officer acting as an accompanying inspector in the president's security unit at the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Johan Tarchulovski.<sup>33</sup> The ICTY Trial Chamber acquitted Boshkovski and sentenced Tarchulovski to 12 years in prison;<sup>34</sup> after serving eight years of his sentence, he was released from prison in 2013.<sup>35</sup> This event, even though commemorated,<sup>36</sup> was ultimately not included, owing to the lack of media coverage of the commemorations and lack of information about them; which has made it impossible to analyse the specifics, but also in and of itself indicates the politics of remembrance, especially of civilian victims.

The four selected events were studied through a content analysis of media coverage, using the archive of the news aggregator [www.time.mk](http://www.time.mk), as well as Google searches for local media outlets and social media in some instances, especially in regard to various statements and events that might have received less coverage. Once the media materials were gathered, they were filtered for similarity, as often the news articles would be word-for-word identical to one another, after which the remaining media material was subject to a content analysis to best understand the politics of remembrance for each event in each year of the analysed decade.

It is important to acknowledge two caveats of the analysis. The first is that it was primarily carried out in Macedonian, which also covers the national media outlets that publish bilingually. The searches were, however, carried out in both Macedonian and Albanian, and where coverage was only available in Albanian, both machine translation and consultations with Albanian native speakers were used, on account of the country expert's limited knowledge of Albanian. The second caveat is that a number of important media outlets had ceased to exist over the past decade, especially during the period of the VMRO-DPMNE-led government, up until 2017, which has resulted in some media coverage from the time not being available for analysis. Wherever possible, however, web archives were used to recover some of the material.

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32 <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/macedonia/>

33 International Justice Resource Centre (2021) "Boškoski & Tarčulovski (IT-04-82)," available [here](#).

34 Ibid.

35 MIA (2013) "Tarčulovski released from prison," DW, 10 April, available [here](#) [original in Macedonian].

36 As we can see, although not covered in any detail, [here](#) (2016), [here](#) (2017), [here](#) (2018), [here](#) (2019), [here](#) (2020), and [here](#) (2022).



### 2.3. Argument

The main argument of this country report is twofold. First and foremost, it argues that there has been an active attempt at the state level to either ignore or minimise the commemoration of any 2001 armed conflict events other than the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement and therefore, the end of the armed hostilities. This results in very few events being commemorated and acknowledged. Secondly, with the exception of the OFA signing, even when commemorations do happen, they are characterised by:

(1) ethnic spatialisation and overall ethnicisation of the commemorations – which is to say, a tendency to separate and isolate different ethnicities, whereby ethnicity is imagined as a category that possesses spatial characteristics.<sup>37</sup> In other words, certain spaces are associated with certain ethnicities, which in commemorative practices means that the predominantly ethnically Macedonian political parties, and especially those of them in the ruling coalition, attend or issue statements on commemorations of the fallen state security forces members, most of whom were ethnic Macedonians, with the commemorations taking place in predominantly ethnic Macedonian municipalities; while the DUI leadership attends or issues statements on commemorations of fallen NLA members, who were ethnic Albanian, and the commemorations take place in predominantly ethnic Albanian municipalities;

and (2) localisation of most of the commemorations, whereby it is the local municipalities, often working closely with the families of the victims and/or veterans' associations, who take the lead in organising the commemorations and keeping the memory of a certain event alive.

This type of politics of remembrance, I argue, is a reflection of the country's leadership's inability and unwillingness to deal with the past and to establish the facts of the 2001 armed conflict, whereby the past is either ignored or minimised to the local and therefore often ethnic level.

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37 Stavrevska, Elena (2016) 'Space, Class and Peace: Spatial Governmentality in Postwar Bosnia and Herzegovina'. In *Spatialising Peace and Conflict: Mapping the Production of Places, Sites and Scales of Violence*, eds. Annika Björkdahl and Susanne Buckley-Zistel, 141–158. London: Palgrave Macmillan.



### 3. Unofficial start of the armed conflict

#### 3.1. Introduction

Although there were other violent incidents in early January 2001, the 22 January armed attack on the police station in Tearce, a village to the northeast of Tetovo in north-western Macedonia, is unofficially considered to be the beginning of the 2001 armed conflict.<sup>38</sup> During the attack on the station, which happened at 2 a.m., there were four policemen on duty when a mortar projectile landed in the room where they were located.<sup>39</sup> 30-year-old Momir Stojanovski, a police officer from Kriva Palanka who was one of the men on duty, died in the attack and is considered the first victim of the 2001 armed conflict.<sup>40</sup> The other three officers who were in the duty room together with Stojanovski – Davor Evrosimovski, Borche Gjurovski, and Jahi Lika – were also wounded during the attack, with Evrosimovski being critically injured.<sup>41</sup> Stojanovski was buried in his native village of Dobrovnica and was posthumously awarded a medal for bravery by the President of the Republic of Macedonia.<sup>42</sup>

The day after the attack, the NLA issued a communique in which it claimed responsibility for the attack, labelling it a warning, and calling on police officers to withdraw from their posts in order not to lose their lives.<sup>43</sup> The mastermind behind the attack, Semi Hebibi, after having been arrested in Germany, was extradited to Macedonia in January 2002, and was ultimately granted an amnesty with a court order in March 2002.<sup>44</sup>

To date, there has been no official permanent memorial plaque placed at the location of the attack, and there has not been any official state-led commemoration, or even one attended by state officials. In 2021, on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the attack, a memorial plaque was installed, which was removed shortly after.<sup>45</sup> As the then police station has since been left to fall into ruin and a new police station has been opened elsewhere in the village, the state security forces veterans' association Board of Defenders has been calling on the Ministry of the Interior to install a more permanent memorial plaque at the new police station, in order to ensure that it remains undamaged;<sup>46</sup> but to no avail. Instead, Stojanovski's death is commemorated in his hometown

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38 <https://prizma.mk/posleditsite-od-konfliktot-vo-2001-se-chuvstvuvaa-i-po-dvaeset-godini/>

39 <https://denesen.mk/na-deneshen-den-vo-teroristichkiot-napad-vo-tearce-zagina-prviot-branitel-na-makedonija-i-zapochna-konfliktot-predizvikan-od-ona-2/>

40 Ibid.

41 <https://tetovoinfo.mk/odbelezhani-22-godina-od-napadot-na-policiskata-stanica-vo-tetovsko-tearce-vo-2001-i-zaginuvanjeto-na-policecot-momir-stojanovski/>

42 <https://denesen.mk/na-deneshen-den-vo-teroristichkiot-napad-vo-tearce-zagina-prviot-branitel-na-makedonija-i-zapochna-konfliktot-predizvikan-od-ona-2/>

43 <https://www.mkd.mk/node/285700>.

44 <https://denesen.mk/na-deneshen-den-vo-teroristichkiot-napad-vo-tearce-zagina-prviot-branitel-na-makedonija-i-zapochna-konfliktot-predizvikan-od-ona-2/>; <https://vecer.mk/uncategorized/%D0%B1%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%BFD1%80%D0%B5%D0%BA%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BD%D0%BE-%D1%87%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%82%D0%BE-%D0%B4%D0%BE%D1%81%D0%B8%D0%B5/>

45 <https://tetovoinfo.mk/%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%B6%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B8-21-%D0%B3%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%BE%D0%B4-%D0%B-D%D0%B0%D0%BF%D0%B0%D0%B4%D0%BE%D1%82-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%B-%D0%B8%D1%86/>

46 <https://www.brf.mk/odbelezhana-13-godishnata-od-napadot-na/>



of Kriva Palanka, together with those of two other victims during the armed conflict who were also from Kriva Palanka and members of the state security forces (also referred to as ‘defenders’, at least by the ethnic Macedonian population in the country) – Goran Stojanovski (killed on 8 March 2001) and Jane Jakimovski (killed on 21 March 2001) – with a memorial installed for all three.<sup>47</sup> The three are commemorated each year on the Day of the Police, 5 May, by the local police station, the local municipality and the Ministry of the Interior, with occasional memorial football tournaments organised locally on the day.<sup>48</sup>

Much like in the case of the Karpalak Massacre discussed below, although on a much smaller scale, this event follows the logic of localisation of commemorations, whereby it is either a veterans’ organisation, the victims’ families or the victims’ home municipality, or all three, that make sure the lives of the lost are commemorated. Similarly, the ethnic spatialisation of commemorations is present here too, with the state arguably not placing a memorial plaque in Tearce in an effort not to ruffle the proverbial ethnic feathers in an ethnically mixed area, and the main commemoration occurring in Kriva Palanka, a town predominantly inhabited by ethnic Macedonians. Both aspects connect back to the country leadership’s inability and/or refusal to deal with the country’s past and to establish the facts of the 2001 armed conflict, partly because that might undermine their own position.

### 3.2. Commemorative practices

The Kriva Palanka local commemoration notwithstanding, as far as the occasion of the 22 January 2001 attack and the unofficial start of the armed conflict is concerned, it remains largely outside the country’s visible and official memory. In the last decade, the only persons commemorating this date have been some of the state security forces veterans’ associations, such as the Board of Defenders, and at time, the political party formed by former veterans, Dostoinstvo. These commemorations have taken place, or to be precise, have been covered by the media, not more than four times over the last decade – in 2014, 2021, 2022, and 2023. While the Board of Defenders have commemorated the occasion by laying flowers at the place of the attack in Tearce each of the four years mentioned, representatives of Dostoinstvo joined them in Tearce in 2021 and additionally, in 2021 and 2022, laid flowers at the main monument in Skopje dedicated to the 2001 defenders, erected opposite the Parliament.

Apart from highlighting the need to remember Stojanovski’s sacrifice and the responsibility to honour it, these occasions have been used by the Board of Defenders and by Dostoinstvo, when their representatives were present, to highlight some of the issues the state security forces veterans are facing. In the January 2023 commemoration, Zharko Milevski from the Board of Defenders emphasised that “*the status of the defenders is desperate considering that they are not taken care of, most of them are at social risk, many have died. The state has not taken care of them. They are not integrated into the society.*”<sup>49</sup>

In some instances, the ways the state has approached these issues have also been juxtaposed to the ways in which the DUI, as a party formed and led by the former NLA leadership, and the

47 <https://a1on.mk/macedonia/vo-kriva-palanka-odbelezhan-denot-na-policijata/>

48 Ibid.

49 Transcripts 2023.



ethnic Albanian community more broadly, have gained from the Ohrid Framework Agreement. For instance, during the 2014 commemoration in Tearce, Aco Stojanovski, a member of the Board of Defenders, noted that *“if we want to move forward, the state should put these things in place, compensate the families of the dead and wounded defenders, and do psychological resocialization. What is being done now [is that] the Framework Agreement is being used for one side, and for the other side, there is nothing. That is what we are here to say.”*<sup>50</sup> Even more directly tying the status of the defenders to the DUI being in power was the 2021 commemoration statement by Stojanche Angelov, President of Dostoinstvo and former National Coordinator for Military and Police Veterans, who marked the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the unofficial start of the armed conflict by stating: *“The Macedonian defenders who defended the homeland in 2001 went through a series of trials, and from then until today they are facing a series of problems. A series of improvements have been made by this Government led by [then Prime Minister] Zoran Zaev and the SDSM, but owing to the impossibility of systemically passing a law, they are working on a single solution to the rights and problems faced by defenders who ask the Government for help (...) Why we cannot pass a new law for the defenders is a question that is being constantly repeated. One of the reasons is the 20 years that have passed since the conflict, as well as the insufficient awareness of people born after 2001. On the other hand, our military enemy in 2001 is now part of the government, that is to say, this has been almost constant for 20 years, so for any laws for the defenders, we must get their approval as well.”*<sup>51</sup>

At the same time, as noted above, the start of the conflict is rarely, if at all, mentioned by the parties in power. This can be interpreted from at least two perspectives. On the one hand, the DUI has consistently over the years portrayed itself publicly as a ‘stability factor’ in the country,<sup>52</sup> be that as an explanation for them staying in coalition with an openly anti-Albanian and nationalist political party like VMRO-DPMNE during the Gruevski years, or as an explanation of their positions in building new governing coalitions. This portrayal goes hand in hand with the party being the main force behind the commemoration of the signing of the OFA, as the agreement that ended the 2001 hostilities and which can be framed to have brought stability to the country. At the same time, commemorating the victims of attacks carried out by the now former NLA during the conflict, including the one that marked the unofficial start of the conflict, could potentially go against such a portrayal. However, it can be assumed that some of the reasons why the senior government partner, regardless of whether that is VMRO-DPMNE or SDSM, has not initiated an official state commemoration of the January 2001 attack in Tearce include: (1) ensuring stability within the governmental coalition, which has included DUI for more than 19 of the past 21 years, (2) the portrayal of an image that the country has moved on from the armed conflict, and (3) possibly, the already existing efforts to honour the victim of this attack together with other fallen defenders during the Day of the Police in his hometown.

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50 Transcripts 2014.

51 Transcripts 2021.

52 <https://24.mk/details/akhmeti-dui-e-faktor-za-stabilnost>



### 3.3. Conclusion

Overall, the unofficial start of the conflict is rarely commemorated and reported in the media; and when it is, the commemoration is small in scope, taking place either in front of the former police station in Tearce or in front of the monument in Skopje dedicated to the 2001 fallen defenders, and carried out by some of the state security forces veterans' organisations and the political party Dostoinstvo, without top state officials even acknowledging the occasion or their delegations being present at the commemorations.

The politics of remembrance around this event indicates efforts to actively forget it at the national level and dislocate it to the local level – to Kriva Palanka, as the hometown of Stojanovski, the first victim of the 2001 armed conflict. This form of politics of remembrance is almost entirely in line with what can be observed about the commemoration of nearly all the victims in the 2001 armed conflict from the state security forces – the organisation of the commemoration is left to the local municipalities of the victims, the victims' families and/or veterans' association, with the events by and large following a logic of ethnic spatialisation. Furthermore, the active forgetting in this instance, much like in other instances, is a direct result of the country's not having dealt with its past and with the facts of 2001, which in turn leads to leaders' lack of political will to even publicly acknowledge losses such as this as something worth commemorating.



## 4. Start of clashes in the Karadak – Lipkovo region

### 4.1. Introduction

Until early May 2001, the armed conflict was mainly concentrated in the north-western part of the country. This changed on 2 May, when the NLA carried out an overnight ambush, killing two army soldiers, and declaring the Karadak – Lipkovo region near Kumanovo, including the villages of Slupchane/Sllupçan and Vaksince/Vaksincë in Lipkovo Municipality, a ‘free zone’ or a ‘liberated territory.’<sup>53</sup> The ARM responded nearly immediately by launching an offensive on 3 May.<sup>54</sup> The heavy clashes continued throughout May and part of June, with another front opening in the nearby village of Matejche/Mateç after an attack on the police station there on 24 May.<sup>55</sup> The direct confrontations stopped on 11 June, after the ARM had been ordered to suspend its military operations in the region.<sup>56</sup> The clashes in this region led to a significant number of displaced people and refugees, several civilian casualties, including seven members from one family (the Zymberi family), and a number of military victims on both sides.<sup>57</sup> Since the armed conflict, 2 May is commemorated in the village of Slupchane as the day of the establishment of the so-called “liberated territory”.

This event, 2 May, is usually commemorated by the Association of NLA Veterans, as well as the political party DUI, often together with the local community and the municipality. In the past, the Association has organised annual celebrations to mark the date, usually including performance of songs and dances. In 2012, the Museum of the War of 2001 and the NLA was also opened in Slupchane on the occasion of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the independence of Albania.<sup>58</sup>

In this past decade, which is the subject of analysis here, the commemoration of the start of the clashes in the Karadak – Lipkovo region – or rather, the establishment of the so-called ‘liberated territory’ – has been primarily carried out by the Association of NLA veterans, with the involvement of high-level members of the DUI, depending on the political climate in the country in any given year, as well as the sentiments by the NLA veterans and the inhabitants of the Lipkovo region. In this sense, this commemoration, too, follows the logic of localisation, whereby it is primarily the Association of NLA veterans and the local municipality that organise the annual event, while the involvement of the top officials of the DUI is often dependent on the political situation in the country, be it with their coalition partners or with their electorate, as elaborated below. Similarly, much like the other events covered, with the exception of the OFA signing, this commemoration also follows a logic of ethnic spatialisation, with the events taking place in a predominantly ethnic Albanian area and with Albanian symbols and folklore.

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53 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/1310372.stm>

54 Ibid.

55 <https://lists.peacelink.it/balcani/2001/06/msg00024.html>.

56 <https://www.rferl.org/a/1096658.html>

57 <https://360stepeni.mk/vojnata-nikogash-ne-e-optsija/>

58 [https://www.hlc-rdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Publikacija-Oruzani\\_Sukob\\_u\\_Makedoniji-mk.pdf](https://www.hlc-rdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Publikacija-Oruzani_Sukob_u_Makedoniji-mk.pdf)



## 4.2. Commemorative practices

In 2012, when the Minister of Defence post was held for the first time by a member of the DUI, the commemoration in Slupchane was surrounded by a significant public controversy when the Minister, alongside a number of army officers, laid flowers at the NLA monument.<sup>59</sup> In the context of the failure to deal with the past surrounding the 2001 armed conflict in the country, this act was seen differently by the different ethnic communities in North Macedonia. While for ethnic Albanians, and NLA veterans in particular, this might have indicated hope that the NLA veterans might finally be taken care of by the institutions, for ethnic Macedonians this was seen as a provocation, whereby the Minister was honouring the fallen fighters of the same guerrilla group that had killed members of the army he now led.

It was in that context that the 2013 commemoration, which was attended by the new Minister of Defence, Talat Xhaferi, who was not only a DUI member but also a former NLA commander, took place. While Xhaferi, alongside other ministers, deputies and other state officials, members of the DUI, laid flowers on the monument, it was noted in the media that, unlike his predecessor, he was not accompanied by army officers.<sup>60</sup> On the occasion, Xhaferi remarked: *“All of us who perform public functions today, 12 years after 2001, have these sons and daughters of the nation [the fallen fighters of NLA] in our minds at every moment. At every moment they remind us that our path must precisely fulfil the ideals for which they gave their lives.”*<sup>61</sup>

The commemoration of this event for the following seven years has received very little media attention, especially in mainstream media in the country. This might be related to the absence of high-level DUI members from the commemorations, but also to the volatility of the political situation in the country. For example, May 2014 was marked by a certain level of uncertainty around the intense negotiations between VMRO-DPMNE and DUI on forming a new government,<sup>62</sup> while May 2017 was in the immediate aftermath of the violent 27 April attack on the Parliament following the election of Talat Xhaferi as its speaker,<sup>63</sup> and also of a period of new government negotiations, this time between the SDSM and DUI. This is not to say that commemorations were not taking place. On the contrary, the commemoration has taken place every year and has been attended by former NLA members, NLA veterans, family members of fallen fighters – or, as they are referred to, “fallen martyrs” – and citizens of Slupchane and the Municipality of Lipkovo, even though in some instances the only record of the commemoration taking place in the media appears to be a social media post or a YouTube video.<sup>64</sup>

59 <https://a1on.mk/macedonia/besimi-se-izvini-za-polozhuvanjeto-cvekj/>

60 <http://web.archive.org/web/20130506031442/https://www.novamakedonija.com.mk/DetailNewsInstant.asp?vestInstant=17851>

61 <http://web.archive.org/web/20130506034734/https://www.sitel.com.mk/video-ministerot-talat-dzhaferi-bez-razmis-luvanje-se-pokloni-pred-spomenikot-na-ona-vo-slupchane>

62 <http://web.archive.org/web/20140514061958/https://lokalno.mk/izdisha-balonot-na-ahmeti-i-dui-salto-mortale-i-daj-shta-dash/>

63 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/27/macedonia-protesters-storm-parliament-and-attack-mps>.

64 For the 2017, 2018, and 2020 manifestations, see here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sh74OqoP6oE>, here <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.373073829865030&type=3>, and here <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=272137947293923>



Importantly, this period coincides with ever more pronounced dissatisfaction by the NLA veterans, as well as the dissatisfaction in Slupchane and the region more broadly, with the work of the DUI. Reflecting on the situation of the NLA veterans, Vadedin Ibrahim, a former NLA member, captures this dissatisfaction: *“I, as a former member of the NLA, am not satisfied with the achievements of Albanian politics in Macedonia, especially regarding the goals of the war. They do not match the achievements, the goals were completely different, and the reality is bitter. Especially, the most vulnerable category are the former soldiers of the NLA, they despise us, with fabricated cases, murders, chaos...”*<sup>65</sup> The wider dissatisfaction by the inhabitants of the region is well captured by two inhabitants of Slupchane: *“Invincible fortress is its name, but the village of Slupchane remains the most forgotten place. You can see what it says up here: ‘Traitors are forbidden from entering Slupchane.’ This is horrible. It is over for me already, I am dying, but I am sorry for the young people we neglect, there are no schools, ambulances, nothing... [...] From 2001 until now, nothing has been done – you see, the river is destroyed, the paving is bad. Not a single nail has yet been driven in. 73 houses that were destroyed in 2001 have not been repaired. I repaired my house myself, just like my relatives... Where is the municipality, where is the government?”*<sup>66</sup>

The tone changed ever so slightly in 2021, when on the occasion of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the armed conflict at the commemoration in Slupchane, Ali Ahmeti, the leader of the DUI and former leader of the NLA, laid the foundation stone of a memorial tower to honour “the Albanian mother who stood in support of the NLA”<sup>67</sup> This was not without criticism, as the building of the monument had long been delayed, with the start of the work immediately after the armed conflict.<sup>68</sup> At the commemoration, Ahmeti noted: *“This monument, for which we are laying the foundation stone today, is being built in memory of the brightest history of this country and these spaces, it is being built so that we will always remember [the fallen fighters], because their blood was a light for us and for the people. This monument is being built in memory of the mothers of the entire municipality of Lipkovo, the women, our sisters. We did not lose the war against the opponents we had – here, we lost the war with our mothers, sisters and women, because they did not want to come out of the trenches despite our prayers and ultimatums, they gave the most authentic example of the Albanian mother who has historically fought for freedom, justice and equality, that’s why this monument is dedicated to them. We have great responsibilities ahead of us, we must fulfil all the dreams of heroes and fallen fighters. We have achieved a lot, but there is still a lot of work ahead of us. Our efforts, our dedication will never stop in realising the ideals of all generations who sacrificed and worked for better and brighter days, therefore not only on this anniversary, but also at every moment we remember all those generations, we remember all who fought and fell, in order that their actions may not be stalled, but materialise as they see fit.”*<sup>69</sup>

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65 <https://lokalno.mk/odbelezhana-15-godishninata-od-pochetokot-na-vojnata-na-ona-vo-slupchane/>.

66 <http://web.archive.org/web/20160503120141/http://alsat.mk/News/251054/poraneshnite-vojnici-na-ona-revoltirani-za-svojata-sostojba>.

67 <https://kanal5.com.mk/ahmeti-vo-slupchane-denes-e-poseben-den-nie-mora-da-gi-odbelezhuваме-site-padnati-borci/a472976>

68 <https://mk.tv21.tv/dui-odbelezha-20-godini-od-voeniot-konflikt-19-godini-se-cheka-za-eden-spomenik/>

69 <https://kanal5.com.mk/ahmeti-vo-slupchane-denes-e-poseben-den-nie-mora-da-gi-odbelezhuваме-site-padnati-borci/a472976>



The following year, the monument was officially opened at the Slupchane commemoration, in the presence of Ali Ahmeti, the Speaker of the Parliament Talat Xhaferi, nearly all the government ministers who are DUI members, as well as DUI-affiliated mayors.<sup>70</sup> This 20-meter high memorial tower dedicated to the fallen NLA fighters, with a full-length Albanian flag displayed on it,<sup>71</sup> is said to have cost around 200.000 euros, allocated from the budget of the Municipality of Lipkovo.<sup>72</sup> On this occasion, Ahmeti remarked: *“Glory belongs to the [fallen fighters], to those who build bridges, not to those who step on them. That’s why our freedom, the foundations of our bridge are in the blood and that blood is perpetuated here, at this monument [...] The freedom acquired, both in Macedonia and in Kosovo, was obtained with sacrifices, and the most deserving are the fallen fighters [...] This country has a future. I have heard the media [reactions about] this monument being erected, comments from fellow citizens, or from journalists and Macedonian publicists. This monument does not divide us, this monument unites us. The NLA is part of the history of this country, this country cannot have a history without the NLA. There can be no history without the greatest achievement, the Framework Agreement, as the result of their contribution. The future of this country is the Prespa Agreement, which joined us with NATO.”*<sup>73</sup>

The reactions to the monument among ethnic Macedonians were mixed. While the political party Levica had requested an extraordinary inspection to determine the legality of the procedure surrounding the construction of the monument,<sup>74</sup> the families of some of the fallen members of the state security forces remarked at the injustice of those fallen soldiers not being honoured with a state- or municipality-funded monument;<sup>75</sup> all this, whilst perhaps the most visible person from the state security forces veterans of 2001, Stojanche Angelov, had called for calm, asking people that each side be allowed to honour their victims.<sup>76</sup>

Nevertheless, the monument aside, not much has been done to resolve the status of the NLA veterans. As a result, the public voicing of the dissatisfaction noted above, dating back to at least 2016, was again evident in 2023, when Ali Ahmeti was, in fact, prevented from laying flowers on one of the graves of the fallen NLA soldiers by the outraged father of Ali Mahmuti, who had been killed during the fighting in Matejche/Mateç.<sup>77</sup> This, once again, put the issue of the unresolved status of the NLA veterans and the dissatisfaction with DUI in the spotlight.<sup>78</sup>

70 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/31831103.html>

71 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/31831103.html>

72 <https://mk.tv21.tv/podignat-spomenik-na-padnatite-bortsi-ahmeti-ne-ne-razdvojuva-tuku-ne-obedinuva-ona-e-del-od-istorijata-na-zemjava/>

73 <https://mk.tv21.tv/podignat-spomenik-na-padnatite-bortsi-ahmeti-ne-ne-razdvojuva-tuku-ne-obedinuva-ona-e-del-od-istorijata-na-zemjava/>

74 <https://24.mk/details/levica-podnese-inicijativa-za-inspekcijski-nadzor-za-utvrduvanje-na-zakonitosta-na-spomenikot-na-ona-vo-slupchane>

75 <https://alfa.mk/%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%BC%D0%B8%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%BE%D1%82%D1%81%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BC%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%BE%D1%82-%D0%B2%D0%BE-%D1%81%D0%BB%D1%83%D0%BF%D1%87%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B5-%D0%B5/>

76 <https://sitet.com.mk/angelov-da-ne-se-kreva-megjuetnichka-tenzija-tie-neka-gi-si-gi-chestvuvaat-nivnite-nie-nashite>

77 <https://alsat.mk/mk/ali-ahmeti-sprechen-da-stavi-tsveke-na-grob-vo-slupchane/>

78 <https://alsat.mk/mk/veteranite-na-ona-22-godini-bez-reshen-status/>



### 4.3. Conclusion

Given all the above, it can be concluded that the politics of remembrance around the start of the clashes in the Karadak – Lipkovo region is that of largely localised commemoration, with the Association of the NLA veterans and the Municipality of Lipkovo taking charge of the annual observances. At the same time, at the state level, while the state itself remains uninvolved, the DUI political party participates in the commemorations largely depending on the political climate in the country, be that in relation to larger developments, such as the formation of new government coalitions, or growing dissatisfaction with the DUI among the ethnic Albanian population of the region and the NLA veterans, at the region's and the veterans' needs largely being forgotten, apart from this one day in the year.

This is precisely what explains the only changes in the politics of remembrance around this event that we have witnessed in the last decade, with the DUI leadership being present and involved most of the time, but also disengaging when the political climate both among its electorate and within the country more broadly is not convenient. This in some ways links to the monopoly on the narrative around the 2001 armed conflict held by the DUI (and not, significantly, by the NLA veterans as a whole), but also to the lack of public discourse and societal acknowledgement, and an acceptance of what happened in 2001.



## 5. The Karpalak ambush

### 5.1. Introduction

The Karpalak ambush or Karpalak Massacre refers to an attack on an ARM convoy, carried out by the NLA on 8 August 2001 in the area known as Karpalak, on the highway that leads from Skopje to the north-western town of Tetovo.<sup>79</sup> The convoy was composed of 120 reservists, all from the town of Prilep.<sup>80</sup> Ten army reservists lost their lives that day, when their army truck was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade.<sup>81</sup> The attack, considered to be the single deadliest incident of the 2001 armed conflict against the state security forces, constituted a breach of the ceasefire agreement in place while negotiations were underway to finalise the Ohrid Framework Agreement.<sup>82</sup> In the end, the OFA was signed, only five days after the Karpalak Massacre.

In the more than two decades since the ambush, no one has been held responsible for the incident, neither from the NLA side, nor from the side of the military and political leadership for having sent the convoy without sufficient organisation and without protection. This has led to a growing frustration among the victims' families, but also to various commonly discussed conspiracy theories as to why the reservists were sent there that day and who benefited from their death. Such conspiracy theories have only added to the general dissatisfaction among the ethnic Macedonian majority in the country with what are seen as the consequences of OFA, and with the political party that was formed by the NLA guerrilla leaders, the Democratic Union for Integration, being part of the ruling coalition for 19 of the last 21 years. Additionally, the lack of any meaningful efforts by the state to deal with the past in the aftermath of the armed conflict has resulted in differing, contradictory, and ethnicised narratives about the armed conflict<sup>83</sup> within the context of which the Karpalak Massacre is publicly portrayed.

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The commemoration of the massacre happens at two locations: a small one at the place of the massacre and another, larger one in the hometown of the victims, Prilep. In many ways, the commemoration of the Karpalak Massacre is an example that is replicated in the commemoration of most, if not all 2001 victims from among the state security forces: even when a commemoration for those victims happens, it is localised, that is, it takes place in the homeplace of the victim(s), and it is ethnically specialised, that is, it takes place only within certain spaces considered predominantly ethnically Macedonian, and along the invisible 'ethnic lines' within the country.

79 <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/08/08/north-macedonia-marks-karpalak-massacres-21st-anniversary/>

80 [https://www.bbc.co.uk/macedonian/news/story/2006/08/printable/060808\\_karpalak.shtml](https://www.bbc.co.uk/macedonian/news/story/2006/08/printable/060808_karpalak.shtml)

81 <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/08/08/north-macedonia-marks-karpalak-massacres-21st-anniversary/>

82 <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/08/08/north-macedonia-marks-karpalak-massacres-21st-anniversary/>

83 <https://paxvoorrede.nl/wp-content/uploads/import/2023-01/PAX%20rapport%20oorlogsslachtoffers%20Balkanoorloggen%2018%20januari%2023.pdf>, 107.



## 5.2. Commemorative practices

It is within this context that the massacre is commemorated every 8 August. The commemoration happens at two locations: one is at the place where the massacre happened, on the highway between Skopje and Tetovo, and another is in Prilep, the town of the ten victims. At the place of the ambush, there have been several plaques to commemorate the fallen reservists, but those plaques are frequently the target of vandals, often ending up damaged and removed as soon as the commemoration is over.<sup>84</sup>

Beyond the plaques, there are no memorials—let alone state-funded memorials—at the place of the massacre. The sentiment expressed in 2012 by the surviving driver of the army truck which was hit, Aco Jovanovski Regan, has remained the same throughout the decade: *“For eleven years we have been laying wreaths and flowers and lighting candles on the highway embankment. We ask that a memorial be placed for the 10 defenders, the heroes from Prilep who died in this place.”*<sup>85</sup> Over the years different opposition political parties, considered to be primarily ethnic Macedonian, have promised that they will erect a monument once they are in power, but all such promises have fallen short. Notably, during the 2019 commemoration, Stojanche Angelov, then national coordinator for military-police veterans and a participant in the 2001 armed conflict stated: *“It is necessary to consider what is the internal situation in the country. I expect that we will continue to swim in calm waters, in view of our entry into NATO, which is certain and only a matter of the day when it happens. This, I believe, will have a positive impact on inter-ethnic relations and in such a case, we can discuss a suitable monument in this place.”*<sup>86</sup> Nevertheless, even though the country has since joined NATO, there is still no monument at the place of the massacre.

In Prilep, on the other hand, in 2002 already a memorial dedicated to the ten victims was installed in the local army barracks from where the convoy carrying the reservists departed. This memorial is one of the places in Prilep where the annual commemorations of the ‘fallen defenders’, as the members of the state forces participating in the 2001 armed conflict are known among the ethnic Macedonian population, takes place. Additionally, in 2011 a new, 40-metre-high monument in Prilep was also dedicated to the ten fallen reservists,<sup>87</sup> which has since become a place for the main commemoration on 8 August.

With the commemoration happening in two places, one can observe an almost Janus-faced commemoration, which is ethnically spatialised. On the one hand, the commemoration at Karpalak is usually small in scale, in many ways driven by the survivors of the massacre and other army veterans, without speeches and in some years even without attendance by the highest state representatives, although their delegations are regularly present to lay wreaths during that commemoration. In some ways, and in the context of the above statement by Angelov, it can be observed that this commemoration is kept small on purpose, in the name of preserving the inter-ethnic relations in the country, although this is hardly ever explicitly stated. This ten-

84 Andonov, Zoran (2019) “Memorial plate for defenders killed at Karpalak was removed again,” *Sokam Da Kažam*, 14 May, available [here](https://a1on.mk/macedonia/11-godini-od-karpalak-se-ushte-se-bara-vis/) [original in Macedonian]; <https://a1on.mk/macedonia/11-godini-od-karpalak-se-ushte-se-bara-vis/>

85 <https://a1on.mk/macedonia/11-godini-od-karpalak-se-ushte-se-bara-vis/>

86 Transcripts 2019.

87 [http://stefimiloska.blogspot.com/2011/05/blog-post\\_10.html](http://stefimiloska.blogspot.com/2011/05/blog-post_10.html)



dency was noted by Marin Najdov from the veterans' association Board of Defenders, during the 2020 commemoration at Karpalak: *"Someone is obviously working so that this event will slowly but surely begin to be forgotten. Because this year, as well as last year, no one said even half a word as to why they came here and what is being celebrated today. I think that the Ministry of Defence will find the strength to honour this in a more dignified way, and to give the defenders the place they deserve."*<sup>88</sup>

On the other hand, the commemoration in Prilep, whose population is predominantly ethnic Macedonian, is much bigger in scale, supported and organised by the local government and attended by state representatives. With Marjan Risteski, who was also among the reservists in the convoy in August 2001, being Mayor of Prilep from 2005 until 2017, the commemoration in Prilep was given even more importance. It was this mayor who in 2011 unveiled the main memorial to the fallen reservists in Prilep. This commemoration has historically been attended by government ministers, not infrequently a minister who is from Prilep, as was the case with Mile Janakieski, the Minister of Transport and Communication in Gruevski's government, and later Goran Sugarski, the Minister of Transport and Communication in Zaev's government. In more recent years, the Prilep commemoration has also been attended by the Minister of Defence, which has also been a source of controversy. This was the case during Talat Xhaferi's tenure as Minister of Defence between 2013-2014. Xhaferi, who at the beginning of the armed conflict was a senior officer in the ARM which he later deserted to join the NLA, was nominated for the ministerial post by the DUI in the face of wide public reactions. During his ministerial tenure, perhaps understandably, considering the fragility of inter-ethnic relations in the country, Xhaferi did not attend the commemoration.<sup>89</sup> At the same time, when then Minister of Defence Radmila Shekerinska did not attend the commemoration in 2020, there was noticeable public dissatisfaction, with the non-attendance in some media being framed as an attempt to forget what had happened in 2001.<sup>90</sup> This was ameliorated in 2021, when Shekerinska was one of the speakers at the Prilep commemoration. In her speech, she noted: *"To have the virtue of looking to the future, you must appreciate, commemorate and remember the sacrifices made in the past. That is why we are here in Prilep today, to remember the ten defenders who are no longer with us. Let's respect their work, let's appreciate their bravery even today, in order to show proper respect to all the families who lost their loved ones (...) And in the moments when we remember their sacrifice, their courage, we should say that every generation, every year, every crisis, shows the same. It is that there are people, there are institutions, there is a state behind which we can protect ourselves, with which we can defend ourselves. In every crisis and almost every year, it is shown that the peace and security of the homeland and its citizens is the most basic, the most important thing that guides thousands of our soldiers, whether they are in the regular army or in the reserves."*<sup>91</sup>

The commemoration in Karpalak has maintained a similar format over the last decade. The day is marked on the highway embankment by different delegations, veterans' associations, and the families of the victims laying flowers, and by a memorial service usually performed by

88 Transcripts 2020.

89 <https://time.mk/?q=%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%BF%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%B0%D0%BA+%D1%9F%D0%B0%D1%84%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B8&search=news&startdate=01.08.2013&enddate=12.08.2013&order=dec>

90 <https://alfa.mk/anketa-shekerinska-ne-smeeshe-da-si-dozvoli-da-ne-se-pojavi-na-chestvuvanjetu-na-zaginatite-na-karpalak/>

91 Transcripts 2021.





priests of the Tetovo episcopal vicarage. Delegations from the President's cabinet, from the Parliament, from the Government, and from the General Staff of the ARM are regularly present to lay wreaths, as well as delegations from the Municipality of Prilep. It is worth noting that while the ministers of defence more often than not attended the ceremony in Karpalak until 2016, this practice seems to have been quietly discontinued following the change of government in 2017, when the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia came to power. Since then, while delegations from the Ministry of Defence have been present on the day, those representatives usually do not include the minister themselves. It is possible that this shift in approaches is a result of the efforts by the SDMS government to improve inter-ethnic relations in the country, having famously advanced a strategy called One Society for All. However, the shift in approaches, even more so when done quietly without much public discussion to communicate the thinking behind it, might have had the opposite impact amongst ethnic Macedonians.

The commemoration in Karpalak has also been a rare occasion for the victims' families and the army veterans to voice their demands for the state to build a memorial on the location as a form of gratitude to the fallen reservists. These demands have remained constantly present over the years, with the present government representatives usually refusing to comment on them.<sup>92</sup> In some instances, the veterans have also tried reminding those in power of the promises they made when in opposition. For instance, in 2019 Jordan Trajkovski from the Association of Army Reservists from Prilep called on then Prime Minister Zaev to remember his promises: *"Didn't these ten deserve a memorial for giving their lives for Macedonia? The government's approach is the same as the previous one, there is absolutely no difference. I am calling on Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, because seven years ago when he was the vice-president of the SDSM, we signed a memorandum of cooperation in which he committed that if he came to power, 90 percent of the demands of the participants in 2001 would be met. Unfortunately, he forgot, and I want to remind him (...) It is as if we were fighting for the wrong side, even though we were defending the country."*<sup>93</sup> In this direction, the lack of a memorial in Karpalak has been juxtaposed against the existing memorials of the NLA fighters. In 2017, Trajkovski noted that *"governments have promised the construction of a monument in Karpalak, which has not been seen to this day, while on the other hand, in several places throughout the country, there are monuments dedicated to those who died on the other side."*<sup>94</sup>

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In this direction, considering the media interest, the commemoration in Karpalak has also been a rare opportunity for the veterans to highlight their needs, which are largely invisible in the public discourse for the rest of the year. While the Law on the Special Rights of Members of the Security Forces of the Republic of Macedonia and Members of their Families, passed in 2002 and amended in 2003, 2004 and 2007, has given some rights and benefits to family members of state security forces who were killed or war-disabled, the same benefits are not extended to the surviving members of the security forces or their families. Many of the veterans do not have health insurance and are without employment. According to the analysis by the Prilep reservists in 2015, some

92 <http://web.archive.org/web/20140810045117/https://plusinfo.mk/vest/146845/GALERIJA-Taga-i-sekjavanje-za-zaginatite-vojnici-kaj-Karpalak>.

93 Transcripts 2019.

94 Transcripts 2017.



75 per cent of the remaining 2000 reservists were unemployed.<sup>95</sup> To that end, in 2017 Trajkovski emphasised: *“We demand that our fallen comrades be respected, but that the living ones not be forgotten. The surviving defenders are dying of diseases, without employment or a solution to their housing issue. We demand a dignified life, as people who risked their lives for the country.”*<sup>96</sup>

The commemoration in Prilep has also largely kept the same format. Tributes are paid in front of the fallen reservists’ monument in the “Mirce Acev” barracks in Prilep and in front of the monument in the Sveta Petka monastery near the village of Lenishte. The central commemoration has been taking place in front of the Karpalak monument in Prilep, with speeches by the mayor of the town, the minister of defence when in attendance, and representatives of the veterans. The tone of the speeches by the mayors over the years have slightly differed, which is perhaps a reflection of the fact that the former mayor, Risteski, is among the survivors of the Karpalak ambush. Risteski’s speeches have largely focused on the loss of the reservists and the role that loss has played for those who survived. In his 2017 commemoration speech, he stressed that *“no matter how much we want, no matter how hard we try, none of us can remove the pain in our hearts for Nane Naumoski, Sasho Kitanoski, Vebi Rushitoski, Branko Sekuloski, Goran Minoski, Erdovan Shabanoski, Darko Veljanoski, Ljube Grujoski, Pece Sekuloski and Marko Despotoski, who gave their lives in defence of the Republic of Macedonia. With this gathering, standing in front of their monument, we prove that grief unites us and makes us stronger and that no one can tear us away from our intention to love and defend our country.”*<sup>97</sup> His successor Ilija Jovanoski, on the other hand, has largely framed his commemoration remarks in a forward-looking manner, usually in line with the rhetoric of his political party, the SDSM, and of the current government. In 2021, Jovanoski stated: *“Let’s not allow the ghosts of the past to destroy the perspective of young people and their dream of life in a democratic and prosperous state. Let’s choose light instead of darkness, and stand together on the side of the future. The fact is that as a people, we face new trials and new battles again and again. None of them must shake us in our intention to achieve the two strategic goals that we outlined 30 years ago, when we chose to live in an independent and sovereign state. For the second year already, we have the benefits of one of them – membership in the NATO alliance. With that, a huge step forward has been made in ensuring secure and safe borders, and at the same time the internal stability of the state. At the moment when we are one step away from the second goal, full membership in the great European family of nations, we must leave behind all internal political battles. Let’s show unity on key issues for the country.”*<sup>98</sup>

Similarly, the commemoration in Prilep has been used by the government ministers in attendance to deliver a message of peace and stability, which has been a recurring trend over the years regardless of the change of government and parties in power. To give one example, the Minister of Defence Zoran Joleski, minister in the VMRO-DPMNE government, noted that *“[i]t is our duty to continue to honour the fallen defenders, to respect their work, courage and sacrifice, because they were driven not only by their duty, but also by love for their homeland (...) Their*

95 <http://web.archive.org/web/20150812004755/http://libertas.mk/%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%BF-%D0%B8%D0%BC-%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B0%D0%B4%D0%B5-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D1%87%D0%B8%D1%82-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B1%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%BA/>.

96 Ibid.

97 Transcripts 2017.

98 Transcripts 2021.



loss always reminds us that the defence and freedom of the homeland has no price. It is a lesson for all of us to build a safer and more prosperous future for our children and future generations, to protect and nurture them, but also to defend the peace and freedom of our homeland.”<sup>99</sup> For comparison, the same tone can be found in the remarks by Radmila Shekerinska during her tenure as Minister of Defence in the SDSM government. In her 2019 remarks, she notes that “[t]his part of history will remain in our memory and this courage must be remembered. There is no greater pain than losing a loved one and no one can bring that comfort (...) Today, like never before, this sacrifice of theirs, this self-sacrifice of theirs, shows how important peace and stability should be to all of us. That nothing has a price if we fail to bring stability and security to all our citizens.”<sup>100</sup>

In this sense, the politics of remembrance around the commemoration in Prilep has largely remained the same for the last decade. The most notable difference in the last ten years is the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration in 2021 being attended by President Stevo Pendarovski,<sup>101</sup> which is the first time the president of the country has attended any of the Karpalak commemorations in the last ten years.

### 5.3. Conclusion

Overall, the politics of remembrance around the Karpalak commemoration in the country has not seen any significant changes in the last decade. The trend of an ethnically spatialised commemoration has continued, whereby the commemoration at Karpalak is small in scale, driven by the Karpalak survivors and state security forces veterans’ associations, without speeches or often without attendance by the highest state representatives (even if their delegations might be present). Presumably it has been kept small and almost invisible in the name of preserving good inter-ethnic relations.

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At the same time, the commemoration in Prilep, the hometown of the victims, is significantly larger in scale, organised by the municipality, and sometimes attended by top state officials, with even the President attending in 2021. Apart from this, we have not witnessed any bigger changes in the format of commemoration in either place, nor in the tone of peace and stability invoked in the government ministers’ speeches in Prilep, regardless of which party is in power. It can be argued, in fact, that bigger changes in the format or the location of this commemoration are hardly possible without some form of public reckoning with the past, especially around the responsibility for the loss of lives at Karpalak. However, none of the parties in power, regardless of their ideological leanings, have been ready or willing to engage in such a process.

In this sense, the politics of remembrance around the commemoration of the Karpalak Massacre are in line with what we have witnessed across all other commemorative events, with the exception of the OFA signing, which is an ethnically spatialised commemoration within the parameters set along the lines of actively forgetting 2001 in the public discourse at the national level, without having dealt with its causes or consequences.

99 Transcripts 2015.

100 Transcripts 2019.

101 <https://makpress.mk/Home/PostDetails?PostId=425238>



## 6. Signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement

### 6.1. Introduction

The Ohrid Framework Agreement, which marked the official end of hostilities between the NLA and the state security forces, was signed on 13 August. The OFA emphasises the multi-ethnic character of Macedonia, the importance of the Constitution meeting the needs of all citizens, and local self-government being essential for citizens' participation and for promoting respect for the identities of the different communities.<sup>102</sup> Aside from the development of decentralised government, the OFA also includes provisions regarding the cessation of hostilities, voluntary disarmament and the complete disbandment of ethnic Albanian armed groups, non-discrimination under the law and equitable representation of communities in all public administration bodies, special parliamentary procedures that ensure there is no tyranny of the majority on a number of critical issues, the right to education and the use of languages, as well as to emblems as an expression of identity. As of 2019, the Agreement is considered to have been fully implemented.<sup>103</sup>

While the changes introduced with the OFA are important, as noted earlier in the report, these were never followed up by state efforts to either determine the facts around the armed conflict or to initiate a societal dealing with this part of the country's past.<sup>104</sup> It is perhaps this that has created space over the better part of the last twenty years for the parties in power, and especially the top state officials, to strategically choose whether and how to acknowledge and/or commemorate the signing of OFA. The notable exception is the DUI, a party that has emerged out of the demobilised NLA and that has been in power for most of the period since the armed conflict. As the political party that considers the OFA to be amongst its main achievements, the DUI has imposed itself as the main bearer of memory for its commemoration.

At present, the signing of OFA appears to be the only event connected to the 2001 armed conflict in whose commemoration there has been an evident change in the politics of remembrance in the last decade, which has importantly coincided with the significant change in political direction the country experienced with the change of government, from VMRO-led to SDSM-led, in 2017. The changes have been on a number of fronts, as detailed below, including in the format of the commemoration, moving to a bigger and more notable event; in the organising institution, mainly owing to internal decisions, but also to the institutional changes following the declared full implementation of the OFA; in the approach taken by the predominantly ethnic Macedonian party in power, with a more prominent embracing of the OFA as something to be acknowledged and even celebrated; and finally, in the framing of the OFA and its significance, with the Agreement being portrayed by the political leaders as being more directly linked to projections about the country's future.

102 Ohrid Framework Agreement (2001), articles 1.1, 1.3, 1.4, and 1.5.

103 <https://sitetel.com.mk/vladata-ja-odrzha-149-redovna-sednica>; Marusic, Sinisa Jakov (2021) "The consequences of the conflict in Northern Macedonia are felt even after twenty years," *BIRN Skopje*, available [here](#) [original in Macedonian].

104 <https://paxvoorrede.nl/wp-content/uploads/import/2023-01/PAX%20rapport%20oorlogsslachtoffers%20Balkanoorloggen%2018%20januari%2023.pdf>



## 6.2. Commemorative practices

In the first few years after the armed conflict, the annual OFA commemorations were organised by the DU, in different locations across the country, with the 2003 event held on Popova Shapka and the 2005 event in the Metropol Hotel in Struga.<sup>105</sup> While these commemorations were regularly attended by the country's diplomatic corps, the highest state offices were not represented.<sup>106</sup> It was not until 2006 that the then president Branko Crvenkovski first organised a formal reception on the occasion of the OFA signing anniversary in the presidential villa in Ohrid, and not until 2007 that the Macedonian government first organised an event to mark the anniversary. These are the first recorded events related to the anniversary organised by the Macedonian state institutions.<sup>107</sup>

As of 2009, the annual OFA signing commemorations were organised by the Secretariat for the Implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which was a government body established in 2004 with the goal of implementing the OFA and providing support to the Deputy Prime Minister in charge of OFA implementation.<sup>108</sup> In 2019, the Secretariat officially ceased to exist and a new ministry, the Ministry of Political System and Inter-Community Relations, was introduced instead.<sup>109</sup> The mandate of the new ministry, inter alia, includes the implementation of the OFA.<sup>110</sup> The position of first Deputy Prime Minister in charge of OFA implementation and later, by the Minister of Political System and Inter-Community Relations, has traditionally been held by a member of the DUI. This shows, in some ways, a continuation in the DUI leading the commemoration of the OFA signing, albeit through the state institutions from 2009 onwards.

In the last decade, there have been three notable changes in the commemoration of the OFA signing. The first is a change in the format of the commemoration, the second is a change of the organising institution, and the third and perhaps most notable change has been in the approach of the predominantly ethnic Macedonian party in power and, relatedly, the framing of the OFA and its significance.

In terms of the format, in the last decade we have seen a move from formal receptions only towards the organisation of debates and conferences, sometimes on their own and sometimes in addition to formal receptions. In 2014, for instance, the Secretariat organised a debate titled “Second decade of the Ohrid Framework Agreement – need and obligation on the road to European integration?”,<sup>111</sup> followed by a public debate in 2015,<sup>112</sup> a conference titled “Ohrid Agreement – challenge and guarantee for integration” in 2016,<sup>113</sup> a thematic panel “The road to Brussels via Ohrid” in 2018<sup>114</sup> - with this process culminating in 2021 in a series of events under

105 <https://ofa-2001-2021.mk/komemoracii/komemoracija-na-ord>.

106 Ibid.

107 <https://ofa-2001-2021.mk/komemoracii/komemoracija-na-ord>.

108 <https://ofa-2001-2021.mk/komemoracii/komemoracija-na-ord>.

109 <https://sdk.mk/index.php/makedonija/od-tret-obid-izglasano-novoto-ministerstvo-za-politicki-sistem-i-odno-si-megu-zaednitsite/>.

110 <https://vlada.mk/node/18472?ln=en-gb>.

111 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/26523106.html>.

112 <https://mk.voanews.com/a/2916930.html>.

113 <https://sdk.mk/index.php/makedonija/za-ahmeti-ushte-ne-e-ispolnet-ohridskiot-ramkoven-dogovor/>.

114 <https://meta.mk/ahmeti-chlenstvoto-vo-eu-i-nato-ke-ni-donese-napredok-stabilnost-i-mir/>.



the heading of “After Ohrid” on the occasion of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing.<sup>115</sup> These events during the Gruevski and VMRO-DPMNE governments were frequently an opportunity to highlight both the approach of the government towards OFA and the need for its full implementation. For example, during the 2014 debate, Vlado Buckovski, one of the few attendees who were politically involved at the time the agreement was made official, noted that the absence of the VMRO-DPMNE represented the party’s view that the agreement was unpopular for those identifying with their nationalist ideology, and therefore they refused any involvement, stating that “[the absence of any VMRO-DPMNE members among those present] shows that for them the Ohrid Agreement is a necessary evil, and the DUI remains the only party that commemorates it and thus tries to collect political points. This was shown in the last elections. The Ohrid Agreement requires harmonisation and building a compromise on all issues (...) It requires a different mentality of politicians who will be able to implement it. Unfortunately, we don’t have those now.”<sup>116</sup>

The most noteworthy change in format happened in 2022, when the Ministry for Political System and Inter-Community Relations organised a so-called ‘Peace Festival’ to mark the 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary, with the hope of turning the festival into an annual celebration of equality, peace, and integration.<sup>117</sup> It is worth noting, however, that the festival might not have achieved its desired goal, with festival attendees audibly booing during the announcement in Macedonian, and the lack of attendance by government officials.<sup>118</sup>

The second change in commemoration has been in terms of the organising institution. As mentioned earlier, since 2009 it had been the Secretariat for the Implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement that organised the annual commemoration. This was the case until 2018, when it was the Secretariat for European Affairs organising the anniversary events. This change can and has been interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, some in the media have framed it in terms of inter-party rivalry between two DUI members – Hazbi Lika, the then Deputy Prime Minister in charge of OFA implementation, and Bujar Osmani, the then Deputy Prime Minister for European Affairs.<sup>119</sup> On the other hand, this change can also be seen to be in line with the increased framing of the OFA implementation as a cornerstone for the country’s EU integration. With the government structural reorganisation in 2019 and the introduction of the Ministry for Political System and Inter-Community Relations, this ministry has been at the helm in organising the annual commemorations in 2021 and 2022.

The third and most significant change in the last decade has been in regard to the framing of the OFA and the approach of the predominantly ethnic Macedonian party in power towards

115 <https://novatv.mk/dvaeset-godini-ramkoven-dogovor-makedonija-od-ohrid-preku-prespa-do-eu-i-nato/>.

116 <http://web.archive.org/web/20140816042737/https://plusinfo.mk/vest/147404/Gruevski-bega-od-Ohridski-ot-dogovor-Ahmeti-go-slavi>.

117 <https://novamakedonija.com.mk/makedonija/politika/se-odbelezha-21-godina-od-potpishuvanjeto-na-ohridski-ot-ramkoven-dogovor/>.

118 <https://www.mkd.mk/makedonija/politika/hk-ja-povika-vladata-da-gi-osudi-izlivite-na-omraza-na-koncertot-na-dui-za>.

119 <http://web.archive.org/web/20181124011035/https://plusinfo.mk/%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0-%D0%B3%D0%BE-%D0%B1%D0%BE%D1%98%D0%BA%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%B0-%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%B6%D1%83%D0%B2%D0%B0%D1%9A%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%BE-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D1%80/>



the signing anniversary. During the VMRO-DPMNE – DUI government coalition, neither the then Prime Minister Gruevski, nor for that matter the then President Ivanov, nor their representatives were ever in attendance at the annual commemoration, regardless of its format. The distancing was not without political logic, considering the nationalist card VMRO-DPMNE and Gruevski often played, especially during elections. During the 2014 elections, for instance, the VMRO-DPMNE asked the electorate to vote for them with the explicit goal of not having to be in coalition with the DUI or any predominantly ethnic Albanian parties, even if such coalitions were in the spirit of OFA. As Naser Ziberi from the PDP, who participated in the OFA negotiations, noted during the 2014 public debate on the anniversary: *“If the prime minister, the leader of a party, in an election campaign seeks 62 mandates in order not to be conditioned by the coalition partner, it shows that he does not want to debate, discuss and harmonise his views, but seeks a position from which he will decide by himself.”*<sup>120</sup> He further added that the OFA was the result of discrimination against Albanians and that its purpose was to eliminate discrimination, but given the delays in implementation at the time, it was not excluded that the factors that led to the agreement in the first place would be repeated.<sup>121</sup>

This positioning by Gruevski and the VMRO-DPMNE played directly into the narrative of the OFA being at best something to be endured, and at worst an agreement that destroys Macedonian national interests. As previously noted, the lack of any societal dealing with the past, and much less public discourse around the reasons for the armed conflict, the facts of the conflict, and the implications of OFA, have created a fertile ground for separate and contradictory, ethno-centric narratives to emerge. It is precisely in this context that there was a further societal polarisation during the commemorations in 2012<sup>122</sup> and 2013<sup>123</sup>, when a number of DUI-appointed ministers at the time, including the Minister of Defence, the Minister of Justice, the Deputy Prime Minister for OFA Implementation, laid wreaths at the memorial of the fallen NLA members, even if the occasions were framed around reconciliation and acknowledgement of the victims on both sides. To that end, the commemorations have also sometimes been used as opportunities to call to resolve the status of the former NLA guerrilla fighters and war invalids. One such example is the 2013 commemoration, when the then Deputy Prime Minister for OFA Implementation, Musa Xhaferi, stressed that *“[w]e have government programmes and a common position that social laws and conditions for granting privileges will be created, so that they can study and work. All of this should be without politicisation, because if it is not politicised, everything can be achieved, and that means we will find practical ways at the operational level for families, such as helping them with social assistance or social pensions, which are necessary for a dignified life.”*<sup>124</sup> To date, these promises have not materialised at the formal, state level, even if there are

120 <http://web.archive.org/web/20140816042737/https://plusinfo.mk/vest/147404/Gruevski-bega-od-Ohridski-ot-dogovor-Ahmeti-go-slavi>.

121 <http://web.archive.org/web/20140816042737/https://plusinfo.mk/vest/147404/Gruevski-bega-od-Ohridskiot-dogovor-Ahmeti-go-slavi>.

122 <https://web.archive.org/web/20120814154720/https://plusinfo.mk/vest/53192/ARM-se-pokloni-pred-spomenikot-na-UChK>.

123 <http://web.archive.org/web/20130816101827/https://plusinfo.mk/vest/102496/FOTO-Gzaferi-se-pokloni-na-spomenikot-vo-Slupchane>.

124 <http://web.archive.org/web/20130816165327/http://plusinfo.mk:80/vest/102469/Ramkovniot-dogovor-godina-va-kje-se-slavi-so-debata-i-so-lopata>.



informal, DUI-coordinated ways in which some of the former NLA fighters and their families have received assistance, provided they are close to the party in power.<sup>125</sup>

The change in framing and approach regarding the OFA signing commemoration happened after 2017 and the change of government, with the SDSM – DUI government coalition now being in power for the last six years. The approach by the SDSM towards the OFA and its importance has been significantly more positive and embracing than that of any previous government. This is perhaps unsurprising considering the centrality the ‘One Society for All’ concept assumed in the SDSM election campaign in 2016, and the efforts they have taken to develop an implementable strategy around it since coming to power. It is in this direction that on the occasion of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the OFA the then Prime Minister Zaev noted: *“We are marking a significant anniversary of the agreement that has ensured a peaceful future and the further democratic construction of North Macedonia, with the equal participation of all its ethnic communities. The agreement laid the foundations on the basis of which we as a newly formed government in 2017 are building our common united and equal society, by including and respecting equally all the ethnic identities and interests of all the citizens who live here.”*<sup>126</sup>

On the other hand, the framing of the OFA commemoration has also increasingly been directly linked to the country’s European integration aspirations. This is visible, as mentioned earlier, in the Secretariat for European Affairs organising the 2018 commemoration, with the panel discussion “The Road to Brussels through Ohrid,” which clearly positioned the OFA as a critical step towards EU and NATO integration. This framing is further visible in the close discursive link developed through the speeches of the state officials that connects the OFA with the Prespa Agreement, i.e. the bilateral agreement between Macedonia and Greece intended to resolve the so-called ‘name dispute’ and to remove Greece’s veto on the country’s Euro-Atlantic integration. With the commemoration taking place on the eve of the referendum on the Prespa Agreement, the then Prime Minister Zaev stressed: *“With the Ohrid Agreement, the basis for coexistence was established (...) And just as with the Ohrid Agreement, a new historical chapter is before us, Macedonia integrated into the EU. Just as 17 years ago, the courage of the citizens and the politicians brought the country out of the crisis, now we are also given the chance to finally make a decision to secure the future of our country. I know that on September 30<sup>th</sup> we will step forward together with our heads held high.”*<sup>127</sup> The discursive framing was subsequently somewhat expanded on occasion to include the Treaty of Friendship, Good-Neighbourliness, and Cooperation between Macedonia and Bulgaria as another milestone, with the leader of the DUI, Ali Ahmeti, remarking on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the OFA on the importance of *“the full implementation and application of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, the Prespa Agreement and the Good-Neighbourliness Agreement with Bulgaria, point by point,”* adding that *“[w]e have Europe close to our doorstep, but we have to perform the tasks ourselves.”*<sup>128</sup>

Finally, another difference in the recent discursive framing of the OFA during commemorations is the forward-looking approach by most of the state officials, many of whom have attended

125 <https://paxvoorvrede.nl/media/download/PAX%20rapport%20oorlogsslachtoffers%20Balkanoorlogen%2018%20januari%2023.pdf>.

126 Transcripts 2021.

127 Transcripts 2018.

128 Transcripts 2021.





and spoken at the commemoration events since 2018. This particular change in focus and more forward-looking approach might be the result of the OFA finally being considered fully implemented in 2019.<sup>129</sup> This forward-looking tendency is evident in President Pendarovski's speech at the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary event, noting that, *"It is imperative that the liberal and modern vision for our future takes precedence over the narrow, nationalist and parochial policies that have repeatedly threatened the foundations of the state. I am convinced that within such a vision for the future, the thinking behind the Ohrid Framework Agreement is an advantage, not an obstacle for our development and prosperity. Namely, this is the main challenge for us, the current generation of politicians, to explain that the state cannot lose if some of our fellow citizens obtain rights, when those rights have not been obtained at the expense of other fellow citizens or ethnic communities losing their rights. To use the title of the conference, we are far enough from Ohrid to know its practical value, but also the truth – where we were 20 years ago, and where we are today."*<sup>130</sup> The same thinking has been reiterated by the President of the Parliament, Talat Xhaferi: *"As the slogan of this event says, 'After Ohrid' - the process continues, the challenges are not exhausted, and our journey as a country will come to an end when we fulfil our second strategic determination and goal, i.e., after full membership in NATO, to start negotiations with the EU (...) And, again, nothing ends here! The care for and provision of rights and freedoms, of course, and the obligations of every citizen in the country remain now and forever, the first, second and last priority of all of us!"*<sup>131</sup>

### 6.3. Conclusion

With the above in mind, we can conclude that the last decade has seen a noteworthy change in the politics of remembrance when it comes to the way the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement is commemorated. The change has been threefold. First, in terms of the format of the commemoration, we have witnessed a shift from a smaller, DUI-led commemoration in the early 2000s to a state-acknowledged and sometimes state-organised commemoration in the late 2000s, on to a bigger commemoration in the early 2010s, led by the state institutions generally, but not attended by the top state officials, and then to an even bigger, state-led commemoration attended by top state officials, at the very end of the 2010s and the beginning of the 2020s.

Second and related, we have witnessed a change in the organising institution, from the commemoration efforts in the early 2010s being led by the Secretariat for the Implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, then by the Secretariat for European Affairs in 2018, and then finally by the newly created Ministry for Political System and Inter-Community Relations from 2021 onward. It is worth mentioning that all three institutions have been led by DUI-appointed ministers. The change in 2018 can be interpreted through the framing of OFA's implementation as a critical part of the country's EU integration, while the latter change can be seen through the prism of the OFA being framed as simply the first step in advancing a multi-ethnic political system and stronger inter-community relations.

129 <https://sitel.com.mk/vladata-ja-odrzha-149-redovna-sednica>

130 Transcripts 2021.

131 Transcripts 2021.



This is directly connected to the third and most significant change, which concerns the overall approach to the OFA and its importance by the predominantly ethnic Macedonian party in power, which came with the change of government in 2017, with the VMRO-DPMNE being replaced by the SDSM. Namely, the VMRO-DPMNE leaders largely distanced themselves from the OFA commemoration during their time in power and used nationalist rhetoric to gain the support of ethnic Macedonians. The SDSM leaders, on the other hand, have shown appreciation for the OFA while in power, celebrating it not only as an agreement that ended the armed conflict, but also as the first of the two or three agreements (along with the Prespa Agreement with Greece and the Agreement with Bulgaria) whose implementation they have argued is directly linked to future EU membership as the country's highest strategic priority. In this regard, and possibly as a result of the OFA being considered fully implemented as of 2019, we have also recently witnessed a change in the commemoration being more optimistic and future-oriented.

This makes the OFA commemoration the only commemorative event around which we have witnessed a significant change in the politics of remembrance in the last decade. Specifically, the state institutions and the country's top officials, including those in the political parties currently in power which are considered to be predominantly ethnically Macedonian, have moved away from active avoidance and ethnicisation of the commemoration, and appear to have embraced the OFA not only as something worth acknowledging, but also as something that is now framed to have paved the way for the country's future and Euro-Atlantic integration.

## 7. General Conclusion

The overarching politics of remembrance in the country in the last decade have exhibited two main features. The first has been an active effort at the state level to either ignore or minimise most of the commemorations related to the 2001 armed conflict. This, I argue, is the result of the country never having dealt with the past surrounding the armed conflict, including what exactly led to it, what happened during it, and what its outcome means for the country. In such a context, the political parties in power, smaller coalition parties notwithstanding, have taken one of two approaches. Namely, the senior government coalition partners – usually the VMRO-DPMNE or the SDSM – until very recently, have traditionally ignored or minimised everything related to 2001, treating it as a closed chapter without any need to be addressed again, and what is more, without the facts of 2001 having to be determined. The junior government coalition partner meanwhile – that is, the DUI for nearly the entirety of the period since the armed conflict – which in many ways draws legitimacy from the armed conflict and the NLA, has mainly focused on commemorating events that relate to the NLA and the signing of the OFA, framed as a victory in the struggle led by the NLA. At the same time, the DUI has ignored or barely acknowledged the commemoration of the victims from the state security forces, because such an acknowledgement would also entail reopening the chapter regarding the responsibility for those deaths, which was made impossible by the so-called ‘authentic interpretation’ of the Amnesty Law in July 2011. Both approaches essentially reflect what each party in power considers most politically beneficial for themselves.

The most notable exception to this aspect of the politics of remembrance in the country has been the commemoration of the signing of the OFA. This is the sole event for which we have witnessed big changes in the politics of remembrance surrounding its commemoration in the past decade. These include changes in the format – from small, DUI-organised commemorations to large events led by state institutions and attended by top officials –, and changes in the organising institutions – from the Secretariat for the Implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, to the Secretariat for European Affairs in 2018, and finally to the newly created Ministry for Political System and Inter-Community Relations, all of which have been led by DUI-appointed ministers. And, lastly but perhaps most importantly, there have been the changes in the overall approach to the OFA and its importance by the predominantly ethnic Macedonian party in power, which came with the change of government in 2017 when the VMRO-DPMNE was replaced by the SDSM. This has been characterised by a development away from a distancing from the commemoration, towards the appreciation and framing of the OFA as a key step in the country’s Euro-Atlantic integrations. In fact, the latter aspect is where we have seen, if not a convergence, at least a very close approximation of the discourses used by the DUI and by the SDSM in the past several years, presenting the OFA as a stepping stone to subsequent agreements ‘towards peace’, albeit with the country’s neighbours (such as the Prespa Agreement with Greece and the Agreement with Bulgaria), and as being directly linked to the country’s top strategy priority, EU membership. In this sense, the commemoration of the OFA signing is also the only recent event which is more optimistic and oriented towards the future. But here, too, the approach by the parties in power reflects what they view to be their best interests: for the DUI, it is to link the achievements of the NLA in the form of the OFA to the country’s future, and for the SDSM, to portray the country as stable and peaceful under its leadership, with the OFA and its implementation as a prime example.

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The second feature that has characterised the politics of remembrance in Macedonia and then North Macedonia in the last decade is the ethnicisation and localisation of the few other 2001 armed conflict-related events that are being commemorated. Ethnicisation and the related ethnic spatialisation here refer to the tendency to separate and isolate, including spatially, different ethnicities, and relatedly, to approach ethnicity as a category with spatial characteristics. In the context of North Macedonia, while there is no formal or strict separation of the different ethnicities, there is a general understanding over which ethnic community is predominant in which town, village, or space in general. The census data in 2022 in many ways confirmed some of these common assumptions. In the context of the commemorations what this means is that: (1) the events are being marked in a particular space where the ethnic community of (most of) the victims is likely predominant, even if they have been killed elsewhere, (2) the commemorations are in a particular language and contain particular symbols, and (3) they are primarily attended or announced and spoken about by politicians from the ethnic community in question, which in turn is related to the other aspect of the politics of remembrance, discussed above. Localisation, on the other hand, refers to the spatial and sometimes political dislocation of the commemoration to the hometowns or villages of the victims. This goes hand-in-hand with those local municipalities which are actively involved, working closely with the victims' families and/or veterans' associations in organising the commemorations and keeping the event in the public discourse, even if with a limited reach and for a limited time.

This aspect is present in the politics of remembrance surrounding all the other three events, and has not changed in the past decade. For instance, at the unofficial start of conflict commemoration, we witness the main commemoration taking place in Kriva Palanka, the hometown of the victim (or rather, as he is referred to, the 'defender'), a predominantly ethnic Macedonian town, in the organisation of the local municipality and the victim's family, while the commemoration in Tearce, a predominantly ethnic Albanian village, is small in scope, with only the state security forces veterans' organisations' representatives attending and without any acknowledgement by any of the state officials. This is, in principle, the same way all of the victims from among the state security forces are commemorated – in their hometowns, either solely by their families, or with the involvement of the local municipality and/or a state security forces veterans' association. To that end, we witness the same trend, although on a slightly different scale, in the commemoration of the Karpalak ambush. In this case too, the commemoration at Karpalak, which is in a predominantly ethnically Albanian area, and perhaps as a result, small in scale, often without any speeches or attendance by the highest state officials, is organised by the survivors of the ambush and state security forces veterans' associations. Here too, the main commemoration is in the hometown of the victims, in this case Prilep, also a predominantly ethnic Macedonian town (even though not all the victims of the ambush were ethnic Macedonians). It is organised by the local municipality and sometimes attended by ministers from the SDSM or VMRO, depending on who is in power – once it was also attended by the country's President. And finally, we also see this same aspect, with a slight difference, in the commemoration of NLA-related events, among which the start of the clashes in the Karadak – Lipkovo region and the declaration of a 'liberated territory' is an example. The commemoration takes place in the village where the clashes started, which is a predominantly ethnic Albanian village, and it often involves the display of the Albanian flag and the performance of folklore songs and dances, honouring the victims. In this case, the victims (or rather, as they are referred to, the 'martyrs') are commemorated by the local municipality and the NLA veterans' association, with the state remaining uninvolved, but with DUI representatives, including ministers and the leader of the

party, frequently attending. As we have seen in the last decade, the attendance and participation of the DUI leadership largely depends on the political climate in the country, which could be in relation to the stability of the existing government coalition or to the formation of a new one; or just as importantly, it could be in relation to how the DUI leadership and their work is perceived by the local ethnic Albanian population and the NLA veterans in the region. In the cases of both the security state forces veterans and the NLA veterans, their needs and sacrifices appear to be forgotten by those in power, except on that one day a year.

Overall, both these aspects of the politics of remembrance connect to the lack of political will in the country's leadership to discuss any issues that are related to the 2001 armed conflict, and thus help the society to deal with its past, for fear of destabilising their own position and/or that of the ruling government. Instead, especially with the OFA considered fully implemented in 2019, the political parties in power approach the 2001 armed conflict as a closed chapter in the country's history – although as one that has paved the way for its future. In such a context, it can be argued that unless there is a political upset at the next parliamentary elections, it is unlikely that we will see any more significant changes in the politics of remembrance in the country in the foreseeable future.



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