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WORKSHOP: War and Identity in the Balkans and the Middle East
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Title: From a Stormy Past to a Troubled Future: Regional Reconciliation and Commemorative Practices of Croatia's Homeland War¹

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The modern-day Republic of Croatia gained independence at the end of the twentieth century after socialist Yugoslavia's crises escalated into a series of conflicts that resulted in the disintegration of the multinational state. During the last 100 years, Croatia experienced three major wars, numerous territorial changes, and experiments with political systems from parliamentary democracy and monarchism to fascist dictatorship and state socialism. War and violence therefore contributed greatly to Croatian identity and politics of remembrance, even though that century was also marked by ethnic cooperation and utopian visions of a more just, peaceful society that rejects nationalist exclusivity. Nevertheless, Croatian elites draw their political legitimacy by calling upon the historical continuity of the Croatian struggle, often involving armed conflict and countless victims, to achieve an independent state.² According to Franjo Tuđman—Partisan officer, historian, nationalist dissident, and first president of the Republic of Croatia—Croatia's War of Independence (*Domovinski rat* – Homeland War, 1991–1995) enabled the Croatian people to realize their “thousand year-old dream” of an independent state. For many in Croatia, this war, and its accompanying myths, continues to be the crucial moment in the nation- and state-building process, from the Constitution to political discourse, commemorative practices, and construction of the official narrative of the recent past.³

¹ The research for this article was part of the project “Framing the Nation and Collective Identity in Croatia: Cultural Memory of 20th Century Traumas,” funded by the Croatian Science Foundation (HRZZ - Hrvatska zaklada za znanost).

² For a detailed analysis of symbolic nation-building in Croatia, see Vjeran Pavlaković, “Fulfilling the Thousand-Year-Old Dream: Strategies of Symbolic Nation-building in Croatia”, in Pål Kolstø, ed., *Strategies of Symbolic Nation-building in South Eastern Europe* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).

³ For a critical view of the role of the Homeland War in contemporary society, see Dejan Jović, *Rat i mit: Politika identiteta u suvremenoj Hrvatskoj* (Zagreb: Faktura, 2017).



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The two aspects of Homeland War remembrance are victimization, symbolized by the Vukovar commemoration every 18 November (the day the town fell to rebel Serbs and the Yugoslav People's Army in 1991 after a three-month siege), and victory, embodied in the celebratory anniversary of Operation Storm (*Oluja*) every 5 August. Although there are many other commemorations related to other events before or during the Homeland War (including the relatively marginalized commemoration of the peaceful reintegration of the Eastern Slavonian region), the focus of this article are the commemorative practices surrounding the commemoration of Operation Storm (see below) and their impact on identity politics. For the Croatian state, this anniversary represents the liberation of Croatian territory and the ultimate victory of the Croatian Army. For Croatian Serbs, however, and more recently the Serbian state, Operation Storm represents the massive expulsion of the Serb population from Croatia and the defeat of Serb nationalist aspirations of a Greater Serbia. Despite years of attempting to normalize relations and resolve the remaining issues related to the conflict of the 1990s (missing persons, border disputes, minority rights, the return of cultural heritage, war crimes prosecutions), the annual commemorations of Operation Storm invariably heighten tensions and provoke diplomatic sparring between Croatia and Serbia. Rather than focusing on a dignified remembrance of victims on both sides or investing in regional cooperation, memory entrepreneurs in both Croatia and Serbia have politicized commemorations of Operation Storm in order to perpetuate ethnic divisions and hinder constructive bilateral relations.

An easily analyzed manifestation of collective remembrance is the war commemoration. Commemorations, along with other political rituals such as rallies, parades, anniversaries, and other mass gatherings, are symbolic public activities that elites use to construct a grand narrative of a nation-state's history. "Politics is expressed through symbolism," asserts anthropologist David I. Kertzer, suggesting that even people in modern societies are influenced more by symbolic forms than rational calculations.⁴ In *Ritual, Politics, and Power*, he cites the prevalence of political rituals, replete with emotional, historical, and national symbols, in every political system regardless of whether it is a democracy with free market capitalism or an authoritarian regime with a state-run economy. Kertzer adds that "ritual is an integral part of politics in modern industrial societies; it is hard to imagine how any political system could do without it."⁵ The commemorations of Operation Storm provide an annual litmus test of Croat-Serb relations, and the political speeches given at the central manifestation in Knin reflect the political leadership's view of those relations. As part of the project FRAMNAT, the research team attended all of the Operation Storm commemorations from 2014-2017 and recorded the commemorative speeches, observed participants, photographed symbols and monuments related to the commemoration, and collected media reporting before, during, and after the central manifestation on 5 August.⁶ Additional research has been conducted on Operation Storm commemorations for the past ten years, although not as systematically as has been done for the past four years. Whereas there seemed to be signs of regional reconciliation in the years leading up to Croatia's entry into the European Union (1 July 2013), the last few years have seen an increase in nationalist rhetoric in not only Croatia but also in neighboring

⁴ David I. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶ For video footage, transcripts of speeches, photographs, and selected media coverage, see the project website at www.framnat.eu.



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Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, which has been reflected in the commemorative practices of Operation Storm.

The Homeland War, Operation Storm, and Victory Day Commemorations

After Josip Broz Tito's death in 1980, Yugoslavia was destabilized by economic crises and the rise of nationalist politicians who challenged the stagnant communist establishment.⁷ Although the situation between Serbs and Croats had become tense in Croatia during the so-called "Log Revolution" (*balvan revolucija*) in August 1990, full-scale violence erupted in the spring of 1991, escalated during the summer after Croatia declared independence on 25 June, and culminated in November with the siege and eventual fall of the town of Vukovar in Eastern Slavonia.

Rebel Croatian Serbs, backed by paramilitaries from Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina and openly supported by the Serb-dominated Yugoslav People's Army, created the Republika Srpska Krajina (RSK – *Republika Srpska Krajina*) carved from about 30% of Croatia's internationally recognized territory by late 1991. In addition to attacks against Croatian police and fledging military forces, Serb units expelled tens of thousands of non-Serbs from the territories they controlled and committed numerous atrocities against the civilian population. Although not undertaken in such large numbers, Croatian armed forces and police were involved in disappearances and revenge killings of Serb civilians. The conflict lasted another four years and resulted in approximately 20,000 deaths, hundreds of thousands of displaced persons, and 1,945 persons still listed as missing in early 2018.⁸

Throughout 1994 and early 1995, with almost a third of the country still under the control of rebel Serbs, Croatian armed forces carried out several smaller operations in Croatia and Western Herzegovina. In May 1995, Croatian troops quickly retook parts of Western Slavonia during Operation Flash (*Bljesak*), revealing the low morale of their opponents and the unwillingness of Slobodan Milošević to send help from Serbia. After the Krajina Serbs rejected the so-called Z-4 plan offered by Tuđman and negotiated by the international community, the Croatian Army launched Operation Storm (*Oluja*) on 4 August 1995. Militarily the offensive was a complete success, breaking rebel Serb resistance in only a few days. Knin, the capital of the RSK and symbolically the heart of the Serb rebellion, fell on 5 August (the day that is subsequently commemorated), and by 7 August the Croatian government declared that the fighting was over. Croatia's victories were sullied by the subsequent exodus of the Krajina Serbs (estimated at 150,000 – 200,000 people), widespread looting, the destruction of housing stock and other buildings, and the murder of several hundred civilians in the four months after hostilities ended.⁹ The ICTY indicted Generals Ante Gotovina, Mladen Markač, and Ivan

⁷ Dejan Jović, *Yugoslavia: A State that Withered Away* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 2009); Zdenko Radelić, *Hrvatska u Jugoslaviji 1945. - 1991.: od zajedništva do razlaza* (Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 2008).

⁸ Davor Marijan, *Domovinski rat* (Zagreb: Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2016). See also the trial judgments of cases related to Croatia at the International Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), such as Ante Gotovina, Milan Martić, Milan Babić, and others available at www.icty.org for information on the conflict and war crimes that were committed.

⁹ For estimates of civilian deaths and number of people who left the Krajina, see Gotovina et al. (IT-06-90), <http://www.icty.org/case/gotovina/4>.



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Čermak for war crimes committed during and after the operation, which resulted in numerous delays in EU accession due to Gotovina's four years on the lam. Opposition to cooperation with the ICTY and domestic trials served to rally rightists and many veteran groups, but in 2012 the Appeals Chamber acquitted all of them and war crimes issues lost their mobilizing function.¹⁰ Operation Storm thus became the keystone of the heroic narrative of Croatia's War of Independence as well as the country's greatest obstacle to Euro-Atlantic integration.

The Croatian government began commemorating Operation Storm already on the first anniversary, although under Tuđman most of the official celebrations took place in Zagreb. Since 2000 the central celebrations commemorative speeches have taken place in Knin, although it was only after Ivo Sanader became prime minister that the entire political leadership (president, prime minister, speaker of the parliament) attended the commemoration more or less every year.¹¹ Known colloquially as Victory Day, the official name of the commemoration was expanded to Victory and Homeland Thanksgiving Day, Day of Croatian Defenders. The commemoration begins with the raising of the Croatian flag on the fortress above the town (reenacting the hanging of a giant flag by Croatian soldiers after Knin fell), followed by flyovers of the Croatian Air Force and civilian aircraft, and then a procession of soldiers and veterans through the streets of Knin. Politicians have given commemorative speeches in the fortress, in the stadium in front of the military formations, or occasionally, since 2012, on the main square in front of the Oluja Victory '95 monument.

Croatia's relationship with the ICTY frequently influenced the speeches, reactions from the crowd, and images spotted on the streets of Knin, which hung over the commemoration for a decade due to the indictment of the key generals involved in the operation. As opposed to the commemoration in Vukovar during which that what is being remembered are victims of the war and victimization of the town for Croatia's freedom and independence, the speeches held in Knin mostly focus on the bravery of Croatian defenders and on their heroic deeds in the fight for independence. The memory of victims plays far less of a role than in Vukovar, and the main victims mentioned are the fallen defenders who gave their lives for Croatia. Their victim is, for that reason, *celebrated*, and not *commemorated*.¹²

After the speeches, the participants walk in a procession to the church for Mass. From 2005 until 2014, nationalist singer Marko Perković Thompson held concerts in his hometown of Čavoglave on 5 August, drawing as many as ten times as many participants as the official commemoration as a form of protest against Croatian cooperation with The Hague. In 2015 and 2016, Thompson moved his concert to Knin, resulting in numerous incidents of nationalist excesses. Since 2015, the leaders of Serbia and Republika Srpska, Aleksandar Vučić and

¹⁰ Vjeran Pavlaković, "Better the Grave Than a Slave: Croatia's Relations with the ICTY, 1995–2005," in Sabrina P. Ramet, Konrad Clewing and Reneo Lukić, eds., *Croatia since Independence: Politics, Society, Foreign Policy* (Munich: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2008); and Vjeran Pavlaković, "Croatia, the ICTY, and General Gotovina as a Political Symbol," in *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 62, no. 10.

¹¹ Vjeran Pavlaković, "From Conflict to Commemoration: Serb-Croat Relations and the Anniversaries of Operation Storm," in Darko Gavrilović, ed., *Serbo-Croat Relations: Political Cooperation and National Minorities* (Novi Sad: CHDR, 2009).

¹² Tamara Banjeglav, "Filling voids with memories: Commemorative rituals and memorial landscape in post-war Vukovar," in Davor Pauković and Vjeran Pavlaković, eds., *Framing the Nation and Collective Identities: Political Rituals and Cultural Memory of the Twentieth Century Traumas in Croatia* (London: Routledge, forthcoming).



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Milorad Dodik respectively, have organized an official parallel commemoration in Serbia dedicated to the Serb victims of the operation after years of unofficial commemorations by Croatian Serb refugees. The Serbian National Council in Croatia, along with NGOs, also organizes annual commemorative events in various towns (Varivode, Gošić, Glina, Dvor) in honor of not only Serb victims, but all victims of the war.

Commemorative Speeches of Croatian Presidents in Knin

As noted above, for many years the investigations and trials conducted by the ICTY influenced the commemorative speeches on Victory Day. Stjepan Mesić, who served two terms as Tuđman's successor in the presidential office, angered Croatian nationalists because of his willingness to cooperate with the ICTY and publicly speak about crimes committed by the Croatian Army during, and especially in months after, Operation Storm. Although fears of anti-ICTY demonstrations destabilizing the government diminished once a right-wing administration came to power under prime ministers Ivo Sanader and Jadranka Kosor (2003-2011), the Victory Day commemoration was always marked with protests and symbols of defiance at the political elite's willingness to trade suspected Croatian war criminals for EU membership. While President Mesić was always more critical in dealing with the darker aspects of the Homeland War, the official narrative pushed by members of the ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ – *Hrvatska demokratska zajednica*) was that any crimes were committed by individuals, and not a result of systematic efforts to expel the Croatian Serb population by the Tuđman administration. The ICTY did acquit all Croatian officers accused of war crimes during Operation Storm, but the judges also noted that there were many incidents of war crimes that still needed to be investigated by domestic courts.

Ivo Josipović, the candidate of the Croatian Social Democratic Party (SDP – *Socijaldemokratska partija Hrvatske*), succeeded Mesić and continued to push for an open coming to terms with the legacy of the Homeland War. He pushed a commemorative culture that tried to foster both domestic and regional reconciliation. He presided over the unveiling of the first official monument to Croatian Serb victims in the village of Varivode, and sought to depoliticize the Bleiburg commemoration¹³ by visiting sites of communist crimes with representatives of antifascist organizations and Croatian Serb associations. Josipović nurtured good relations with Serbian president Boris Tadić, who visited Vukovar in 2010 and apologized for Serbian crimes against Croatia. Josipović also worked with political and religious leaders in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where he organized joint visits to sites of memory related to the 1990s war. The election of a left-wing coalition led by the SDP in 2011 meant that both the president and prime minister, Zoran Milanović, were of the same ideological orientation, with the potential to continue with a pro-EU, anti-nationalist, reconciliatory regional policy.

The first results of this new political configuration regarding the Homeland War were seen during the Victory Day commemoration in 2012, which was attended by Veljko Džakula, a Croatian Serb representative. This was the first time someone from the Serb minority attended the Victory Day celebrations, although Džakula told reporters that Croatia still had a long way

¹³ Bleiburg, a town in Austria near the Slovenian border, symbolizes communist post-war crimes against Croatian collaborators and civilians, but has often been used to rehabilitate the Ustaša movement and silence Croatia's antifascist legacy. Martina Grahek Ravančić, *Bleiburg i križni put 1945*. (Zagreb: Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2009).



to go in addressing the crimes committed against Serbs.¹⁴ In his speech, Josipović emphasized that after winning in war Croatia needed to win in peacetime, and “winning in peacetime means extending a hand to our fellow citizens of Serb nationality, recognize their victims, and show them piety.”¹⁵ This elicited some jeers and whistles from the crowd, although there were no serious incidents. This was also perhaps due to the fact that Thompson attracted over 60,000 people to Čavoglave, which had established itself as the center of nationalist euphoria and right-wing celebration on Victory Day.

In 2013, even though the Tribunal acquitted General Ante Gotovina and his fellow defendants the previous November of all alleged crimes in Operation Storm, the Victory Day commemoration began to serve as a serious challenge to Josipović and Milanović’s authority from the right-wing opposition. Josipović once again issued a reconciliatory speech, stating:

we need to extend our hand even to those who were on the other side, we need to recognize that national minorities also loved and continue to love Croatia, as well as recognize that Croatia is a country that is open for all of its citizens and it has to remain like that in order to stay democratic and European.¹⁶

People in the crowd whistled and jeered slightly when Josipović mentioned reconciliation, but yelled and insulted Milanović during his speech, which was considerably more patriotic in tone. Knin, a HDZ stronghold, would serve as a trial run for future commemorative interventions by the right-wing opposition. While the ICTY could no longer mobilize radical nationalists, resistance to the use of Cyrillic in Vukovar turned into a new right-wing, anti-Serb cause, culminating in the disruption of the Procession of Remembrance during the annual commemoration on 18 November 2013.¹⁷ The HDZ’s new president, Tomislav Karamarko, shifted the party to the right and focused on symbolic politics, such as Homeland War patriotism, calls for lustration of former communists, investigation into communist crimes, and fomenting anti-Serb hysteria. This strategy played out during commemorations of the Homeland War and World War 2, as the rhetoric of both the left and right radicalized and was fed by media coverage about Ustašas and Partisans.¹⁸

The Victory Day commemoration on 5 August 2014 would be the last time Josipović and Milanović would attend this event together. Both politicians were met with an angry crowd that drowned out the speeches almost completely. Comparing these speeches with others in the FRAMNAT database shows that they are among the shortest at any commemoration analyzed over the past four years.¹⁹ It did not even matter that Milanović’s speech was full of praise for Tuđman and classic state-building narratives about Croatia’s centuries of struggle against foreign rule; the crowd was clearly there to embarrass the political leaders regardless of the

¹⁴ *Novi list*, 6 August 2012, 2-3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁶ *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 6 August 2013, 4.

¹⁷ Veteran groups tacitly supported by the HDZ blocked the political leadership and diplomatic corps from participating in the 5.5km procession from the Vukovar Hospital to the Memorial Cemetery, forcing the prime minister, president, and other politicians to lay wreaths at the Ovčara memorial instead.

¹⁸ For a new volume about how the increase in nationalist discourse and revisionism affects memory politics around issues such as World War 2, the Holocaust, and the Jasenovac Concentration Camp, see Andriana Benčić, Stipe Odak, and Danijela Lucić, eds., *Jasenovac: manipulacije, kontroverze i povijesni revizionizam* (Jasenovac: Spomen područje Jasenovac, 2018).

¹⁹ See www.framnat.eu/knin-framnat/.



lack of respect for those who gave their lives during Operation Storm. Josipović repeated his call for victory in peace, but noticeably missing were references to Serb victims (he mentioned the “memory of all military and civilian victims of the war”) and reconciliation.²⁰ For the first time a veteran was invited to speak alongside the politicians, but this did little to ameliorate the vitriol hurled at the state leadership. Newspapers reported how the president and prime minister had faced a “barrage of insults” and had been drowned out by jeering.²¹ Meanwhile Čavoglave had transformed into a massive right-wing happening, highlighted not only by Thompson’s usual nationalist repertoire in front of tens of thousands of fans decked out in fashion flirting with fascist symbols, but featuring convicted war criminal Dario Kordić as the guest of honor.

Several months after the debacle in Knin, veterans began what would be a 555-day protest in front of the Ministry of Veteran Affairs. They nominally demanded the resignation of Minister Predrag Fred Matić and his deputy, but in fact it was a right-wing mobilization against the government that continued where the Cyrillic protests left off. Josipović’s efforts to appeal to the right-wing voter base fell on deaf ears, since they considered him a pro-Yugoslav communist, and it alienated the left, including antifascists and Serbs, who saw him unwilling to stand up to the rising xenophobic discourse of the HDZ and its satellite parties. Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, the HDZ’s candidate, won the closely fought election in early 2015. She had campaigned on a conservative, anti-communist platform with a lot of support from veterans’ organizations, whom she visited several times in the protest tent in front of the ministry.

In the months leading up to the 2015 Victory Day, the twentieth anniversary of Operation Storm, the media was full of speculation about the commemoration due to the personal animosity between Milanović and the new president, as well as Milanović’s understanding that his appearance in Knin would not only be an embarrassment but potentially dangerous. The government’s efforts to move the entire commemoration from Knin to Zagreb was stymied, and the compromise solution was a military parade in Zagreb on 4 August followed by the traditional commemoration in Knin the following day.

The new president brought several changes to the Victory Day commemoration and speeches. Firstly, her speeches did not address the citizens of Croatia as had been the practice of her predecessors, but rather began with “dear Croatian women and men in the Homeland and in the world” (*drage Hrvatice i Hrvati u Domovini i svijetu*).²² She often used numerous references to her being a mother and understanding the trauma of the victims of war. She continued the practice of giving a representative of the veteran organizations the opportunity to speak in 2015 and 2016, but after a vulgar and very critical speech by Ivica Glavota in 2016, this was discontinued. In fact, the government decided to move the entire commemoration away from Knin’s main square in front of the Victory Monument, and hold it on top of the Knin fortress, comfortably separated from the masses which had proven willing to show their displeasure at the political elite. Finally, in 2015 and 2016, Thompson was asked to perform in Knin instead of Čavoglave, resulting in numerous nationalist excesses and display of Ustaša symbols, salutes, songs, and souvenirs. Josipović’s efforts at reconciliation and a commemorative culture that would be inclusive, tolerant, and open to dialogue was swept aside

²⁰ Ivo Josipović, 5 August 2014, www.framnat.eu/knin-framnat/.

²¹ *Novi list*, 6 August 2014, 1; *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 6 August 2014, 1.

²² See speeches by President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović on 5 August 2015, 5 August 2016, and 5 August 2017 at www.framnat.eu/knin-framnat/.



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in a victorious nationalist euphoria that certainly did little to convince the remaining Croatian Serbs that they were welcome, let alone equal, in Croatia.

In Serbia, the scenes of Croats dressed in black shirts and chanting the Ustaša salute “Ready for the Homeland” (*Za dom spremni*) only fed into Vučić’s own nationalist agenda. While services for victims of Operation Storm had always been unofficially organized, in 2015 Vučić and Milorad Dodik attended a state ceremony commemorating the exodus and tragedy of Croatian Serbs. Whereas the Victory Day celebrations in Knin can be criticized for not giving enough recognition to Serb victims, since Mesić’s presidency there has always been acknowledgment in the commemorative speeches that crimes had been committed by Croatian forces. The new commemoration in Serbia, however, portrays Serbs only as victims without taking into account the war began in 1991 with many Croatian civilian victims, which shows the nationalist shift away from the reconciliatory efforts when Josipović and Tadić held office. The Serbian state’s discourse in the days prior to the anniversary of Operation Storm, including calls for Croatia to end celebrating Victory Day, only provoked sharper responses in the president’s speeches in Knin.

President Grabar-Kitarović did not completely abandon all of Josipović’s efforts at recognizing the victims of the “other side”, and it proves that many times it is less important what is being said but rather who is saying it, since Grabar-Kitarović’s mention of Serb victims was never met with whistling or jeering as was the case with the SDP government. Yet her references to Serb victims deserve closer analysis, since her otherwise positive statements are followed immediately with a “but” clause. For example, in 2015 she stated that “We in Croatia do not wish to return to the past, we are extending our hand of friendship, co-existence, and tolerance. We do not want to blame the Serbian people as such for aggression against our country.” This was then conditioned with the phrase “But we will never allow aggressors and victims to be equal,” which brings into question who can be considered a legitimate victim when nationalist discourse portrays all Serbs in the RSK as complicit in aggression, and all members of the RSK’s military as war criminals.²³ She continued by saying “Every victim needs to be remembered, every victim has a first and last name, and every crime has a perpetrator.” This seemed to follow in the footsteps of Josipović and his support of erecting monuments to Serb civilian victims. However, this was again immediately conditioned by her next sentence: “But, we must never forget that Croatia was attacked from within and from without, and it is only thanks to the unity and national reconciliation of the Croatian national being that led to this honorable victory in the Homeland War.”²⁴

Her comments followed a similar pattern in 2016, when the SDP government had been replaced by an unstable coalition of the HDZ and a new party, MOST. After extensively criticizing Serbia for failing to accept responsibility for the war and attacking Milanović in the context of communist crimes, Grabar-Kitarović turned to the issue of victims: “I want to use this opportunity to clearly say that I respect every victim, because every human life is equally valuable, and the sorrow of every family for their loved ones is the same. However, it must be known that Operation Storm was, and historically will remain, a politically justified, ethically clean, and militarily brilliantly executed liberation, an honorable victory for a just goal.”²⁵ In

²³ President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović on 5 August 2015, www.framnat.eu/knin-framnat/.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović on 5 August 2016, www.framnat.eu/knin-framnat/.



both cases she also directly referred to the importance for Serbia to accept the ICTY judgments that acquitted Croatian generals in Operation Storm, drawing upon the international legitimacy of the Tribunal to support her arguments. Interestingly, in 2017, when the ICTY found six Bosnian Croats guilty of a joint criminal enterprise during the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, she stated in a press conference that “no one else, not even the Hague Tribunal, will write our history.”²⁶

Conclusion

The analysis of the presidential speeches at the Victory Day commemorations shows how politicized they are for both domestic and international relations. The change from a center-left to a center-right president indicates shifts in rhetorical strategies, and reveals how quickly long-term efforts at post-conflict reconciliation can be derailed by new political constellations. Josipović, who had high approval ratings practically his entire term, was willing to risk reaching out to Croatia’s rivals and former enemies, even when it would potentially lose him votes. The radical right in Croatia also proved it was ready to use massive street protests, disrupt solemn commemorations, and threaten opponents with the label of national traitor if the official narrative of Croatia as the exclusive victim of Serbian aggression was challenged. President Grabar-Kitarović, who had considerable international diplomatic experience prior to her election, had the political capital to make bold steps in putting the war behind and close the chapter on outstanding issues, but instead returned to a more nationalist rhetoric that appealed to her base, including influential veteran organizations. In this she found appropriate partners in Serbia and Republika Srpska, who likewise build support by feeding off of the exclusive myths of victimization and justified wars rather than engaging in a cross-border effort to move the region out of the seemingly permanent cycle of socio-economic, demographic, and spiritual crises.

But clearly nationalist rhetoric and generating a reliable enemy are recipes that ensure the survival of the political elites in the region, at least for the near future. They are additionally fed by global populist trends and nationalist movements in the region, from Hungary to Austria and Russia. Croatian society cannot live off of a permanent state of war, and its commemorative culture needs to reflect a remembrance of the past but with a vision of the future. The speeches need to be followed up by concrete acts, whether the support of regional initiatives such as REKOM or bilateral working groups working to solve the issue of missing persons, the return of cultural heritage, prosecution of war criminals, and symbolic reparations. In 2017, when the Croatian political scene had stabilized and no elections were on the horizon, President Grabar-Kitarović allowed herself to be a bit more explicit in pushing a more positive relationship with Serbs:

Celebrating this great historical victory today, we are aware that it morally and politically binds us to reconciliation. Sharing with you these moments of joy and pride, when with the greatest respect we are renewing the memory of all of those who during the Homeland War and Operation Storm fell for freedom and the independence of Croatia, as president of the republic, but also as a Croat, citizen, and mother, I would

²⁶ *Net.hr*, 30 November 2017, <https://net.hr/danas/hrvatska/predsjednica-se-vratila-u-domovinu-uskoro-obracanje-grabar-kitarovic-vezano-uz-dramu-u-sudnici-haskog-suda/>.



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like to also express mourning for all Serbs who died. The Croatian people did not want war and does not celebrate anybody's death.²⁷

In the midst of all of the militarized rhetoric and nationalist discourse, even the small moments of recognition and empathy are important. As conflicts simmer in eastern Ukraine and rage in the Middle East, it is hard to offer many positive examples from the Western Balkans to future reconciliation efforts when the guns will presumably go silent. Yet there are always alternative groups and organizations that sometimes work alongside governments and sometimes against them in the effort to move beyond the entrenched narratives and intolerant ideologies, and there is perhaps the level where a more sustainable reconciliation can be built apart from the performative nationalism of the political elites.

²⁷ President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović on 5 August 2017, www.framnat.eu/knin-framnat/.



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