Heroes at the Margins: Veterans, Elites and the Narrative of War

Abstract

This chapter investigates the interaction between the elite and the everyday war narratives related to the 1991-1995 conflict in Croatia. The analysis is based on transcripts from focus groups with war veterans and from speeches at the Knin and Vukovar commemorations, all held in 2014 and 2015. The war narrative, one of Croatian self-defence against a larger Serbian aggressor, and the manner of its reproduction at the elite level has significant effects on war veterans at the level of the everyday. The manner in which the top-down narrative is constructed keeps veterans in a heightened state of alertness, which makes them vulnerable to political manipulation. The war narrative is constructed in the present (as if the war was not over) through militarised language, which is interpreted as a continuous call to arms to defend the state against internal or external aggression. This has created a notion among war veterans that the war is not over and that they are marginalised in society. Political and religious leaders reproduce this notion, thereby constructing war veterans as problematic and diverting focus from their more practical needs.

Introduction

War veterans of the 1991-1995 conflict continue to hold a privileged position in Croatian society and politics.[1] The *branitelji*, or "defenders", as they are referred to in Croatian, are regarded as the embodiment of the Croatian war narrative of sacrifice, bare-handed defence and victimhood (Pavlaković, 2014). Their associations are the most powerful actor within Croatian civil society, in terms of financial and political support, and they feature prominently in media headlines.[2] Their potential to garner public support, as well as to stir the domestic political situation remains significant.

Much of how war veterans of the Homeland War define the world around them, as well as their role in it, is based on their everyday interpretation of the official war narrative. This is a narrative promoted in a top-down fashion by political and societal, especially religious, elites. This chapter will analyse how the current, officially promoted, Croatian war narrative affects the everyday war narrative of veterans. It will look at what new elements exist, or are now stressed, in the war narrative. The chapter will focus on the notion that the war and struggle for Croatian independence is not yet over for war veterans. It will then discuss the implications of this for war veterans and their status in Croatian society. Underpinning the paper is the interaction between the elite and everyday war narratives. The war narrative is being reproduced in a specific manner at the elite level, the implications of which are felt at the level of the everyday.

The Defenders' Then and Now

Croatian veterans of the Homeland War are an important object of study due to three reasons: their potential to cause public disruption; their role in the transmission of norms; and, their political closeness to the Croatian Democratic Union (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica* – HDZ). Their potential to disrupt is best exemplified by the number and scale of public protests

[1]The Homeland War, or *Domovinski Rat*, is the name used for the 1991-1995 conflict in Croatia. It is a loaded term based on the Tuđmanist narrative of the 1990s, but it is in common use today (Jović, 2009).
[2] It is, however, debatable if war veterans' association in Croatia are a part of civil society due to the large amount of government funding they receive and their close connection to certain political parties.

they have been involved in. The 2001 demonstration against the arrest warrant for General Mirko Norac stands out due to its sheer scale: between 120,000 and 150,000 demonstrated on the streets of Split. It surprised authorities at the time and highlighted the power of war veterans' associations to mobilize the public and challenge the state, when partnered with the HDZ (Rangelov, 2013). The 2004 demonstrations against the indictments of Generals Ante Gotovina, Ivan Čermak and Mladen Markač, although not as large, nevertheless gathered 50,000 in Split. More recently, starting in 2013, protests spearheaded by war veterans' associations against the introduction of Cyrillic signs in Vukovar drew large crowds in the city (over 20,000), as well as in other urban centres. On a smaller scale, but potentially more politically disruptive, demonstrations on *Savska Road* in front of the Croatian Ministry of Veterans' Affairs lasted from 2014 until 2016 and featured extensively in the media. They involved a number of war veterans' associations demanding the resignation of the Minister of Veterans' affairs.

Second, war veterans' associations held a crucial role in preventing the diffusion of international human rights norms in society, by encouraging non-compliance preferences against transitional justice (Lamont, 2010:42). This was made possible due to their privileged position in civil society (ibid.). Human rights NGOs did exert pressure in the opposite direction, which resulted in the growth of human rights norms, but found it difficult to compete with the organised and well-funded war veterans' associations.

This was made possible by the associations' close political links. The links are facilitated by the war narrative and the memory of the war. The HDZ, and other rightwing parties, have been able to use them to legitimise their efforts in the eyes of war veterans, as well as the general public (Fisher, 2003: 79; Peskin and Boduszinsky, 2003: 1123). Simultaneously, war veterans' associations have been able to exploit the symbols to further their political aims. As a result, during the 1990s, the associations had nearly exclusive access to state funding, benefited from relatively positive media coverage and were relatively unified in their actions (Car, 2008; Fisher, 2003; Lamont, 2010). The media used, and continue to use, veteran's issues to boost sales, resulting in prominent media coverage (Fisher, 2003: 76). In comparison, human rights NGOs were highly dependent on international funding, were often branded as "communist" or "anti-Croatian", even after the 2000 regime change, and were fragmented (Fisher, 2003; Lamont, 2010).

Since the change, the associations have lost much of this funding and political support, but the legacy of it and dependency on it has tied their fate to the HDZ, whether they are in power or not (Rangelov, 2013). It has also led to Social Democratic Party (SDP) efforts to try to financially appease and appeal to war veterans' associations. An example of this political support in action are the above-mentioned demonstrations. In the largest demonstration in 2001, the HDZ (specifically former prime minister Ivo Sanader) was in opposition and helped organise the protests. In 2004 war veterans struggled to reach the same level of mobilisation without the support of the HDZ, who were now in power and committed to cooperation with the European Union and International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (Rangelov, 2013: 81).

These three facets of war veterans and their associations has two crucial implications. First, it enables political parties to manipulate such groups for their own political purposes through calls to arms against supposed attacks against the legitimacy of the Homeland War. This influence is exerted in the opposite direction as well; war veterans can use political parties to affirm their own continued influence. The associations are, therefore, not wholly independent from political institutions and their behaviour is closely tied to the performance of the HDZ and similar parties. They form a part of Croatian civil society, but also remain distinct from many other parts of it due to this close connection to state institutions. Second, this results in political aims of associations being prioritised over the humanitarian and therapeutic aims.

Today, the majority of war veterans in the public discourse feel forgotten and marginalised in Croatian society. They feel that successive post-war governments have disappointed them and the Croatian state. They believe in the war narrative, as does the majority of the Croatian public, but they also have a general distrust and cynicism with the world around them. In particular, they do not trust the institutions designed to represent and protect them, such as the government, media and judiciary. The result is that the war remains central to their lives and, in their particular version of the war narrative, the Croatian struggle for independence is not yet over.

Narratives from Above and Below

This chapter takes a constructivist approach to narratives. Individuals use them to understand and construct the world around them, both at the individual and state levels (Carlsnaes et al., 2012; Sommers, 1994; White, 1984). They spread and gain meaning through interaction, which includes competition as well as complementarity (Subotić, 2015). Homogenous narratives may be desirable in a normative sense, but they may not be possible in practice (Obradović-Wochnik, 2013: 139). They are crucial to the formation of identity and are based on notions of a "Self" and an "Other", which helps define the "Self" (Neumann 1999).

Narratives can be produced and reproduced from above or below. Elite narratives (top-down) are often imposed, from either domestic or international institutions (political, judicial, economic, military, media, etc.), and can be ignorant of cultural specificities that may hamper their work. They are often, therefore, fragmented and not fully implemented. Everyday narratives (bottom-up) on the other hand are reproduced through networks of families, friends and smaller scale social groups, which are quite powerful in the region. Moreover, the nation as a discursive construct is shaped through everyday conversation, choice, performance and consumption (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008: 538).

Elites often "perform the nation" with national symbols and rituals at events, such as commemorations, that generate national solidarity (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008: 546). The conveyed message is, however, mixed since it depends on the varying interpretations of individuals; the process is in no way mechanistic (Kolstø, 2006). Individuals are not only consumers of symbols, they are also producers (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008: 546). The consequence of this interaction is that top-down messages are not always interpreted in the manner that elites intended. The ordinary public, even in the context of polarising nationalism, is frequently indifferent to the messages they receive from elites (Brubaker, 2006; Fenton, 2007). Political messages do not always have the same effect on society, although they do still hold a central role in narrative production. Once at the level of the everyday, these narratives have a taken-for-granted status in society (Billig, 1995: 37; Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008: 544).

At the very least, elites set the parameters of the discursive space in which narratives operate. In Croatia, this has had the effect of the predominant war narrative rarely being questioned (Kolstø, 2011). Loaded terms, such as the Homeland War, *branitelji*, Greater Serbian aggression, Chetniks and so on, are frequently used in the public sphere (Pavlaković, 2014: 39). Narratives attain further meaning in everyday life by individuals talking about it (Fox and

Miller-Idriss, 2008: 538). The war narrative and associated world view are reinforced at this everyday level; by ordinary people, such as war veterans, talking with each other, about themselves and about their world (Fox, 2004). Commemorations, and other mechanisms of elite level narrative production, operate in this dynamic context.

Commemorating the Homeland War

Two large, annual events commemorating the Homeland War stand out from the growing number of commemorations: Vukovar and Knin. Both are state sponsored and attended by state elites, war veterans' associations and the broader public. In November each year, since 1999, crowds gather in Vukovar to pay tribute to those who died during and after the 1991 siege of the city (see chapters by Banjeglav, Ljubojević, and Milošević). Politicians, religious leaders, families of victims, war veterans, their associations from Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the public congregate in front of the central city hospital (where the last defenders surrendered), before proceeding on a symbolic, five kilometre walk to the memorial cemetery on the outskirts of the city (where the victims of the siege and related massacres are buried). The days preceding the commemoration feature smaller events, such as symbolic walks and concerts, in and around Vukovar, often organised by local authorities or war veterans' associations. Politicians participate by laying wreaths at the cemetery, but the only speeches at the official event are by Church leaders (dealt with elsewhere in this volume).

The commemoration in Knin has a distinctly different character; that of a celebration. The event on 5 August, the national holiday known as Victory and Homeland Thanksgiving Day and the Day of Croatian Defenders **(***Dan pobjede i domovinske zahvalnosti i Dan hrvatskih branitelja*), marks the day when in 1995 the Croatian military retook the city of Knin in Operation Storm (*Oluja*). Events include a Mass, wreath-laying, parades, concerts and speeches by prominent politicians, religious leaders and war veterans. All high ranking state officials attend, with some giving speeches, and a Croatian flag is raised on Knin Fortress as a part of the ceremony. The commemoration reinforces Operation Storm as a central tenet of the nation's founding myth (Koren, 2011; Pavlaković, 2014).

The two events are both centred around the war narrative and reverberate its key themes. Their key difference is that one is a celebration of a victory, the other a tribute to those who died in battle or were killed in a mass crime (the Ovčara farm massacre). Both feature extensive Catholic symbolism, but the commemoration in Vukovar has much more of a religious focus than the overtly political commemoration in Knin, which in some ways marks the foundation of the modern Croatian nation. They are both sites of continuous, on an annual basis, elite narrative production and reproduction. They, therefore, provide an invaluable insight into the

newer facets of the war narrative, which may not be present in other mechanisms of production, such as parliamentary declarations (discussed below).

Church leaders play central roles in both commemorations, just as Catholicism is central to Croatian national identity (Babić, 2010; Smith, 1991). Croats identify themselves strongly as Catholics and identify their "Other", the Serbs, as Orthodox at both the elite and everyday levels (Prcela, 2009; Sokolić, 2017). The identification was entrenched following the Second World War, when national and religious identities merged, and the Church put itself forth as the defender of the Croatian nation and people (Jakelić, 2010; Sells, 2003). It is public, collectivist and defines relations towards the Serb minority (Casanova, 1994: 217; Jakelić, 2010; Sokolić, 2017). It is also closely connected to the military and the Homeland War. Many volunteers saw the conflict as a religious calling to defend Croatia, as well the Catholic faith (Schäuble, 2014). Since the conflict, it has been used to justify resistance to central authorities and attempts at economic modernisation (Schäuble, 2014). This union features prominently in political and religious speeches, as well as in various types of narratives. For example, the phrase "God and the Croats" (*bog I hrvati*), symbolised the joint suffering of the victimised nation and Church. The image of the Serbian Orthodox Church is constructed in relation to the forgiving and compassionate Croatian Roman Catholic Church, making it inherently aggressive (Sokolić, 2017).

Method

This chapter employs qualitative narrative analysis to analyse focus group and speech transcripts. The data come from two sources. A series of focus groups conducted in 2014 and 2015 with members of smaller war veterans' associations across Croatia represent everyday narratives. Elite narratives are drawn from the FRAMNAT speech transcripts from the Knin and Vukovar commemorations in 2014 and 2015. This approach does not allow for generalizable results, but an effort was made to derive categories from existing literature to increase validity and reliability. Comparison of contemporaneous data raises validity of conclusions relating to correlation, since it ensures direct comparison. In the context of narrative transmission, there may exist a top-down transmission lag, which would require researching everyday narratives at a later date. The consequence is that it is only possible to draw conclusions related to correlation, rather than causation.

The speeches in Vukovar were conducted exclusively by members of the clergy. In 2014 these were Mate Uzinić (Bishop of Dubrovnik) and Ivica Jagodić (Vicar of Sveti Filip and Jakov, Vukovar). In 2015 these were Đuro Hranić (Archbishop of Đakovo-Osijek) and Želimir Puljić (Archbishop of Zadar).

Knin featured a greater variety of speakers. In 2014 these were Ivan Vukić (retired Colonel from the Croatian Army), Josip Leko (President of the Croatian Parliament), Ivo Josipović (President of Croatia) and Zoran Milanović (Prime Minister of Croatia). In 2015 these were Josip Bozanić (Archbishop of Zagreb), Juraj Jezerinac (Bishop of the Military), Josip Rimac (Mayor of Vukovar), Dražimir Jukić (Representative of the Assembly of Croatian Guards Veterans' Association) and Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović (President of Croatia). The different number of speakers, as well as the different nature of the commemorations, resulted in more data from Knin. The 2014 and 2015 commemorations were also different to preceding ones since they were the first to which war veterans were invited to speak. Both were consequently critical of the political establishment in the country and resulted in a more cautious approach to later commemorations, under the Plenković government.

One focus group was conducted with members of smaller war veterans' associations in Zagreb (4 individuals), Sisak (3), Zadar (6) and a non-urban location in Banovina (5), respectively. Additionally, one dyad was held in a non-urban location in Slavonia, since it was not possible to recruit enough individuals for a focus group. Zagreb was chosen as the political and cultural centre of the country; Sisak and Zadar as large cities that were on the front-line; and, the non-urban locations were chosen to provide a counterpoint the cities. The groups were semi-structured and focused on the transitional justice process in Croatia, including the war narrative. The researcher organised the groups using snowball sampling and moderated them.[3] The context of the focus groups and speeches in 2014 and 2015 was also interesting because parliamentary elections were announced in September 2015 and held three months later. Informal campaigning had begun far in advance so the topic of an upcoming election was common throughout discussions. Moreover, the centre-right "Patriotic Coalition", led by the

[3] For more information on conducting focus groups in the post-conflict setting and the guidelines followed, see Söderström (2010) and Sokolić (2016). These articles include a discussion of the same dynamics and problems faced in this research.

opposition HDZ, frequently employed war veterans, nationalist symbols and war memories in their rhetoric.

The transcripts of the focus groups and speeches were analysed using narrative analysis. This is an appropriate method since it identifies the key narrative that is being told by actors, unpacks narrative construction, investigates the intentions of the producer and analyses meaning (Riessman, 1993). It does not segment data, thereby avoiding the problem of decontextualisation (Atkinson, 1992). It is well-suited to a constructivist research design because the focus is on how individuals make sense of the world around them (Bryman, 2016: 589). It focuses on the stories that people use to explain the world around them, especially major or traumatic life events, such as war (Riessman, 1993). The analysis is, however, hampered by the difference in transcripts. The speeches are prepared in advance, performed in front of a large audience and publicly available (on YouTube, as well as the FRAMNAT website). The focus groups were, on the other hand, conducted with a strict promise of anonymity and confidentiality. Participants' responses were spontaneous and affected by the group process (Finch and Lewis, 2003). This makes it more difficult to compare the structure of narratives sequences across transcripts and the two are, therefore, analysed separately in the sections below.

Interpretation of data in a constructivist manner is a reflexive undertaking that entails the construction, rather than discovery, of meaning (Mauthner et al., 1998). It is impossible to disentangle the researcher from the method and the data (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003: 414). The analysis is, therefore, imbued with the researcher's world view and resulting epistemological and ontological considerations. It cannot be decontextualized from the researcher's own personal background (his Croatian citizenship, Croat ethnicity and emigration from Croatia) and academic surroundings at a British university. Different researchers, with different backgrounds or at different times, may interpret this data in a different manner.

The War Narrative

In Croatia there is a pervasive, nearly universal among ethnic Croats, notion that Croatia was a victim of Serbian aggression. According to this narrative, Croatia led a war of self-defence, with the aim of not only saving the Croatian state, but preventing the destruction of the Croatian

nation (Pavlaković, 2014: 19). This narrative was also central to the nation building process in the state, together with other strategies such as severing all ties with the multinational Yugoslav state and providing a history of continuity of the Croatian state into history (Pavlaković, 2014: 31). The war narrative is important since it forms a kind of founding, or refounding, myth in Croatia. Much like in other societies, this helps the society explain its origins and define what it stands for (Eliade, 1963). Such myths are often marked by "monumental didactics" (Osiel, 1998: 4), in other words, public recounting of the heroic deeds as a national narrative. Wars and ethnic conflict provide particularly strong inspiration for the creation of national narratives of the past and many modern nations have built national sentiment on these foundations (Ristić, 2014; Zertal, 2005).

The Croatian war narrative is concerned with the notion that the war was defensive; that it was an attempt to create a democratic Croatian state, which the Croatian people expressed a desire for through a referendum; that a distinction must be made between the Greater Serbian aggressor and the victim; that the most recent war memory must be kept alive; and, that war heroes must be protected. It is inscribed by parliament in institutionalised form in the Declaration on the Homeland War (*Deklaracija o Domovinskom Ratu*) and the Declaration on Operation Storm (*Deklaracija o Oluji*). The war narrative has previously been extensively outlined by the literature on Croatia and transitional justice, especially Banjeglav (2012), Jović (2009), Koren (2011), and Pavlaković (2014). The core components of the dominant war narrative are summarised in the literature, and apparent in transcripts, as those of:

Defence: The conflict is seen as an act of self-defence against an aggressor (Jović, 2009). Narratives consistently refer to notions of self-defence, which are often used to justify other actions (for example Croat war crimes) and juxtaposed with Serb aggression:

> NU.V.5 – It was not [a civil war], it was a war, an aggression against Croatia and Croatia defended itself. If someone is killing me then I will not accept that it was a civil war. No one from Croatia went to Serbia (focus group with non-urban war veterans Banovina).

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> Ivan Vukić – The Homeland War is the foundation of modern Croatian and the defender (*branitelji*) are the foundational value of the Homeland War, as well as the modern state (Knin 2014).

Survival and struggle: In Croatia, the emotional symbol of struggle is the unprepared and unarmed fledgling state (Banjeglav, 2012: 26; Peskin and Boduszynski, 2003: 1129). In the transcripts this was often referred to in terms of the "barefooted" or "bare-armed" Croatian soldiers who, without any preparation (as opposed to Serbs, who did prepare), fought off and survived the aggression.

> SI.V.1 – The war was forced on us, we met it unprepared, barefoot, without weapons. I went to war in sneakers (focus group with Sisak war veterans).

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> Mate Uzinić – Dubrovnik was connected during wartime, as we heard, with [Vukovar] through suffering and victimhood (Vukovar 2014).

Aggressors: These are frequently referred to as "Serbs/Serbia", "Greater Serbs/Serbia", "*JNA*", "Chetniks", "communists" or any combination of these words (for example "Serbo-chetniks"). Yugoslavia is often paired with communism, whereas Serbs are often collectively referred to as Chetniks (Banjeglav, 2012: 10-11; Jović, 2009; Pavlaković, 2014). In the group discussions aggression was referred to overtly, but it was also often implied by participants stressing how Croatia did not attack anyone, how the Croatian army never left the territory of the Republic of Croatia and how the situation would have been different had Croatia been "gone to someone else's home".

> SI.V.1 – A war crime is exactly what she (another participant) said, when another power, Serbia, Yugoslavia, commits a war crime against us. The moment they came on to Croatian territory to kill the Croatian people, they committed a war crime. This is a massive war crime on everyone who was killed. They killed them on our territory. In our house, in our country. This is a war crime.

> SI.V.2 agrees (focus group with Sisak war veterans)

Želimir Puljić connected this notion to the international community, that "allowed the aggression on the Republic of Croatia, that stood by and watched people die and villages and cities be destroyed" (Vukovar 2015).

Yugoslavia as broken: This part of the narrative, less present than the others, is more central to the nation building narrative than the war narrative. The two, however, often overlap and appear together. Many facets of Yugoslavia's breakup, including refugees, the appearance of extremist groups (such as Chetniks) and wartime media reporting, are all today associated with the Yugoslav state itself, rather than simply the violent dissolution of it (Pavlaković 2014: 32). This part of the narrative was also used by focus group participants to highlight how the current Croatian state had been infiltrated by unwanted elements or had not changed much from Yugoslavia, since they saw a continuity in Yugoslavia not functioning and the modern Croatian state not functioning. War veterans, for example, interpreted this as a problem of lustration, since they believed the same people to be in power in both regimes. Elites, on the other hand, portrayed the Yugoslav state as a vehicle for Serbian "imperialist wartime ideologies" (Josip Bozanić, Knin 2015).

Victimisation: The Croatian victimisation narrative is built around several focal points, such as Vukovar and Dubrovnik, whose destruction (in the case of Dubrovnik more symbolic) is expressed across all Croatian society (Banjeglav, 2012: 14; Jović, 2009). Further symbols are war crimes committed by the Yugoslav People's Army (and associated paramilitary groups) and destruction in other localities, which are more locally pronounced (for example the attacks on Sisak and Zadar, murders in Petrinja, Glina, Škabrnja, and so on). Participants not only referred to the key focal points, but they also created a distinction between "us, Croats, the victims" and "them, Serbs, the aggressors". In Vukovar, where the commemorations focus on victimisation, speakers warn of the danger of equalising the victim and the aggressor (for example through war crimes trials).

War is not over: Finally, there is a perception (not covered elsewhere in the academic literature) among certain groups in society that the Homeland War, or at the very least the struggle for Croatian independence, is not over. The war was still central to some individuals' lives and they saw issues from it as unresolved. This is sometimes attributed to Greater Serbian forces still being alive and present (inside or outside of Croatia), at other times it is seen as an attempt by the international community to take away Croatian independence (for example, through

international tribunals or the EU). This also includes the notion that the Croatian government "works against Croatia" and that it has been infiltrated by unwanted elements. This is connected to the notion that the "other" to Croats, namely Serbs, have throughout history been oppressors of the Croat people and that history is repeating itself, so Croatia must once again defend itself (MacDonald, 2002). This is a new feature of the war narrative, closely associated with a general disappointment with how Croatian politics, society and economics have developed since independence. War veterans consistently referred to an ongoing or constant defence, as if the war or struggle had not ended yet for them. The war remains central to their lives:

> SI.V.2 – Listen, I am not a historian. I have not completed any great schools, but I tell you, what has started in Vukovar[4] will spread to all of Croatia.
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> SI.V.3 – If they start to rape.
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> SI.V.2 – Let me ask you, in what state is there another state? And our government has allowed the Republic of Serbia. In a state you have another state. In which state? In England would they allow another state (focus group with Sisak war veterans)?
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> ZG.V.1 – I, as a journalist, call this a permanent ideological civil war. There is no shooting, there are no bombs being put in theatres. It is not like Dublin in Ireland, or like Belfast or Spain. However, here this kind of war continues for 40 years. And in certain phases it becomes very intense. And this is a fact in Croatia. Everyone knows this (focus group with Zagreb war veterans).
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> ZA.V.4 – We have a feeling that [the Serbs] are laughing at us. We have a feeling that they can attack us again whenever they want to. Why? Because even our people who are in power take part in this. We feel betrayed (focus group with Zadar war veterans).

[4] Referring to the Cyrillic signs.

This is a trope at both commemorations. In Knin, it is more overt, while in Vukovar it is achieved through religious symbolism, which furthers the connection between the Croatian nation and Catholic Church:

> Dražimir Jukić–Those who once attacked us and who left a bloody trail. They are bothered by Croatian institutions, Croatian saints, Croatian patriots. It bothers them that Croatia is independent, sovereign and a recognised member of international associations. And we tell them from here: gentlemen, we defended what was ours. Croatian defenders (*branitelji*), heroes, liberated their own country. Unlike you, they did not yearn for someone else's. And remember, they would do so again. And they would win (Knin 2015).

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> Mate Uzinić – And it is especially bad that Zacchaeus the tax collector persists in his evil, that he is still thinking about how to rob and remove his neighbours and that his neighbours still suspect Zacchaeus (Vukovar 2014).

The connection between religion and the Croatian nation is highlighted throughout these elite passages. Bishop Uzinić uses religious allegory to create a sense of continued alarm, while Dražimir Jukić, not a religious figure, refers to "Croatian saints", instead of Catholic saints. Catholic and Croatian become interchangeable. This facet is an addition to the war narrative, which is produced by elite actors and resonates with war veterans, who feel disappointed by and marginalised in Croatian society.

Forgotten and Marginalised – The Defenders of Croatia

The condition that allows this facet of the war narrative to develop are war veterans' feelings of marginalisation. They feel they have been forgotten in the society and country they have fought for and created. Moreover, the they feel this country has not developed in the manner they hoped for, which has left them disappointed. They, therefore, feel the need to fight on two fronts: for their position in society and for all of society. The ensuing distrust of state intuitions is perpetuated at the elite level as well:

> Ivan Vukić – During the Homeland War we completed our tasks successfully and honourably. Can we say the same for the political elites since the end of the Homeland War (Knin 2014)?

War veterans in focus groups highlighted their worries about being forgotten, their disappointment with the country they fought for and their struggle to be recognised:

> ZA.V.6. – Currently there are 37 defenders (*branitelji*) in parliament, and they have never had a shared idea, despite their party allegiances, to solve something for the Croatian defenders (*branitelji*). This has not happened a single time. Not in a single session of parliament. This means that there is not even a reason to talk about the war. Why should we talk about the war? This is something ugly, dark.
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> ZA.V.4 – It is the past.
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> ZA.V.2 – It is not the past to me. To me it was yesterday. My husband is gone. I am putting on a uniform, I am carrying a rifle, I am firing.
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> ZA.V.6 – This is all done by people who do not have a single wound from the Homeland War. They live comfortably on the cross of these defenders (*branitelji*). They cannot see the cross from some cosy office, who would see the cross? But we carry it every day. We live with these people, especially those who also took part. Now this happens on *Savska* and it is some kind of world wonder. Maybe someone has really had enough.
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> ZA.V.4 – I do not like to compare, but it really bothers me that the dignity towards the Second and First World Wars must be planted into younger generations as something that needs to stay with the people. And the feeling that you need to respect that (focus group with Zadar war veterans).
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> SI.V.1 – As I said, we came back to nothing. It is different if you return, if you wage a war in another country against someone else, and then you return to your family, your home. Many came back here and no longer had a home. Had nothing. They came back to poverty (focus group with Sisak war veterans).

War veterans wish to keep the memory of the war alive, since it also keeps their role in society central. They see themselves as continuing the fight for Croatia, but also for their status in society. This affects their everyday lives, since it creates a distinction between them and the non-veteran population, including political elites. The struggle not to be forgotten also creates a distinction between them and veterans of the Second World War, who they see as revered, rather than forgotten, in society. This is echoed at commemorations, which may explain their popularity with war veterans. Elites reproduce these narratives and draw on the same emotional symbols of struggle:

> Mate Uzinić – Why are our dead defenders (*branitelji*) heroes, and our living defenders a burden (Vukovar 2015)?

Speeches at commemorations referred to war veterans as "at risk" or "marginalised", thereby problematizing them as a group and their situation. Most of these speakers are attempting to highlight the plight of the war veterans and sympathetic to their plight, be it for political gain or altruistic reasons. The construction of war veterans as a "problem", however, has implications on their position in society since it presents them in a negative light. This can make them feel unwelcome, which many do, and it deflects attention from their out of the ordinary, but manageable and practical, needs (which are shared with all former combatants). Instead, they are branded as the sick child of Croatian society and more easily employed for political gain (which is not to say that they do not use this notion for their own purposes).

Producing and Reproducing the War Narrative: Militarisation, Infiltration and the Church

The narrative of continued defence and a further calling to arms are maintained through militarised language, which often references an infiltration of Croatian society (as a threat to the state) and to children (as a justification for a continuous defence). The militarised language is omnipresent in Croatian society: it occurs at the elite level across party lines; it was reflected

in focus groups; it is a regular feature in media reporting on a range of topics[5]; and, it is reflected in the regional media.[6] These were reflected in the focus groups, including the transcripts quoted above.

In Knin, a military commemoration, both left wing and right wing politicians used a militarised narrative to discuss topics such as the economy and the European Union. Words such as "win", "defence", "resistance", "battle", "storm" (a direct reference to Operation Storm), as well as references to present day Serbian politics by more radical speakers, all contribute to a militarised construction of broader issues in society, politics and economics:

> Ivo Josipović – Croatia won in war, Croatia must now win in peace (Knin 2014).
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> Zoran Milanović –Croatia won in war, Croatia now has to win in peace [...] In war, as well as in peace, resistance and defiance (Knin 2014).
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> Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović – Together with you, I want to set in motion an economic and demographic storm, which will be preceded by broad national consensus. Only with new Croatian unity can we win this battle (Knin 2015).

Militarised language perpetuates notions of fighting at the negotiating table, fighting in peacetime and a need for a continuous defence. The narratives are often nearly identical and refer to an infiltration of Croatian politics and a lack of unity in society:

> NU2.V.2 - What the Serbs did not manage to do with weapons and the task the Yugoslav National Army did not complete, this will be won at the negotiating table (dyad with non-urban war veterans Slavonia).

[5] For example, reporting by centre-right daily *Večernji List* on the 2014 floods in Croatia (https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/nista-nas-nije-moglo-pripremiti-na-tih-desetak-sati-u-gunji-950979; https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/u-takvim-uvjetima-nismo-zivjeli-ni-u-ratu-morali-smo-pomoci-poplavljenima-925055)

[6] See Marušić (2017) for an example.

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> Ivica Jagodić – Once they waged war with rifles, today they wage war with words. And I believe this war is much worse, because you do not know who the enemy is and where the enemy stands (Vukovar 2014).

The war veteran from Slavonia relates this to an infiltration of the system by unwanted elements, but elites also construct the issue of internal division. This create an atmosphere of distrust and war veterans, a willing audience, are spurred into action through the rhetoric:

> NU2.V.1 – Greater Serbs, Yugonostalgics, persecutors of the Croatian national spirit throughout history, UDBA members. Today they have completely infiltrated all the pores of Croatian economic, political and daily life (dyad with non-urban war veterans Slavonia).

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> Josip Leko – In no way and never will I agree with this politics, no matter what side it comes from; I do not justify and I condemn the planted seed of division (Knin 2014).

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> Mate Užinić – We will pray for the present and future of Vukovar, but also for the present and future of the homeland, which due to our divisions that we so painfully face, leaves us incapable of facing the crisis (Vukovar 2014).

Elites call on emotional symbols of children and future generations to justify these calls to arms. In all speeches, it was the children, the children of victims, the children of war veterans and future generations of Croats that were prioritised. They were invoked in all greetings to crowds (although few children were present) and were mentioned in relation to the deceased, the missing and the mutilated. This constructs an alarming message, which can result in a tense atmosphere with the target audience.

FRAMNAT's unique contribution to the study of the war narrative lies in how the narrative is reproduced. The database highlights the central role of the Catholic Church in the Knin and

Vukovar commemorations. The centrality of the Catholic Church to Croatian identity and the war narrative has been explored at the everyday level (see: Sokolić, 2017), but these transcripts show how consistently it is produced at the elite level. It is crucial to defining ingroup and outgroup characteristics in Croatia. The transcripts are littered with examples:

- Ivan Vukić referred to a "holy duty" and "with God's help" when discussing the war and fighting (Knin 2014).
- Josip Bozanić thanked "God and the defenders (*branitelji*) for the free homeland" and defined Knin as a "city of pilgrimage" (Knin 2015).
- Dražimir Jukić listed the defence of "our people, our churches, culture, tradition, history and, finally, truth and justice" (Knin 2015).
- Mate Uzinić discussed forgiveness specifically in relation to Christianity and stated that "Christian forgiveness is not the negation of justice" (Vukovar 2014).
- Đuro Hranić celebrated the "surviving defenders (*branitelji*) who trusted in God to resist the wartime aggression" (Vukovar 2015).
- Želimir Puljić referred to "memories that radiate human and Christian spirituality", as well as to "the Church and the homeland" (Vukovar 2015).

Church elites use commemorations as a podium to merge the narratives of nation building and religion. The Church thereby presents itself as the protector of the war narrative, the nation and of war veterans. This creates an interdependent triumvirate between the Church, war veterans and right wing parties, especially the HDZ.

Conclusion

Elite level reproductions of the war narrative have significant implications for war veterans at the everyday level. The manner in which the elite war narrative is constructed keeps war veterans in a heightened state of alertness. This makes war veterans vulnerable to political manipulation. Moreover, this enables elites to lay blame for negative developments in the state on the perceived "Other", be they Serbs, the government or international forces.

The officially promoted, top-down, war narrative's construction affects the everyday narrative in several ways. First, it is constructed in the present. It depicts the recent war as a current reality, through militarised language and calls to action. Narratives about the past help individuals understand the present, but in this instance the past is constructed as the present. The Homeland War is, therefore, used to interpret the present, for example the current economic situation, as well as the past that preceded the conflict, for example the whole Yugoslav period. These are portrayed as struggles against a Serbian aggressor, both now and then. Second, the elite narrative constructs the problem of the war veterans. It stresses notions of disappointment with facets of the modern Croatian state and war veterans' marginalisation within society. In doing so, it presents war veterans as a burden, whilst ignoring their more practical and manageable needs. This also leaves them open to political and economic manipulation. Third, it connects the nation building narrative to the Catholic Church in the country. The war narrative forms a key component of the nation building project in Croatia, and the use of religious symbolism in the war narrative constructs the Croatian nation as intrinsically and exclusively Catholic. Fourth, it keeps the memory of the Homeland War alive through emotional, top-down pressure. This is characterised by emotional symbols of victimhood and defence.

The war narrative, at both levels, has changed as time has passed and the current narrative contains several new tenets. Chief among these is the notion that the war is not over. This is characterised at the elite level by the above mentioned militarised language and construction of the narrative in the present. At the everyday level, this is reflected by the centrality of the war in individuals' lives. A key facet of this notion is a sense of infiltration; that the Croatian government or society has been infiltrated by unwanted elements. The "Other" – which attacked Croatia, which must be repelled, which continues to work against Croatia – is presented as being both internal and external. Certain elites, including Church leaders, use this narrative to justify their opposition and resistance to central authorities and aspects of modernisation.

The new facets of the war narrative and the manner of its reproduction have significant implications for war veterans and their status in society. Above all, their fate continues to be closely tied to political parties and the Church. They need their support for continued funding and to maintain their exalted position in society. The Church is particularly influential in this sense, since it provides a seemingly cross-party source of support, which is not seen as overtly

political. Through their support, war veterans can maintain a relatively powerful role in society: despite their small number they are able to cause significant disruption, as is evidenced by numerous protests since 2000. These political parties and the Church are, however, also dependent on the political support of the war veterans. They gain more power from war veterans, even when their own power may be in recession (for example, when the HDZ is in opposition). This tripartite symbiotic relationship helps to continuously keep their respective interests on the public agenda.

War veterans are kept in a constant state of alertness. At the societal level, this at times results in public disruption. At the individual level this can significantly impact mental and physical wellbeing. The war veterans are a population with numerous and serious health problems because of their participation in the conflict. Many suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and a variety of connected issues, which often affect whole families and communities. A constant state of alertness is detrimental to such conditions and does not allow these individuals to focus on practical improvements in a safe environment. Instead, the world around them is portrayed as threatening and they are faced with continuous calls to defend themselves, their families and their homes. The war narrative appeals to their emotions, leading to emotional, rather than rational, interpretations of the world.

Such a logic has helped elite actors co-opt war veterans in their efforts to resist modernisation. Other than hampering progress for all of society, this creates a negative image of the war veterans among the rest of society. They are seen as disruptors, as obstacles to progress, as being difficult. This perpetuates their marginalisation in society, which is a condition that enables elite actors to continue reproducing the narrative of marginalisation and, therefore, to maintain their influence over them. This creates a negative cycle for war veterans, in which their needs are rarely met and their construction in the eyes of the rest of society remains negative.

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