

**Ivor Sokolić**

## Denying the unknown. Everyday narratives about Croatian involvement in the 1992-1995 Bosnian conflict

**Article (Accepted version)  
(Refereed)**

**Original citation:**

Sokolić, Ivor (2017) *Denying the unknown. Everyday narratives about Croatian involvement in the 1992-1995 Bosnian conflict*. *Südosteuropa*, 65 (4). pp. 632-653. ISSN 0722-480X

DOI: [10.1515/soeu-2017-0042](https://doi.org/10.1515/soeu-2017-0042)

© 2017 [Walter de Gruyter GmbH](#)

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/86484/>

Available in LSE Research Online: January 2018

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's final accepted version of the journal article. There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

Ivor Sokolić

**Denying the Unknown. Everyday Narratives About Croatian Involvement in the 1992-1995 Bosnian Conflict**

**Abstract.** This article, based on the results of focus-group discussions, dyads, and interviews in Croatia, examines how Croatians construct their narrative of the 1992-1995 conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia's role in it. Despite judgements at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) concluding that the Croatian state intervened in the Bosnian conflict, respondents in this study claimed to be ignorant of any such intervention. What was discussed worked in concert with the dominant Croatian war narrative of Croatian defence, victimhood, and sacrifice in the face of a larger, Serbian aggressor. By portraying the Bosnian conflict as chaotic and savage, respondents differentiated it from the Croatian one and relativised any illicit actions within a framework of nesting orientalism. Croatian involvement in Bosnia-Herzegovina was generally seen as positive: it was viewed in terms of Croatia welcoming Bosniak refugees and providing military assistance, which enabled moral licensing with regard to the rarely mentioned and marginalised negative aspects of Croatia's involvement in the conflict.

**Ivor Sokolić** is a Research Officer on the Art and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded 'Art and Reconciliation: Conflict, Culture and Community' project at the Department of Government at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

The 1991-1995 conflict in Croatia, more commonly referred to as the Homeland War, forms a key part of the nation-building project of the Croatian state and defines much of the country's politics, society, and culture. The memory of the conflict, its interpretation, and the subsequent foundation that it provides for various facets of public life are all premised on the dominant war narrative, one of self-defence against a larger Serbian aggressor. According to this narrative, the existence of the Croatian state and the very survival of the Croatian people were achieved through an exclusively defensive conflict of an international nature, in which the sovereign state of Serbia or Yugoslavia attacked the sovereign state of Croatia. Trials at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) have shown,

however, that a chain of command (formal or informal) existed between the Croatian government in Zagreb and ethnic Croat forces operating in Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>1</sup> Awareness and acknowledgment of Croatian involvement in the 1992-1995 Bosnian conflict have the potential to undermine the dominant war narrative of defence. This remains particularly relevant because relations between the two countries are often significantly affected because of on war-crimes allegations against Croats in Bosnia.<sup>2</sup>

This article uses the results of focus-group inquiries, supplemented by dyads (group interviews with two individuals) and individual interviews, to explore how narratives about the conflict in Bosnia interact with the war narrative. This represents an instance, ultimately unsuccessful, in which transitional justice efforts had aimed to change the war narrative and to lead to some kind of understanding of the conflict's international nature. The analysis examines the narratives certain segments of the Croatian public use when discussing the Bosnian conflict, and how they distance themselves from it.

The analysis takes a constructivist view of narratives, in which actors respond to cultural factors in their environment and the world around them is 'talked into existence'.<sup>3</sup> Such narratives are essentially stories that make the past real and shape the understanding of both past and present.<sup>4</sup> They also constitute actions in themselves, since action 'only becomes meaningful in the process of narrating a constitutive story of the self'.<sup>5</sup> Narratives, therefore, are norms, and by studying societal narratives this study also delves into societal norms. Because of these characteristics, they are disseminated through interaction, often with counter-narratives based on 'opposing' stories.<sup>6</sup> What may have been institutionally produced can spread and become stronger within the sphere of culture, art, education, or any other corner of society.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bosnia and Herzegovina will be referred to as Bosnia throughout the text.

<sup>2</sup> For example, in October 2016 ten former members of the Croatian Defence Council (*Hrvatsko vijeće obrane*, HVO) were arrested in Orašje, Bosnia, for alleged war crimes. The HVO between 1992 and 1995 constituted the army of the Croats in Bosnia and in the Croatian Republic Herceg-Bosna, which was not acknowledged internationally. The HVO was effectively the main Croatian army during the war in Bosnia. The Croatian government reacted strongly to the arrests, and up through the present relations with Bosnia have remained tense.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Carlsnaes / Thomas Risse-Kapen / Beth A. Simmons, *Handbook of International Relations*, London 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Jelena Subotić, *Genocide Narratives as Narratives-in-Dialogue*, *Journal of Regional Security* 10, no. 2 (2015), 177-198.

<sup>5</sup> Christopher S. Browning, *Constructivism, Narrative and Foreign Policy Analysis. A Case Study of Finland*, Oxford 2008, 11.

<sup>6</sup> Jelena Subotić, *Genocide Narratives as Narratives-in-Dialogue*.

Elite narratives (top-down) are often imposed by either domestic or international institutions (political, judicial, economic, military; media organisations, etc.) and can ignore cultural specificities that may hamper their work. Therefore they are frequently fragmented and not fully endorsed. 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 conversations, choices, performances, and acts of consumption.<sup>7</sup> The narratives presented and explored in this article are ‘everyday’ phenomena in that they are contested and reproduced at an everyday ‘site of practice’<sup>8</sup> by individuals who have no direct authority over official policy but can influence political change by contesting or reproducing the claims of those in power.<sup>9</sup>

Stanley, together with a range of scholars, highlights the use of focus groups as a particularly valuable data-gathering method for this type of inquiry: focus-group projects are good at investigating social interactions, which display narratives and provide sequences, rather than simply instances, to analyse.<sup>10</sup> The perspectives they reveal may exist outside of the group setting, but they are more likely to be highlighted through social interaction, which inherently includes agreement and disagreement.<sup>11</sup> Focus-group studies, therefore, are particularly well suited for the study of contestation.

One may question to what extent the narratives that emerge from focus groups represent everyday narratives, since they are artificially produced instances of speech.

---

<sup>7</sup> Jon E. Fox / Cynthia Miller-Idriss, Everyday Nationhood, *Ethnicities* 8, no. 4 (2008), 536-563, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23890181>. All internet sources were accessed on 16 November 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Liam Stanley and Richard Jackson, Introduction: Everyday Narratives in World Politics, *Politics* 36, No. 3 (2016), 223-235, DOI: 10.1177/0263395716653423

<sup>9</sup> John M. Hobson / Leonard Seabrooke, Everyday IPE. Revealing Everyday Forms of Change in the World Economy, in: John M. Hobson / Leonard Seabrooke, eds, *Everyday Politics of the World Economy*, Cambridge 2007, 1-24, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Liam Stanley, Using Focus Groups in Political Science and International Relations, *Politics* 36, no. 3 (2016), 236-249, DOI: 10.1177/0263395715624120; cf. also William A. Gamson, *Talking Politics*, Cambridge 1992; Ted Hopf, Making the Future Inevitable. Legitimizing, Naturalizing and Stabilizing—the Transition in Estonia, Ukraine and Uzbekistan, *European Journal of International Relations* 8, no. 3 (2002), 403-436, DOI: 10.1177/1354066102008003004; David Marsh / Su Jones / Therese O’Toole, *Young People and Politics in the UK. Apathy or Alienation*, Basingstoke 2007; Lee Jarvis / Michael Lister, Disconnected Citizenship? The Impacts of Anti-Terrorism Policy on Citizenship in the UK, *Political Studies* 61, no. 3 (2013), 656-675, DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9248.2012.00993.x; and Liam Stanley, ‘We’re Reaping What We Sowed.’ Everyday Crisis Narratives and Acquiescence to the Age of Austerity, *New Political Economy* 19, no. 6 (2014), 895-917, DOI: 10.1080/13563467.2013.861412.

<sup>11</sup> Jane Lewis, Design Issues, in: Jane Ritchie / Jane Lewis, eds, *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*, London, 2003, 47-76, 60.

Arguably, a long-term ethnographic approach would be better suited to the observation of everyday narratives in their 'natural' setting. The benefit of focus groups in this instance is that they can produce a greater number of such interactions in a more targeted fashion, since the shorter timespan required allows for the specific pursuit of certain segments of society in specific locations. This advantage, together with the semi-structured nature of the focus groups, enables a more comparative approach than ethnographic research can provide. In this sense, focus groups offer a good middle ground and, whilst they cannot highlight everyday narratives through the lived experience of participants, they can study the 'living presence of the past' by showing how it is constructed in social interactions.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, many authors have highlighted the importance of forgetting, the gaps and silences in memory, as well as the methodological problem they present since they are not observable.<sup>13</sup> The social interaction inherent in focus groups can, albeit in a somewhat forced manner, produce these pauses, if not outright silences.<sup>14</sup> These breaks in speech tell us something about the narratives at stake, and they are made 'everyday' or 'natural' due to the spontaneity that social interaction entails.<sup>15</sup>

In total, 52 participants took part in the study. Follow-up interviews were conducted with selected individuals to decrease the risk of social context adversely influencing responses. Ten focus groups were convened, numbering three to six individuals, in addition to three dyads and a further four one-on-one interviews with individuals who could not attend the focus-group gatherings. All the sessions were semi-structured and took place in Zagreb, Sisak, Zadar, and several non-urban locations in 2014 and 2015. Zagreb was chosen since it is Croatia's political and cultural centre and its largest city. Sisak, a mere 60 kilometres to the south, was chosen because it was on the frontline of the war, unlike Zagreb, and since it is an industrial city it has a large working-class population. The northern Dalmatian coastal town of Zadar, also on the frontline, provides a different regional perspective than Sisak; moreover, it is known for its right-wing political complexion. The non-urban

---

<sup>12</sup> Carol A. Kidron, Toward an Ethnography of Silence. The Lived Presence of the Past in the Everyday Life of Holocaust Trauma Survivors and Their Descendants in Israel, *Current Anthropology* 50, no. 1 (2009), 5-27, 8.

<sup>13</sup> Monika Palmberger, *How Generations Remember. Conflicting Histories and Shared Memories in Post-War Bosnia and Herzegovina*, London 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Ivor Sokolić, Researching Norms, Narratives, and Transitional Justice. Focus Group Methodology in Post-Conflict Croatia, *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 6 (2016), 932-949.

<sup>15</sup> Johanna Söderström, Ex-Combatants at the Polls. Exploring Focus Groups and Electoral Meaning, *Anthropology Matters Journal* 12 (2010), 1-16.

locations were determined according to the possibility of finding participants, but all but one were held in the same regions as the urban locations.

In each location, a group was organised that comprised, respectively, middle- and high-school history teachers, members of smaller war veterans' associations, and pensioners. Teachers were chosen since they play a crucial role in the transmission of narratives to younger generations; war veterans, since they hold a particularly influential position in Croatian society; pensioners, because they have experienced the narratives of three different regime types. Snowball sampling was used to recruit participants, sometimes with the help of a gatekeeper, who was also a participant. This meant that participants referred other potential participants for the study, which also helped overcome the general distrust that the researcher occasionally encountered. All discussions included a broad set of questions about international and domestic war-crimes trials, including those of Dario Kordić and Tihomir Blaškić, as well as more general questions about Croatian involvement in Bosnia.

Dario Kordić and Tihomir Blaškić were indicted in 1995 for their roles in events that occurred in the Lašva Valley part of Bosnia. Blaškić was sentenced to 45 years' imprisonment in 2000 after being found guilty of committing, ordering, planning, or otherwise aiding in crimes against the Bosnian Muslim population in the region. In 2001 Kordić was sentenced to 25 years' imprisonment for many of the same or similar crimes perpetrated in the localities where Blaškić had been operating. The trial chamber in the latter case showed that various military units in the region acted under Kordić's direct orders, though he held no formal position in the chain of command. In 2004 Blaškić's sentence was reduced on appeal after his legal team successfully showed that, in light of the Kordić verdict, it was clear that Blaškić did not have effective control of the troops in the area.<sup>16</sup>

The researcher moderated all the groups. An interview guide was used, with each of its sections beginning with a broad topic about which the researcher would let the participants speak relatively freely and develop the topic as they saw fit. Following this initial discussion, the researcher asked more specific questions and became more actively involved in directing the conversation, which allowed for more comparisons across groups. Prior to the beginning of each group session, the

---

<sup>16</sup> See the ICTY trials of Tihomir Blaškić (IT-95-14) and Dario Kordić (IT-95-14/2), <http://www.icty.org/case/blaskic/4> and [http://www.icty.org/case/kordic\\_cerkez/4](http://www.icty.org/case/kordic_cerkez/4).

researcher would outline the aims of the research (withholding no information) and provide all participants with an information sheet that described the whole project; the participants, if they still agreed to take part, were then asked to sign a consent form, which also guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality. Only after these preliminaries would the focus-group sessions begin and the voice recorder be turned on. The use of the voice recorder freed the researcher to focus on the recording of physical gestures (such as nods or shakes of the head).

In some but not all groups, the participants knew one another. This variability was an unfortunate result of snowball sampling and its effects are difficult to determine. The social contexts of focus groups, in other words the relationships among the participants and between the participants and the researcher, as well as the more comprehensive social structures within which the discussion takes place, all influence the way the data is generated and the nature of what is produced.<sup>17</sup> These contextual effects have yet to be investigated in any depth, so it was important to avoid contaminating the data by paying careful attention to the groups' composition. For example, when interviewing teachers, the presence of a head teacher in the discussion may force other teachers to adapt their answers to what they believe their superior would like to hear. Avoiding such potential pitfalls was not always possible; the non-urban pensioners group included a husband and wife, each of whom may have tailored responses based on the other's participation. Neither member of the couple seemed to influence the other, but to further reduce the likelihood that this would happen, the follow-up dyad included the husband. At the very least his opinions did not seem to change, although this does not account for the wife's responses. Generally, follow-up interviews were used to address this problem, especially by targeting the quiet individuals within focus groups.

In hindsight, focus groups were an effective method of data collection: they made it possible to explore the construction of narratives, including the contestation and agreement that is inherent to this process. Although disagreement did not frequently occur within groups, disagreement across groups allowed comparison of how different target segments perceived Croatia's role in Bosnia. The usefulness of such comparisons, however, is limited due to its qualitative nature and to the uniqueness of the environment. While the use of focus groups and many other

---

<sup>17</sup> Jocelyn A. Hollander, The Social Contexts of Focus Groups, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 33, no. 5 (2004), 602-637.

qualitative approaches can provide greater depth to a study, which seems necessary when analysing complex interactions within politics, law, and culture, they do not lend themselves to generalisation and to comparison between cases as well as quantitative approaches do. Furthermore, more could have been done in this study to produce sequences to analyse rather than instances. The semi-structured approach to the focus groups employed in this study allowed for comparison between groups, but it did occasionally prevent the free flow of conversation. Particularly quiet groups, such as teachers, may have been more talkative in a less structured group and environment (for example, in a more informal focus group convened in a café), although such an alternative arrangement may have resulted in even more limited comparative data.

During the analysis of the transcripts, categories, if possible, were derived from the existing literature to increase the validity and reliability of the analysis. When this was not possible, categories were formed so as to account for the highly subjective nature of such an endeavour. Given the study's constructivist approach (although this is true in social-science research more broadly), it was important to be aware that the interpretation of data is a reflexive endeavour in which meanings are constructed rather than discovered.<sup>18</sup> The researcher, the method, and the data are reflexively interdependent and interconnected.<sup>19</sup> The analysis is therefore infused with the researcher's epistemological and ontological assumptions. Moreover, the story presented in this article cannot be decontextualised from the researcher's own personal background (a Croatian citizen of Croat ethnicity who has lived abroad for some time) and institutional surroundings (a British university where he is studying for a PhD, but also the broader academic environment such a project takes place in). Different researchers, especially those with differing backgrounds or those looking at the data during later time periods, may interpret these categories differently.

### **Elite Narratives and Croatian Involvement in Bosnia**

The conflict in Croatia lasted from 1991 to 1995 and ended with the controversial operations 'Flash' and 'Storm'. The conflict in Bosnia started in 1992

---

<sup>18</sup> Natasha S. Mauthner / Odette Parry / Kathryn Backett-Milburn, The Data Are Out There, or Are They? Implications for Archiving and Revisiting Qualitative Data, *Sociology* 32, no. 4 (1998), 733-745.

<sup>19</sup> Natasha S. Mauthner / Andrea Doucet, Reflexive Accounts and Accounts of Reflexivity in Qualitative Data Analysis, *Sociology* 37, no. 3 (2003), 413-431.

and continued until the end of 1995. It ended with the Dayton Peace Agreement. Whereas the former conflict witnessed violence on ethnic grounds between Croats and Serbs, the latter also involved Bosniaks. Croat forces in Bosnia operated under the banner of the Croatian Defence Council (*Hrvatsko vijeće obrane*, HVO), the official military formation of the Croatian Republic of Herzeg-Bosna, a geopolitical entity created with the aim of joining the Republic of Croatia or at least seceding from Bosnia and Herzegovina. The ICTY trials of Dario Kordić (IT-95-14/2) and Prlić et al. (IT-04-74) provided evidence of this military activity, as well as of the existence of a chain of command to Zagreb, formal or informal. In the eyes of international criminal law at the very least, then, the conflict in the region was of an international nature and Croatian involvement in the conflict occurred outside the territories of the Republic of Croatia. This assertion does not change the fact that Croatia and Croats were also attacked in Croatia, nor does it alter the suffering of the victims in Croatia. It simply means that certain political and military elites in the country had ambitions or offered support to armed forces outside the territory of the Republic of Croatia.

In Croatia, elite and everyday narratives alike (discussed in this article) deny Croatian involvement in Bosnia or, at the very least, claim that it was not aggressive in nature. This stance forms a cornerstone of the dominant war narrative of defence and is inscribed as such by parliament in institutionalised form in the Declaration on the Homeland War (*Deklaracija o Domovinskom Ratu*) of 17 October 2000 and the Declaration on Operation Storm (*Deklaracija o Oluji*) of 10 July 2006.<sup>20</sup>

Croatia transitioned from Yugoslav socialism to rule by the competitive authoritarian regime of President Franjo Tuđman and the Croatian Democratic Union (*Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica*, HDZ). Formal democratic institutions were primarily a way for the HDZ to obtain and exercise political authority, which meant that conventional standards of democracy were not met. Tuđman died in 1999 and the HDZ lost the parliamentary elections in 2000 to a centre-left coalition that began Croatia's transition to liberal democracy. Croatia's first post-Tuđman government was initially willing to actively cooperate with the ICTY but, due to a public backlash and the threat of certain facets of the war being criminalised, they issued the Declaration on the Homeland War the same year they came to power. The

---

<sup>20</sup> Deklaracija o Domovinskom ratu, *Narodne novine* 102 (2000), [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2000\\_10\\_102\\_1987.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2000_10_102_1987.html); Deklaracija o Oluji, *Narodne novine* 76 (2006), [http://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2006\\_07\\_76\\_1787.html](http://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2006_07_76_1787.html).

Declaration enshrined, in an official state pronouncement, a single interpretation of the past, whether correct or not, which paints Croatia exclusively as a victim of international ‘Greater Serbian’ aggression; it puts the whole blame for the start of the conflict on Serbia (and none on the Tudman regime); it ignores elements of civil war in the conflict (even though this is still being debated among scholars); and, though ICTY rulings have asserted official Croatian involvement in Bosnia, the Declaration’s interpretation denies that there was any state-sponsored intervention.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, binding all citizens, media outlets, and public bodies to accept these points, it elevates their status and places them amongst the core values of the Croatian state and *narod* (people / nation).

Much like the acknowledgment of Croatian military involvement in Bosnia could undermine the notion that Croatia acts only in its own defence, assessments of Operation Storm have the potential to cause the same effect, since it was an aggressive military operation to retake lands (at times this is also how it is justified as being defensive, because its aim was to *retake lost* lands). The Declaration on Operation Storm was issued in 2006 in order to pre-empt an ICTY verdict that might criminalise the military operation. Unlike its earlier counterpart, it does not focus on the core values of the Croatian state, but instead it attempts to define the nature and events of the operation. It cites key facts, actors, dates, and goals, much like a historical document, although it is not academic in nature since it does not use sources or define its terms.<sup>22</sup> It was less influential than the Declaration on the Homeland War, although it also aimed to create an official version of events that transpired during the 1990s.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, it includes large elements of the war narrative and of the narrative that regards Croatia as saving Bosnia from Serbia, a narrative repeated at the everyday level: one of the justifications for the operation was that ‘from the occupied territories of the Republic of Croatia, Serb forces organised and conducted systematic aggression against the free and liberated parts of our country

---

<sup>21</sup> 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 2014, 19-50.

<sup>22</sup> Snježana Koren, ‘Korisna prošlost’? Ratovi devetdesetih u deklaracijama hrvatskog sabora (Useful Past? The Wars of the Nineties in the Declarations of the Croatian Sabor), in: Tihomir Cipek, ed., Kultura sjećanja: 1991. Povijesni lomovi i svladanje prošlosti (Culture of Memory: 1991. Historical Breaks and Overcoming the Past), Zagreb 2011, 123-156.

<sup>23</sup> Snježana Koren, Useful Past? The Wars of the Nineties in the Declarations of the Croatian Sabor, in: Tihomir Cipek, ed., Culture of Memory: 1991. Historical Breaks and Overcoming the Past.

and neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina' (Article 1).<sup>24</sup> Article 2 focusses on the legally legitimate nature of the operation, but also on cooperation with the government of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Tuđman-Izetbegović agreement specifically (Article 2).<sup>25</sup> Article 5 states that 'Operation Storm was, by all accounts, organised and executed in the last moment, because the defeat of the Serb forces prevented a repeat "scenario" of Srebrenica in other parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially in Goražde, Bihać, Sarajevo, Tuzla, Cazinska Krajina and Posavina' (Article 5).<sup>26</sup>

This last point of the Declaration is particularly interesting, since it was often reproduced (word by word with regard to Bihać) by members of the focus groups. Overall the Declaration presented a change of tactics from its earlier counterpart, since it no longer focussed so much on defence (it is more focussed on the response to aggression) and instead centred on cooperation with Bosnia as well as allies in the West, thereby countering any arguments over Croatian aggression in the neighbouring state. Despite being the less influential of the two declarations, it still enshrined facets of the war narrative in writing, thereby quasi-legally undermining competing narratives from judicial institutions. Elements of it were reflected in the focus-group discussions.

The dominant war narrative has several key components. First and foremost is defence. The conflict is seen as an act of self-defence against an aggressor.<sup>27</sup> As Pavlaković notes, even the Croatian word for war veterans of the Homeland War is *branitelji*, or 'defenders', reinforcing this notion of defence. Second, the war narrative draws forth emotional reactions, based on symbols of struggle.<sup>28</sup> In Croatia the framing involves the idea that the fledgling state was unprepared and unarmed for the coming conflict.<sup>29</sup> Third, since Croatia is seen as having acted in self-defence, aggressors must exist. These are frequently referred to as 'Serbs/Serbia', 'Greater

---

<sup>24</sup> Declaration on Operation Storm (*Deklaracija o Oluji*).

<sup>25</sup> The Tuđman-Izetbegović agreement refers to the Split Agreement of July 1995 signed by Croatia, the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which established military cooperation primarily to relieve the siege of Bihać.

<sup>26</sup> Declaration on Operation Storm (*Deklaracija o Oluji*).

<sup>27</sup> Dejan Jović, Croatia After Tudjman. The ICTY and Issues of Transitional Justice, Chaillot Paper no. 116, Paris 2009, 13-27.

<sup>28</sup> Pavlaković, Fulfilling the Thousand-Year-Old Dream.

<sup>29</sup> Tamara Banjeglav, Conflicting Memories, Competing Narratives and Contested Histories in Croatia's Post-War Commemorative Practices, *Politička Misao* 49, no. 5 (2012), 7-31; Victor Peskin / Mieczysław Boduszynski, International Justice and Domestic Politics. Post-Tudjman Croatia and the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, *Europe-Asia Studies* 55, no. 7 (2003), 1117-1142, DOI: 10.1080/0966813032000130710.

Serbs/Serbia', 'JNA', 'Chetniks', 'communists', or any combination of these words, both in Croatia and in Bosnia. Fourth is the notion of Croatian victimhood built around several Croatian focal points, such as Vukovar and Dubrovnik, whose destruction was decried across the whole of Croatian society.<sup>30</sup> Further symbols are war crimes committed by the Yugoslav People's Army (*Jugoslovenska narodna armija*, JNA) and associated paramilitary groups as well as acts of destruction in other localities, which are more locally emphasised (for example, the attacks on Sisak and Zadar, murders in Petrinja, Glina, Škabrnja, and so on). This component was reflected in the importance Croatian elites attributed to the Croatia–Serbia International Court of Justice genocide case. Their unhappiness with the final ruling (the case was dismissed) focussed on the lack of recognition given to the amount of suffering and the level of victimhood experienced by Croatia. This ruling potentially undermined the Croatian interpretation of events, since it belittled Croatian victimhood; and yet the dismissal of the Serbian claim to genocide also reinforced the interpretation that Operation Storm was a legitimate military operation.<sup>31</sup> The narrative of the Croatian self is complex and multilayered, despite being centred on several similar themes, which stands in stark contrast to the reductionist construction of the Bosnian 'other' in Croatia.

The effect of the narrative and of the declaration on everyday narratives is discussed below, but its effect on the elite level is best exemplified by a 2001 parliamentary exchange between Vesna Pusić of the leftist Croatian People's Party (*Hrvatska narodna strana*, HNS)<sup>32</sup> and several members of parliament: Vladimir Šeks and Ivo Sanader of the HDZ and Zdravko Tomac of the Social Democratic Party of Croatia (*Socijaldemokratska partija Hrvatske*, SDP).<sup>33</sup> The heated exchange began when Pusić proclaimed that she, personally, speaking not on behalf of her party, believed that the Homeland War waged in Croatia was positive, but that it should not have been fought outside the territories of Croatia, namely in Bosnia. Her comments resulted in an avalanche of retorts, with one member of parliament quoting the

---

<sup>30</sup> Banjeglav, *Conflicting Memories, Competing Narratives and Contested Histories*; Jović, *Croatia After Tudjman*; Pavlaković, *Fulfilling the Thousand-year-old Dream*.

<sup>31</sup> International Court of Justice, *Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Croatia v. Serbia)*, <http://www.icj-cij.org/en/case/118>.

<sup>32</sup> She later served as first deputy prime minister and minister of foreign and European affairs in a centre-left coalition under prime minister Zoran Milanović (2012-2016).

<sup>33</sup> Ivo Sanader later became prime minister of Croatia. Tomac was always far more nationalistically oriented than most of his fellow party members and closely aligned himself with HDZ policies during the 1990s. He was highly critical of the ICTY and formally left the party in 2003.

Declaration on the Homeland War, stressing that it clearly states that Croatia had led a defensive, liberating war, not an aggressive conquest. Another member of parliament complained that Pusić was incorrect since the Tuđman-Izetbegović agreement had made Croatian military action in Bosnia legitimate (this claim was often repeated in the focus groups across all target segments). Several members agreed, to which Pusić responded that she had the right to her own opinion, including on the Declaration, and that she believed that the HDZ government, under Tuđman's leadership throughout the conflict, had waged an aggressive war in Bosnia. The ensuing reaction was possibly most telling of all: Vladimir Šeks requested that the parliamentary session be paused due to Pusić's insults and the speaker of the parliament asked her to apologise to the entire parliament for belittling the Declaration on the Homeland War, a demand ratified by a vote. Refusing to comply, Pusić was given an official warning. Punitive actions, such as the demand for an apology and the official warning, show the direct policy implications of the narratives and how they limit what is considered acceptable, even legal, in the Croatian political sphere.

The incident, although it occurred in 2001, is emblematic of the war narrative's current predominance and its commonly used symbols. It also shows the interaction between an emotional narrative and legal reasoning. Because the war narrative forms a key part of Croatia's nation-building and state-building projects, the understanding that Croatia was involved in an aggressive conflict in Bosnia has the potential to undermine these processes and, in the eyes of some, the legitimacy of the modern Croatian state. At the level of political elites and institutions, the declarations add expressive weight to a preferred version of history and force normative obligations on them, which may be reflected at the level of the everyday as well.

The interaction between these different understandings of the conflict is based on extra-legal, or expressivist, effects of the transitional justice process in the country and region more broadly. The expressivist aims of war-crimes trials, such as fostering pedagogical outcomes or cementing the legacies of the documentation such trials leave behind, are seen as particularly important in the aftermath of conflict, as opposed to the more traditional aims of retribution and deterrence.<sup>34</sup> These aims have

---

<sup>34</sup> Mark A. Drumbl, *Atrocity, Punishment and the Law*, Cambridge 2007; Mark Osiel, *Making Sense of Mass Atrocity*, Cambridge 1998.

also been noted in studies of the former Yugoslav states.<sup>35</sup> International and domestic war-crimes trials, among their numerous goals, have attempted to achieve a sense of legitimacy in transition and to draw a line separating the present from the past.<sup>36</sup> The trial chambers have even stated expressivist goals in their verdicts, such as the strengthening of social solidarity and the incubation of particular forms of moral consensus in the public. Moreover, this sort of aim was manifested specifically in a trial related to Croatian involvement in Bosnia.<sup>37</sup> In other words, trials that were intended to lead to a different understanding of the conflict and judicial narratives were meant to interact with the war narrative. These goals, however, remained secondary for legal institutions and in particular for the ICTY.

Thus the Croatian state, post-2000, could comply with ICTY requests but also conduct domestic affairs as it wished and to simultaneously promote a different story to domestic audiences, which allowed the state to preserve the nationalist understanding of and narrative surrounding the Homeland War and the idea that Croatia played purely a defensive role in it.<sup>38</sup> Lamont frames this tactic within the larger strategy of successive Croatian governments to accept the normative and legal framework of the Tribunal system while also occasionally mounting legal challenges to specific indictments and investigations. This approach meant that the state was propagating countervailing norms that often limited its ability to cooperate with Tribunal requests. Despite the prosecution and conviction of Croatian generals, Croats continued to believe that their own citizens did not perpetrate war crimes. Prime Minister Ivo Sanader and his government regarded compliance as an unavoidable legal obligation, but at the same time, before a domestic audience, attempted to challenge the Gotovina indictment, for example. Compliance with the Tribunal was designed to fit within a broader legalistic strategy of defiance that allowed HDZ-led governments to present their formal conformity to international obligations even as

---

<sup>35</sup> Eric Gordy, *Guilt, Responsibility and Denial. The Past at Stake in Post-Milošević Serbia*, Philadelphia 2014; Lara J. Nettelfield, *Courting Democracy in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Hague Tribunal's Impact in a Postwar State*, Cambridge 2010; Jelena Obradović-Wochnik, *Ethnic Conflict and War Crimes in the Balkans. The Narratives of Denial in Post-Conflict Serbia*, London 2013; Mladen Ostojić, *Between Justice and Stability. The Politics of War Crimes Prosecutions in Post-Milošević Serbia*, Farnham 2014; Pavlaković, *Fulfilling the Thousand-year-old Dream*; Jelena Subotić, *Hijacked Justice: Dealing with the Past in the Balkans*, Ithaca/NY 2009.

<sup>36</sup> Ruti G. Teitel, *The Law and Politics of Contemporary Transitional Justice*, *Cornell International Law Journal* 38, no. 3 (2005), 837-862, <http://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/cilj/vol38/iss3/9>.

<sup>37</sup> ICTY trial of Dario Kordić, *ICTY Prosecutor v. Kordić and Čerkez*, IT-95-14/2-A.

<sup>38</sup> Chris K. Lamont, *International Criminal Justice and the Politics of Compliance*, Farnham 2010; Subotić, *Hijacked Justice*.

they also contested ICTY indictments. Croatia was not unique in this sense. In Serbia the ICTY lacked awareness of domestic political circumstances, which curtailed its ability to affect the transitional justice process. The Serbian government felt threatened by what ‘truth-telling’ efforts could do, such as endanger its stability and legitimacy, and these concerns ultimately meant that transitional justice policies generally had only a superficial effect.<sup>39</sup> In Kosovo, on the other hand, the top-down approach to transitional justice focussed on institutions and ignored truth-seeking, victim support, reparations, and community-level reconciliation.<sup>40</sup>

### **The Unknown Conflict**

For the most part, participants in the study claimed not to be familiar with the conflict in Bosnia and, while they were often keen to elaborate on any other topic concerning Croatia’s 1991-1995 conflict, this subject was often met with blunt and brief professions of ignorance. There was a general lack of willingness to elaborate on the topic: participants either ignored the ICTY trials dealing with Croatian involvement in Bosnia or were ignorant of them. Not that the ICTY hadn’t tried to foster awareness: its numerous efforts to disseminate information had included streamed broadcasts of hearings and publication of transcripts, the production of easy-to-digest case summaries, and endeavours to make court documents and press releases generally available, along with other Outreach Programme activities:

Moderator – What do you think of the Dario Kordić trial?

NU.T.3 – I do not know. I did not follow it at all.

Moderator – What about the Tihomir Blaškić trial?

NU.T.3 – He is the one from Bosnia and Herzegovina. I do not know, I also did not follow it. (dyad with non-urban teachers)

Such brief answers exemplify the unwillingness to discuss the topic, as do long pauses and silences (a benefit of focus-group research is the production of such moments), which often occurred at this point in the group discussions. The Sisak war veterans starkly showed this reluctance by refusing to speak at all either about the

---

<sup>39</sup> Mladen Ostojić, *Between Justice and Stability*.

<sup>40</sup> Anna Di Lellio / Caitlin McCurn, *Engineering Grassroots Transitional Justice in the Balkans*, *East European Politics and Societies* 27, no. 1 (2013), 129-148, DOI: 10.1177/0888325412464550.

conflict or the related ICTY trials. Moreover, the notion of a defensive Croatian war was itself used as a defence mechanism by the group to avoid difficult topics (a recurring feature in these discussions):

Moderator – What do you think of the trial of Dario Kordić?

SI.V.1 and SI.V.2 vocally protest

SI.V.2 – I would not like to answer that question.

Moderator – Could I then ask about the related trial of Tihomir Blaškić?

SI.V.1 – I would rather not speak about individuals at all.

SI.V.2 – You asked us about a defensive war, about individuals no.

Moderator – We can skip it, it is not a problem.

SI.V.1 – They have their lawyers, a whole team working for them, who are familiar with their affairs.

SI.V.2 – We are just mere mortals.

SI.V.1 – I would rather not hurt any individuals, I do not want to talk about it. (focus group with Sisak war veterans)

This sequence illustrates the fear that the topic of Bosnia can elicit, especially in war veterans. The perceived potential to incriminate the Croatian war narrative has significant implications, since it can undermine the entire Croatian understanding of Croatia's role in the war, which in turn delegitimises Croatian national identity. This understanding is particularly important to war veterans, to whom the war remains a central feature of daily life and who define and position themselves in society based on shared notions of suffering, victimhood, and innocence.

The overall effect of this lack of knowledge regarding the conflict, or at least the respondents' claims of ignorance, is twofold. First, it works in concert with the dominant Croatian war narrative of victimhood, in this case of Croats being ignorant because they are 'a small people'. This framing can be understood in orientalist terms, since Croatian identity is one of belonging to the West without necessarily being quite equal members of it. Consequently, within a framework of nesting orientalism (discussed below), Bosnians are relativised as inferior to Croats. The second effect is that this understanding, in turn, relativises Croatian and Bosnian notions of victimhood by making Croatian victimhood real, confirmed, and irrefutable, whilst casting doubt on the veracity and legitimacy of Bosnian victimhood. Thus the right of

Croats, any Croat, to speak about what happened in Bosnia is removed; it denies Bosnians such a right due to their purportedly savage nature; and international actors in this context are highly distrusted. No one, then, is permitted to contest the dominant narrative. This effect recurred in many facets of how the respondents viewed the Bosnian conflict. It is premised on the notion that while all Croatians know that Croatia and Croatians were the undeniable victims of Serbian aggression, respondents did not know whether Bosnians (in particular Bosniaks and Serbs) could also be accorded the status of victim, since they do not know what happened in Bosnia:

ZG.P.2 – In Bosnia all kinds of things happened. It was a dirty war. In some places Bosniaks and Croats started together, they tied flags together and so on, only to later fight between themselves. In other places Serbs and Croats cooperated to fight the Bosniaks, and so on. I do not know much about this.

ZG.P.1 – This is why I would rather we limit ourselves to Croatia. Bosnians can talk about Bosnia.

ZG.P.2 – That is fine.

ZG.P.1 – We are not familiar enough with it. Because we were gripped by war. In Slovenia and in Croatia.

ZG.P.2 – But it is all closely connected. Bosnia and Croatia.

ZG.P.1 – But in Croatia we are not familiar enough with the situation in Bosnia to be able to discuss it.

ZG.P.3 – This is what I wanted to say, that we do not have the right information!

ZG.P.1 – But if you lived in Croatia, then you can talk, you know what was happening to Croatia. (focus group with Zagreb pensioners)

This sequence is interesting because the initial premise of a lack of knowledge leads to ZG.P.1 insisting several times that Bosnia cannot be discussed, since the group does not know enough about it, though they can talk about Croatia. By referring to the conflicts in Croatia and Slovenia, the respondent also stresses (over and over again) the perceived aggression visited upon the two states. In this manner, the war narrative of Croatian defence and victimhood is reproduced consistently, whilst acknowledgment or even the mere discussion of Bosnia and Bosnian victimhood occurs only in a highly selective manner—only when it complements,

rather than contradicts, the overwhelmingly dominant Croatian war narrative. This relativisation recurs time and again in other facets of this narrative; and in those instances when Bosnian victimhood and suffering *is* discussed, it is exclusively related to aggressive Serbian policies (again, reinforcing the selective nature of the narrative).

In this instance, the elite and the everyday narratives differ. The elite narrative stresses the positive nature of Croatian involvement as proven fact, whereas the everyday narrative stresses first and foremost the conflict's unknown nature. Both reinforce the notions of nesting orientalism and of Bosnia as the inferior 'other': the elite narrative through benevolent paternalism (Croatia as the saviour), the everyday narrative through a reduction of the conflict by painting it as unknown.

### **Extreme, Grotesque, and Savage Bosnia**

The Bosnian conflict and Bosnia more broadly were also presented as extreme, grotesque, even savage. This characterisation directly or indirectly juxtaposed Bosnia (as savage) with Croatia (as not). It also fits into the broader narrative that includes Croatia within the Western tradition of civilisation, as opposed to (in particular Serbian) Eastern savagery.<sup>41</sup> By painting the Bosnian conflict as extreme, chaotic, and unknown, individuals were able to more easily distance themselves from the reality of the situation. Bosnians (of any ethnicity) were likened to savages, much as Serbs were, distinguishing them from Croats. They therefore do not belong to the Croatian state, nation, or tradition, nor is their role one of innocent victims.

This phenomenon can be understood using Bakić-Hayden's theoretical framework of 'nesting orientalism', in which the label of the 'other' has been appropriated by those who have themselves been labelled as such in traditional orientalist discourse.<sup>42</sup> This sort of othering has been particularly salient in the identity politics of the former Yugoslav states, where the people in areas previously under Habsburg rule see themselves as being more European than those from areas once under Ottoman rule. Moreover, the 'other' is often constructed in a simple,

---

<sup>41</sup> Nataša Zambelli, A Journey Westward. A Poststructuralist Analysis of Croatia's Identity and the Problem of Cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, *Europe-Asia Studies* 62, no. 10 (2010), 1661-1682, DOI: 10.1080/09668136.2010.522424.

<sup>42</sup> Milica Bakić-Hayden, Nesting Orientalism. The Case of Former Yugoslavia, *Slavic Review* 54, no. 4 (1995), 917-931, 922.

reductionist fashion, especially in comparison to the complexity of the ‘self’. In this sense, the Croatian war narrative is complex and involves many variations of the same themes of victimhood and defence, whereas the Bosnian experience is posited simply and exclusively as something unknown and chaotic. The implication of the nesting orientalism expressed by participants in the study treated here is a negation of the full political, historical, and cultural capacity of Bosnia-Herzegovina.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, if Croatia is understood to have taken part in the Bosnian conflict, its participation would delegitimise its self-perception as a civilised, European nation. The Bosnian conflict’s construction as chaotic and unknown inherently differentiates it from the known and clear (in terms of aggressor and victim) Croatian conflict:

SI.P.4 – Bosnia is too difficult. I know for sure that [the different ethnicities] would lend each other tanks when they needed to. For 2,000 Deutsche Marks you could rent a tank. I cannot comprehend that war. That is insane, but it is the truth. They rent a tank from the one side that has it and use it to fight against the third party. And most likely the third party then rents the tank to fight the others. Bosnia is difficult. (focus group with Sisak pensioners)

This Sisak pensioner constructs his narrative so that no one in Bosnia is portrayed as having been innocent—but no one in particular is guilty either, especially when measured against the clear guilt of one party in the Croatian conflict. Throughout the focus-group discussions, no clear distinctions were made among the various ethnicities. At times Serbs and Serbia were blamed for starting the conflict through their aggression; at other times all three ‘savage’ ethnic groups were collectively blamed. The narrative that took hold during the early 1990s in Croatia, which posited that the *Hercegovci* (or the ‘Herzegovina mafia’) were to blame for an increase in nationalism, was not at all present in the transcripts. This study is not representative enough to make any conclusive claims, but such a shift in the narrative construction of the conflict may highlight the fluid nature of nesting orientalism.<sup>44</sup>

### **Croatian Involvement in Bosnia**

---

<sup>43</sup> Bakić-Hayden, *Nesting Orientalism*, 922-926.

<sup>44</sup> Bakić-Hayden, *Nesting Orientalism*, 930.

The respondents did not discuss Croatian involvement in Bosnia at length, but when they did, they acknowledged positive and negative involvement. Sometimes respondents would acknowledge both sorts of involvement, but many only discussed Croatia's perceived positive role in Bosnia. Survey results are also indicative of the public's ambiguous view of the Croatian state's role in Bosnia. When asked whether presidents Tuđman and Milošević had agreed to a division of Bosnia in Karadžorđevo,<sup>45</sup> thereby implying some kind of illicit Croatian involvement, 34% answered that they did not know, and 40% answered that they believe this to some degree; only 17.1% were neutral and 14.7% did not believe there had been an agreement.<sup>46</sup>

That Croatia had played a positive role in Bosnia was, among the study's participants, the mainstream view shared across all groups. This interpretation was seen as obvious, official, and exculpatory in relation to the alleged and thus less clear negative role. It also relativised and somewhat excused the negative role by providing a type of moral licensing. It was centred on two memories: the reception of Bosniak refugees in Croatia during the conflict, and the official Tuđman-Izetbegović agreement. As discussed above, here the elite and everyday views differ. The elite narrative of paternalism (expressing a positive role, with Croatia as saviour) can be traced back to the Tuđman period. It subsumes Bosnian cultural, historical, and political identity within Croatian identity.<sup>47</sup> The everyday narrative does not subsume Bosnian identity in the same manner, since its focus is on the unknown and uncivilised nature of Bosnia, implying that Bosnian identity is inferior.

During the Bosnian conflict, Croatia took in a large number of refugees from the neighbouring state (surpassed only by the number of internally displaced persons within Bosnia itself). The situation put a significant strain on the Croatian economy at a time when the country was also at war, but it also worked in concert with the narrative of Croatian victimhood and sacrifice:

ZG.P.1 – In my house I had a whole Muslim family from Bosnia. Us Croats helped a lot.

ZG.P.2 agrees.

---

<sup>45</sup> This refers to the meeting held between Tuđman and Milošević at Karadžorđevo in March 1991, where the two leaders were rumoured to have discussed the partitioning of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

<sup>46</sup> Ipsos Puls, Izbori 2011 (Elections 2011), January 2012.

<sup>47</sup> Bakić-Hayden, Nesting Orientalism.

ZG.P.1 – I have a relatively large house and I took a whole Muslim family. We helped. Since we have connections abroad, our Viennese friends brought help. I personally took supplies to Kozari Bok, where there was a Muslim camp. We helped them. We took them to hospital. No one can say that we wanted this war. And the world would have thought very differently had we just let them out over our border. Croatia also carried on its back half of the Bosnian war and its armament. I know a lot about this. (focus group with Zagreb pensioners)

The Zagreb pensioner highlights how the international nature of the conflict is reconfigured to exist only within a domestic narrative of Croatian victimhood. No opposing narratives are allowed to exist (the conflict's international dimension notwithstanding). In the sequence, the respondent even relates refugees to the central war-narrative theme of unarmed Croatian defence. In Banovina, war veterans highlighted how these Bosniak refugees remain in Croatia, thereby exacerbating the feeling of prolonged victimhood. In this manner the Croatian role in the Bosnian conflict does not contest, but rather reinforces, the dominant war narrative of defence.

There is also an official nature to the positive role assigned to Croatia in the Bosnian conflict, which is embodied in the Tuđman-Izetbegović agreement and is directly reflected in elite narratives, such as that of the Declaration on Operation Storm. The purported good of the agreement was often a counter to any charge of potential negative involvement, since this agreement is seen as proof of both the overt help given to Bosnia and the fraternal bond between Croatia and Bosnia. Such a characterisation, again, reinforces the dominant Croatian war narrative and is reproduced through personal experience:

ZA.V.2 – There was the Tuđman-Izetbegović agreement about a joint defence.

ZA.V.4 – There was a joint defence.

ZA.V.2 – We gave them weapons.

ZA.V.4 – Against the aggression. And at the same time, Croatia is caring for 500,000 Bosniaks. In Zadar, which is on the front line, ZA.V.3 will tell you, she has a summer house on the island, a thousand Bosniaks went there to stay. Artillery fire can still hit them, but we are taking the Bosniaks in.

ZA.V.3 – By Bosniak we mean people of the Muslim faith. So that there is no confusion. Bosniaks can be Croats or Serbs from Bosnia.

ZA.V.4 – Yes, Muslims. But during this period they are our brothers who are threatened just like us. So we are taking care of their refugees.

ZA.V.1 – I am a living witness because until 1992 I lived among them. My husband was Muslim. And I lived among them and in 1992 together with them I barely got out alive. (focus group with Zadar war veterans)

This narrative was particularly common amongst war veterans; the sequence connecting refugees, the Tuđman-Izetbegović agreement, and Croatian victimhood was often repeated. It was, however, also present with the other target segments, who equally felt that the world saw Croatia save Bosnia, that the agreement was the formal acknowledgement of this act of salvation, and that this role, unambiguously positive, was far more concrete and well defined in relation to a potential ‘grey’ negative role. The perceived heroism of the Croatian army is probably best highlighted by how many participants claimed that Croatian involvement had prevented another Srebrenica from happening in Bihać, which is also directly reflected in the Declaration on Operation Storm. When the negative role was acknowledged, other than being relativised in relation to the positive role, it was also seen as having been mitigated by the need to ‘defend one’s own *narod*’.

The narrative of Croatia’s positive role provided moral justification for its negative role in the conflict. For many respondents, this balancing exhibited itself through the stating of the positive role when asked about the negative role, which was then ignored or met with a refusal to discuss. Others, however, did acknowledge the negative role. This is the only theme that saw significant variation across target segments. All groups of teachers acknowledged the negative role, while none of the war veterans did. Pensioners were split: those in Sisak and Zagreb acknowledged it, those in Zadar and the non-urban location did not. Why this is the case is outside the scope of this study, especially since its sample is not representative. Teachers were younger and better educated than the other two target segments, and pensioners’ groups whose members acknowledged the negative role had completed more years of education than those that did not. But neither group can be analysed in any conclusive manner. Additionally, as discussed above, the war narrative is particularly central to war veterans since it defines their place in Croatian society.

The quote by the Sisak teacher presented above highlights how the negative role is mentioned in relation to the positive one and how it is considered far less clear. In all instances, the negative effects were always somehow relativised:

ZA.T.2 – Given [Kordić] was sentenced, I assume he is guilty. I do not think it is a big problem to disagree with the verdict, maybe he is innocent after all, what do I know? But it is problematic to welcome him as a positive individual, even though he was found guilty. You can then compare that to Gotovina, who was found innocent. It is not correct towards Gotovina in the end, or to the victims.

ZA.T.1 – I agree.

ZA.T.3 – Bosnia is such a complex topic, I would rather not add anything.  
(focus group with Zadar teachers)

Manifestations of nesting orientalism further exacerbate the disregard of Croatian involvement by portraying Bosnia as the ‘other’. Its savageness is used as a ‘rhetorical screen’ that obscures the disputed notions of state, nation, and ethnic identity that helped cause the conflict.<sup>48</sup> The social world is divided into two stark realms: the civilised as peaceful and the uncivilised as violent. The implication is that the latter is made responsible for violence and disorder, and what is thereby ignored is the potential for violence in the ‘self’. Croatia is absolved of any possible responsibility.<sup>49</sup> Participants in the study, and the Croatian state more broadly, deny being Balkan in the same way that Bosnia is Balkan, thereby constructing Croatian involvement in the conflict as something wholly different than that of its ‘Balkan’ participants. Groups that do acknowledge the potential negative Croatian role also construct a more nuanced version of the ‘other’ in relation to the ‘self’, thereby removing some notions of nesting orientalism.

Certainly some of the teachers in the study seemed to be aware of the gravity of Croatian involvement in Bosnia. A Zagreb teacher highlighted how Croatia was on the cusp of international sanctions for its involvement, whilst a non-urban teacher highlighted that this issue is ignored in Croatian society and that any narrative of victimhood can be misused to hide such issues. Without fail, however, the expression

---

<sup>48</sup> Bakić-Hayden, *Nesting Orientalism*, 929.

<sup>49</sup> Andrew Hodges, *The Hooligan as ‘Internal’ Other? Football Fans, Ultras Culture and Nesting Intra-Orientalisms*, *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 51, no. 4 (2016), 410-427, 411.

of these perspectives included relativisation in some form, highlighting the potential development of a collective amnesia and diminishing the pedagogical effects of the ICTY.

### **Conclusion**

Consideration of the Bosnian conflict has the potential to provide a powerful counter-narrative to the Croatian war narrative of exclusive victimhood and defence, since it involved Croatian aggression in a foreign state. Among the participants in this study, such a counter-narrative has not emerged. Transitional justice efforts, especially those of the ICTY, did not have a significant effect on changing dominant narratives, and the way the respondents in this study view the Croatian role in Bosnia is in great part defined by the dominant war narrative. The robustness of that narrative and its dampening effect on alternative conceptions are particularly relevant today since relations between Croatia and Bosnia often deteriorate precisely over the narrative of the war. Moreover, the recent influx of asylum seekers and economic migrants into Croatia has evoked the respondents' starkest memories of the Bosnian conflict: recollections of refugees, in particular Muslim refugees, finding shelter in the country.

Overall, respondents found it hard to comment on the Bosnian conflict, which for them represented something unknown. This declared sense of ignorance may have been a strategy to avoid the topic: one can hardly expect individuals to possess no knowledge of the conflict whatsoever, and the war veterans, arguably the individuals most invested in the Homeland War's memory and symbolism, were those who were the least willing to comment and, in the case of the Sisak war veterans, who most strongly reacted to the topic. When the conflict was discussed, it was universally portrayed as chaotic and savage, which helped individuals differentiate it from Croatia and the Croatian conflict, which was clearer (having an obvious aggressor and victim) and not savage. This phenomenon is best explained using the conceptual framework of nesting orientalism, in that Bosnia represents the 'other' to the Croatian 'self'. This attitude can be traced to the Tuđmanist legacy as a way of negating the full legitimacy of the Bosnian state.

When Croatian involvement in the Bosnian conflict was acknowledged, it took positive and negative forms. The more prominent positive view focussed on Croatia's taking in of Bosniak refugees and Croatia saving Bosnia in the wake of the official

Tuđman-Izetbegović agreement. This laudatory characterisation of Croatian involvement worked in concert with the dominant Croatian war narrative and enhances the notion of Croatian victimhood, sacrifice, and heroic survival in the face of a better armed, larger Serbian aggressor. Moreover, it provided a type of moral licensing: in other words, it undergirded an apologetic discourse with regard to consideration of Croatia's negative role in Bosnia. This negative role, most prominently exemplified by illicit Croatian military involvement in Bosnia, is supported by ICTY judgements, which show that a chain of command existed between the Croatian government in Zagreb and forces in Bosnia. Respondents, however, found this involvement to be unclear in comparison to the positive forms of intervention in the conflict and, at least with the respondents in this study, the ICTY judgements seem to have not much affected how they constructed their understanding of the conflict.

The various target segments in the study constructed the narrative of Croatian involvement in Bosnia in a similar way. All groups stressed the same themes in much the same manner. The key difference concerned the perceptions of negative Croatian involvement. War veterans and two groups of pensioners did not mention this at all, while all the teachers and the other two groups of pensioners did at least remark upon it, although with much relativisation and only after much probing. This is, however, significant since it does allow alternative discursive options a space to exist within the consensus interpretation of events, whereas the veterans' and pensioners' lack of acknowledgment of the negative aspects of Croatian involvement suggests a discursive monopoly about the conflict. Further, representative study will be required to ascertain why the former groups may be deliberating on issues while others are not, although levels of education and age cohort may be key. Moreover, for the war veterans, the potential of 'incriminating' the war narrative also holds the possibility that their understandings of their own selves will be 'incriminated'.

Croatian elite narratives about the Bosnian conflict and the Croatian involvement in it are reflected in everyday narratives. The narrative propagated by transitional justice authorities, on the other hand, has had little effect. Causality is difficult to ascertain and it is impossible to tell whether the elite narrative sets the terms of the everyday one or vice versa. What is clear is that the facets of the Bosnian conflict, as well as court decisions more broadly, which work in concert with the dominant war narrative resonate more powerfully with individuals. The declarations

certainly add expressive weight to a preferred version of history, and whilst they do not penalise the expression of contrary views, they confer normative obligations on individuals. In other words, they seem to define the framework within which these discussions take place.

The elite and everyday narratives, therefore, generally overlap and work in concert with each other. They both broadly deny negative Croatian involvement, they both claim that Croatia saved Bosnia, and they both lie within the framework of nesting orientalism, in which Croatia is seen as superior to Bosnia. They diverge in the manner in which these points of emphasis are effected. The elite narrative stresses, first and foremost, the notion of benevolent paternalism. It is an instrumentalised narrative and a remnant of the politics of the 1990s, which aimed to subsume parts of Bosnia within Croatia. The everyday narrative, by contrast, achieves this reduction by painting Bosnia as savage. This characterisation helps define Croatian conceptions of itself within Europe, but it does not imply subsumption.

These results raise further questions that are outside of the scope of this study. For example, why have the ICTY and transitional justice authorities not had more of an influence? Is there a collective ignorance or amnesia towards these issues and, if so, what can now be done to reverse this trend? The study does, at the very least, hint at a collective avoidance of the topic, especially with the two older target segments who were more involved in the conflict, many of whom still relive their memories of the war on a daily basis. Focus groups are an excellent method of data-gathering for this type of inquiry, especially when they generate sequences to analyse. In this instance, however, they can also be limiting, since the topic was so often met with brief responses, if any at all. Silences, pauses, and brief responses are in themselves fruitful material for analysis, but they can also limit the benefits of focus-group research. The topic would, nevertheless, benefit from a complementary approach (for example, in-depth interviews or ethnographic study) that would allow for more expansion on key topics. Moreover, these results are only indicative and require support from larger, quantitative research, which can help show how the broader Croatian public views the Croatian role in the Bosnian conflict.

Corresponding author

**Ivor Sokolić**, London School of Economics and Political Science, Department of Government, Houghton Street, London, WC2A 2AE, United Kingdom, [i.sokolic@lse.ac.uk](mailto:i.sokolic@lse.ac.uk)