

Ready for Memory Wars:

THE CASE OF THE HOS MEMORIAL
PLAQUE IN CROATIA



Humanitarian Law Center Foundation

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Belgrade, November 2023



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Abstract

This report focuses on Croatia and the use of hate speech and controversial symbols for the maintenance of symbolic boundaries, the reinforcement of a one-sided version of the past, and the mobilization of voters. The presence and use of the Ustaša salutation, “Ready for the Homeland” (*Za dom spremni* – expanded upon in a later section and referred to as: the ZDS) is a consistent example of those tendencies. In recent years, the salutation has become increasingly intertwined with the legacies of World War Two and the 1990s Croatian War of Independence (predominantly referred to as the *Homeland War*, or *Domovinski rat* in Croatian), while simultaneously reflecting the rise of nationalism and radical-right parties and movements in Croatia as well as abroad. The report presents insights into the ways ZDS is used to reify national identity, while centering around some of the main actors perpetuating this dynamic, such as politicians and war veterans. Accordingly, it focuses primarily on the case of the memorial plaque erected in 2016 by former members of the Croatian Defence Forces paramilitary unit, which included the ZDS salutation. At one point threatening to topple the government, the case demonstrates how the salute is used to maintain the dominant narrative of the *Homeland War*.

The first section presents an overview of the use and presence of the ZDS salutation in contemporary Croatia, namely, following Croatia’s accession to the European Union in July 2013. The second section considers the role played by Croatia’s *Homeland War* veterans in Croatia’s politics and society and is followed by a section about the Croatian Defence Forces (*Hrvatske obrambene snage*, HOS), a paramilitary unit that was active during the *Homeland War*. The case of the HOS memorial plaque which triggered a strong local and international backlash in 2016 and 2017 on account of the fact it contained the inscription of the ZDS salutation, is discussed in the following part of the report. The penultimate section introduces the *Dialogue Document* as a response to the HOS plaque, while the final part considers the intertwining of the salutation with the enshrined *Homeland War* narrative.

1. The presence and use of *Za dom spremni* in Croatia

When it comes to nationalistically fueled hate speech in Croatia, its presence has been reflected predominantly through symbols that praise the legacy of the Nazi-aligned, fascist-backed WWII Independent State of Croatia (NDH, *Nezavisna država Hrvatska*), that existed from 1941 until 1945. The ZDS as the official salute of the NDH Ustaša regime was used in documents and declarations that sent thousands of innocent civilians to their deaths (see Mataušić 2003).¹

In contemporary Croatia, the ZDS can be observed as an example of hate speech as well as a controversial symbol. For many in Croatia and neighbouring countries, the salutation is interpreted as hate speech advocating radical right positions, while as a controversial symbol, the presence of the ZDS significantly hinders any efforts to counter or regulate it because of being appropriated as a symbol of the *Homeland War* by some war veterans' organisations, politicians, and radical right parties, groups, and individuals. There is no doubt that "the same object can symbolise two quite different ideas and emotions, and the particular meaning depends on the context within which the symbol is used".² However, while symbols certainly have the capacity to acquire additional meanings, this does not mean that the original meanings somehow disappear. Precisely this has usually served as an argument in favor of ZDS from the side of politicians, war veterans' associations, and radical-right organisations and parties. Namely, that the ZDS is first and foremost

1 Mataušić, Nataša. *Jasenovac 1941. - 1945. Logor Smrti I Radni Logor*. Jasenovac: Javna Ustanova Spomen-Područje Jasenovac, 2003.

2 Mach, Zdzisław. *Symbols, conflict and identity: Essays in political anthropology*, 25. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993.

a symbol of Croatia's victory and defence during the *Homeland War* and that it has no – or little – relation to the WWII Ustaša regime. This, of course, is far from a legitimate argument since the ZDS was used precisely with the aim of evoking the Ustaša legacy during the *Homeland War*.³

Besides the use of the salutation by some war veterans' organisations, the ZDS has manifested in diverse cultural layers, and been utilised to reify national identity as well as reinforce enshrined war narratives. Some prominent cases include the use of the ZDS during football matches, which has demonstrated the importance of football for the construction and dissemination of social memory.⁴ The proliferation and use of the ZDS on Croatian right-wing Facebook pages has indicated the tendency to reproduce the notion of *Croatianness* as opposed to the notion of the *Yugoslav* by maintaining symbolic divisions between *us* and *them*, i.e., the perceived enemy.⁵ The salute has also been a part of commemorative practices, especially the annual Bleiburg commemoration.⁶

The musician Marko Perković Thompson has been among the most influential nationalist figures in Croatian popular culture, becoming famous during the *Homeland War* with his song "Bojna Čavoglave" (*Čavoglave* Battalion), that starts with the ZDS salutation. The song features some blatantly polarising lyrics, such as when Thompson sings that the Serb enemy will not enter his village as long as there are Croats alive. Despite his controversial performances, in the early summer of the year 2020 the High Court of Misdemeanours in Zagreb ruled that Thompson had not violated public order or breached the peace by

3 Veselinović, Velimir. "Franjo Tuđman i Pravaši." *Politička misao* 53, no. 1 (2016): 71–102.

4 Brentin, Dario. "Ready for the Homeland? Ritual, Remembrance, and Political Extremism in Croatian Football." *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 6 (2016): 860–76. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2015.1136996>.

5 Damcevic, Katarina, and Filip Rodik. "Ready for the Homeland: Hate Speech on Croatian Right-Wing Public Facebook Pages." *Romanian Journal of Communication and Public Relations* 20, no. 3 (2019): 31–52. <https://doi.org/10.21018/rjcp.2018.3.264>.

6 The annual Croatian right-wing gathering in Bleiburg, Austria, commemorates the deaths of Nazi-allied Croatian troops and civilians. In 2019, Austria banned two Croatian Ustaša symbols: the letter "U" with a grenade, and the checkerboard coat of arms with the white field under a stylised letter U, used in the NDH flag. See "Austria Bans Two Croatian Ustaša Symbols"

Pavlaković, Vjeran, Dario Brentin, and Davor Pauković. "The Controversial Commemoration: Transnational Approaches to Remembering Bleiburg." *Politička misao* 55, no. 2 (2018): 7–32. <https://doi.org/10.20901/pm.55.2.01>.

Rudic, Filip. "Austria Bans Two Croatian Ustasa Symbols." *Balkan Insight*, February 13, 2019. <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/02/13/austria-bans-two-croatian-ustasa-symbols/>.

Rudic, Filip. "Austria Bans Two Croatian Ustasa Symbols." *Balkan Insight*, February 13, 2019. <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/02/13/austria-bans-two-croatian-ustasa-symbols/>.

chanting the Ustaša salutation at his August 2017 “Operation Storm” concert.⁷ Namely, the majority of the judges decided that the salutation at the beginning of Thompson’s song does not constitute a violation when the song is performed by the author in its original form. Fifteen out of the twenty judges that were present ruled in favour of the salute remaining a part of Thompson’s song, while four judges advanced the position according to which the public use of the salutation (always and regardless of circumstances) was illegal and constituted a misdemeanour.⁸

That same year a group of Dinamo Zagreb football fans, namely members of the Bad Blue Boys ultras group, gathered in Zagreb holding up lighted torches and a banner that contained the slogan “We’re going to fuck Serbian women and children” and the ZDS salutation. They also held flags of the Croatian Defence Forces paramilitary unit, which was active during the *Homeland War* and remains notorious for their use of Ustaša symbols. Responses to the incident were immediate and predominantly condemnatory, especially given the presence of an explicit call for violence and came from politicians and scholars, as well as the general public. However, despite the heated reactions, the incident did not result in the development of any concrete initiatives or regulations aimed at mitigating the use of Ustaša insignia.⁹

In the context of the public’s attitudes towards contentious symbols, authors Nebojša Blanuša and Enes Kulenović conducted survey research into Croatian citizens’ tendency to legally sanction hate speech and contentious symbols that are associated with Fascism and Communism.¹⁰ The results of their research demonstrated that more than 80% of Croat citizens would ban direct hate speech directed towards certain groups, including the use of Nazi symbols. 47% of citizens, however, advocate for the preservation of the

7 Vladislavjević, Anja. “Croatian Court Rules ‘Thompson’ Song Did Not Break Law.” *Balkan Insight*, June 4, 2020. <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/06/03/croatian-court-rules-thompson-song-did-not-break-law/>.

8 Lukić, Slavica. “Thompson Smije Vikati ‘za Dom Spremnii’ Na Početku PJESME ‘Bojna Čavoglave’ Visoki Prekršajni Sud Donio Odluku Koja Je Obvezujuća Za Sve Suce Tog Suda (Thompson Can Shout ‘Za Dom Spremnii’ At The Beginning Of The SONG ‘Bojna Čavoglave’ The High Criminal Court Has Made a Decision That is Binding for All Judges of That Court).” *Jutarnji*, June 3, 2020. <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/thompson-smije-vikati-za-dom-spremnii-na-pocetku-pjesme-bojna-cavoglave-visoki-prekršajni-sud-donio-odluku-koja-je-obvezujuća-za-sve-suce-tog-suda-10368703>.

9 Vladislavjević, Anja. “Zagreb Fans’ Obscene Anti-Serb Banner Sparks Outrage.” *Balkan Insight*, June 18, 2020. <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/06/12/zagreb-fans-obscene-anti-serb-banner-sparks-outrage/>.

10 Blanuša, Nebojša, and Enes Kulenović. “Hate Speech, Contentious Symbols and Politics of Memory: Survey Research on Croatian Citizens’ Attitudes.” *Croatian Political Science Review* 55, no. 4 (2018): 176–202.

Homeland War monuments that contain *Za dom spremni*.¹¹ A relevant question that arises from the aforementioned results is whether the salutation is perceived as hate speech by a large portion of those 80% who are in favour of sanctioning hate speech.



¹¹ Ibid., 198.

2. Croatia's war veterans

Veterans of the *Homeland War* in Croatia maintain a high position in society and politics and are often referred to by the national media and politicians as the creators of Croatia.¹² As demonstrated in scholarly research, Croatia's war veterans are considered to be the embodiment of the Croatian war narrative of sacrifice, defence, and victimhood, and their symbolic status is best reflected in terms of their central relation to the war narrative.¹³

The fact that they are predominantly referred to as *branitelji* (the defenders), and themselves prefer that term, is indicative.¹⁴ Namely, the *branitelj* is conceptualised as “the redoubtable actor who defended and thus facilitated the rebirth of Croatia by unselfishly sacrificing themselves on ‘the altar of the Fatherland’”.¹⁵ Accordingly, the *branitelji* are an important object of study, especially owing to “their potential to cause public disruption, their role in the transmission of socio-cultural norms, and their political closeness to the HDZ”.¹⁶ Their closeness to the political party in power has also ensured that the *branitelji* are able to exploit symbols to further their political aims, gain access to state funding, and maintain relatively positive media coverage.¹⁷

12 Jović, Dejan. *Rat i Mir: Politika Identiteta U Suvremenoj Hrvatskoj*. Zaporešić: Fraktura, 2017.

13 Sokolić, Ivor. “Heroes at the Margins. Veterans, Elites, and the Narrative of War.” Essay. In *Framing the Nation and Collective Identities. Political Rituals and Cultural Memory of the Twentieth-Century Traumas in Croatia*, edited by Vjeran Pavlaković and Davor Pauković, 143–59. London: Routledge, 2019; Fisher, Sharon. “Contentious Politics in Croatia: The War Veterans’ Movement.” Essay. In *Uncivil Society?: Contentious Politics in Post-Communist Europe*, edited by Petr Kopecký and Cas Mudde. London: Routledge, 2003; Soldić, Marko. “A Land Fit for Heroes: Croatian Veterans of the Homeland War.” Thesis, University Of Oslo, 2009; Pål, Kolstø, and Vjeran Pavlaković. “Fulfilling the Thousand-Year-Old Dream: Strategies of Symbolic Nation-Building in Croatia.” Essay. In *Strategies of Symbolic Nation-Building in South Eastern Europe*, 19–51. Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2014; Jakir, Aleksandar. “Croatia: Victims of Transition? The Role of Homeland War Veterans in Public Discourse in Croatia.” Essay. In *Military Past, Civilian Present International Perspectives on Veterans’ Transition from the Armed Forces*, edited by Paul Taylor, Emma Murray, and Katherine Albertson, 31–42. London: Springer, 2019.

14 Soldić, “A Land Fit for Heroes”.

15 Ibid., 23.

16 Sokolić, “Heroes at the Margins”, 143.

17 Car, Viktorija. “Myths in Media Texts: How Media in Croatia Treats Veterans and Tycoons.” *Medianali* 2, no. 4 (2008): 145–63; Sokolić, “Heroes at the Margins”.

The *branitelji*'s official status is regulated by the "Law concerning Croatian Defenders from the Homeland War and the Members of their Families", which was initially passed in 2004 and amended most recently in July 2021.¹⁸ According to Article 3 of the aforementioned Law, a *branitelj* is defined as "an individual who participated in the organised defence of the independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Republic of Croatia as a member of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Croatia", or as an armed member of the National Defence (*Narodna zaštita*), initially created by the Croatian Democratic Union (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica, HDZ*) in 1991 as a civilian organisation. The purpose of *Narodna zaštita* was to assist the government amid the rising tensions with the Yugoslav People's Army (*Jugoslavenska narodna armija, JNA*).

The official status of the *branitelj* and the accompanying privileges that they enjoy have not failed to attract controversy. As pointed out by political scientist Danijela Dolenc, veterans' rights were subject to legislation from 1994 onwards, with significant changes having been made in 1996, 2001, and 2004.¹⁹ Namely, "by 2004, the law had accorded 37 different material entitlements to this population, including, most importantly, pensions, disability compensation, paid health and care services, priority in securing housing, child allowance, unemployment benefits, financial help in securing employment, tax cuts, scholarships, guaranteed university entry, and many more".²⁰ There is no lack of controversies when it comes to the veterans' registry; it was kept secret for almost twenty years and made public in 2012 under the government led by the Social Democrats (SDP). The SDP reported the number of veterans at 503,112, thereby uncovering 13,700 people who seemed to have been added to the registry between 2008 and 2012, and thus demonstrating that manipulation of the registry was a persistent issue.²¹

18 *Narodne Novine*. "Law concerning Croatian Defenders from the Homeland War and the Members of their Families", NN 121/17, 98/19, 84/21. <https://www.zakon.hr/z/973/Zakon-o-hrvatskim-braniteljima-iz-Domovinskog-rata-i-%C4%8Dlanovima-njihovih-obitelji->.

19 Dolenc, Danijela. "A Soldier's State? Veterans and the Welfare Regime in Croatia." *Anali Hrvatskog politološkog društva: časopis za politologiju* 14, no. 1 (2018): 63. <https://doi.org/10.20901/an.14.03>.

20 The 555-days long protest initiated by some war veterans' associations in 2014 and ending in 2016, demonstrated their importance for Croatia's political life. As pointed out by Boduszyński and Pavlaković, the protest represented "the most serious threat to Croatia's legal institutions since independence". Boduszyński, Mięczyński P., and Vjeran Pavlaković. "Cultures of Victory and the Political Consequences of Foundational Legitimacy in Croatia and Kosovo." *Journal of Contemporary History* 54, no. 4 (2019): 799-824.; Milekić, Sven. "A Protest, Coup d'État, or Internal Party Power Struggle: What Motivated Croatian War Veterans to Hit the Streets?" *Croatian Political Science Review* 59, no. 4 (2022): 215-250.; Dolenc, "A Soldier's State?", 63.

21 Dolenc, "A Soldier a State?", 63.

The Croatian Defence Forces (*Hrvatske obrambene snage, HOS*) are another category of 1990s war veterans, and the most prominent group when it comes to the use of the ZDS salutation and the Ustaša insignia in general. The controversial position that HOS veterans remain in is predominantly the result of their insistence on using Ustaša symbols – primarily the ZDS salutation – while seeking the same respect accorded to the *branitelji*. It should be pointed out that not all veterans' organisations use controversial symbols, and the use of the ZDS greeting is primarily associated with HOS veterans and radical right-wing groups and individuals.²² The next section introduces the HOS in more detail, before focusing on the case of the memorial plaque.

22 In order to explore the meanings that are associated with the ZDS salutation, I conducted preliminary interviews with several war veterans at the beginning of the year 2020. However, this segment of my research was disrupted by the pandemic, so I decided to postpone it.

3. The Croatian Defence Forces

The Croatian Defence Forces (HOS) were established and dispatched by the Croatian Party of Rights (*Hrvatska stranka prava, HSP*) between 1991 and 1993. The HSP was founded on 25 February 1990 by Dobroslav Paraga and Ante Paradžik, who were both dissidents during socialist Yugoslavia. The HOS initially functioned as a paramilitary under the HSP, after which they were integrated into the regular Croatian Army in 1992. Their history is far from being simple, and the HOS veterans continue to spark controversy to date. Multiple factors have contributed to this situation, as I briefly demonstrate in what follows.

Initially, the HDZ was in fact a result of the idea of national reconciliation developed by its founder and Croatia's first president, Franjo Tuđman. As such, the HDZ supported the idea of an "across-the-nation reconciliation" that was built upon three pillars of Croatian political ideology: the state-building doctrine of Ante Starčević, the social doctrine of Stjepan Radić, and finally, the "positive legacy of the Croatian left".²³ As one of the consequences of liberalisation and the establishment of a multiparty system in Croatia in the 1980s, different ideas arose regarding the renewal of some of the old political parties such as the HSP. Dobroslav Paraga and Ante Paradžik, former political prisoners, were the main actors who facilitated this process.²⁴ The main goal of the HSP – a party that actively evoked the memory of the Ustaša legacy and the establishment of the Independent State of Croatia – was an independent and sovereign Croatian state.²⁵

23 Cipek, Tihomir. "Politike Povijesti u Republici Hrvatskoj. Od 'Puška Puče' Do 'Hristos Se Rodi.'" Essay. In *Kultura Sjećanja: 1918. Povijesni Lomovi i Svladavanje Prošlosti*, edited by Tihomir Cipek and Olivera Milosavljević, 19. Zagreb, Hrvatska: Disput, 2007.; Veselinović, "Franjo Tuđman i Pravaši", 73.; Goldstein, Ivo. *Povijest Hrvatske 1945-2011*. 3. svezak 1991-2011. Zagreb: EPH Media, 2011.

24 Veselinović, "Franjo Tuđman i Pravaši", 75

25 Veselinović, Velimir. "Obnavljanje i Djelovanje Hrvatske Stranke Prava, 1990-1992." *Politička misao* 51, no. 2 (2014): 55–87.; For a more detailed analysis of the political relationship between Tuđman and the pravaši see: Veselinović, "Franjo Tuđman i Pravaši"

Ever since the re-establishment of the HSP, the party has referred to the NDH as an indication of a desire of the Croatian people for an independent state, actively marking 10 April, as the official date of the establishment of the NDH. Moreover, the HSP's political propaganda also included Ustaša insignia. However, while they did appeal to the NDH, they also renounced any connection with the Ustaša regime. As mentioned by Pavlaković, this paradoxical position was typical, and led to a certain political rehabilitation of the Ustaše during the 1990s.²⁶ HOS soldiers made active use of Ustaša symbols, while the ZDS salutation was the official salutation, and occasionally accompanied by the physical Nazi salute. In addition to the HOS acronym referring to the one used by the Ustaša armed forces in 1944-1945, HOS members also wore black uniforms that resembled Ustaša uniforms, sang Ustaša songs, and celebrated the founding date of the NDH, which they continue to regularly commemorate to this day.²⁷

Since Paradžik and Paraga thought that the Croatian authorities were not acting in a decisive manner against the Great Serbian aggression, they founded the Croatian Defence Forces War Headquarters, upon which they elaborated by stating that the HOS "had been created spontaneously by the members who are already fighting on the front line in critical areas of Croatia".²⁸ As such, the HOS can be defined as "a paramilitary formation that was organised by the HSP outside of any military or police organisation, with the goal being defence against the Great Serbian aggression".²⁹

The HOS committed various wartime transgressions, such as killings, shootings, fights, and the destruction of WWII anti-fascist monuments.³⁰ HOS soldiers were also involved in illegal evictions of the mainly Serb occupants of apartments in Split formerly owned by the Yugoslav People's Army. As Sven Milekić writes, HOS units committed a number of

26 Pavlaković, Vjeran. "Opet Za Dom Spremni." Essay. In *Kultura Sjećanja: 1941*, edited by Tihomir Cipek, Sulejman Bosto, and Olivera Milosavljević, 125. Zagreb: Disput, 2008.

27 Milekić, Sven. "Croatia's 1990s Paramilitaries: From Government Critics to Collaborators." *Balkan Insight*, May 6, 2020. <https://balkaninsight.com/sr/2020/05/06/croatians-1990s-paramilitaries-from-government-critics-to-collaborators/>.

28 Veselinović, "Franjo Tuđman i Pravaši", 79.

29 Veselinović, "Obnavljanje i Djelovanje Hrvatske Stranke Prava, 1990-1992.", 69.

30 Pavlaković, Vjeran. "Memoryscapes of the Homeland War." Youth Initiative for Human Rights Croatia, March 2022. https://yihr.hr/system/publication/document/32/memoryscapes_en_web.pdf.

crimes, such as the one in the village of Cerna near Vinkovci in February 1992, when an entire Serb family was executed.³¹

Many anti-fascist monuments were also vandalised and destroyed by regular Croatian units, locals, and political party activists. The HOS was ultimately incorporated into the official Croatian military in 1992-1993, but this was only recognised in 2001, in a law passed by a center-left government. However, securing veteran status was challenging for HOS members if they had not also served in the Croatian army after having been incorporated into the official military.

31 Milekić, Sven. "Croatia's 1990s Paramilitaries: From Government Critics to Collaborators." *Balkan Insight*, May 6, 2020. <https://balkaninsight.com/sr/2020/05/06/croatians-1990s-paramilitaries-from-government-critics-to-collaborators/>.

4. The HOS memorial plaque

The HOS memorial plaque, containing the inscribed ZDS salutation was erected by former members of the HOS and local politicians on 5 November 2016 (Figure 1). The plaque was dedicated to 11 HOS soldiers who were killed in combat in 1991 and 1995. It was placed on a kindergarten near the Jasenovac Memorial Site, which stirred controversy and fueled debate. This was because Jasenovac was the largest concentration camp to have been established by the NDH, and a camp where the Ustaše persecuted and killed tens of thousands of Serbs, Jews, Roma, and anti-fascists.³²

The ZDS salutation is, however, part of the official HOS emblem, which serves as an obvious go-to argument in favour of its alleged legality, despite its not being legally regulated during the 1990s war. The post-war recognition of the HOS as legitimate military formations in the *Homeland War* forms the base for the position according to which the ZDS is a product of the 1990s.³³ Yet, during the war the salutation was used with the purpose of evoking the memory of the Ustaša regime and the NDH, as has been pointed out above.

The case of the HOS plaque reached the highest levels of government, while simultaneously provoking a backlash by the local and international communities. This included reactions from representatives of national minorities in Croatia, such as the Serb National Council (*Srpsko narodno vijeće, SNV*), as well as various NGOs and politicians.³⁴ The president at the time, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, downplayed the use of the salutation, and consistently

32 Mataušić, "Jasenovac 1941. - 1945. Logor Smrti I Radni Logor".

33 Damčević, Katarina. "Cultural Texts, Enemies, and Taboos: Autocommunicative Meaning-Making Surrounding the 'Ready for the Homeland' Ustaša Salute in Croatia." *Social Semiotics* 33, no. 3 (2021): 476. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2021.1883404>.

34 Milekić, Sven. "Fascist Slogan near Croatia Concentration Camp Sparks Anger (Fašistički Slogan u Blizini Hrvatskog Koncentracionog Logora Izaziva Bes)." *Balkan Insight*, May 22, 2018. <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/12/05/plaque-near-wwii-concentration-camp-scandalises-region-12-05-2016/>.

referred to it as an “old Croat salutation”.³⁵ The stability of the government was also threatened at one point, because the war veterans’ associations insisted that the plaque remain, and the ruling HDZ party had historically relied on their support.³⁶ At the same time, the Independent Democratic Serb Party (*Samostalna demokratska srpska stranka, SDSS*) and the Croatian People’s Party (*Hrvatska narodna stranka, HNS*) threatened to leave the coalition government if the plaque remained. However, this scenario was ultimately avoided, when the plaque was relocated next to a *Homeland War* memorial park outside of the nearby town of Novska.³⁷



Figure 1. The HOS memorial plaque in Jasenovac. Photograph by Vjeran Pavlaković.

35 Milekić, Sven. “Fascist Legacy Causes Persistent Headache for Croatian President.” *Balkan Insight*, March 7, 2019. <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/02/28/fascist-legacy-causes-persistent-headache-for-croatian-president/>.

36 Sokolić, “Heroes at the Margins”.

37 Milekić, Sven. “Croatia Removes Fascist Slogan Plaque from Jasenovac.” *Balkan Insight*, May 18, 2018. <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/09/07/croatian-wwii-fascist-chant-plaque-from-jasenovac-09-07-2017/>.

5. The Dialogue Document as a response to the HOS plaque

As a response to the dispute that erupted because of the HOS plaque, the government established the Council for Dealing with Consequences of the Rule of Non-Democratic Regimes, which consisted of scholars who attempted to respond to the controversy. Their response ultimately took shape in the so-called *Dialogue Document*, which they issued to mitigate the perceived irreconcilable perspectives associated with the ZDS salutation and the HOS memorial plaque, as well as those related to the legacy of the former Yugoslavia and the 1990s *Homeland War*.

The purpose of the *Dialogue Document* can be seen as twofold, since it provides a narrative about Croatian experiences under the fascist Ustaša regime, as well the forty-five years of single-party communist rule that followed, while at the same time serving as a declaratory memory law. Namely, as pointed out by Hrvoje Cvijanović in his analysis of the Document, the overarching implication of the *Dialogue Document* seems to be the premise that not all symbols of hate are created equal.³⁸ Accordingly, the *Dialogue Document* proposes that the disputed insignia which should be deemed symbols of hate unambiguously, qualify as such “because they are created precisely to identify the regimes and movements they belong to”, with “their criminal and genocidal policies”. On this basis, they are assigned to the category of “insignia of fascism in all its manifestations”.³⁹

38 Cvijanović, Hrvoje. “On Memory Politics and Memory Wars: A Critical Analysis of the Croatian Dialogue Document.” *Politička misao* 55, no. 4 (2018): 126. <https://doi.org/10.20901/pm.55.4.05>.

39 *Dokument Dijaloga: Temeljna Polazišta i Preporuke o Posebnom Normativnom Uređenju Simbola, Znakovlja i Drugih Obilježja Totalitarnih Režima i Pokreta*. Vijeće za suočavanje sa posljedicama nedemokratskih režima, 2018., 22-23. <https://vlada.gov.hr/UserDocImages/Vijesti/2018/02%20velja%C4%8Da/28%20velja%C4%8De/Dokument%20dijaloga.pdf>.

The Council ultimately forwarded an interpretation of the salutation as a “prima facie insignia of hate” due to its origins and use under the WWII Ustaša regime, while also calling for an exception to be made when it came to the use of the ZDS when commemorating the *Homeland War*.⁴⁰ As the Council explained, the possibility of using the salutation in extraordinary circumstances was aimed at acknowledging the rights of some war veterans’ associations that used the ZDS during the *Homeland War*.⁴¹ The fact that the HOS used the salutation as a deliberate continuation of the Ustaša legacy failed to be acknowledged by the Council, which further contributed to the normalisation of the Ustaša legacy.

It is relevant to note that the Council invoked the *Homeland War Declaration* in their justification of the salutation’s use in “extraordinary circumstances”. They did so specifically in relation to characterising the war as “a legitimate and constitutionally justified battle against an aggressor in order to free the land during the *Homeland War*”.⁴² Consequently, the *Dialogue Document* acknowledged solely the already established – and prevalent – interpretations of the ZDS tied to the *Homeland War*, rather than fostering dialogue about the controversial war legacies and the persistent use of Ustaša symbols in Croatia. The recommendations of the Dialogue Document were ultimately never legally enacted by any legislative body.

The section that follows sheds light on the intertwinement of the salutation with the established narrative of the *Homeland War* and its institutionalised version enshrined in the *Homeland War Declaration*.

40 Ibid., 24-25.

41 Ibid., 26.

42 Ibid., 25.

6. The war narrative and the Homeland War Declaration

The fact that the *Za dom spremni* salutation has become intertwined with the dominant war narrative regarding the 1990s Croatian War of Independence adds another layer of complexity when it comes to its use, which the case of the HOS memorial plaque aptly demonstrates. Namely, the dominant narrative about the Croatian *Homeland War* frames it as a solely defensive war, with the main aims being the salvation of the Croatian state as well as the prevention of the destruction of the Croatian nation.⁴³ Furthermore, the fact that the *Homeland War* has served as the principal event for post-war identity-building is something that further reinforces this view.

The HDZ political party that came to power in 1991 had the aim to sever any ties with Yugoslavia, by making the war narrative a central part of the post-war nation-building process.⁴⁴ Maintaining the war narrative also serves to provide a sense of the continuity of the Croatian state, reflected precisely through an erasure or marginalisation of elements that are perceived as threatening to the newly established order. The Homeland War Declaration (*Deklaracija o Domovinskom ratu*) aptly demonstrates the relevance of the enshrined war narrative for Croatian society and politics. Introduced by the Croatian Parliament in the year 2000, the Declaration presents an institutionalised version of the war narrative and calls for a univocal acceptance of the meanings and values attached to the *Homeland War* by all citizens of Croatia.⁴⁵

43 Kolstø and Pavlaković, "Fulfilling the Thousand-Year-Old Dream", 19.; Jović, Dejan. "The War That Is Not Allowed to Be Forgotten: Nationalist Discourse on the 'Homeland War'." *Südosteuropa-Mitteilungen* 52, no. 3 (2012): 52–69.

44 Kolstø and Pavlaković, "Fulfilling the Thousand-Year-Old Dream".

45 *Narodne Novine*. "Deklaracija o Domovinskom ratu (Homeland War Declaration). NN 102/2000.". https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2000_10_102_1987.html.

As Ivor Sokolić identifies in his research, there are certain core components of the war narrative that characterise it, namely: *defence, survival and struggle, aggressors, Yugoslavia as broken, victimisation, and the war is not over.*⁴⁶ Sokolić's insights based on interviews conducted with Croatian war veterans provide an invaluable contribution to the understanding of the political uses of the war narrative and the crucial role of veterans within that dynamic.

When it comes to the *defence* component, it is relevant to note that the conflict is seen as an act of self-defence against an aggressor; while there is no doubt that an aggression did take place, this view is usually utilised with the purpose of justifying war crimes committed by Croats during the *Homeland War*.⁴⁷ The Homeland War Declaration significantly contributes to this as an institutionalised document allowing a one-sided version of the past to prevail.⁴⁸

The *survival and struggle* component refers to the war veterans' characterisation of their readiness to go to war - what they described as "bare-footed" or "bare-armed" Croatian soldiers who were able to fight off the aggressors - the Serbs - without preparation.⁴⁹ When it comes to the Croatian Defence Forces specifically, they are usually praised as heroes who went to war with no questions asked.

The *aggressors* component most notably includes references to "Serbs/Serbia", "Greater Serbs/Serbia", "JNA" (*Yugoslav People's Army*), "Chetniks", or combinations such as "Serbo-Chetniks".⁵⁰ As Pavlaković points out, the political discourse of the 1990s saw Yugoslavia "systematically characterised as the 'Dungeon of the Croatian nation' (*tamnica hrvatskog naroda*)", with specific phrases emerging that would reflect this tendency, such as the use of "aggressors" in reference to "Yugocommunists", as compared to "knights" (*vitezi*) and "martyrs" (*mučenici*), referring to Croatian soldiers.⁵¹

46 Sokolić, "Heroes at the Margins".

47 Jović, Dejan. "Croatia after Tudjman: The ICTY and Issues of Transitional Justice." *Chailot Papers* 116 (2009): 13–28; Ljubojević, Ana. "Remembering The Hague: The Impact of International Criminal Justice on Memory Practices in Croatia." Essay. In *Framing the Nation and Collective Identities. Political Rituals and Cultural Memory of the Twentieth-Century Traumas in Croatia*, edited by Vjeran Pavlaković and Davor Pauković, 177–93. London: Routledge, 2019.

48 Koren, Snježana. "Korisna Prošlost?" Ratovi Devedesetih u Deklaracijama Hrvatskog Sabora." Essay. In *Kultura Sjećanja: 1991. Povijesni Lomovi i Svladavanje Prošlosti*, edited by Tihomir Cipek, 123–55. Zagreb: Disput, 2011.

49 Sokolić, "Heroes at the Margins", 150.

50 Ibid.

51 Kolstø and Pavlaković, "Fulfilling the Thousand-Year-Old Dream". 32.

Yugoslavia as broken is a component that is tied more to the nation-building narrative, although the latter can also overlap with the war narrative.⁵² For instance, refugees and the appearance of extremist groups during the dissolution of Yugoslavia are nowadays often associated with the Yugoslav state rather than its violent break-up in the 1990s.⁵³ A wider social practice associated with the *Yugoslavia as broken* component is reflected in the attempt to erase or marginalise parts of the Yugoslav legacy, by, for example, renaming streets and squares.⁵⁴

Croatia as a perpetual victim – or the *victimisation* component of the war narrative – is tied to events such as the wartime destruction of the cities of Vukovar and Dubrovnik. Sokolić points out that, while the interviewees did refer to the mentioned cities as focal points, they also made the distinction between “us, Croats, the victims” and “them, Serbs, the aggressors”.⁵⁵ The victimisation component is regularly reproduced through annual commemorations, and by using symbols and insignia related to the *Homeland War*, such as the use of the ZDS salutation by former HOS members.⁵⁶

The war is not over is the last component of the war narrative identified in Sokolić’s research, and it refers to a shared perception among certain war veterans’ organisations that the struggle for Croatian independence is not over.⁵⁷ Some of the reasons expressed by Sokolić’s interviewees included the perception that Greater Serbian forces are still present, as well as attempts by the international community to take away Croatian independence.

The war narrative is reinforced primarily by the ruling HDZ party and war veterans’ organisations, as well as by radical right politicians. This, in turn, contributes to the marginalisation or exclusion of more critical insights into the war and its legacy, as well as into the symbolic representation of the enemy. Namely, anyone who challenges the prevailing interpretation of the war is usually deemed as an enemy or a traitor, or, as Dejan

52 Sokolić, “Heroes at the Margins”.

53 Kolstø and Pavlaković, “Fulfilling the Thousand-Year-Old Dream”. 32.

54 Lynch, Lily. “Croatia’s Far-Right Rewrites Tito out of History.” *Balkanist*, September 29, 2018. <http://balkanist.net/rewriting-tito-out-of-croatias-history/>.

55 Sokolić, “Heroes at the Margins”, 151.

56 Pavlaković, Vjeran, and Davor Pauković. *Framing the nation and collective identities: Political rituals and cultural memory of the twentieth-century traumas in Croatia*. London: Routledge, 2019.

57 Sokolić, “Heroes at the Margins”, 151.

Jović expresses it, “not pure enough” or “not Croatian enough”.⁵⁸ Within this dynamic, the ZDS salutation has the capacity to serve as the symbolic carrier of the established war narrative, thereby making it more challenging to mitigate and counter.

58 Jović, Dejan, “*Rat i Mir: Politika Identiteta U Suvremenoj Hrvatskoj*”, 27.

7. Conclusions

Struggling with controversial legacies – especially in the context of post-conflict societies – is a burden many societies carry. However, it becomes a problem when the past is predominantly embellished, rather than engaged with it in a way that fosters dialogue and critical thinking. The symbolic continuation of the *Homeland War* in Croatia, manifested through the use of symbols and narratives that maintain the status quo, hinders the creation and facilitation of an open sphere of dialogue aimed at building a better future based on what we can learn from the past.

As an example of the abovementioned dynamics, the case of the HOS plaque has demonstrated the persistence of symbolic boundaries between Croats and Serbs, probably best epitomised in the *Homeland War Declaration* as the institutionalised war narrative. Moreover, the backlash of war veterans' organisations and right-wing actors against any criticism of the salutation's public presence has further symbolically divided Croatian society into those who either support Croatia by approving the salutation and the prescribed meanings associated with it, or those who are deemed to be traitors because they are critical of its presence. This also leads to the tabooisation of perspectives that do not fit into the idealised war narrative, which only adds more fuel to the existing problem.

However, recent developments might serve as the basis for more concrete initiatives for countering the use of Ustaša symbols, although it is far too early to reach an evaluation. Namely, changes to the "Law on misdemeanours against public order and peace" (*Zakon o prekršajima protiv javnog reda i mira*⁵⁹) have been proposed, with a notable increase in fines for the use of Ustaša symbols, such as chanting the ZDS salutation (*Novi list*, 3 April 2023). While it remains to be seen whether the proposed sanctions will have any effect, the main issue remains in need of resolution. In fact, banning something for the sake of banning it should never be a go-to solution. Rather, it should be part of a wider social initiative that includes the contributions of politicians, educators, scholars, journalists, and other relevant actors. This is particularly the case with controversial symbols such as the ZDS

59 *Zakon.hr*. "Zakon o prekršajima protiv javnog reda i mira.". <https://www.zakon.hr/z/279/Zakon-o-prekr%C5%A1ajima-protiv-javnog-reda-i-mira>.

salutation, since banning them does not make the ideas and narratives that fuel their existence disappear.

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radikalizma i populizma*. Zagreb: Despot infinitus d.o.o., 2019.

Ready for Memory Wars:

THE CASE OF THE HOS MEMORIAL PLAQUE IN CROATIA

Publisher:

Humanitarian Law Centre
Dečanska 12, Belgrade
www.hlc-rdc.org

Author:

Katarina Damčević

Proof Editing:

Jonathan Boulting

Graphic Designer:

Milica Dervišević

Print run:

200

Printed by:

Instant System, Belgrade

ISBN-978-86-7932-138-1

CIP - Каталогизacija у публикацији
Народна библиотека Србије, Београд

355.426:316.7(497.1)"1991/1995"
316.75(497.5)"20"

DAMČEVIĆ, Katarina, 1988-

Ready for Memory Wars : the Case of the HOS Memorial Plaque in Croatia / [author Katarina Damčević]. - Belgrade : Humanitarian law center, 2023 (Belgrade : Instant System). - 32 str. ; 24 cm

Izv. stv. nasl.: Spremní za ratove sećanja : slučaj spomen-ploče HOS u Hrvatskoj. - Tiraž 200. - Napomene i bibliografske reference uz tekst. - Bibliografija: str. 27-30.

ISBN 978-86-7932-138-1

a) Грађански рат -- Културолошки аспект -- Југославија -- 1991-1995 б) Култура сећања -- Хрватска -- 21в

COBISS.SR-ID 130547977