

DOSSIER

MEMORY AND MEDIA IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Policy Analysis Lab

Master degree in Relazioni internazionali e Diplomazia of the University of Padova
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This dossier is the result of the Policy Analysis Lab "Memory and media in the Western Balkans" organized by the the Master degree in Relazioni internazionali e Diplomazia of the University of Padova and Osservatorio Balcani Caucaso Transeuropa (CCI).

The 12hrs Lab aimed at providing significant insights on the everyday tasks of experts working for the think-tank Osservatorio Balcani Caucaso Transeuropa (OBCT) at the Centro per la Cooperazione Internazionale (CCI) in Trento (Italy). The Lab was organized by Professor Benedetto Zaccaria (University of Padova), Marco Abram, and Serena Epis (OBCT-CCI).

The Lab was dedicated to memory and media, two of the most relevant issues in the current analysis of politics and society in Southeast Europe. Students were provided with theoretical and practical tools and were required to test them by analyzing specific case studies from various perspectives and with different approaches.

The first part of the course provided a theoretical introduction to the public and collective memory of some of the events that marked the history of South East Europe. The second part focused on specific case studies of journalists who, due to their reporting of such events, were targets of threats and intimidation.

Students' contributions are organized in chapters devoted to four relevant case studies from three post-Yugoslav countries.

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The Rhetoric of Denial on Srebrenica: the pursuit of Dragan Bursać for truth, memory and legacy

Ana Karolina Medeiros, Marina Garcia Cunha, Sukanya Sengupta

In 2017, the Bosnian journalist and former soldier in the Bosnian Serb Army (VRS), Dragan Bursać wrote a controversial piece titled “is Banja Luka celebrating Srebrenica genocide?” which has made him a target of online death threats on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (now X). These events resulted in the removal of the article from the internet.

In his work, he has questioned the denial of the Srebrenica Genocide, spoken out strongly against the celebration of war criminal Ratko Mladić, and denounced the aggressive nationalism in Republika Srpska.

Bursać is a columnist for "Buka", a magazine based in Banja Luka, Republika Srpska. In the course of his work, he has endured years of being the target of cyberbullying and intimidation, having even received a [death threat by Facebook](#) message stating that he would be killed with a "bullet in the head" if he ever set foot in Montenegro. Despite having informed the Free Media Helpline and appropriate authorities about the threats, there wasn't proper follow through and, in due course, it caused him and his family to leave the region.

But what was so controversial about his work that made him the target of such constant attacks?

In July 1995, at least 8,000 Bosniak (Bosnian Muslims) boys and men were chased and killed by the army of Republika Srpska (Bosnian Serb Republic) around the Bosnian town of Srebrenica. The nature of the crimes committed against Bosniaks in Srebrenica opened up narrative disputes and exacerbated the cracks in an ethnically divided society in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The recognition of genocide in Srebrenica by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the conviction of political leaders of the Republika Srpska before the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in the Hague were not enough to put an end to the discussion.

Nonetheless, in 2019, the government of Republika Srpska created two controversial commissions with the purpose of revisiting the war crimes committed in Srebrenica. The formation of these commissions raised concern amongst academics, civil society organizations, and the international community, who warned that these commissions aimed to instrumentalize and appropriate the memory of the “already established truth”.

Even one of the main documents produced in Republika Srpska on the topic—the “Report on Srebrenica” of 2004—suffered revisionist attempts aiming to deny the genocide. In 2018, the parliament of the Republika Srpska voted to annul the 2004 report.

The report was responsible for recognizing the massacres committed by the army of Republika Srpska against the Bosniaks, identifying the responsibility of General Ratko Mladić and the main military leadership, and describing the horror and the systematic bloodshed of thousands of Bosniaks. The Republika Srpska President, Milorad Dodik, [affirmed](#) that the report contained false data and that it was only carried out under pressure from the international community. The political figure has previously called the events in Srebrenica a [“fabricated myth”](#) and [“the biggest sham of the 20th century”](#).

Dodik boosted his political career by denying facts about the Srebrenica genocide and manipulating the discourse to make people believe that no genocide was committed in Srebrenica and that what actually happened was a plan by Bosniak politicians to put the responsibility on the Serbs. That is also true for other members of his party (SNSD), as is the case of the current mayor of Srebrenica, Mladen Grujičić, who is a [self-proclaimed denier of the genocide](#).

The identity-based discourse from the SNSD party creates a “we” versus “them” narrative, cementing the differences between the ethnic Serbs and the “other”

Bosnians and defying the creation of a Bosnian civic identity. This serves to augment his popularity in the RS and distract from other issues such as corruption, abuse of power, and youth emigration.

By dominating the discourse of "what you know is false" and manipulating the memory of the Srebrenica genocide as an "attack aimed at demonising the Serbian people," the political scope of Republika Srpska, under the rule of ethnonationalist politicians, has been able to attract mass popular support, gather ultra-nationalist movements, and name streets and public buildings after convicted war criminals.

Besides the positive political propaganda, this narrative also contributes to the legitimisation of Republika Srpska. In this landscape, whoever challenges the predominant nationalistic narrative is threatened and attacked. And that brings us back to the case of Dragan Bursać.

As one of the few voices to confront the governmental narrative of Republika Srpska and openly discuss the Srebrenica genocide, the journalist has been incisive in his criticism. In 2017, Bursać published a piece condemning the public demonstrations in support of the convicted war criminal Ratko Mladić that commemorated "the liberation of Srebrenica," which occurred on the same day of the yearly memorial service for victims of the Srebrenica genocide.

Bursać questioned whether it was acceptable for people to stand by and watch as the Srebrenica genocide was celebrated in Banja Luka. He also raised concern about the rally being rescheduled rather than outright prohibited. Perplexed by the incident and its consequences, Bursać called silent onlookers "accomplices", criticizing their inaction in the face of Serb ultra-nationalists pushing their revisionist agenda.

These historical foundations highlight how hazardous his journalistic endeavors are and how difficult it could be to navigate the unstable geopolitical climate of the area. The attacks made against Bursać serve as a testament to the worsening plight of journalists in BiH. There are a significant number of threats made against journalists without proper follow-through from the competent authorities, as well as verbal attacks by political figures.

The legal provisions on media freedom are in accordance with most international standards; however, in recent years, new governmental policies have surfaced that challenge the protection of press freedom. The most notable reversal and alarming events have occurred in the Serb-dominated region, where there are additional obstacles for the media, such as the penalties for defamation re-introduced in July 2023 that contain disproportionate sanctions on journalists, as well as the politicization of regional media outlets such as the RTRS's (Radio Television of Republika Srpska).

Freedom of expression and of the media and the protection of journalists are guaranteed human rights according to the European Convention on Human Rights and are monitored by the European Commission considering the progress of Bosnia's candidature to the EU. In [its 2023 report](#), they have recommended the government ensure the protection of journalists and better institutional mechanisms to follow-up on threats made against them; combat the effect of media capture by ensuring the political independence of public broadcasters; and adopt legislation for the transparency of media ownership. Without which Bosnia cannot be guaranteed access to the EU. A similar situation was the EU's additional condition for Serbia's accession of establishing cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), which [recognized that the mass executions of Bosniaks from Srebrenica constituted genocide](#).

With the political instrumentalization of the memory in BiH, an intergenerational dispute around the war legacy was created in the country. [Bursać explained to OBC Transeuropa](#) that younger generations in Republika Srpska, who were not born when the war broke out, tend to believe that the narrative of genocide was an invention to prevent reconciliation in the country, and close to 80% are more nationalistic than their parents. According to the journalist, these young people act as "keyboard warriors," posting misinformation on social media and criticizing those who go against the predominant narrative - especially about the Srebrenica genocide.

In areas plagued by echoes of genocide and the intergenerational legacy of the war, the role of journalists as truth-seekers (or, in some cases, keepers) is especially vital

for sustaining and preserving the shared memory for coming generations. Dedication from journalists such as Bursać has become a symbol of resistance in the face of political pressures and the ongoing manipulation of historical narratives. That is why preserving media freedom and protecting journalists is particularly important in the Western Balkans, where there is a fine line between truth and memory.

It might be surprising that an EU directive on ‘adequate minimum wages’ in the European Union’ (the ‘Minimum Wage Directive’) would be contested or would be an important site for struggles over the vision of human rights that should animate European law and policy, but that is the case. In this paper, we explore the theoretical and political contestations that informed the important developments in language and substance between the directive proposed by the European Commission in October, 2020,¹ and the final Directive (EU) 2022/2041 of 19 October 2022 on adequate minimum wages.² We argue that the normative imperatives of the directive’s relationship to human rights, specifically social and economic rights and the ‘solidarity rights’ related to trade unions, along with the competing interests and the variation between member state labor systems that characterize European labor politics on this issue, led to the particular form contestation took in this case and the prospects the agreement opens up for future labor politics in the European space. We further argue that the tensions between the alleged absence of EU competence in this area show the need for a robust statement of human rights that emphasizes workers’ agency and collective action and not just the passive entitlement to a decent standard of living.

¹ ‘Commission proposal for a DIRECTIVE OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL on adequate minimum wages in the European Union’ COM(2020) 682 final Brussels 28.10.20. (‘Proposed Directive’)

² Directive (EU) 2022/2041 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on adequate minimum wages in the European Union (‘Adopted Directive’).

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Clashing Narratives: The Role of Collective Memory and Media Freedom in Contemporary Serbia

Giulia Guatieri, Pietr Zanettin, Sabaeta Zeneli, Xhoana Agaçi

According to Halbachs, collective memory is a social construct influenced by cultural, social, and political factors, and it is shaped not only by the events of the past but more importantly, by the social and political concerns of the present. In this paper, we will delve into the collective memory of the population of Serbia concerning the time of the Yugoslav wars which is rather complex and multifaceted. We will zoom into the now-controversial figure of Ratko Mladic and how different mnemonic actors play a role in shaping this collective memory. In particular, pointing out the importance of media in shaping collective memory, as evidenced by the dynamics that emerge when the media diverges from the generally accepted and promoted memories.

The past holds significant weight in shaping a nation's collective identity, offering origins, legacy, continuity, and uniqueness to its people. However, the memory of the past is influenced by several factors, including political narratives, media portrayals, and individual experiences. When we look at countries whose identity is built around a history of conflict, victimhood, and rejection of out-groups, the collective memory has a particularly significant role in creating this identity and maintaining the status quo. A tool that has often been used to serve this goal and draw political legitimacy is the revision of the past and rehabilitation of certain historical figures. An exemplification of this phenomenon can be found in the Serbian collective memory with the image of Ratko Mladić.

During the Yugoslav Wars, specifically the Bosnian War of 1992-1995, Ratko Mladić served as a Bosnian Serb military officer. He was later convicted for war crimes during his leadership of the Army of Republika Srpska by the ICTY and is currently serving a lifelong sentence in the Hague.

He was arrested in 2011 after 10 years in hiding and, in 2017, he stood trial on eleven charges of alleged crimes conducted while serving as the commander of the Main Staff of the Army of the Bosnian-Serb Republic. He was found guilty of committing war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY). In the days that followed his arrest, ultra-nationalist politicians condemned the arrest, and Serb media showed little or no interest in what Mladić was accused of. [As stated by the editor of Belgrade's leading weekly magazine](#), NIN, the issue of war crimes and genocide committed by the general remained almost invisible in Serbia.

In this context, Ratko Mladić's image was idealized, portraying him as a victim and a hero rather than acknowledging his status as a war criminal. Painted murals glorifying his image appeared all around Belgrade, the most famous being the [“Ratko Mladić, a Serbian hero”](#) one, which appeared in July 2021. This triggered protests from individuals advocating for the removal of the murals from the walls in the following months, considering Mladić's current status as a convicted war criminal. Subsequently, a cultural clash unfolded in the urban landscape, primarily manifesting on walls through a series of graffiti and murals conveying contrasting messages about Ratko's figure.

This 'clash on the walls' has also sparked attacks towards journalists who try to go against the main narrative regarding his figure and deeds. An example is the attack directed toward a crime journalist for the daily “Danas” in Serbia, Snežana Čongradin on the 25th of November 2021. She was assaulted while filming a protest organized on the removal of the “Ratko Mladić, a Serbian hero” graffiti located in the city center of Belgrade. The journalist was live broadcasting the protest with her phone for the Danas website when somebody started to insult and later physically assault her by hitting her arm and breaking her phone. Nevertheless, the device kept on filming the attack showing the incident and allowing the police to identify the man. He was later found to be tied to the extremist group “Leviathan” (a Serbian neo-fascist political organization) and on the day of the protest he was there with other people protesting against the removal of the graffiti. The attack did not result in physical injury of the journalist, but the police later arrested the man.

This was not the first time that Čongradin was attacked because of her positions regarding Mladić and the Srebrenica genocide. Just a month before the Mladić incident, Čongradin received a series of insults and threats on Facebook from the team manager of one of the younger selections of the Football Association of Serbia (there has been no reaction from the State's Prosecutor and the federation has just distanced itself from the man). In another instance, in 2019, Vojislav Šešelj, a member of the Serbian parliament and concurrently a convicted war criminal at The Hague, asserted during a session of the Assembly, referencing an article by Čongradin, that the journalist claiming genocide occurred in Srebrenica should be sentenced to 20 years in prison. After this most recent attack, Čongradin said to the Serbian [TV Channel N1](#): "From now on, I will report every case that happens to me because I don't want anything like that to happen to anyone." She also added that for too long journalists have reported violations without the police doing anything to prevent them.

Various media organizations and newspapers, including the Safe Journalist Network and the Independent Journalist Association of Serbia, [condemned](#) the attack against Čongradin. They issued a compelling call to public authorities, urging swift action to protect journalists and ensure justice for the attacks occurring in the line of duty. Furthermore, the Network for Democratic Dialogue [expressed](#) strong condemnation of the attack on Snežana Čongradin saying that it "threatened the right to freedom of action, trampled on the idea of fighting violence against women, physical confrontation was verified as a form of expression of opinion, and journalism was once again kicked "with a hood". The issue of violence against women journalists' was echoed also by the group "Journalists Against Violence against Women", which [highlighted](#) that what happened to their Danas colleague was the "worrying reality of the life of female journalists in Serbia". This declaration gains added significance considering the attack occurred on the International Day Against Violence Against Women."

The aforementioned statements indicate that the issue of the violation of media freedom and attacks on journalists is not out of the ordinary in the country. As of the first six months of 2023, 18 press freedom violations had been [documented](#) by the

platform “Mapping Media Freedom”, with a total of 31 attacked persons or entities related to the media. Another evident trend is journalists and media outlets being targeted by political power, including figures like Prime Minister Ana Brnabic. Other sources, like the Resource Center on media freedom in Europe, [express](#) their concern and warning over the state of media freedom and journalists’ safety in Serbia.

In October of 2023, [a new concern](#) arose regarding media freedom in the country because of the draft Law on Public Information and Media and the draft Law on Electronic Media. The draft laws are criticized for their lack of compliance with international and European standards on freedom of expression standards as they also facilitate the possible return to state co-ownership of private media which, under the current media strategy in power, is banned. In addition, another issue emerges in one of the latest [reports](#) of the European Commission released in November 2023. According to the key findings on Serbia, there needs to be urgent action undertaken to counter foreign information manipulation and interference, most notably in the context of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

In conclusion, the complex narrative surrounding Mladic’s perception in Serbia has ignited societal clashes that extend from city walls to physical attacks on journalists like Snežana Čongradin. Her case exemplifies those who have been challenging the prevailing narrative and faced consequences, illustrating the lengths certain individuals go to suppress dissenting opinions. The condemnation of the attack highlights the harsh reality that Serbian journalists face every day. Moreover, amid a concerning trend of political interference and increasingly documented press freedom violations, there is increasing pressure on authorities to safeguard journalists, ensuring justice and upholding principles of freedom of expression.

In the aftermath of the 2023 Parliamentary elections on December 17, recent events underscore the intricate and polarized nature of Serbian society. Taking this into account, a crucial question arises: Will the public institutions make any progress toward enhancing journalist and media freedom, or will the situation remain the same?

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Instrumentalization of Memory: The Case of Vukovar and Boris Dežulović

Sava Mirković, Anna Ryżewska

Cultural memories serve an important function in every society, as they represent a collective recollection of particular happenings that through the process of redefinition and repackaging done by dominant mnemonic actors got a more or less inert form. In the landscape of the Balkans, following the trauma of the Yugoslav Wars in the last decade of the 20th century, these memories tend to get an exclusive dimension characterized by top-down dynamics reinforced by a limited plateau of actors. Such is the case with the memory of Vukovar – a city that became a memory.



Following the end of the war, and the return of Vukovar to Croatia in 1998, which was the result of the 1995 Erdut Peace Agreement, the martyrdom of the city and its defenders essentially became a baseline cultural memory that also serves the defining role of modern Croatian identity, as veneration of Vukovar became a

narrative directly related to Croatian statehood. However, this perception of the „City of Heroes“ promulgated by main mnemonic actors, in the first place the state and its agencies, has come to present a challenge for the development of the city, as it continues to be instrumentalized for ceremonial purposes, rendering its existence to merely a symbolic function.

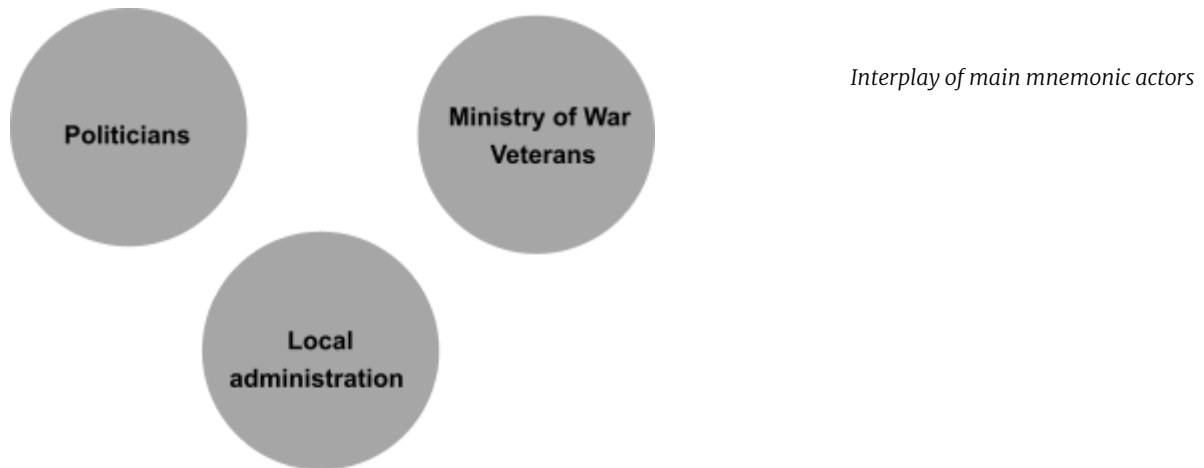
Vukovar is a Croatian city, a symbol of its independence war; close to the Serbian border, multi-ethnic and prosperous before the war. It was subject to approximately 87 days of shelling, after which it fell to Serbian forces (at the time still going by the name of Yugoslav People’s Army) on November 18th 1991. The Vukovar massacre, also called the Ovčara massacre – named so after the Serbian prison camp Ovčara for Croats which operated from October 1991 to December 1991 – took place on November 20th 1991. It was an execution carried out by Serbian forces and the largest massacre during the Croatian War of Independence. The trauma this left behind continued to be remembered in Croatian society for years to come.

Mapping the Mnemonic Actors, Devices and Narratives

The dominant memory of Vukovar as the City of Heroes is developed mostly by top-down dynamics with some exceptions which we will define later on. This present dynamics allows the interested parties/mnemonic actors, namely the government and the political elite, its agency the Ministry of War Veterans and ultimately the local administration to have a certain degree of monopoly on the forming of, as Assmann defines it, a „fixed point“ of cultural memory. Fixed points are fateful events, such as the Siege of Vukovar, whose memory is maintained through utilization of mnemonic devices.

The political elite in Zagreb, spearheaded by the Government, regularly uses Vukovar as part of the political business cycle, as defined by modern political science. This essentially comes down to politicians trying to gather popular support by refocusing to topics such as the future investment plans, but also mutual accusations, as was the one between the Prime Minister Plenkovic and the Mayor of Vukovar Ivan Penava, which traded blows over who uses Vukovar to their political advantage. Another important actor is the Ministry of War Veterans, a government

structure whose (sole) purpose is preservation of the memory of the Homeland War. Their modus operandi is fundamentally public statements and commemorative activities related to the important dates and events of the Homeland War.



Such is an example of the Vukovar Memorial Center, of which the Ministry claims the founding rights. This tripartite dominance over the official narrative throughout the years formed the cultural memory that fundamentally lacks any sensitivity to counter-memories, and leaves space only for even more affirming stances of organizations such as various war veteran associations and football ultras. These bottom-up actors fill-up the little left over space of influence on the narrative, as they are allowed to do so as they are mostly simply reaffirming it.

“Population of Vukovar dropped from approximately 27 thousand to around 23 thousand in the past decade”

-Source: Croatian Bureau of Statistics

Result of such politics of memory is perception of Vukovar as a place of tragedy, with its symbolic function greatly outweighing its regular function of a city with local, communal problems and dynamics. Harmonic action of the above mentioned actors led to this, robbing the city of its potential for greater development, that led to constant decrease in population in the past decade and lacking infrastructural development. Instead of revitalizing the city, it was the exploitation of memory that was the preferred course of action, as mnemonic actors deemed it more important to

assign it the role of an altar of the nation than the role of a living city. Serbian forces actively killed the city through the shelling and the following occupation in 1991, Croatian authorities made sure it stayed dead until this day. The greatest example of that is the water tower, a mnemonic device preserved as the main symbol of Vukovar today, alongside “The Procession of Memory” that happens every year in November. Examples of similar mnemonic devices are what the city is known for today.

Counter-Memories: Sidestepped Truths

Talking about the counter-memories when it comes to Vukovar does not necessarily mean getting into the perspective of the other side, that is the Serbian side, as in this paper we are treating Vukovar as an intra-Croatian subject, so the Serbian perspective, with all its relevance stemming from the fact that a large number of Serbs lived in Vukovar, and that a Serbian community is still present, would be another subject. We will try to focus on the counter-memories and their existence in the Croatian public sphere.

One important account of a counter-memory is that of the radio-dispatcher Glavašević, who was in Vukovar during the aggression of the Serb forces. In a [famous radio speech](#) named „Optužnica“, he attacks the Croatian government and Parliament for their inactivity on the subject of helping Vukovar in the time of dire need. He recognizes Croatian government as the main culprit:

“I condemn you, gentlemen, for all the pain of the moment when Vukovar realized that there is no difference between you, the Croatian Parliament, the Croatian Government, the President of the Republic of Croatia and the Chetniks.”

-Part of Glavašević’s radio speech

This example shows to us that Vukovar, unfortunately, was part of political play even during the unfortunate events in 1991. What followed was the 7-year long occupation under Serbian rule. Importance of this lies in the fact that the Croatian state did not manage to liberate it, but got it back as a part of political accord. Counter-memories stem from this fact, as people, such as Glavašević, felt abandoned. The criticism is that the politicians did everything to define how people

will remember Vukovar through the mnemonic devices they utilized, but did not do enough to recover the city. This instrumentalization is one of the main motives behind the controversial text published by a renowned journalist and writer Boris Dežulović. It is in fact a counter-memory of its own sort, as it unveils the problematics of the process of mummification happening in Vukovar. Following part of the paper will deal with this account and the effects it had on the Croatian public sphere after its release.

In [a text published in 2021 on the N1 portal](#), following the cancellation of the concert of a famous Serbian artist Rade Šerbedžija that was to take place as part of Vinkovci Film Festival, Dežulović criticizes this as completely unnecessary and explains what he sees as real reason behind the cancellation. The official reasoning was that it was to be held in the week during which the commemoration of Vukovar victims takes place – the so-called Procession of Memory. With a striking title “Jebo vas Vukovar” (“Fuck you, Vukovar”), Dežulović showed he wanted to gather attention of people throughout Croatia. Most attention, of course, was negative, going to the point of his neighbors sharing his address online, greatly endangering the security of both him and his family.

However, what is crucial is that most criticism came on the account of the title itself, showing that the people attacking Dežulović did not care as much about the content of the article. The title was the one which was presumably disrespecting the martyrs and heroes who were defending Vukovar and downgrading the holiness of the City of Heroes with such graphic language. In fact, they did not care that the article was a defense of Vukovar, a cry-out for help for a city dead in everything except memory.

Dežulović used the Šerbedžija example to point out the process of mummification of Vukovar, of its degradation from a city to a symbol. Dežulović talks about the narrative present in Croatia, showing how political actors in a grotesque way politicize the war trauma. He intently uses grotesque and cynicism to point out the perverted dynamics that he believes is actively robbing Vukovar of its potential to develop past the current state and more generally Croatia of the prospect of moving past these topics. He shows how fetishization of the memory has a profound effect on the advancement of normal life of citizens of Vukovar.

Initial Reactions and Media Landscape

As mentioned earlier, the groundwork laid out by dominant mnemonic actors is characterized by a peculiar non-receptivity to criticism. When criticism comes in such sharp form as was the case with the article in question, main protagonists recognized in the first part of the paper rise to the defense of the sanctity of Vukovar remembrance so carefully reinforced throughout the years.

The Ministry of War Veterans, as the official government outlet tasked with dealings concerning Homeland War and official memory structure employed around it, immediately put forward an [official statement](#) claiming how they must do everything to preserve the promotion of the truth about the Homeland War. HDZ, as the strongest political party in the country, [condemned](#) the language of the article stating that it offends the heroes of Vukovar who died fighting for freedom and independence. This is in line with the general leaning of the party to present itself as the protector of the Homeland War heritage. Individual reactions that mostly came down to insults and threats, a part of which is sharing the address of the article author online, point to, as Dežulović stated in an interview following the attacks, deep-rooted fascistization happening in the society that is a direct consequence of mnemonic narrative adopted and propagated by the above mentioned sides.

This brings forward a question of the safety of journalists in Croatia and the quality of the media landscape. Even though Croatia is an EU member state, certain topics, including this one, produce reactions that show how democratization in its wider sense is a process that is not solvable solely by being part of an institutional framework oriented at protecting freedom of speech and opinion. Certain opinions in Croatia, that are indeed oriented toward good goals and structural criticism of cultural and memory narratives present that subvert its potential, are considered unacceptable, and a constellation of actors prevent that situation from changing, as was just highlighted.

Media landscape, as Dežulović says, is characterized by the presence of free journalists but lack of free media outlets. Even before the controversial Vukovar article, Dežulović had problems with expressing his opinion. This was the case in

2015 when he got fired from the media outlet named “Slobodna Dalmacija” (Free Dalmatia). They dismissed him because they had to pay court settlement to Split intellectuals who had sued Dežulović for slandering, in their view, their image in an article about the weaponization of the murder of Antonija Bilić.

According to the Press Freedom Index, Croatia sits at the 42/180 score, with medium results in protecting the freedom of press and opinion. Commenting on the sociocultural context, the Reporters without Borders website recognizes that the topics of 1991-1995 war and the crimes of Croat forces stay off-limit, and that the journalists who deal with such issues are subject to harassment.

This further goes along the line of our main argument in this paper. The journalists who express opinions which take issue with the dominion of main actors in the political scene and their utilization of traumatic experiences in forming memory narratives to bolster their influence and cut down any differing opinion on these taboo topics, become an object of national anger. Dežulović dared to point out this process, stressing the unfortunate fate of a city not allowed to become fully alive again.

Conclusion and Future Prospects

Being part of EU framework, thus subscribing to certain standards when it comes to press freedom is a scenario that emboldens the future perspective of Croatia in this sense. However, it is not a guarantee, as the attacks on Dežulović happened at a time when Croatia was in its eighth year of European Union membership. Recent developments, such as the European Media Freedom Act, for which a [provisional agreement](#) was reached in December 2023, and for which the approval vote is possible soon, in 2024. This is well-rounded Act that will provide benchmarks and standards when it comes to media outlets in Member States, thus guaranteeing that attacks through outlets and half-true information will be further discouraged. This can help with the Croatian case, as the officials and other mnemonic actors taking part in the narrative will be more weary of how much they can further instrumentalize feelings and traumas of Croatian people.

On the other side, that is not encompassing the whole problem, as it has become rooted in various pores of Croatian society. Years of glorification of death, made a cult of the Homeland war a complex thing in Croatia. While on one hand people have the right and obligation to honor the fight for independence, on the other it can give birth to reflexive nationalism disallowing criticism. Dežulović was a victim of that phenomenon. Politics of memory in Croatia is correspondent with its nation-building anchored in national homogeneity of exclusive type. Any disagreement with this is seen as an attack on the nation, proving an existing insecurity of Croatian society.

Voices of reason, free journalists who are stationed outside the official paradigm, are thus representing an important balancing factor pointing to the faults of the system. Just like Glavašević in 1991, Dežulović did not coward away from pointing out the culprits. Healthy media framework encouraged by European Media Freedom Act will have a positive effect on similar voices having space in public space, giving Croatia a definite chance for advancing free discussion and de-stigmatization of neuralgic points of its society, as is Vukovar

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Challenging Collective Memory in Bosnia Herzegovina: an interview with Srđan Puhalo

Silvia Viscomi, Elpiniki Paisi

From April 1992 to February 1996, the capital city of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sarajevo, suffered the longest siege in modern warfare history, which drastically resulted in the deaths of 5,434 civilians, including a significant number of children.

In 2022, shortly after May 5th, commemorating the deceased children of Sarajevo, the psychologist and analyst Srđan Puhalo published [an opinion piece](#) on the Analiziraj.ba platform. His intent was to critically examine and problematise the count of children who were killed during the siege. Puhalo referenced media headlines and official statements citing 1601 children killed, asserting that this figure lacked substantiated research.

The initial documentation of children's deaths in Sarajevo emerged in 1994 from the United Nations, which reported 1525 fatalities³. Subsequently, in 1996, the Bosnia and Herzegovina Institute for Health Protection published a slightly higher figure of 1601 deceased children⁴. Notably, a monument commemorating the children slain in besieged Sarajevo, situated in the city's historic centre, bears the names of 524 children, underscoring the importance of preserving this collective memory.

Prior to Puhalo's intervention, the Association of Parents of Murdered Children, in collaboration with the Institute for Research on Crimes against Humanity and International Law at the University of Sarajevo, [initiated a project](#) in 2006 titled "Crimes against the Children of Sarajevo during the Siege of 1992-95" culminating in 2010 with a confirmed count of 524 slain children.

³ Annex VI Part 1 (Study of the Battle and Siege of Sarajevo) to the Final Report of the United Nations Commission of Experts Established Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 780 (1992)

⁴ Bassiouni, C. 1994. Final report of the United Nations Commission of Experts established pursuant to Security Council Resolution 780. Annex VI – The Battle and Siege of Sarajevo. New York, United Nations.

Puhalo's opinion piece immediately ignited controversy and prompted numerous threats against him. An ensuing interview with Puhalo provides further insight into his personal perspective and experiences.

What was your intention when you wrote this article? Was it your intention to provoke or did you simply believe you were denouncing the right?

The intention was very simple, and that is telling the truth. If you have data that is not in line with the information conveyed by the media and used by politicians, all you have to do is problematise it. My first article on this subject appeared in 2015. In that occasion I carefully pointed out in choice words the illogicality between the numbers concerning children killed in Sarajevo and the official narrative. Then I published it for years with the hope that someone in Sarajevo would reconsider it, but this did not happen. Then followed another article in which I offered EUR 5,000 for proofs, but to this day I have not received a relevant list of children killed in Sarajevo, proving that 1601 were killed. This has nothing to do with denouncing the law, because the number of 1601 children is used by everyone in Sarajevo and beyond, without any material proof. So the aim was the truth and nothing more.

How did you feel after the attack (emotions, sensations)? We Suppose you expected to receive criticism.

I didn't expect anything, but the reaction was fierce and lasted a long time. It started with social networks, and then spread to the media and politics. Everyone had an opinion about it, but no one offered any relevant data, neither then nor now. Everything was talked about but the evidence. I was first accused of killing children in Sarajevo as a Republika Srpska soldier, then of [being responsible](#) for the death of Bosnians, whom I invited to report for duty in 1992 and who were then killed. None of this is true and now we'll discuss all of this in court, where some Bosnians will have to prove everything they accused me of. I was left with the nickname of 'death courier'. There was some throwing of objects in the street and attempts at spitting, but that is to be expected when touching a taboo. Emotions were mixed, I was proud

of myself because I had opened an important topic, but also fear and concern for my safety.

The saddest thing is that many people (professors, journalists, researchers) knew that there was no proof that 1,601 children were killed in Sarajevo, but they remained silent or sent me private messages, fearing criticism from their environment.

Did media organisations contact you after the article? In what way and manner? Is this something that often happens in your country?

When the situation got out of control, the Association of Journalists of Bosnia and Herzegovina spoke out and demanded an end to the attacks against me. Private individuals and some embassies, as well as international associations of journalists, also denounced this. The media covered everything except the simple question of whether or not there is a relevant list showing that 1,601 children were killed in Sarajevo. Since then, many media have simply ignored me, even though I had previously had very good cooperation with them.

Concerning the threats. Did you report them to the police and if yes what did they do for you? Nowadays in your country, would you say that journalists are free to report these things or feel safe to express their opinion in general?

The Association of Journalists of Bosnia and Herzegovina denounced all the threats to the police, but the police reacted slowly and I gave up to take into consideration legal action because a lot of time has passed since then and the situation has calmed down a bit.

When it comes to dealing with the past, the situation is simple, everyone wants to portray themselves as the main victims, while they want to hide and ignore their crimes. There is pressure on journalists, even physical attacks, and the statistics are getting worse and worse.

In your opinion, is the memory of the siege of Sarajevo today one for all or is it contaminated/compromised by other versions? Is there still an attempt to 'hide' what happened? Are new generations aware of the facts?

When it comes to the perception of the war in Sarajevo, we have at least two truths, the Bosnian and the Serbian, which are diametrically opposed. We do not even know with certainty the number of victims, much less agree on the interpretation of certain events.

Both Bosnians and Serbs lie and try to impose their story as the only correct one. There are no common projects, the Serbs list their victims and the Bosnians theirs, and there is no consensus or dialogue.

Of course, this also applies to young people, who only learn their stories, where the others are criminals and they are victims. Unfortunately, in Sarajevo, and throughout Bosnia, this is the situation.