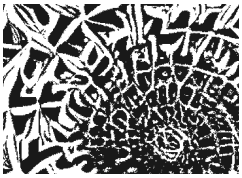

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THE SENTIMENTS OF CROATIAN HOMELAND WAR VETERANS TOWARDS WARTIME COMRADES, FAMILIES, AND SOCIETY IN GENERAL, 30 YEARS AFTER THE WAR

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The reintegration of veterans into civil society after military experience presents a challenge for individuals and governments alike, with social ties and institutional support being key factors in facilitating this transition. To gain insight into how the Croatian Homeland War veterans coped with these challenges 30 years after the war, we conducted semi-structured focus groups (N = 17). We explored how connected they feel to the different segments of society, such as their families, comrades, other Homeland War participants, and other citizens of Croatia and Europe, and the quality of communication with relevant institutions and decision-makers. The findings attest to lasting feelings of cohesion among veterans who have shared their warpath and experiences, the importance of veteran organisations, and the supportive effect of their families. Corrupt policies, resulting in a hyperinflated number of declared veterans who haven't been subject to wartime experiences, hinder a broader connection between veterans. The institutions mainly provide adequate support.

Keywords: Croatia, Homeland War, veterans, cohesion, focus group

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INTRODUCTION

After Croatia declared independence from Yugoslavia at the end of June 1991, it entered its war of independence, or what is now called the Homeland War, which lasted until August 1995. It characterised and continues to influence the country's current social status. The exact date of the start of the war is still debated, as conflicts began a year earlier, after the first parliamentary elections in 1990 (Marijan, 2008), when a part of the population in areas with a Serbian ethnic majority began to rebel against the newly voted independence. During the summer of 1990, propped by the political leadership in Belgrade, the ethnic Serbian civilian population in the Lika and northern Dalmatia regions of Croatia took to arms and blocked road and railroad traffic connecting the Croatian mainland to the coast. This so-called log-revolution or *balvan revolucija* soon after led to a self-proclaimed Serbian autonomous proto-state called the Serbian National Territory Krajina, also known as SAO Krajina or the Republic of Srpska Krajina, which in March 1991 declared the secession from the newly founded Republic of Croatia (Marijan, 2008). By openly opposing the democratic processes that were taking place at the time and by creating and arming paramilitary organisations, this insurgent movement, propelled by Serbian leadership as well as the Yugoslav National Army, quickly escalated into a full-blown ethnic conflict with widespread Serbian violence against Croatia in an attempt to annex as much of Croatian territory as possible. The Yugoslav National Army supported the insurgence and was later held responsible by the international community for their impartial participation in the war, initiating conflicts, and aiding the insurgents in their aims (Marijan, 2008).

The cost of war was estimated to be 40 billion US dollars (Živić, 2001), but the biggest loss was that of lives. According to Goldstein (2010), over 13,000 people died and over 37,000 people were injured, including both civilians and soldiers, while Živić (2001) puts the number of killed soldiers and civilians at 14,433. The above number does not include the missing persons, many of whom have later been exhumated and identified in one of 125 mass murder gravesites (Živić, 2001). Official numbers from 2002 determined that 8,147 Croatian soldiers lost their lives either by being killed in conflict or as a consequence of war through injury, illness, or suicide, and 521 were still considered missing (Živić, 2005). Finally, throughout the war, almost 500,000 people were exiled and fled from their homes (Živić, 2001), and about 150,000 left Croatia, driven away by both Serbian aggression and the negative economic impacts of the war (Živić & Pokos, 2004).

The Defenders

The term "Branitelji", which could be translated as "The Defenders" has become well-established in Croatia to emphasise that the Croatian war of independence was fought solely to defend Croatia from aggression, even though all who actively participated in the conflict can be referred to as veterans. This somewhat generic term encompasses all the persons who participated in the war as members of various police, military, and even militia units and formations, with a prominent distinction being made between the draftees and volunteers, or *dobrovoljci*, which is a term for people that willingly participated in the defense of Croatia in the period between 1990 and 1992 (Begić et al., 2007).

Croatian Defenders differ from other veteran populations mostly due to the specific circumstances of both the war and the early military formation in Croatia. Croatia didn't have an army at the start of the war, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs took on the responsibility of the country's defense. The first armed units called the National Guard Assembly (*Zbor Narodne Garde*) were essentially a police-military hybrid, and they integrated most of the Homeland War volunteers at the time (Marijan, 2008). These early military units, created under police administration, had confronted numerous challenges, such as near-total shortage of appropriate weapons, infrastructure, and a lack of a well-established leadership structure. The disproportionality of the size and the military might of the two armies should not be neglected either. The Yugoslav army had over a million soldiers at the beginning of the Homeland War and was deemed one of the most powerful armies in the world at the time. The estimates of the size of the Croatian armed forces were around 35,000 people in the summer of 1991, which later grew to 200,000 (Živić, 2005).

This unforeseen and necessity-driven requirement for a fast and efficient organisation in the face of such a powerful foe is thought to have had a unique effect on fostering and sustaining cohesion in the Croatian veteran population.

Social capital, institutional trust and support

Social capital, as an observable and measurable quality of societies with far-reaching consequences, has been extensively studied in the social sciences (i.e. Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Lin, 1999). Although there are numerous conceptualisations of this term, one of the most prominent was proposed by Putnam (1993, 2000), who refers to it broadly as an aggregate of features within the society that influence and direct cooperative actions of the members of the society to a mutually beneficial result.

Putnam (1993) initially posited the relationships among the members of a society as a primary generator of social capital production. However, he subsequently included policies and regulations as equally important additions to the former mentioned "bottom-up" principle of social capital creation. Indeed, one of the government's policies aims should be to create a healthy and productive society in which people will be able to utilise their abilities and promote the well-being of individuals, as outlined in the sustainable development goals of the Agenda 2030 by the United Nations General Assembly (2015). What we do know is that countries that are making the best progress in reaching those sustainable development goals are the countries that have the highest social capital (Sachs, 2019).

One of the moderating effects on the success of government policies is trust (i.e. Rothstein & Stolle, 2008). The decline of trust and social capital is shown to be linked also to corruption (i.e. Banerjee, 2016; Della Porta, 2000), and some researchers attribute the decline in social capital and institutional trust in Croatia explicitly to the overwhelming corruption in the period following the war of independence, resulting in feelings of loneliness and helplessness in the population (Budak, 2007; Štulhofer, 2004).

Reintegration and stigmatisation

Reintegration can be conceptualised as an individual's return to the roles, functions, and responsibilities they previously held in a society (Dijkers, 1998; Resnik et al., 2012). The process can be deemed completed when a person becomes integrated into family, community, and society in a way that they can enjoy all the benefits that come from belonging to a group (i.e. Wilier et al., 1994). It should be noted that the challenges in post-military reintegration are not exclusive to Croatian Homeland Defenders. Studies in the US reveal that veterans often face difficulties in reintegrating into civilian life (i.e. Danish & Antonides, 2013; Sayer at al., 2014), encountering prejudice and struggling with the shift from a structured and collectivist military environment to a civilian setting (i.e. Atuel et al., 2016; Kleykamp, 2009; Rudstam et al., 2012).

However, all of the above-mentioned issues seem to have been even more prominent among Croatian Homeland veterans at the end of the war as has been shown from a poll indicating that most veterans felt they did not have the opportunity to openly share their experiences outside of their friend group nor did they feel the society has helped them adequately in returning to civilian life (Šetka, 1997). Begić et al. (2007) trace the specific issues of Croatian Homeland War veteran reintegration to the social transition that took place during and

right after the war with the abrupt end of the socialist regime and the crony privatisation process which left hundreds of thousands unemployed. Another significant number of Homeland War participants, troubled with medical issues and no prospect in the labour market, retired at a young age, placing themselves in a passive position in society.

Up until today, debates on veteran issues are a frequent topic in the public and political discourse and a subject on which there seems to be no consensus in the Croatian media and political sphere. With veterans being treated both with respect and considered heroes as well as being stigmatised, accused of enjoying or abusing various social privileges, and attributed with materialistic motives for their participation in the Homeland War, their status in Croatian society today remains a highly controversial subject (Rihtar et al., 2022).

Possibly the most persistent negative implications for Croatian Homeland War veteran reintegration originate from the irregularities within the Register of Defenders, which fostered a prevailing perception of veterans receiving undeserved privileges. The Register, designed to honour those involved in the Homeland War, has undergone a complex evolution over time, impacting the perception of veterans due to challenges related to inclusion criteria that allowed individuals without direct wartime participation to access veteran benefits. Early data from the Unified Register revealed 489,407 Homeland War participants (Dobrotić, 2008). In 2005, the benefits were extended to non-combatants, leading to discontent among veterans. Consequently, a prevalent public perception has emerged, characterising most war veterans as individuals who may not have actively engaged in combat but presently enjoy what is perceived as undeserved privileges. This sentiment has been echoed in protests by veterans themselves, vehemently opposing the granting of rights to those lacking direct wartime experience (Begić et al., 2007).

This evolving timeline underscores the complexities in accurately documenting and recognising those involved in the Homeland War. Due to these shortcomings, the term Defender underwent a transformation in the public and in the media, from being depicted extremely positively to extremely negatively (Soldić, 2009) and turned into a form of stigma for a large portion of the veteran population (Rihtar et al., 2022).

Social ties and the resilience of social cohesion

A sense of purpose and positive close relationships are crucial in achieving happiness and life satisfaction (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009; Seligman, 2012), whilst the need to belong is a fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Group cohesion, defined as the sum of all the forces that bind individuals to a group (i.e., Festinger et al., 1950) proved to be one of

the factors protecting soldiers from the many negative effects of military stress and influencing many positive post-war and war experiences (i.e., Armistead-Jehle et al, 2011; Griffith, 2002, 2015). Unit cohesion (both vertical and horizontal) has thus been shown to serve as a protective factor post-deployment, reducing the likelihood of mental disorders including PTSD and depression (i.e. Anderson et al., 2019; Campbell-Sills et al., 2022).

This bond can be experienced mostly in close familial groups and environments. However, it is also possible to accomplish this feeling of oneness with a group with which we share no genetic or direct personal relationship by using a group identifier such as "war veteran" or member of a nation or a religion. This process of "identity fusion" can be triggered by stressful and dysphoric experiences such as those experienced in wartime settings (Swann et al., 2012; Swann & Buhrmester, 2015; Swann et al., 2014). Fused individuals can also turn into devoted actors willing to engage in acts of extreme parochial altruism to defend the group, its members, and values (Atran, 2016; Atran & Sheikh, 2015; Sheikh et al., 2014). In the veteran context, it has been found that viewing oneself primarily through one's military identity inhibits a broader sense of social connection and potentially hinders integration into civil society (Flack & Kite, 2021). However, the sense of connection and cohesion, although strongest within the combat and veteran groups, is not necessarily limited to them. According to research by Šućurović et al. (2017), cohesion within the Defender population still reliably predicts attitudes towards social involvement as well as social participation, even after accounting for the effects of confounding factors.

It was the aim of the study to explore in more detail the current state of these social bonds in the Defender population. Most notably, how far their circle of connection and support extends above the family and comrades to determine the level of integration in Croatian and European society. Our aim was also to explore the perception of trust and support from various institutions and political actors which can, in turn, affect the well-being and social capital of the veteran population.

METHOD

To achieve a comprehensive insight into the homeland veteran relations with groups and institutions and to be able to plot these relationships into a meaningful framework, we focused on using qualitative/exploratory focus group methodology. This methodology is extensively used in social sciences as a means of exploring people's experiences, understanding, and assigned meanings to various topics, events, or phenomena (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). Conducted as a series of semi-structured focus groups or group interviews, they allow the moderator

to get an in-depth understanding of the target audience and explore the nature of the subject in detail without the need to impose any restrictions on the scope and context. It is especially powerful as a tool for creating new hypotheses and acquiring information about thoughts, experiences, motivations, and context, providing invaluable insight for revising and expanding our knowledge and theories.

There was a total of two focus groups conducted, one in December 2021 and the other in February 2022. The length was 1 h 46 min, and 1 h 31 min respectively. The focus group conducted in December 2021 had three and the one conducted in February 2022 had 14 participants.

Participant recruitment

The study aimed to recruit Homeland War veterans and participants were reached out to and contacted with the help of the Assembly of Associations of Croatian War Veterans Guard Units (The Assembly). The researchers contacted The Assembly with the request for recruiting the participants for the study, and a trusted person within the organisation sent out the invitation to various veteran organisations within the Assembly. This was a formal invitation with a detailed explanation of the study goals and methodology and a request for volunteers to participate in the focus groups, to which 17 people responded. The volunteers were then instructed further to connect over the online video call platform at a certain time and date to participate. Some of the participants met in person at their veteran organisation facilities and joined the same call, whilst others joined from their homes.

Sample

The sample consisted of 17 Croatian Homeland War veterans. All participants were members of at least one veteran organisation and had experienced combat during the Homeland War with some being wounded and/or captured in the war. The sample consisted of 16 males and one female, all of whom volunteered into service.

Materials

The moderator guidelines during the Focus groups were as follows:

1) Can you describe to us in one sentence your connection, acceptance, relationship, or feelings and come up with an event or anecdote that best describes your relationship with or feelings towards:
   - your family
   - your comrades-in-arms
   - other participants in the Homeland War

- residents of war-affected areas
- neighbours and fellow citizens
- other citizens of Croatia
- other citizens of Europe

2) Can you assess the quality of your communication so far and examples of positive or negative experiences and communication with:

- public institutions and services
- the health system
- the pension system
- the education system
- state, regional, and local governments
- various political actors
- bureaucracy in general
- some other institutions that are important to you (specify which ones)

Procedure

The focus group interviews were conducted by the lead researcher with previous experience in focus group moderation, and he was introduced to the participants by a veteran organisation coordinator, who enhanced participant trust and openness to communication. The focus groups were conducted online using the Zoom platform. For each focus group, an audio file was recorded which was later transcribed.

The discussion was being recorded, but it was made clear at the start of the focus group that the names and recordings would not be used in the presentation or dissemination of the results. All participants were thanked for taking part, and the focus group's purpose was presented as a brief discussion on the factors influencing veterans' relationships with various societal groups as well as an investigation into the effectiveness of communication with key decision-makers, including those in public institutions and services, state, regional, and local governments, among other pertinent factors. It was stressed that there are no right or wrong answers and that participants' truthful responses will determine whether this study is successful. The focus groups began with a repetition of these directives. Before taking part in the focus groups, everyone signed the informed consent forms.

Analysis

The study goal was addressed through thematic analysis, a qualitative research methodology used to find and explain patterns or themes in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The theory posits that a significant aspect of the qualitative data concerning the research topic can be captured by a theme, which denotes

a degree of patterning or significance in the given data source (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Researchers went over the entire data set methodically and identified noteworthy elements in the data that served as the foundation for recurring patterns across the data set (themes). The formation of themes was then evaluated by comparing the codes to see how they would organically group or display opposing viewpoints.

Two of the researchers first conducted independent analyses of the focus group transcripts and created themes for each focus group after which they convened to compare and evaluate their distinct analyses and discussed their findings to help ensure a degree of confirmability of the findings and interpretations. During the comparison, an attempt was made to reach a consensus. To guarantee the veracity and trustworthiness of the themes and interpretations, verbatim quotes that perfectly reflected each subject were chosen.

RESULTS

Two major themes emerged following the application of the thematic analysis on the focus group transcripts. One related to the institutions and the other to the groups. Each of the themes had a positive and a negative pole, with institutions showing examples and cases of positive practices on the one hand and negative ones on the other. It is worth noting that some of the institutions were ambivalently assessed while others had unipolar positive or negative evaluations. The second theme was related to groups with each group loaded both with attractors and detractors, while some groups had no favourability preferences of emotional or cognitive value. For instance, reports of families consisted only of attractors, while relations with veterans had pronounced detractors as related to the existence of "false Defenders" and denoting the qualitative difference between those who were conscripted and those who volunteered.

Themes

Social ties

Family. As for the relationship with the family, all participants report that they get the most understanding from their families. Participants assess their relationship with the families closest to them. Primarily because of the communication and understanding they get from the family. The family accepts them as they are and helps and supports them in veterans-related activities. Some participants also assess that the war did not have a special impact on relationships within the family, which they consider to be strong and close and without any external factors, while some state how the family went through those difficult moments and how it further bound them.

Defenders. Following family, the highest closeness of ties was reported to be with other veterans with whom they can share experiences or have shared some part of the warpath. Defenders thus provide them with feelings of mutual respect and a sense that they can rely on each other. The connection with the veteran population is for some of the veterans the same as the one with the family. From veterans, as well as from the family, they report primarily gaining understanding. Especially in instances they call "dark minutes", when by conversing they help each other bridge difficult moments. Also, they estimate that they have not faced rejection from veterans like they have from the general population and report that they have more tolerance towards veterans in life situations. They believe that mutual understanding is a source of trust and connection between veterans. Some of them remained connected with the war veteran population through veteran associations or through the continuation of their professional careers in the army, which further emphasised this connection.

A significant number of participants are now working in veteran associations on various projects, jobs, and socially useful work and improving living conditions for the veterans who are struggling now. The participants report that working in veteran associations takes a lot of their time, which implies absence from home at the expense of the family, but the participants report that the families are aware of this and support them, which allows them to continue their engagement.

Some participants have a pronounced role of personal experience and acquaintanceship during the war and testify that even among families and veterans with whom they did not directly participate in the war, mistrust can occur. As one participant reports "Eighty percent (of people) do not believe anything that happened in the war. In the books today there are no reports of what the Defenders did. Two-three pages here and there… People who were there understand. Others all say that we are lying". They further emphasise a special connection with people with whom you went directly to war and that these are the people, as one participant notes, who you will "at some point ask for support, help" and with whom you will "share a story, share a problem, grieve or rejoice depending on the situation."

Also, there is a noticeable difference in the perception of those veterans who volunteered to go to war and who were on the front lines. They believe that the war was a specific and different experience for those Defenders and as one of the participants describes, the one "who was on the front line understands what happened on the front line, and the others do not understand." They note that such "true Defenders" love their homeland and continue to socialise and see each other,

go to each other's meetings, attend workshops, go to commemorations, etc., and that such Defenders understand each other and can distinguish themselves from others. Participants assess the socialising among those who were on the front lines as more positive, and feel that veterans who did not experience the battle on the front lines "trivialise the war, do not know how it was, do not know what we went through."

The above points to the problem of the status of veterans where they recognise how everyone is crammed "into the same basket". Both those who were volunteers and were on the battlefield from 1990–1992, and those who were only mobilised and engaged in the war for a few days.

They also address the problem of the existence of "false Defenders", who got the benefits of participating in the war without ever experiencing it and which have caused a lot of notoriety and stigmatisation of the term Defender. Their existence undermines the feeling of closeness and trust, but they note that such phenomena can also be a trigger for Defenders to want to harm themselves. They fight against such negative perceptions by getting involved in the work of the local community. They note that they are citizens of Croatia like everyone else and that they try to show with their work that they are not a privileged caste and that they can still contribute to the work of the community.

Other groups. Looking at the wider community within Croatia, they see that some people have full acceptance of veterans, while some people notice the disparagement of the veteran population and participation in the war. One participant estimates that 60% of the population accepts and understands (Defenders), while 40% deny their achievements or problems and do not support them in their efforts. Also, they believe that this resistance occurs mainly in people who were not in the war and estimate that 90% of the people who were in the war understand the sacrifice of this act.

By some of the participants' accounts, a gap is created between those who were not in the war and those who were, because of viewing Defenders as privileged members of society. They consider the media to be largely responsible for this change in Defenders' perceptions. They also look back at the difference between the public treatment they received after the end of the war when sentiment towards them was extremely positive and today when the status of Defenders is mentioned almost universally in a negative context. According to the participants, this effect of negative judgement and condemnation of Defenders is emphasised and aggravated on online social networks, online forums, and news outlet comment sections.

Some members further emphasise that they are sad and disappointed to see the direction the country they fought for is going in.

Part of the veterans who were in the prisoner of war camps or who were injured and disabled in the war state that there is more understanding for them and the feeling that people appreciate them, but they testify that the positive attitude and pride they felt and the gratitude that people expressed began to fade, and now the public view their pensions as a privilege, forgetting the disability which many have been living with ever since the war.

They report very good cooperation with members of other ethnic minorities, for instance, the Roma minority by veterans from the area of Međimurje.

Looking at the broader group membership, the Defenders have an overall positive view of the European Union and its influence. They considered themselves as part of that community and do not feel it to be a threat to sovereignty. Rather, they see Europe and European peoples as a group they belong to.

Institutional support and trust

Positives

Veterans report extremely positive experiences with the Ministry of Defenders, with an emphasis on responsiveness in solving problems and speed of responding to enquiries. They also praise the announcement of the Ministry that the construction of nursing homes is under way. They note, however, that projects from the Ministry that are transferred to the municipal level, such as the implementation of various veteran services, get delayed and veteran associations are forced to intervene.

Furthermore, among the positive examples, the participants note the beneficial effects of the digitalisation of bureaucratic processes, especially in the education system.

Negatives

There were several negative examples of discrimination against veterans where health examinations were either neglected or in some way delayed due to the veteran status and diagnosis of PTSD. This has caused frustration and spilled over into other aspects of life.

In addition, as far as government at a local level is concerned, communication takes place mainly in the context of the construction of memorials, where cities, municipalities, and counties participated in financing the monuments.

However, according to the testimony of the focus group participants, the associations took over a large part of the work

of the institutions. Associations adapt to this and apply for project funding which they use to hire psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, and lawyers. Part of the veterans' associations applied successfully to European funds. They consider these EU projects as some of their biggest achievements. Finally, they highlighted that the veteran associations dedicate a significant part of their funds to financially supporting a large number of veterans, some of whom have for various reasons been left out of the pension system.

Regarding the positive experiences, it can be inferred that the experience of quality, care, and connection with a particular institution – whether health, education, or public administration – depends primarily on relationships with individuals within that institution. In addition, some participants express apathy and believe that even if there were things that should change, they could not influence them.

Suggestions for improvement

A recurring finding was that the quality of communication with various institutions varied and depended greatly on the individuals they came in contact with. The participants propose that the managers of these systems should work on educating their employees and make them aware of the importance of their work. Otherwise, when service users fall into these "bureaucratic nightmares" they withdraw and create resistance to contacting those services in the future, thus endangering their health and well-being. This dependence of the quality of service on the characteristics of individuals working in these services is most pronounced in the healthcare system, whose quality and responsiveness varies greatly and largely depends on individuals – doctors and nurses, and whether they will be engaged or non-cooperative.

Additionally, although veterans' experiences with the health and pension systems have witnessed an improvement in the quality of service recently, there is still a pronounced need for additional advice and assistance in navigating the "forest" of regulations and procedures. The desire was also expressed that educated and capable Defenders, with real experience of war, be placed in key positions in governance because they believe that with the integrity and zeal carried over from participating in their wartime roles, they could benefit the State. They believe that more work should be done to make the veterans' contribution more appreciated, although they point out that they do not ask to be exalted or praised excessively.

They also have the impression that there is a negative influence of the media, in a way that the veteran population is often humiliated, and that topics related to veterans do not have enough space in the media. They, however, express a de-

sire to improve that reputation through education and are willing to create and participate in projects to this end.

Finally, some participants conveniently quantified their connection with these groups, and the feeling of connection with family was rated as 10 (on a scale of 1–10), with veterans 7–8, community 4–5, while in this progression the institutions were rated lowest with 1–2. However, both the family and the Defenders fall basically into the same category that "must be respected, ... regardless of the circumstances".

DISCUSSION

Focus groups with 17 Croatian Homeland War veterans were held to learn how they handled the difficulties of reintegrating into society 30 years after the war. We investigated how connected to various societal groups individuals feel, including their families, fellow soldiers, other Homeland War combatants, and residents of Croatia and Europe, as well as the effectiveness of communication with pertinent organisations and policymakers. Focus group data were analysed by applying thematic analysis, and two major themes – social ties and institutional relations – were established.

According to the findings, veteran groups are essentially valuable for this population as they provide feelings of belonging and acceptance, and there are long-lasting feelings of cohesion among veterans who have shared their wartime experiences and paths. There is also a strong supportive influence of the families in veterans' lives.

On the topic of institutional support, their view is that the majority of the institutions offer acceptable support, but there is a strong impression that the quality of the services is largely influenced by the traits of the staff and not particularly by the organisational characteristics of that institution.

Furthermore, the veterans accept Croatia's position in the EU as a positive outcome and consider themselves to be a part of the European community and integrated into the community of citizens of Europe.

A major theme, however, is that of corrupt regulations and policies which have created an exaggerated number of Defenders, many of whom have not been in the war, and are enhancing distrust and harming a potentially deeper bond amongst a broader circle of veterans. Such events erode trust in institutions, which has a lot of downstream negative effects on society.

It is worth noting again that due to specific characteristics of the Croatian Homeland War, the population of Defenders differs somewhat from what would be considered a veteran population in countries that have professional armies and have not fought in a war in their country.

Those arduous and stressful times were the bedrock of the cohesion we see in the Defender population today. The relationships between people who have shared traumatic experiences make up some of the strongest bonds between individuals (Whitehouse et al., 2014), and affection for other members of one's group grows stronger as the difficulty increases. Individuals who participated in military activities were more likely to compare their relationships with their comrades to those with their own families, demonstrating once more the potential significance of traumatic and stressful experiences in forging strong bonds between people in military units (Murphy, 1957; Whitehouse et al., 2014).

Although affiliations and connections have a positive impact on people's willingness to give back to the society they live in, it has been shown that centralised military identity and extreme levels of cohesion might be inversely related to successful integration into civilian society and acceptance of the members of the outgroup (i.e. Sheikh et al., 2015; Flack & Kite, 2021).

However, there are numerous examples of the Defender population being at the forefront of non-inclusive altruistic and humanitarian efforts in Croatia. Whether through public service engagements reported in this study, or as the first respondents who provided help and organised collection and distribution of aid in natural disasters such as floods (Šućurović et al., 2017), the COVID crisis, and the Zagreb earthquake (Pavić, 2022). It has been shown that by participating in such communal efforts, the Defenders gained a sense of personal worth, they felt needed, discovered their personal strengths and capabilities, and forgot about their problems as well as felt more connected to the society and other Defenders (Pavić, 2022).

This need for active participation raises the possibility that a sense of national identity emerging from shared values may also have been a crucial emotion that enabled veteran cohesion to be converted into social capital at the national level, and it is encouraging to see that even with a deteriorated institutional trust and prevalent corruption, as well as long-lasting stigmatisation and prejudice, a sense of belonging and not various forms of parochialism persist in sentiments even towards the EU and its citizens.

IMPLICATIONS

This research highlights the capacity of the population of Defenders to support and serve not just other veterans but also Croatian and European society as a whole. It highlights the significance of further cultivating family cohesion and comrade solidarity in general. Peer mentoring programmes could be established to avoid potential veteran incredulity towards the

civilian population. This would utilise the exceptional connection and trust that veterans cultivate in one another to help with issues that the veteran population faces, from health to employment problems and other adjustment issues. Furthermore, institutional support and guidance for veteran organisations and individuals interested in providing services and aid in the public domain should be encouraged as it would benefit the society as well as all the Defenders engaged in such programmes.

LIMITATIONS

The limitations of this study fall in the general category of qualitative research, mainly the limited sample size, whereas the findings and issues we unveiled in our focus groups should be further explored by applying survey measures to a larger population of Croatian Homeland veterans. Also, it would be advisable to include veterans who were exposed to various levels of combat to see if cohesion and social ties are affected by it.

Finally, participants of these focus groups were all active members of a veteran organisation, and as such were more likely to have been volunteers and have participated actively in combat as well as being more likely to have been injured in the war (Bagić et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION

Veterans' active and adequate reintegration into normal civilian life is hampered by the lack of trust in the effectiveness of the institutions, the public's ignorance of the issues they are currently facing, a lack of awareness of this population's particular needs, stigmatisation, as well as some health issues. This hurts the veterans' quality of life and underutilises their potential to actively contribute to their communities. Marginalisation thus robs them of a sense of value and emphasises mistrust, which causes the war veteran population to withdraw into a small group of people with whom they share both postwar destinies and war experiences, closing the circle of dissatisfaction and alienation. Nevertheless, the veteran population still feels positive about engaging in helping both veteran and non-veteran populations, feels a strong bond with their comrades and families from whom they receive the most support, and although trust in institutions is damaged, they see themselves not only as veterans but as Croatians and as Europeans. By aiming at a better understanding of the connection structures, issues, and the social environment of Croatian Homeland Defenders and by actively combating trust issues that arise out of the perceptions of institutional corruption and inefficiency, both Croatian and European institutions and policymakers have the opportunity to create and carry out efficient programmes for integrating veterans into society and to build social cohesion. Even if 30 years after the war.

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Osjećaji hrvatskih branitelja iz Domovinskog rata prema ratnim suborcima, obiteljima i društvu općenito, 30 godina nakon rata

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Reintegracija veterana u civilno društvo nakon vojnog iskustva predstavlja podjednak izazov i za pojedince i za vlade, pri čemu su društvene veze i institucionalna podrška ključni čimbenici u olakšavanju ove tranzicije. Kako bismo dobili uvid u to kako su se hrvatski branitelji nosili s ovim izazovima 30 godina nakon rata, proveli smo polustrukturirane fokus-grupe (N = 17). Istraživali smo koliko se osjećaju povezanima s raznim segmentima društva – poput obitelji, suboraca, drugih sudionika Domovinskog rata i ostalih građana Hrvatske i Europe – te kvalitetu komunikacije s relevantnim institucijama i donositeljima odluka. Nalazi potvrđuju trajne osjećaje kohezije među veteranima koji dijele ratni put i iskustva, važnost veteranskih organizacija sa značajnim učinkom podrške njihovih obitelji. Korumpirane politike, koje rezultiraju iskrivljenim brojem deklariranih branitelja koji nisu sudjelovali u vojnim aktivnostima, otežavaju širu povezanost među braniteljima. Institucije uglavnom pružaju odgovarajuću podršku.

Ključne riječi: Hrvatska, Domovinski rat, branitelji, kohezija, fokus-grupe

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