

# CROATIAN VETERANS' CONSTRUCTION OF THE DOMINANT 1990s WAR NARRATIVE IN THE 2000-2005 PERIOD: BETWEEN PRESERVATION AND NEGOTIATION

**Sven Milekić**  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2096-4467>

Post-doctoral researcher  
CEU Democracy Institute, Budapest

E-mail: [MilekicS@ceu.edu](mailto:MilekicS@ceu.edu)

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**Abstract** As a country gaining independence amid the 1990s war, the Homeland War represents a pivotal historical event for Croatia, serving as its founding myth. By selectively using historical facts about the conflict, the main myth-makers use the war as a political myth important for Croatian contemporary national identity. This sanitised view of the past, constructed and promoted by elites and non-elites, is especially tied to war veterans. Since the 1990s, veteran associations played a significant role in Croatia's memory politics, reinforcing the regime of Croatian President Franjo Tuđman. After Tuđman's death and the subsequent opposition's electoral victory, veteran associations and groups played a major role in keeping the war narrative alive. Veterans were especially active during the 2000-2002 period, when they successfully advocated the dominant narrative about the war, obstructing Croatian cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia. However, after preserving the dominant narrative, many veteran associations took part in negotiating or re-constructing the narrative when, in 2004-2005, they aligned with the new government policy of cooperating with the ICTY for the sake of European integration. By analysing archival documents and media reports, the article points to the pragmatism of many veteran groups contrasted to those loyal to their former fellow combatants.

**Keywords** Croatia, Homeland War, war veterans, ICTY, war crimes, political myths

## Introduction

As part of the violent break-up of socialist Yugoslavia, the Croatian 1990s war resulted in massive casualties and destruction, shaping the country and society for deca-

des.<sup>1</sup> Croatia gained its full independence during the 1991-1995 war, while the conflict triggered or at least expedited the country's international recognition (Glaurdić, 2011; Jović, 2017: 218; Meier, 1999: 226-234; Woodward, 1995: 178-191). As it started almost parallel with achieving statehood, and because it triggered international recognition, the 1990s war functions as Croatia's founding myth (Jović, 2017: 12-13; Milekić, 2024a: 83; Pavlaković, 2021: 25-26). Different actors in Croatian politics and societies, elites and non-elites, co-created this founding myth with a hegemonic narrative or interpretation of the 1990s war (Banjeglav, 2012: 9-12; Pavlaković, 2016).

This article deals with how Croatian war veteran associations and groups contributed to building, preserving, and re-constructing (negotiating) the dominant narrative about the 1990s war, positioning them somewhere between elites and non-elites. The article claims that veteran associations and groups were one of the key, if not pivotal (borrowing from Dolenec and Širinić, 2020) actors in building the hegemonic narrative about the 1990s war in Croatian society. However, the article claims that, like many other political and social actors, veteran associations were not rigid and uncompromising in their interpretations, despite their somewhat populist odium of politics. Thus, they were open to negotiation, re-interpretation or even (self-)censorship. While veteran activities were politically instrumentalised, they did not come without genuine agency on their part. In arguing this, the article focuses on the 2000-2005 period, because it brought a few key social and political ruptures that propelled veteran associations into the main myth-makers.

Firstly, death of the wartime leader and Croatian 1990s President Franjo Tuđman in 1999, and his party, Croatian Democratic Union (in Croatian *Hrvatska demokratska zajednica*, HDZ) losing the subsequent parliamentary elections represents the first rupture in the history of a very young state. As the downfall of HDZ was accompanied by numerous scandals, veteran associations and groups became the main political opposition to the new centre-left government. The new government's policies of speeding-up the process of negotiating with the EU, at the expense of securing a more effective prosecution of the war crimes committed by Croatian forces through the cooperation of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), was another rupture. Thus, veteran associations and groups, supported by HDZ and other right-wing parties, confronted the government on the prosecution of these crimes as well as other policies. Finally, the 2004-2005 period brought another rupture, as HDZ, also pursuing EU membership, now decided to change its policies on prosecuting the same war crimes and coming into conflict with veteran associations. However, this time, veteran associations loyal to HDZ decided to change their rhetoric on the prosecution of these crimes, showing how they are not radicals but also open to negotiation for something they saw as non-negotiable only recently. Therefore, the article brings nuance in analysing the veteran movement in Croatia, showing them as a political actors open to negotiation in certain periods and under certain conditions.

In terms of structure, the article first explains how the 1990s war functions as Croatia's founding myth and what the dominant narration about it is. Then, the ar-

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ticle shortly explains the origins of Croatian veteran associations and how they helped build the dominant narrative during the 1990s and continues with a presentation on how veterans fought to reaffirm, preserve, and negotiate the dominant war narrative during the 2000-2002 and the 2004-2005 periods. Finally, the article will conclude on the important role veteran associations, partially tied to the political parties, had in constructing, preserving and re-constructing the dominant war narrative.

## The Homeland War myth

The myth-like status of the war is first visible from how the conflict is exclusively referred to in Croatia: the Homeland War (*Domovinski rat* in Croatian). The primary point of discontent is the impression of the vagueness of the term „homeland.” Hence, some argue that this term was deliberately coined or popularised to blur certain aspects of the war and sanitise the narrative. The „homeland” can be extensively defined, including territories of Croatia and neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina (Karabalić, 2011: 144-146).

In the Croatian context, the Homeland War myth functions as a belief (not necessarily empirically based) held common by a large group, giving meaning to different events (Edelman, 1971). As a political myth, it represents a made-up, unreliable and contested explanation of reality that serves as a key to understanding the present. This myth is part of the political myth about the centuries-long dream of Croats of an independent state.<sup>2</sup> Thus, in the preamble of the Croatian Constitution, while showing the continuity of Croatia’s statehood in different kingdoms, empires and states, the victory in the Homeland War is chronologically the last stop to „full state sovereignty” (Hrvatski sabor, 2010). As a result, the war and full state independence associated with it serve as lenses for looking at past events and constructing a preferred future.

One of the essential features of political myths is their driving force, to act either as a tool for reaffirming a disturbing identity or constructing a new social reality. The myth of the centuries-long dream of an independent state and the Homeland War as the time of unity and golden age have these features (Jović, 2017: 208-209). Myth-makers used the first to motivate people to take arms and endure the hardships of war, followed by general impoverishment. The other was used to muster unity and support, silence opposition (if it questioned the myth) and secure citizens’ obedience. Having this in mind, Friedrich and Brzezinski explain myth as a „tale concerned with past events, giving them special meaning and significance for the present and thereby reinforcing the authority of those who are wielding power in a particular community” (Friedrich and Brzezinski, 1965: 91). In this way, the Homeland War myth acts as a crucial part of Croatia’s nation-building process while it reaffirms the authority of certain political elites and veterans.

In the symbolic top-down nation-building process, the Homeland War is widely perceived among Croats as a conflict in which Croatia was a victim of the „Greater-Serbian aggression” (in Croatian *Velikosrpska agresija*). According to this interpretation, the conflict threatened the existence of both the Croatian independent state and nation (Milekić, 2024b: 10; Pavlaković, 2016: 19). As political myths are

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of the „centuries-old dream” (s. Bellamy, 2003: 35-58; Uzelak, 1997).

ideologically marked narratives in dramatic form, which explain past events for the sake of the present, so thus the Homeland War has its narrative (Flood, 1996: 42; Tudor, 1972: 16). There is an overwhelmingly dominant narrative of the conflict, advocated by the mainstream parties, war veteran associations, media, academia and school curriculum (Banjeglav, 2012; 9-12; Milekić, 2024a: 83).<sup>3</sup> Like every hegemonic narrative, this dominant narrative is something people in Croatia often take for granted, almost as common sense. Elites and non-elites built this hegemonic narrative, extensively promoting it in the Croatian mainstream from wartime onwards, creating generations of citizens familiar with only that interpretation.

It does not mean that political myths, including the one about the Homeland War, are built entirely on fabricating the historical truth. Political myths are never created out of touch with historical reality but incorporate facts in mythological sanitised narratives (Žirarde, 2000: 13, 57-58). However, the myth-like structure can be noticed when certain elements are not mentioned or downplayed. One of the constitutive elements in framing the conflict as aggression is the denial or downplaying of war crimes committed by Croatian forces against Serbs and Bosniaks (latter in the context of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina). According to the dominant narrative, initially weaker Croats – sometimes referred to as Croatia – defended the nation and newborn state from international aggression by Serbia and Montenegro with the help of the Yugoslav People's Army (in Croatian *Jugoslavenska narodna armija*, JNA) and Serb rebels. This narrative is not entirely ridden from all historical reality, as Serbian paramilitaries and rebels, helped by the JNA, started a full-blown armed conflict in 1991, attacking the non-Serb population and Croatian forces. However, the emotional deployment of the „Great-Serbian aggression” obscures all potential responsibility for transgressions on the Croatian side and ignores elements of civil war (or an internal, mostly ethnic, conflict) (Milekić, 2024a: 84-87; Milekić, 2024b: 10, 12).

The issue of the character of the war in Croatia lies in the fact that at the beginning of the conflict, in 1991, it was still one of the republic in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (in Croatian *Socijalistička Federativna Republika Jugoslavija*, SFRJ). Usually, two dates in 1991 are used as the ones when Croatia became an independent state (and thus a party to international law): 25th of June, when it declared independence (*de facto* independence) and 8th of October, when it broke all legal ties with SFRJ (*de iure* independence) (Žunec, 2007: 177-179). Therefore, the war can be categorised as an international conflict from both dates. However, as the JNA withdrew from Croatia by April 1992 (with the exception of its engagement in the area of Dubrovnik), the conflict was a non-international – a war between the central state and part of its citizens, rebels, mostly aligned on the ethnic basis (Croats against Serbs) – until its end in 1995 (Ibid, 245). Furthermore, the war can be defined as a conflict that was simultaneously an international aggression and a non-international, ethnic war (Ibid).

When it comes to transgressions committed by the Croatian side in the conflict, war crimes are the most important. The radical interpretation claims that Croatian forces could not commit crimes in defending the homeland from foreign aggression (Kardov, Lalić and Teršelić, 2010: 81-82). More moderate variations claimed that these crimes were individual transgressions without state support (Ibid: 79-80).

3 Car demonstrated how during the 1990s Croatian media played a role in constructing Croatian war veterans as heroes (Car, 2008: 156).

Additionally, the dominant narrative completely neglects any official role of Croatia in the Bosnian War and its intervention during the Croat-Bosniak conflict in 1993-94, despite verdicts of the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia (ICTY) suggesting otherwise (Milekić, 2024a: 84; Milekić, 2024b: 12, 14; Pavlaković, 2016: 39; Prosecutor v. Prlić et al, 2017). This narrative was first formed by the 1990s Croatian President Franjo Tuđman, denying any culpability of his regime for transgressions that could have (and had) tarnished the country's image. Through time, this narrative was promoted into an official narrative institutionalised through parliamentary and legal documents passed between 1999 and 2017 (Hrvatski sabor, 1999; Hrvatski sabor, 2000; Hrvatski sabor, 2006; Hrvatski sabor, 2010; Hrvatski sabor, 2017).

The dominant narrative focuses on the aggression dimension of the conflict while obscuring elements of a civil war, as such conflicts do not predispose guilt for the attack or victimhood. The general perception of the conflict as a civil war does not cause equal emotional engagement as aggression (Milekić, 2024a: 85; Milekić, 2024b: 12; Soldić, 2009: 97). This emotional engagement is needed for preserving symbolic power. This official narrative offers a one-dimensional view of the war as „Greater-Serbian aggression,” a life-or-death situation in which the defenders defended the state and Croatian lives.

### **Veteran associations' grounding process (1992-1999)**

Although veteran associations were partly grass-roots organisations, the state and the governing party, HDZ, also had a vital role in their formation. Under the umbrella of the Ministry of Defence, in April 1992, disabled veterans founded the Alliance of the Croatian Military Disabled of the Homeland War (in Croatian *Hrvatski vojni invalidi Domovinskog rata*, HVIDR). Defence Minister Gojko Šušak immediately guaranteed state support to disabled soldiers who have made „a holy sacrifice” at „the altar of the homeland” (Hranjski, 1992). Other veteran associations founded in the 1993-95 period enjoyed a similar state or HDZ support during the ongoing war. Upon forming the Association of the Croatian Veterans of the Homeland War (in Croatian *Udruga hrvatskih veterana Domovinskog rata*, UHVDR), Tuđman's military advisor thought his support could secure effective control over the massive veteran population and potentially politicise the association (Kašpar, 1993).<sup>4</sup> In the case of the Association of Croatian Volunteers of the Homeland War (in Croatian *Udruga hrvatskih dragovoljaca Domovinskog rata*, UHDDR), high-ranking HDZ members and state officials took part in a turbulent and controversial takeover of the organisation (Večernji list, 1994a; Bašić, 1994; Knapić, 1994; Erceg, 1994). Eventually, these events further fragmented the veteran movement, resulting in the state's partial control of the veteran body (Vjesnik, 1994; Večernji list, 1995).<sup>5</sup> An integrating factor of the veteran body was President Tuđman – also Pre-

<sup>4</sup> Although in 2002 UHVDR changed the name into Association of Volunteers and Veterans of the Homeland War (in Croatian *Udruga dragovoljaca i veterana Domovinskog rata*, UDVDR), I will use only UHVDR for simplicity.

<sup>5</sup> Very extensive research into the dynamics of Croatian war veterans gathering into associations, explaining different cycles between 1991 and 2014, was done by Bagić, Kardov and Škacan. The article also demonstrates how associations' membership is predominantly closer to right-wing (Bagić, Kardov and Škacan, 2020).

sident of HDZ – as the supreme military commander who led soldiers and the Croatian nation towards statehood. Veteran associations invited him to anniversaries, events, and annual conventions, while many made him an honorary president or member (Dečak, 1996; Novoselac, 1998). Regarding moral support, veteran associations rhetorically defended Tuđman from perceived adversaries. Even in internal struggles within HDZ, veterans would stand by Tuđman, condemning creators of divisions, when unity was needed to fulfil Croatia's territorial integrity (Večernji list, 1994c). This rhetoric reflected Tuđman's discourse on the unity of Croatia (in a territorial sense) and Croats (in a symbolical and cultural sense). Associations also supported Tuđman in the domestic political arena, standing behind him in elections and disputes with the opposition. When Tuđman faced international criticism or opted to defy the international community, associations pointed to „international factors” working against Croatia's independence (Dečak, 1997).

Not only were associations defending Croatia from „international factors”, but they also promoted the newborn state and its plans of achieving complete territorial integrity globally. The most active association was UHVDR, which dedicated itself to promoting the truth about Croatia and the War globally (Galović and Vukušić, 1993; Večernji list, 1993). The truth spoke of Croatia as a victim of foreign aggression and a struggle to establish sovereignty within its internationally recognised borders – which meant squashing the non-recognised statelet, the Republic of Serbian Krajina. UHVDR saw this promotion of Croatia as one of its roles in the World Veterans Federation (WVF) (UHVDR, 1995).

Focus on complete territorial integrity or unity of Croatia was one of the reasons why veteran criticism against the government was relatively timid in the 1992-95 period. These associations did not want to jeopardise what they saw as a fragile social and political order that crucially needed unity to complete Croatia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Veterans saw the fulfilment of their right as something coming after or at least parallel to the realisation of national interests – „liberation and preservation of the Croatian state” (Večernji list, 1994b). Although veteran leaders did complain about state treatment, this dissatisfaction was not expressed in large public protests or actions, as it would be later.

After years of more or less static veteran movement – with a short-lived dissatisfaction burst in 1996 – the status quo was radically disturbed in December 1999, when Tuđman, their protector and leader, passed away.<sup>6</sup> Veteran associations across Croatia opened books of condolences in their offices accessible non-stop as a sort of religious wake for Tuđman (Glas Slavonije, 1999; Slobodna Dalmacija, 1999). In their obituaries, veteran leaders emphasised all that Tuđman had done for Croatia's independence and victory in the war, promising to remain in their hearts forever. At the same time, Tuđman's presence became transcendental, and veterans transformed him into a symbol, an idea that veterans will follow in the future.

## **Dissent over the Homeland War narrative (2000-2002)**

The passing of Tuđman was followed by a centre-left coalition victory in parliamentary elections in January 2000, dethroning HDZ after a decade. The new government promised to „reverse the anti-democratic and anti-Western policies of its predece-

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<sup>6</sup> For veterans' contentious activities in 1996 (s. Milekić, 2022).



ssor” and improve the cooperation with the ICTY (Peskin and Boduszyński, 2003: 1125). The improved cooperation with the ICTY carried the risk of prosecuting Croatian officers for war crimes, a process largely prevented by Tuđman’s regime.

The ICTY quickly became a major factor in disrupting the Homeland War myth, agitating veteran associations. In the town of Gospić, in the spring of 2000, ICTY investigators excavated mass graves of Serb civilians executed by Croatian forces in 1991. Their activities mobilised veteran and right-wing groups dissatisfied over ICTY’s alleged focus on crimes committed against Serbs (Pavić, 2000). As ICTY’s investigations continued, in August 2000, Milan Levar, a witness of these crimes, was assassinated (Čuljat and Božić, 2000). The assassination caused unease in public, revealing the risks of testifying on crimes committed by Croatian soldiers. Despite being a veteran himself, many veteran associations and leaders portrayed Levar as a traitor, using foul language and threats, contributing to the heated atmosphere. Thus, veteran Tihomir Orešković, arrested only days later and subsequently convicted for war crimes in Gospić, told the media that he „doesn’t give a fuck” about Levar’s murder (Večernji list, 2000). In October, veteran leader Luka Podrug said on local Split TV station ATV that „Judases always end in the same way even if they are called Milan Levar or if they are at the head of the state”, indirectly threatening President Stjepan Mesić (Grcić, 2000). A spokesperson of a veteran association from the town of Đakovo said that Levar was a traitor who testified against „his people, military and homeland” (Pišl, 2000).

As Levar’s murder led to subsequent arrests of persons suspected of his murder and war crimes that he witnessed, veterans launched a new wave of disobedience. In cities and counties across Croatia, veterans started to form groups called the Headquarters for the Defence of the Dignity of the Homeland War (in Croatian *Stožer za obranu digniteta Domovinskog rata*), with the Central National Headquarters created in Split (Jurišin, 2000). These *ad hoc* groups of veterans, active military officers, HDZ and right-wing politicians conveyed the urgency of the potential peril for Croatia parallel to the war itself (Žabec, 2000). Although Headquarters denied its political ties, even veteran leaders pointed to the problem of its public perception as HDZ’s proxy organisation (UHVDR, 2001).<sup>7</sup> In remilitarising the post-war reality – seen from using terms like „crisis headquarters” – veterans wanted to initiate a value-based state of urgency in which they were defending the „dignity of the Homeland War.”

Pressed by veteran protests, the government decided to co-opt some opponents’ discourse on the war’s dignity. Therefore, in October 2000, a junior partner in the government, the Croatian Peasants’ Party (in Croatian *Hrvatska seljačka stranka*, HSS), proposed that the Parliament pass *the Declaration on the Homeland War*. According to HSS, *the Declaration* would outline the values of the war, setting a functional rule of law as one of them. The document would include prosecuting war crimes by applying the principle of strictly individual criminal responsibility (Vlahović et al, 2000). HSS wanted to combine the position of the protesting veterans

<sup>7</sup> This episode, like the others during the 2000-02 protest period, demonstrate the dynamics of veteran associations enhancing their protest activities in situations when HDZ is in opposition (Dolenec and Širinić, 2020; Bagić, Kardov and Škacan, 2020, 217-218) Following up on their research, Milekić and Bagić et al, offer a more nuanced view of the relationship between veterans and HDZ (Milekić, 2022; Bagić, Kardov and Škacan, 2020, 217-218).

with the government's one that aimed at war crimes prosecution and compliance with the ICTY. While some political leaders of the governing majority praised the idea of *the Declaration* bringing peace among all political options in the country, some were highly sceptical, claiming such a document would demean the values of the war (Popović, 2000).

After a few days of heated debates, and in the presence of the Headquarters representatives, the Parliament passed *the Declaration on the Homeland War* (Jutarnji list, 2000). The abrupt passing of *the Declaration* was a clear sign of the success of veteran associations, advocating their view of the war through various Headquarters, as they set the agenda for the political elites. Not only did their narrative survive the period of government change, but associations managed to further silence and marginalise any potential counter-narratives. *The Declaration's* central theme of the „dignity of the Homeland War” shows how successful veterans' activities were and how much politicians had picked up their discourse (Hrvatski sabor, 2000). Furthermore, Article 6 of *the Declaration* states that the Croatian judiciary needs to prosecute war crimes for the sake of the dignity of the War (Ibid). Thus, dignity should motivate the judiciary to prosecute war crimes, not the functional rule of law – a value the government promoted.

*The Declaration* best encapsulates the dominant narrative of the Homeland War. According to this document, Serbia, Montenegro, JNA, and Serb rebels launched an armed aggression against Croatia. The war it waged was „just and legitimate, defensive and liberating”, emphasising that it was not „conquering” (Ibid). The notion of the war being a strictly defensive conflict and not international aggression was essential to counter accusations of Croatia's role in the Bosnian War. As part of that narrative, *the Declaration* sees establishing and defending state sovereignty and territorial integrity as a fundamental value „unanimously accepted” among the Croatian citizens (Ibid).

As Snježana Koren noted, the Declaration sets the Homeland War as the foundational value of independent Croatia, thus clearly functioning as a state-funding myth (Koren, 2011: 137). Additionally, Koren found Article 7 of the Declaration especially problematic. The Article called „all citizens, state and public institutions, unions, associations and media and obliges all officials and all state bodies” to „protect foundational values and dignity of the Homeland War” (Hrvatski sabor, 2000). For her, such an excursion of state authorities represented an attempt to create a monopoly of historical truth and limit the freedom of interpretation and speech (Koren, 2011: 136). According to her, such history laws prescribe how the past should be thought of and strip citizens of intellectual and moral responsibility to express their position on specific social values (Ibid: 128).

However, despite the government's plans, *the Declaration* neither resolved the existing divisions in Croatia's politics and society nor pacified the veteran Headquarters. On the contrary, it possibly strengthened the veterans or fuelled their radicalisation. Like at the battlefield, veterans did not want to give over the initiative to their opponent, the state. The existence of the Headquarters guaranteed them political and social relevance and media coverage. As their patrons, Tuđman and Šušak, were gone and HDZ in opposition, veteran associations needed to secure their position in society from scratch.

After they successfully defended the dominant narrative of the War by pressuring the Parliament into passing *the Declaration*, veteran associations continued with



further steps to obstruct state efforts to comply with the ICTY's requests for war crimes prosecution. Veterans initiated nationwide disruptive activities in February 2001, when the state attorney's office issued an arrest warrant against General Mirko Norac for crimes committed against Serb civilians in Gospić in 1991. Norac did not turn himself in and went into hiding (Opačak et al, 2001a). Immediately, a group of veterans and locals from Norac's hometown of Sinj blocked the major road connecting Zagreb and Split and staged protests. The Central Headquarters called Croats to take a side between the Croatian side with „defenders, legendary war heroes, generals” and the side of a puppet government that „demolishes the foundations of the Croatian state by criminalising the Homeland War” (Karakas et al, 2001).

By now, protests have permanently radicalised the veteran scene, and other associations have picked up the heated and militant rhetoric. Thus, the Coordination of Associations from the Homeland War, led by a moderate UHVDR, started issuing ultimatums to the government (Republička koordinacija udruga proisteklih iz Domovinskog rata, 2001a). Smaller and medium-sized protests, fuelled by militant and even neo-fascist rhetoric, spread across Croatia like wildfire (Opačak et al, 2001b). The Central Headquarters and HVIDR organised a central protest against Norac's arrest warrant in Split. With veteran leaders, generals and HDZ officials as speakers at the rally, some 100,000 people stacked up at the waterfront. Using extreme anti-communist and nationalist rhetoric, with elements of Ustaša iconography, protesters threatened to protect Norac and march on Zagreb. By saying, „in this country, we make the decisions,” retired General Janko Bobetko echoed veterans' prevalent „us vs them” frame. In the presence of right-wing politicians, veterans demanded that the government cease persecution of Norac, end its cooperation with the ICTY and call for new elections (Rajčić and Pejković-Kačanski, 2001; Večernji list, 2001).

Although there were dissenting voices in the veteran movement, most associations rode the protest wave. Therefore, the National Coordination issued its Declaration, demanding that the authorities pass laws to amnesty all veterans for any potential war crimes committed in the „context of a defensive conflict”. Besides such a radical demand, the Coordination proposed that the Parliament passes the Law on Protection of Values of the Homeland War, serving as „a legal basis for the protection of dignity” of the war and veterans themselves (Republička koordinacija udruga iz Domovinskog rata, 2001b). From that time on, associations had frequently used tropes such as „the criminalisation of the Homeland War” when the state opposed introducing more veteran welfare.

Furthermore, the whole protest period, centred on cooperation with the ICTY and reinforcing the dominant narrative of the war, did not exist in a social vacuum. It was connected to other state activities towards veterans. One of these was a revision process of registered veterans and disabled veteran status that would reveal so-called „fake veterans” – especially disabled ones who had the right to special pensions, hand-outs, tax cuts and other benefits (Žabec, 2001).<sup>8</sup> While some veterans associations welcomed this process, some were sceptical or directly opposed the idea (Janjić, 2000). Some associations, such as HVIDR, supported such initiatives

<sup>8</sup> Car shows how the early 2000s brought a radically different representation of veteran in Croatian media in relation to the 1990s, now showing them as tricksters or even enemies (s. Car, 2008: 157-158).

during the previous government while rejecting such activities under the new regime (Sinovčić, 2000).

After two weeks of protest activities in February 2001, Norac turned himself in. Prime Minister Ivica Račan guaranteed he would not be tried before the ICTY in The Hague, but only potentially before Croatian courts (Đula, 2001). Veteran associations saw this as a victory, claiming that Norac would have been transferred to The Hague without their pressure (Ciboci, 2001). Additionally, this pressure resonated with a part of the governing coalition, especially the centrist Croatian Social-Liberal Party (in Croatian *Hrvatska socijalno-liberalna stranka*, HSLs). A fraction of HSLs looked at the prosecution of war crimes committed by Croatian forces similarly to the protesting veterans, indirectly helping their cause (Kavain, 2001).

While 2001 was turbulent, the veteran insurgency climaxed in 2002, with the Bobetko Crisis marking a new low point in Croatia-ICTY relations (Lamont, 2010a: 53). General Janko Bobetko, nicknamed „Croatian Patton”, enjoyed massive popularity in Croatia as a participant in World War II and the 1990s war (Čulić, 2002a). This popularity came from the way he represented a living representative of Tuđman's doctrine that Croatian anti-fascists should defend contemporary Croatia (Wranka, 1995). Additionally, the fact that he joined the Croatian Army in 1992, at 73 years of age, as well as being known for planning and directly participating in many military offensives and visiting Croatian soldiers to lift their spirits across the country amplified his image (Del Ponte and Sudetic, 2008: 246; Goldstein, 2021: 187; Kuljiš, 2005: 146-147, 151-154). Like Tuđman, Bobetko was a living example of a Croatian (and even Croat in an ethnic sense) anti-fascist who turned Yugoslav dissident in the 1970s, thus demonstrating his willingness to fight for the Croatian cause and against the autocratic socialist regime (Kuljiš, 2005: 146; Udovičić, 2006: 624). In this way, Bobetko almost equally enjoyed popularity among sympathisers of socialist Yugoslavia and anti-fascist movement and anti-communists (Čulić, 2002b; Banac, 2002). Finally, his strong support for veterans fighting the government in 2000-2001, right-wing and anti-Serb rhetoric, fight for improvement of the veteran welfare, ensured his support among different right-wing and veteran associations and groups (Bašić, 1996; Bobetko, 1995; Čulić, 2002b; Valdec, 2000; Horvat, 2002; Kuljiš, 2005: 146-147).

Therefore, when in September 2002, Croatian media reported that the government received ICTY's indictment for Bobetko, his house in Zagreb immediately became a shrine attended by opposition politicians, veterans and right-wing groups, many of whom vowed to protect him from extradition to The Hague (Malić, 2002). HSLs President Dražen Budiša, formerly part of the government's majority, stated that Bobetko did not commit the crimes and that the indictment against him is „an indictment against the Homeland War” (Jelić et al, 2002). Encouraged by this support, Bobetko warned that he would not go to The Hague alive, framing his indictment as „another aggression against Croatia,” committed by a court that wishes to „erase” Croatia's history and condemn the country's freedom (Plišić, 2002).

Bobetko's dramatic speech further fuelled veteran groups. Presidents of all UH-VDR county organisations supported Bobetko in his battle against an indictment that wanted to put the war and present and future generations of Croats on trial (UHVDR, 2002). Vowing to transform his house into „a fortress” that veterans would defend, the Central Headquarters saw it as a defence of their „past, present and future” (Profaca, 2002). In other words, veterans quickly transformed Bobetko

into a symbol of victory in the war transcending time. He became Croatia itself – something all patriots should defend till the end of time. Like Tuđman and Šušak before him, Bobetko became one of the veterans' founding fathers, a value of the Homeland War.

At the same time, the media galvanised the crisis, creating an atmosphere of „a state of emergency” and contributing to the general impression of Croatia's uncertain future (Pavlaković, 2008: 456). Consequently, many wanted the ICTY to drop the indictment against him and those against generals Rahim Ademi and Ante Gotovina (Tolić, 2002).

Finally, the government caved in and refused to hand Bobetko the indictment and extradite him (Jelić, 2002). Although the government's decision against Bobetko's extradition gathered support among veterans, it opened the door to new demands that could push Croatia into international isolation (Jutarnji list, 2002). The government's concessions led to additional, more radical demands like two years before. In the end, Bobetko passed away in April 2003 before standing trial (Lamont, 2010b: 1693). The crisis represented a major step backwards in Croatia-ICTY cooperation – one of the government's main objectives on its EU path. The government tarnished its image internationally, as it was reported for non-compliance to the UN Security Council in 2002 (Ibid: 1684). The veteran associations and *ad hoc* groups were, thus, successfully amassing pressure for the state to either use its jurisdiction to try Croatian officers themselves and transfer cases or to avoid processing ICTY's indictments and arrest warrants.

### **Negotiating the Homeland War narrative (2004-2005)**

However, as Croatia's cooperation with the ICTY regressed during the 2000-2003 period, the 2004 HDZ government changed its tune under Prime Minister Ivo Sanader. Although he participated in 2000-2001 protest activities, with his inflammatory speech on the protest in Split in 2001, Sanader quickly abandoned the extreme nationalist rhetoric. Knowing that every government would have to cooperate with the ICTY to fulfil the country's goal of joining the EU, Sanader avoided discussing the issue during the 2003 elections campaign (Pavlaković, 2008: 460). Nevertheless, almost immediately upon assuming office, Sanader's government dramatically improved its cooperation with the ICTY. In March 2004, the ICTY issued indictments against Croatian generals Mladen Markač and Ivan Čermak for war crimes committed during the 1995 Operation Storm, followed by an indictment against a group of Bosnian Croat officers a month after. Finally, in May 2004, the ICTY also issued an indictment for Norac for war crimes committed during the 1993 Medak Pocket Operation. The officers promptly turned themselves, mirroring Sanader's radical turn in cooperation with the ICTY (Peskin, 2005: 221).

What was different between this wave of indictments compared to those against Norac and Bobetko from 2000-2002 was the public's reaction and veterans. There was no „state of emergency” or domestic political crisis. Sanader's government did witness some criticism from right-wing margins, but nothing compared to the turmoil from Račan years (Pavlaković, 2008: 462). Associations were no longer making ultimatums and demanding resignations, snap elections, or even open mutiny. Seeing the mild reactions, the Central Headquarters accused the mainstream associations of compliance, rejecting claims that veterans lack HDZ's logistical support to stage protests (Pejković-Kačanski, 2004).

Despite these accusations, it was evident that associations treated the new government and its cooperation with the ICTY differently. Retired generals signed petitions to support the government's efforts in „promoting the truth about the War” in The Hague (Večernji list, 2004a). The associations sought explanations, believing the government would defend the accused (Večernji list, 2004b). Mainstream associations did not use the belligerent language from the 2000-2002 protest period.

The shift in how associations perceived the cooperation with the ICTY was so evident that some claimed that one reason was that veteran leaders were HDZ members. Associations like HVIDR claimed that their views have not changed but supported the government because the accused willingly turned themselves in (Borković, 2004). Although associations' support for HDZ's new course on cooperation with the ICTY seemed like an expected outcome, it took much negotiating, persuading and coercing. Thus, in one meeting, Sanader and Veterans Minister Jadranka Kosor had to face some of the veteran backlash directly, as their leaders accused the new government of worse relationship towards them than the former government. Some veteran associations and groups, tied to HDZ's right-wing competitors, tried to undermine the government by using guerrilla marketing strategies in pointing to the shift in prosecuting Croatian officers (Đikić, 2004). To please veteran associations, the government proposed a draft of the *Law on Defenders* that widened certain benefits and allowed for a wider definition of veterans (thus potentially triggering their inflation), while it put a hold on a potential revision of disability status among veterans (Barilar et al, 2004; Ivanuš and Sever Šeni, 2004; Sever Šeni and Pandžić, 2004). Material perks aside, Sanader and his top officials tried to publicly emphasise their respect for veterans, portrayed as those who seek respect and not privileges (Modrić, 2004). Although there were still veteran associations that were not satisfied with the new law – stating it only widened the number of veterans, but not their rights – the mainstream ones were on the government's side and secured peace in the movement.

The atmosphere had changed dramatically from less than a year ago. Although the anti-ICTY sentiment was still highly present in society, veteran associations were ready to accept full cooperation with the ICTY as the only way to pursue Croatia's long-standing goal – European integration (Šarić, 2004). Sanader set a new paradigm in defending the „dignity of the Homeland War” – defence before the ICTY (Knežević, 2004). Furthermore, Sanader explained how his government would help the accused defend themselves while convincing the Tribunal to transfer cases to Croatian courts (Pavlaković, 2008: 462).

However, despite dramatically improved relations with the ICTY, the Gotovina case was one major remaining piece in the puzzle. General Ante Gotovina, accused of war crimes committed against Serb civilians during and after the 1995 military operation „Storm”, went into hiding in July 2001, immediately upon receiving news of ICTY's indictment. Back then, speaking with a reporter from his hideout, Gotovina echoed the warnings issued by veteran groups: if he was guilty, the whole Croatian nation was guilty (Plišić, 2001). With time, by 2004, his arrest and extradition to the Hague became one of the country's hottest and biggest political issues. Years on the run from authorities transformed Gotovina into a cult-like persona, gaining most support from disenfranchised elements of the post-Tuđman society. In the view of his followers, Gotovina encapsulated the values that – from a right-wing perspective – led Croats in the war: „patriotism, a willingness to fight against Ser-

bian aggression, religiosity.” He embodied both a hero and a martyr, representing the Croatian army, Homeland War, the Croatian state, and Croats as a whole. This representation of Gotovina was in line with the tradition of a *hajduk*, a 17th to 19th century romanticised bandit or outlaw glorified in folk songs, representing „anti-modern, anti-urban and anti-state mentality” from regions in Croatia. The slogan „Hero, Not a Criminal”, present on billboards with Gotovina’s photo placed across Croatia, resonated with these sentiments in the general population that largely saw him as a war hero (Pavlaković, 2010).

Sanader tackled the issue of Gotovina’s nationwide support by focusing on the bigger picture – cooperation with the ICTY as a prerequisite for its EU membership. Although the right wing still saw cooperation in locating Gotovina as grand treason, Sanader’s government had a strategic advantage compared to his predecessor Račan: close links to mainstream veteran associations and groups (Lamont, 2010a: 47).

The government ignored and quietly resolved the billboard campaign with Gotovina’s photo across Croatia, despite both hidden and openly expressed support of local branches of mainstream veteran associations (Đuretek et al, 2004; Večernji list, 2004c; Miljuš, 2005a; Sokol, 2005, Miljuš, 2005b). Local branches of veteran associations, mainly in the Dalmatian region, often ignored the instructions of their central national organisations and defied the government. Local branches often saw their national leadership – or mainstream associations – as corrupt or politically instrumentalised. These renegade veteran groups opposed the new course of mainstream associations and rejected the political establishment (Borković, 2004; Đikić, 2004; Bilan, 2005; Kvesić, 2005; Večernji list, 2005a). These veterans proceeded down the insurgent route of the 2000-2002 period.

The whole situation triggered internal rifts within some associations. HVIDR President and HDZ’s MP Josip Đakić caused a media storm after stating that Gotovina has to prove his innocence in the Hague, thus repeating Sanader’s mantra (Moskaljov et al, 2005). Mainstream associations on the national level defended their view of the cooperation with the ICTY from a moral and legalistic perspective. For them, the Homeland War was about the national liberation or defence from Serbian aggression and a fight for a democratic state with a functional rule of law (Dečak, 2005).

Unlike the 2000-2002 period, now mainstream associations believed that nothing could be resolved through protests, as the current government is doing everything to present the war as „just, defensive and liberating.” Mainstream associations often tried to distinguish between criticising the government and supporting it fully (Moskaljov, 2005). This opportunistic and diplomatic approach of mainstream associations was noticeable in their refusal to decide if Gotovina should or should not turn himself in. Thus, the mainstream Republic Coordination of Associations from the Homeland War did not directly condemn the government’s activities to extradite Gotovina but peacefully called for legal amending the Constitutional Law on Cooperation with the ICTY (Republička koordinacija udruga proisteklih iz Domovinskog rata, 2005). In public, the government and mainstream associations downplayed the existing internal rifts, claiming that veterans support the new course of its leadership. Alleged unofficial cooperation between the government and associations on preventing protests was hidden from the mainstream media and publicly denied (Sever Šeni, 2005; Večernji list, 2005b).

This brokered peace lasted until December 2005, when Spanish police arrested Gotovina at Tenerife with the help of Croatian intelligence agencies (Bajt et al, 2005). In a press conference, Sanader explained that the rule of law has no alternative and that everyone indicted must stand trial. He emphasised that Croatia would support all ICTY defendants in establishing the truth about the War (Knežević and Moskaljov, 2005).

After the media broke the story, unsatisfied veterans, football fans, and the general population protested in Zagreb and Zadar region (from where Gotovina originated). Although without massive violence, protesters put up roadblocks, torched cars and broke windows on state institutions (Večernji list, 2005c; Šarić and Gojun, 2005; Večernji list, 2005f). HVIDR leaders tried to channel dissatisfaction with the government by supporting Gotovina to defend himself before the ICTY, rejecting threats of radical actions (Večernji list, 2005d). The associations called on reason, claiming that protests and unrest would only hurt Gotovina's case. Many associations urged the government to help Gotovina's defence (Večernji list, 2005g; Večernji list, 2005h). Đakić went even further, comparing roadblocks to the events from 1990, when Croatian Serb rebels blocked the roads in the Dalmatian hinterland, an ominous event in Croatian public memory known as the Log Revolution, aiming at a moral character assassination of veterans opposing the government (Večernji list, 2005e).

Despite individual bursts of dissatisfaction, mainstream associations did not enter a conflict with the government and demanded that it provide Gotovina with all the help it could. The associations organised a new protest on the Split waterfront but banned right-wing opposition politicians from participating as speakers. Additionally, the organisers insisted that it was not a protest but an event of support for Gotovina and the government (Miljuš and Sever Šeni, 2005; Miljuš, 2005c; Večernji list, 2005i). The government and mainstream associations wanted to prevent full-blown political unrest from unravelling, like the already legendary 2001 protest on Split waterfront. The government wanted to avoid creating a political alternative to the HDZ on the right and prevent creating a state of urgency that could threaten EU talks.

These protests over Gotovina's arrest and extradition did not propel any new political actors or political messages to open a new series of anti-government protests. In cooperation with the authorities, mainstream associations managed to de-escalate the situation, transforming it into a support for the government's plan to „defend the Homeland War before the ICTY” (Čulić, 2005). Mainstream associations used the discourse of cooperation, publicly trusting government plans to help the ICTY defendants (Večernji list, 2005j).

In a way, Gotovina's arrest and extradition to The Hague marked the end of the massive political anti-ICTY movement, spearheaded by veteran associations and logistically supported by HDZ. Despite occasional outbursts in later years, veteran associations would not cause a political crisis over the issue of cooperation with the ICTY. With more benefits granted by the amended *Law on Defenders* and hefty funds from the state budget, associations tied themselves to the regime even more, allowing the inevitable institutionalisation of the memory of the war. Associations became the facilitators of not only Croatia's past but also its future. Thus, the associations fulfilled Croatia's strategic goals, such as EU accession (UHVDR, 2009).



## Conclusion

Since the Homeland War functions as the country's nation-building myth, preserving the dominant narrative about the conflict is important for contemporary Croatia. By offering a clean and sanitised record, stressing the victimhood of the nation from the „Greater-Serbian aggressor”, and downplaying alternative interpretations, the Homeland War myth reinforces contemporary Croatian identity.

Aside from Croatian political elites, war veterans were among the most influential groups of new myth-makers responsible for preserving and reinforcing the dominant narrative. Organised in associations during the 1990s, veterans primarily functioned as the ideological and symbolic support of Tuđman's regime. However, during the early 2000s, veteran associations were key players opposing the new centre-left government over interpreting the war. As they lost their leaders (Tuđman and Šušak) and political support (HDZ), veteran associations had to confront the government that threatened to disrupt the dominant narrative. The government's activities threatened to question or dismantle the Homeland War myth that reinforced „the authority of those who were wielding power” in society – the 1990s political elites and veteran associations. Besides such a potential symbolic loss, this disruption had potentially real repercussions for veterans, including ICTY indictments, revision of disability status and cuts in the welfare and financing of their associations.

For these reasons, veteran associations stepped in and confronted the government over the interpretation of the war. Veterans retook control over the narrative in a combination of small to large-scale violence, protests and pressures, using ad hoc para-political groups (Headquarters). Despite evident logistical support from HDZ, veterans were the main actors in the anti-ICTY insurgency. While HDZ had the baggage of the 1990s corruption, veterans quickly established themselves as the moral fibre of the society, built on the foundations of the Homeland War, thus acting as a hegemonic social group (Bagić, Kardov and Škacan, 2020: 218).

Pressured by veteran contentious politics, the Parliament passed *the Declaration of the Homeland War*, transforming the dominant into the official narrative. Also, because of everyday pressure, the political elite completely co-opted the veteran, essentially Tuđmanist, discourse on the war. The shift in discourse over the war was not only rhetorical. It produced real-life consequences: a breakdown of Croatia-ICTY cooperation in 2002, stopping radical cuts in veteran welfare and ending the state revision of disability statuses.

However, the final period of 2004-2005 reaffirmed the impression of veteran associations as political actors prone to compromises and bargaining. Keeping their end of the deal in alliance with HDZ, most mainstream veteran associations, often unwillingly and internally divided, followed Sanader's new course in improving Croatia-ICTY relations. After almost ignoring indictments against Croatian and Bosnian Croat officials in 2004, associations were put to the test with the Gotovina case. After nearly two years of Sanader's soft power over veterans, including an amended *Law on Defenders* and lucrative funding of associations, the mainstream associations changed their model of defending the dominant narrative personified in Gotovina.

As Gotovina was arrested and extradited to the Hague, associations, directly or indirectly, had to change their discourse on prosecuting war crimes committed by Croatian forces. Previously, the associations claimed that Gotovina was innocent

and should not stand trial before the ICTY. They still supported the notion of his innocence but argued that only by standing trial before the ICTY could he prove his innocence and clear his name. Although this caused an uproar at the fringe of the veteran movement and splits within some associations, it did not have long-lasting consequences. The dominant narrative remained intact, reinforced by a cloak of legality in the sense that it combined an exclusive nation-centric interpretation of the war and contemporary international obligations that ultimately resulted in steps towards fulfilling the country's longstanding goal – EU integration.

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## Konstrukcija dominantnih ratnih narativa hrvatskih veterana u razdoblju 2000-2005: između očuvanja i pregovaranja

**Sažetak** Kao državu koja se osamostalila usred rata 1990-ih, Domovinski rat predstavlja ključni povijesni događaj za Hrvatsku, u funkciji njenog utemeljiteljskog mita. Selektivnom primjenom povijesnih činjenica o sukobu, glavni mitotvorci koriste Domovinski rat kao politički mit važan za suvremeni hrvatski nacionalni identitet. Ovaj pročišćeni narativ o prošlosti, koji konstruiraju i promiču i elite i ne-elite, posebno je vezan uz ratne veterane. Od 1990-ih veteranske udruge igrale su veliku ulogu u hrvatskoj politici pamćenja, jačajući režim hrvatskog predsjednika Franje Tuđmana. Nakon Tuđmanove smrti i izborne pobjede oporbe, veteranske udruge i skupine odigrale su veliku ulogu u održavanju ratnog narativa. Branitelji su bili posebno aktivni tijekom 2000.-2002., kada su uspješno zagovarali dominantni narativ o ratu, opstruirajući hrvatsku suradnju s Međunarodnim kaznenim sudom za bivšu Jugoslaviju. No, nakon očuvanja dominantnog narativa, mnoge braniteljske udruge sudjelovale su u pregovorima ili rekonstrukciji narativa kada su se 2004.-2005. priklonile novoj vladinoj politici suradnje s ICTY-jem radi europskih integracija. Analizom arhivskih dokumenata i medijskih izvještaja, članak ukazuje na pragmatizam mnogih veteranskih udruga u odnosu na one lojalne svojim bivšim suborcima.

**Ključne riječi** Hrvatska, Domovinski rat, branitelji, ICTY, ratni zločini, politički mitovi