

UDK 355.1(497.5)"1991/1995":159.942

<https://doi.org/10.53745/bs.95.5.5>

Received: 28. 5. 2025

Accepted: 19. 8. 2025

Original scientific paper

© 2025 Bara – Brgles – Žagi, CC BY NC 4.0

Lessons from the Past, Conflicts, Resilience and Recovery of Veterans:

A Case Study from Croatia¹

Pouke iz prošlosti, sukobi, otpornost i oporavak branitelja.

Studija slučaja iz Hrvatske

Mario Bara²

Miriam Mary Brgles³

Karla Žagi⁴

Summary

This research was conducted with Croatian Homeland War veterans to gain a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of their resilience during the war and their recovery in the post-war period, with particular emphasis on the role of institutions and veterans' associations, as well as the reintegration of the Croatian Danube region, where many veterans reside. Using in-depth interviews and focus groups with veterans and institutional representatives, this study examines how individuals and institutions responded to the risks and societal challenges generated by the war. Drawing on Ulrich Beck's theoretical framework of the risk society, the study situates the Homeland War within the broader processes of modernization and the sociological construction of risk. The key findings show that veterans developed resilience through mechanisms such as a desire for life, humor, faith, and purpose-driven action. Institutional responses, particularly by the Ministry of Croatian Veterans, evolved over time, shifting from basic care provision to more nuanced psychosocial and reintegration programs, with veterans' associations playing a crucial role. The research highlights the duality of veterans' post-war experiences: while many express pride and satisfaction in their contributions, they also struggle with stigmatization and mental health challenges.

¹ The research forming the basis of this paper was financially supported by the Nanovic Institute for European Studies, University of Notre Dame, Indiana, USA.

² University Department of Sociology, Catholic University of Croatia, Zagreb.

³ University Department of Sociology, Catholic University of Croatia, Zagreb.

⁴ University Department of Sociology, Catholic University of Croatia, Zagreb.

The study underscores the heterogeneity of the veteran population and the need for interdisciplinary, participatory approaches in shaping public policies that recognize veterans not as passive recipients of aid but as active agents in societal development. These findings contribute to veteran studies by emphasizing the importance of resilience, recognition, and inclusive governance in post-conflict recovery.

Key words: veterans, Croatian Homeland War, resilience, recovery, social conflicts, risk

Sažetak

Istraživanje je provedeno među hrvatskim braniteljima sudionicima Domovinskoga rata s ciljem dubljega razumijevanja mehanizma njihove otpornosti tijekom rata te oporavka u poslijeratnom razdoblju, s naglaskom na ulozi institucija i braniteljskih udruga kao i na kontekstu reintegracije hrvatskoga Podunavlja, jer na tome području žive mnogi branitelji. Pomoću dubinskih intervjua i fokus-grupa s braniteljima i predstavnicima institucija, analizira se kako su pojedinci i institucije odgovorili na rizike i društvene izazove uzrokovane ratom. Oslanjajući se na teorijski okvir društva rizika Ulricha Becka, Domovinski rat se promatra u kontekstu širih procesa modernizacije i sociološke konstrukcije rizika. Ključni nalazi pokazuju da su branitelji razvili otpornost zahvaljujući želji za životom i moralnim vrijednostima, humoru, vjeri i djelovanju usmjerenom na smisao. Institucionalni odgovori, osobito oni Ministarstva hrvatskih branitelja, tijekom vremena su se razvijali od osnovne skrbi prema složenijim programima psihosocijalne podrške i reintegracije, a nezaobilazna je uloga i braniteljskih udruga. Istraživanje ističe dvojaku prirodu poslijeratnog iskustva branitelja: iako mnogi izražavaju ponos i zadovoljstvo svojim doprinosom, suočavaju se i sa stigmatizacijom, mentalno zdravstvenim poteškoćama te promjenjivom percepcijom javnosti. Studija naglašava heterogenost braniteljske populacije te potrebu za interdisciplinarnim i participativnim pristupom u oblikovanju javnih politika koje branitelje prepoznaju ne samo kao pasivne korisnike pomoći nego kao aktivne aktere društvenog razvoja. Rezultati ovoga istraživanja pridonose razvoju studija o braniteljima isticanjem važnosti otpornosti, priznanja i uključivog upravljanja u kontekstu postkonfliktnog oporavka.

Ključne riječi: branitelji, Domovinski rat, otpornost, oporavak, društveni konflikti, rizik

Introduction

The processes of modernization and globalization in the 20th century have influenced the shaping of contemporary societies where various risks, uncertainties, and potential disasters take center stage. This does not mean that risks were non-existent in earlier periods of human history. Due to static institutions shaped by traditions and customs, previous risks largely remained spatially localized. In modernity, risks have become a global factor that threatens many aspects of social life, including political, religious, ethnic,

and other relationships, as well as open conflicts, terrorism, wars, and mass migrations. Global risks can escalate and endanger all life on Earth, including climate change, environmental degradation, pandemics, and the threat of nuclear war. Many social theorists, especially sociologists such as Ulrich Beck (1992), Niklas Luhmann (1993), Anthony Giddens (1991), Scott Lash (Beck et al. 1994), and Jens O. Zinn (2008), have addressed the concept of risk and the risk society. According to German sociologist Ulrich Beck (1992, 21), risk is defined as »a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself.« Beck elaborated the concept of reflexivity, a central element in his theoretical framework of the risk society. Reflexivity refers to the ability of individuals and institutions to critically assess risks based on past experiences and acquired knowledge, develop management strategies for them, and adjust actions in response to changing circumstances.

1. Social Conflicts as a Risk

Violence and social conflicts throughout the development of human civilization have taken many forms, ranging from small-scale incidents involving a few individuals to world wars with powerful weapons and massive casualties. Violence entails suffering, loss, and trauma, requiring appropriate responses and adaptations by individuals and societies. In recent decades, Europe and the world have undergone significant political, social, and economic changes. Notably, the collapse of communist regimes and the transition to political pluralism, market economies, and democratization in many European countries stand out. These transition processes also brought violence, resistance from old political elites, economic uncertainty, and numerous risks in citizens' lives. Croatia is one of the European countries that fought for its independence while undergoing political transition. Unlike most European countries that transitioned peacefully, Croatia faced aggression from the Yugoslav army, controlled by Serbia, before it had gained international recognition (Cigar 1997, 34). While parallels exist between Croatia's experience and the aggression that Ukraine is currently facing, Croatia's defense has specific characteristics (Ase-nov 2021, 13–14). One key aspect is that Croatia was under an arms embargo, lacking international support in its defense against aggression. Croatia built its army and defense under extremely unfavorable circumstances, relying on captured Yugoslav army's weapons and smuggling arms across its borders (Coll 1993). Interviewees consistently emphasized this fact. In the formation

of the modern state, the Homeland War⁵ and the role of veterans represent a central formative event, particularly in collective memory and the construction of contemporary Croatian national identity (Benčić Kužnar 2020, 33–34). According to official data from the Ministry of Croatian Veterans Affairs from early December 2021, there were 513,140 veterans registered in the »Veteran Registry« (The Registry of Veterans 2021), of whom 426,345 were alive (Ministry of Croatian Veterans 2022). In other words, veterans comprised 11% of Croatia's population according to the 2021 census (3,871,833). This percentage was slightly higher in earlier years, but due to the consequences of war trauma, injuries, disabilities, aging, and suicide, the number of living veterans has declined.

2. Review of Literature and Previous Research

Many conflicts result in an increase in the number of veterans and families who are directly or indirectly exposed to the traumas of war. This has prompted research by academics from various disciplines and the emergence of a new field of study under the concept of »veteran studies.« Some countries have a substantial veteran population owing to their historical engagement in conflicts, yet significant disparities exist in scientific research concerning veteran demographics and the formulation of public policies targeting healthcare, employment, psychological and medical services, among others (Dobrotić 2008, 59). Recognizing this necessity, scholars have called for interdisciplinary endeavors and international collaboration concerning the reintegration of veterans into civilian life and all aspects of that process. Trends present in veteran studies indicate that a large portion of studies focuses on the psychological, mental, and social demands of veterans in transitional environments.

In Croatia, research on war veterans has focused on several fundamental themes, depending on the academic discipline. These include mental health, resilience, recovery (Šućurović et al. 2017), reintegration into civilian life (Clark 2013; Popović 2016), advocacy in public policies, political orientations, political and social mobilization (Milekić 2022), media portrayal of veterans (Balabanić et al. 2022; Brgles et al. 2024), collective memory, public discourse on the social role of veterans and their well-being (Jakir 2019; Hlišć and Šincer 2022), employment activity and opportunities (Miletić and Pokos 2022), social en-

⁵ The given term refers to the defense of the state sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Croatia from 1991 to 1995, which will be analyzed in more detail later in the text.

trepreneurship within the veteran population (Tišma et al. 2023), social care for veterans (Dobrotić 2008), and more. One particularly significant area of research is the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental health disorders among veterans. Studies have examined specific traumas experienced during the Homeland War and their long-term psychological effects. Furthermore, research has also addressed protective factors that foster resilience, enabling veterans to adapt to various challenges and adversities (Knežević et al. 2016, 353 – 370). Resilience, in this context, refers to the ability to recover from trauma and maintain well-being. Factors such as social support, coping mechanisms, and personal characteristics have been identified as key elements in promoting resilience among veterans. According to a survey conducted among victims of rape during the Homeland War, most victims developed their own coping strategies. For many, work therapy and conversation with others who had endured similar trauma proved helpful, along with participation in prayer groups, pilgrimages, spiritual renewals and the sacrament of confession. A smaller percentage sought professional psychiatric or pharmacological support. (Kopunović Legetin et al. 2019)

The role of direct and indirect religious practice during the Homeland War in Vukovar was further highlighted in an in-depth analysis by Bendra and Mihaljević (2016). However, subsequent findings suggest a discrepancy in the recognition of the role of spirituality as a resilience mechanism by policy-makers (Bendra 2018).

Recovery, on the other hand, involves a broader process of reintegrating into civilian life and rebuilding a sense of daily routine, which may take years. The challenges veterans face during this lengthy transition have been the focus of extensive research addressing issues such as 1) public perception of veterans and their media portrayal; 2) healthcare for veterans; 3) veterans' employment activity and involvement in social entrepreneurship; 4) war tourism in Croatia; 5) the psychosocial status of veterans' families; and 6) veterans' communication with decision-makers (policy-makers). A distinctive feature of this body of research is the involvement of partnerships between veterans' associations and scientific institutions and universities (Tematske mreže branitelji 2023). The active participation of veterans' associations in such research represents an important step towards shifting veterans' roles from being mere objects of policy to becoming subjects and co-creators of policies that directly affect the veteran population.

Although numerous studies have provided valuable insights, there remains a need for a comprehensive understanding of resilience and recovery,

particularly regarding the interaction of various formal (governmental) and informal (non-governmental, civilian) actors in the social context affecting the position of the veteran population.

3. Research Aim

This research was conducted with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of resilience during the war and of recovery in the post-war period, with a particular emphasis on the role of institutions and veterans' associations, as well as the broader context of the reintegration of the Croatian Danube region, where a significant number of veterans reside.

The research focused specifically on war veterans and government bodies representatives responsible for addressing the social and related interests of this population. Croatian war veterans were key actors in the establishment and defense of the state sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Croatia during the Homeland War (1991–1995). War veterans constitute a diverse social group, differing in wealth and social status, education, age, gender, family (marital) status, employment, political orientation, social inclusion, and physical and mental health. What defines them as a relevant social group in sociological terms, however, is their shared experience of participation in the Homeland War and the common problems arising from wartime events. A considerable proportion of veterans live in areas that were peacefully reintegrated (1996–1998) into the constitutional and legal order of the Republic of Croatia, or in their immediate vicinity. These Croatian territories were on the front lines and remained free during the aggression in the early 1990s but also suffered destruction and loss of human life. In both cases, the occupied territories that have been peacefully reintegrated and the areas that remained free endured numerous traumas, the consequences of which remain visible today.

4. Research Questions and Applied Research Methods

The key research questions we posed are: 1) what were the mechanisms of resilience among veterans, 2) what were the main personal and societal challenges and gains experienced by Croatian veterans in the post-war period, and how are these reflected in their resilience, satisfaction, and expectations for the future, 3) how do state institutions and veterans' associations contribute to the process of recovery, and 4) what are the consequences of the peaceful reintegration of the Croatian Danube region.

The research process encompassed several phases: reviewing and analyzing relevant literature and materials, selecting methods, preparing the research instrument, i.e. protocol, obtaining approval from the ethics committee, training field researchers, establishing communication with representatives of veterans' associations for participant recruitment, sampling, field preparation, data collection, and finally, data processing, cleaning, analysis, and interpretation.⁶

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Catholic University of Croatia. Field research was conducted from January to April 2024. The selected research methods were semi-structured interviews and focus groups, which were deemed most appropriate given the study's aims and the fact that veterans represent a vulnerable group (Lira and Chandrasekar 2020, 50–51). Organizing such methods required extensive preparation. As Roulston (2014, 297–312) notes, the aim of qualitative research is to gather accounts of participants' subjective states, experiences, and observations. Establishing a rapport with interviewees is crucial in eliciting narrative accounts of lived experiences that can be used to develop in-depth descriptions. Importantly, both scholars and veterans advocate changes related to research on the veteran population (Kleykamp and Hipes 2015, 348–368), stating that research should be conducted *with* and *alongside them*, not *on them*. This principle was applied in the present study, representing a methodological contribution to the project. Participant recruitment was facilitated by gatekeepers, primarily the Assembly of associations of Croatian guard units veterans.⁷ Representatives of state institutions contacted included the Ministry of Croatian Veterans⁸ and the Veterans Center, which was founded by the Ministry of Croatian Veterans.⁹

In total, six in-depth interviews with veterans, one focus group with five participants, and one expert interview with a representative of state institutions were conducted. Interviews and focus groups were held in person, in participants' natural environments, to ensure comprehensive and detailed data collection. The focus group and several interviews were conducted in eastern Croatia, which experienced the highest levels of casualties, destruction,

⁶ Students from the undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral programs in Sociology and History at the Catholic University of Croatia participated in certain parts of the research.

⁷ We would like to thank Mrs. Ida Maček and Mr. Siniša Troha from the Assembly of associations of Croatian guard units veterans for their assistance.

⁸ <https://branitelji.gov.hr/>

⁹ <https://veteranskicentar.hr/>

and occupation during the Homeland War. Additionally, an informal (non-recorded) discussion was held with a representative of the Veterans Center concerning the activities they organize for veterans. All participants signed informed consent forms, were informed of the study's purpose and aims, and were assured that they could withdraw or request the deletion of their data at any point. The average duration of interviews and focus groups was approximately 60 minutes. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and data were subsequently cleaned and analyzed. Initial open coding was followed by inductive axial coding, with analysis conducted using MAXQDA 2020 Analytics Pro. Codes were organized into themes through open coding and into categories and subcategories through axial coding. To protect anonymity, participants were assigned code names (veteran male = VM1, VM2, VM3...; veteran female = VF1; expert = EF; focus group = FG), and all identifying or potentially identifying information was removed. Data are stored in secure, password-protected cloud storage accessible only to the research team.

5. Findings

5.1. Mechanisms of Resilience among Veterans

Resilience is most commonly defined as mechanisms of survival and perseverance in facing various obstacles (Popović 2016, 23). The emotions veterans described were intense; their facial expressions while recounting the most difficult events revealed that, even more than three decades after the trauma, these emotions remain deeply felt. Their emotions toward family and fellow soldiers, combined with lived experiences, formed an important basis for rational judgment.

5.1.1. Desire for Life and Moral Values

Even under abnormal circumstances, veterans sought to preserve a sense of stability. Their testimonies describe days on the battlefield in the urban environments of eastern Croatia and express the desire to live despite the horrors of war they endured.

»Well, you know, what gave strength? It's survival, the fight for survival. The fight for life.« VM15.

»Well, I was a commander, then I always told my soldiers a sentence that I repeated to them a thousand times: 'All wars are over, this one will end as well. Never do

something that you will regret permanently and irreversibly. Once something stupid is done, you can confess later, repent, but the mark on the soul remains.' And that's how I was raised, even though I was young and that's how I was raised. You have the same thing in the book, I described the situation in detail, if it wasn't true, I wouldn't be able to write it like that.» VM3

5.1.2. Humor

Humor was one of the defense mechanisms employed in times of trauma, helping individuals cope with stress more effectively. Research has confirmed that humor and wit are significant factors in fostering resilience.

»I mean, survival. Therefore, humor was often dark. But, you know, that was the basic remedy against those unnatural circumstances.« FG

»And we played pranks. Look, as tough as it was for us, we tried to be normal guys.« FG

5.1.3. Faith

Participants testified to experiencing injuries, as well as the loss of comrades and family members. Constant exposure to stress and the daily confrontation with death placed them in situations where they questioned the meaning and purpose of their own lives. Some, however, found meaning through faith. Various studies have shown that faith and prayer provide veterans with a framework for understanding and coping with their experiences (Ćurković 2009, 239).

»And all the time, I had this feeling that I would survive. Whatever happened, whatever I went through, etc., the feeling was always present that I wouldn't die. (...) So, I personally experienced a testimony of faith, and it strengthened me enormously...« VM3

The spiritual practices of prayer and confession provided many veterans with inner strength, fostering their resilience, reinforcing their commitment to life, and upholding their moral values. Participant VM3 states:

»(...) The brigade was filled mostly, I would say 90 % from the area of Dalmatia and Herzegovina, and all Catholic, religious families. And they prayed to God and wore the rosary, etc.«

In an in-depth study on the religiosity of the inhabitants of Vukovar during the Homeland War, Bendra and Mihaljević (2016) identified specific forms of indirect religious activity, particularly the wearing of the rosary, which

»had a special inner meaning for veterans« and served as »a means of indirect religious action«.

In addition to prayer and confession, participants reported frequently attending the Eucharistic celebration, which remained important to them even under wartime conditions. They also received spiritual support from the parish priest, whom they, in turn, protected. This reciprocal relationship illustrates the exceptionally close bond between soldiers and priests, characterized by mutual support:

»The Church was, as I said, our headquarters. (...) Nights and nights I slept in the parish office with the priest, because it was in the center of the village, to see if the army, police, were coming. (...) The clergy helped us, we were all around the church (...) It was Mass every Sunday (...) and we went to church in the evenings during the week, etc.« VM3

The role of faith, prayer, confession, and related practices is also highlighted in research conducted among victims of wartime rape and sexual violence (Kopunović Legetin et al. 2019; Kopunović Legetin et al. 2020).

One of the codes that emerged from the research relates to the theme of solidarity with the »enemy« (Benčić Kužnar 2020, 42). Participant VM3 recounted sparing the life of an enemy combatant, despite having the opportunity to kill him. His faith guided him to preserve another's life as the most valuable possession a person can have.

5.2. Post-War Period: Personal and Societal Gains, Challenges, Resilience, Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction, and Future Expectations

5.2.1. The Varied Impact of War on Veterans' Quality of Life

In the post-war period, participants displayed diverse experiences. Some reported suffering from consequences such as insomnia, nightmares, heightened sensitivity, and a reduced quality of life.

»You see, I'll tell you something, everything we experienced... if a person survives one war. And that's one negative experience. Actually, I say that the Homeland War destroyed me health-wise, it ruined my health.« VM2

»Out of a hundred nights, let's say two are unconsciously spent crying because I wake up in the morning all swollen and sticky from tears, but I still don't know what I dreamt.« VF1

Some participants suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a condition frequently observed in veteran populations. In some cases, family

members have developed illnesses as a result of secondary trauma, stemming from indirect exposure to the trauma experienced by a loved one. A Vukovar veteran and former captive of Serbian camps recounted such an instance:

»I didn't, I didn't even know I had PTSD. I say, here, I may have healed PTSD, my wife got PTSD (...) I healed, she has PTSD, she got it from me. She saved me, you know, and she helped me a lot because, evidently, you can't help yourself. You make some progress here and there but you're irritable, we're tense. But I can control myself; I've learned and hopefully won't go the wrong way.« FG

5.2.2. Examples of Post-War Resilience: Hobbies and Creative Work

Other participants reported that their war experiences strengthened their resilience in facing life's challenges and high-risk situations, attributing this to the strong moral principles they upheld during the war. Additionally, some participants emphasized that they had independently found ways to cope with post-war psychological difficulties, such as securing employment or exploring new hobbies. Moreover, several participants are publicly active—writing books or giving lectures—with the aim of raising awareness among young people about the significance of the Homeland War.

»I think we have achieved a lot with the program of visits by eighth-grade students to Vukovar, where they go through a school of peace, but learn about the battle for Vukovar and the fight for freedom over two days, visiting sites of suffering and the Vukovar hospital. But in the end, they learn that peace has no alternative, and the lectures... we still have the privilege of having living participants of the battle for Vukovar. Direct participants of the battle who, of course, have all undergone training to ensure that these lectures meet pedagogical standards, but actually bring closer the suffering they endured and the courage that characterized Croatian veterans.« EF

One participant reported engaging in viticulture (VM2), another in beekeeping (FG), a third in the production of cured meat products (VM5), and a fourth in bottle production (VM3). Veterans also remain highly active in volunteering and humanitarian efforts, contributing to the mitigation of the consequences of floods, earthquakes, and other disasters. This demonstrates that this population continues to seek social engagement and contribute to the common good, reflecting the professional ethos of soldiers, as emphasized by Žunec (2006). This habitus is further manifested through the reflexivity inherent in the soldier's role, which entails defending the country and its citizens in various risk situations and disasters.

5.2.3. Satisfaction with and Expectations of Support from Institutions and Associations

An expert from the Ministry of Croatian Veterans confirmed support for employment programs that have a therapeutic effect on veterans (EF). The participants, however, are not homogeneous in terms of their social lives in the post-war period. While one of their primary desires upon returning from the war was to start a family—a goal some achieved (FG)—others experience isolation when contact with their comrades is lost (VM2). For some, involvement in associations and commemorative events, where they reunite with fellow soldiers, holds particular significance. Some participants have received awards, decorations, and prizes, while others consider their greatest recognition to be their contribution to the war effort and reflect on how they might continue serving Croatia (VF1). Such recognitions are often relativized in relation to the roles soldiers must fulfill and the risks they face: »Apart from promotions in ranks and moral acknowledgments, as well as some limited material benefits, a soldier cannot expect any other personal material gain and is obligated to sacrifice even his own life in performing his daily duties without complaint« (Žunec 2006, 17).

The participants' narratives reflect enthusiasm and positive expectations. They are generally satisfied with their lives, which aligns with the findings of other studies (Rihtar et al. 2022, 160–164). Most express contentment with the government's treatment of veterans, particularly with the Ministry of Croatian Veterans and the rights they have obtained, although not all have utilized their material benefits as they do not consider them important (FG).

5.2.4. Dissatisfaction

The greatest dissatisfaction – often accompanied by fear, anxiety, and heightened sensitivity – relates to the post-war period when legal proceedings against Croatian veterans and generals in Croatia and The Hague began, some of which participants attended as witnesses. During this time, negative media coverage increased, and adverse topics became dominant, intensifying social stigma against veterans (Rihtar et al. 2022, 151). Consistent with these findings, our research also indicates that veterans experience societal stigma, corresponding to the code of »non-homogeneous attitudes toward the post-war state and society.« Although participants express satisfaction with the treatment of the veteran population, they perceive and experience stigmatization

due to social divisions, certain political decisions, and media representations (VM4). Regarding media portrayals of veterans, an expert summarized her perspective as follows:

»During the Homeland War, everything was always very positively toned because they were people who risked their lives for freedom. After the Homeland War, they were winners, right? Very quickly after that, they became people who burden the state budget and who have too many rights. Very few were the articles, when we talk about the media, that really delved into the problem of a person who has gone through a certain trauma.« EF

Participants expressed dissatisfaction and incomprehension regarding certain manipulations concerning veterans' status, as well as media and political discourse directed at the veteran population. Some also criticized veterans themselves, or, more specifically, certain political actions (VM2, FG).

5.3. Role of State Institutions and Veteran Associations in Post-War Recovery

5.3.1. The Role of State Institutions

In the early 1990s, alongside the struggle against aggression, Croatia sought to establish itself institutionally. Exiting the monolithic totalitarian atmosphere entailed embarking on a long and complex process of constructing a civil political culture. A foundational principle in building its state institutions was for the newly independent Croatia to sever ties with its totalitarian past and former state, secure its position in the international community, and achieve international recognition. This process unfolded under extremely unfavorable conditions: the occupation of parts of Croatian territory and the large number of displaced persons further strained the country's resources, while the ongoing war complicated diplomatic efforts to gain international recognition. After the international community formally recognized Croatian independence in early 1992, conditions improved somewhat. Croatia then concentrated on obtaining international assistance to achieve a peaceful resolution of the conflict while simultaneously working to strengthen and enhance its defense capabilities.

An expert with over 30 years of personal involvement in the development of the veterans' care system described the beginnings and evolution of support for veterans. The first institution to systematically address veterans' needs during wartime was the Ministry of Defense, which established a Department for Veteran Affairs with branches in all counties. Similarly, the

Ministry of Internal Affairs created care departments to support its personnel, including police and special police, who actively participated in Croatia's defense from the outset. These departments included sections for wounded members of the Croatian Armed Forces and police, as well as sections for the fallen. This marked the beginning of a systematic effort to document, through a database, the fate of each member, based on information collected from military and police units. Initially, the data were not standardized, particularly regarding the fallen, circumstances of death, injuries, or captivity. Building on existing legal frameworks, the first Law on Croatian Veterans was enacted in 1994 (Law on Croatian Veterans 1994).¹⁰

»That was the first law that in a way regulates the rights of Croatian veterans with an emphasis on the rights of Croatian war veterans with disabilities and families of the fallen. Later, legislative solutions changed certain procedures, competencies, and evidentiary documentation.« EF

During and especially after the war, the reintegration of the veteran population emerged as a key societal challenge. Most staff in the veteran care departments were young and recently graduated, often lacking specialized education, with only a few professionals possessing prior experience in care administration. A distinctive feature of the emerging Ministry of Croatian Veterans was the involvement of individuals who were themselves veterans—some wounded and therefore no longer able to participate directly in the defense of the state. These individuals contributed by providing care for other veterans and their families. Their personal experiences of war, coupled with empathy, enabled these employees to better understand and respond to the needs of the veteran population.

»So, our generation was the one that got wounded, that got killed. Generationally, we were close. Another thing, we all worked in the areas where we lived; we knew these people, these veterans. So, the veteran was not a stranger to us, someone who entered our office or when we visited them in the hospital or had to sadly inform a family that he had been killed or gone missing.« EF

Due to the absence of prior models to guide their work—such as in cases of veterans' disappearance, imprisonment, death, or when visiting veterans' families—care departments in the Ministry of Defense maintained regular coordination across all units. Through this collaborative approach, they developed their own procedures and solutions.

¹⁰ For more information see the Law on Croatian Veterans 1994 https://narodne.novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/1994_01_2_11.html

»In the morning, the administrative-legal part and financial assistance were dealt with. In the afternoon, multidisciplinary teams composed of psychologists, social workers, special education teachers, and lawyers worked. (...) It was necessary to, in a way, break the stigma regarding admission to psychiatric institutions. This model proved to be very effective because the staff, who were also oriented towards the field and who received an extremely large number of clients, could notice changes in behavior, problems that arise, and suggest to the afternoon team that it would be good to contact this or that veteran or this or that family.« EF

During the war, there was a shortage of experienced professionals, a gap that gradually diminished in subsequent years as therapeutic teams became more specialized. Veterans themselves, who initially perceived a lack of expertise, also noted this (FG). It was only after the liberation operations in 1995, with the establishment of peace, that a framework for improving the qualifications of staff caring for veterans was created. Over the course of several war years, these teams also developed expertise through practical experience. A representative of the Ministry of Croatian Veterans provided testimony on this process:

»With the establishment of peace, we were able to organize various conferences where foreign experts came and spoke about their care models and the problems they had, so we discussed post-traumatic stress disorder and so on.« EF

5.3.2. The Role of Veterans' Associations

Veteran associations, disabled veterans, and family members of fallen soldiers often share similar values and seek new meaning in life. This process is supported by their families, veterans' associations, and self-help groups, which provide a framework for resilience. These actors foster solidarity among veterans, offer support during crises, and encourage veterans' engagement in the wider community. In Croatia, various veterans' associations and organizations represent veterans' interests and promote social support, significant programs, and broader social inclusion.

5.3.3. Partnerships and the Development of Support Programs in the Context of Contemporary Global and National Challenges and Risks

Among formal state actors, the Ministry of Croatian Veterans aims to provide comprehensive support to veterans, recognizing their central role in the creation of the state, and to foster a partnership-based relationship with them. The

subsequent phase of the Ministry's program focused on strengthening mechanisms for veterans' reintegration into civilian life. Given the destruction of industry, widespread job losses, and the war's impact on their health, returning veterans faced the challenge of establishing a new livelihood and completing interrupted education in order to successfully reintegrate into civilian society.

»We have to be aware that the vast majority of them lost their jobs, and similarly, the vast majority interrupted their regular education, either at university or in the final grades of high school. Therefore, with the help of associations and their input, we started creating programs of additional education, retraining, acquiring a first profession, and measures of self-employment. I think the specificity of this Ministry and this care for Croatian veterans is the direct connection with its users, either individually or through associations.« EF

Employees at the Ministry of Croatian Veterans observe that numerous factors affect veterans' mental health beyond the initial traumas of the Homeland War. In recent years, these have included the government's treatment of veterans, natural disasters such as major earthquakes, and pandemics, during which veterans found social isolation particularly difficult to endure.

»Yes, every activity, every, let's call it, impact in the social sphere affects Croatian veterans. Every public or media statement that in some way portrays Croatian veterans in a negative light negatively affects their psychophysical state. Especially for Croatian veterans who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. The earthquake that happened in Zagreb, in Petrinja... the war in Ukraine, COVID 19.« EF

In addition to the National Program of Psychosocial and Health Care, programs that have demonstrated effectiveness in veterans' reintegration are those that facilitate a return to the workforce. Work activation—reentering the labor market either to secure personal livelihood or as part of social integration and work therapy—has proven particularly effective. However, the state's difficult material conditions, which initially limited opportunities for work activation in the post-war period, contributed to an increase in retirements among Croatian veterans. While retirement provided existential security, it also led to social isolation. These observations were confirmed by focus group participants:

»You're 28 years old, and you are told you have to retire—so what are your options? If you don't retire, you can't stay working because you're a war veteran with disabilities, right?« FG

Subsequently, the numerous benefits of work activity, including its therapeutic effects, were increasingly recognized.

»And through the employment program, where the emphasis wasn't just on ensuring livelihood through one's own entrepreneurial activity, but through work, for example in cooperatives, even retirees were activated.« EF

The Ministry of Croatian Veterans, in collaboration with healthcare institutions, implements a program of preventive systematic examinations. Given the aging veteran population, their health needs are closely monitored, including programs for extended treatment. Four Veterans Centers (Petrinja, Daruvar, Sinj, and Šibenik) currently offer three-week psychosocial rehabilitation programs, and the planned expansion of the network aims to provide more equitable access to these services. Additional initiatives to improve quality of life and enhance resilience include the Croatian Veterans Home, which provides comprehensive care, and the establishment of facilities for permanent accommodation for veterans and victims of the Homeland War. Some of these programs, both implemented and planned, reflect the direct involvement of veterans' associations in shaping public policies, allowing veterans to gain a renewed perception of their societal position and personal affirmation.

5.4. Peaceful Reintegration – The Challenge of Reconciliation

The peaceful reintegration of occupied Croatian territories represents a significant achievement, positioning Croatia as a potential model for the non-violent resolution of territorial conflicts and the reintegration of occupied areas elsewhere. Veteran participants in focus groups repeatedly emphasized that without the military defeat of occupying Serbian forces during Operations Flash and Storm in 1995, peaceful reintegration would not have been possible. The Croatian authorities' decision to pursue a peaceful reintegration process, at a time when military options remained available in the Croatian Danube region, reflects the continuity of Croatia's peacekeeping policy since the establishment of the modern state in 1990. During this process, some war veterans actively sought to contribute to the restoration of interethnic trust, which had been severely undermined by the war. The General Amnesty Law of 1996 granted amnesty for criminal offenses committed in connection with the Homeland War, excluding war crimes under international law, thereby preventing a mass exodus of the Serbian population from eastern Croatia. Nevertheless, issues related to war crimes remain painfully unresolved for the Croatian society until today, compounded by the lack of accountability for numerous unsolved cases of missing persons or killings on the Serbian side.

The peaceful reintegration of the Croatian Danube region was extremely challenging, marked by distrust and the effects of war trauma. Veterans and other citizens returning to occupied or destroyed homes frequently encountered former enemies. Many veterans were initially highly motivated to reclaim the entirety of Croatia's territory through military means—a perspective echoed by focus group participants. However, achieving peaceful reintegration proved far more difficult in practice, particularly in areas such as Vukovar, where war-related traumas were most acute.

»From 2000 to 2003, I lived twice (in Vukovar). I couldn't, simply, no, that's not mine anymore, that's not my city. That's some other city. I knew that city, I used to live in the real city, now I simply couldn't, not even today, as much as I love it, as much as it's hard for me, I wake up with it every day, and I sleep with Vukovar. Simply, I can't live there.« FG

A veteran from Vukovar, who had been imprisoned in Serbian camps, nevertheless succeeded in returning home. Despite societal divisions, he reports being satisfied with his life.

»And when the peaceful reintegration came, we came here to see where, what, how. The house, four walls remained of it. In 1999, or a year before, my parents and my wife's parents got the house renovated, how it went. So, I also returned with them then and renovated my house, in 2000, 2001, I fixed it up. We moved in or rather returned to Vukovar. If I look at my children and they hang out, Croats with Croats. So, in Vukovar, it's known which is the Serbian café, which is the Croatian one. Croats go to Croatian cafés, Serbs, there are a couple of cafés where it's not like that, but mostly that's it. I don't think I came back to Vukovar for all our sacrifices to be in vain that we had in the Homeland War, in the battle for Vukovar, and I don't think I would have succeeded anywhere else.« VM1

Despite the societal burdens, persistent divisions, and the ethnic distance that was evident even during our research, the process of peaceful reintegration saved many lives and prevented further destruction. Although it has not received commensurate recognition, the peaceful reintegration of the Croatian Danube region stands as one of the most successful peace operations in the history of the United Nations.

Conclusion

This research was conducted with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of resilience among Croatian veterans, the challenges they faced in the post-war period, the role of institutions and veterans' associations

in this process, and the specific consequences of the peaceful reintegration of the Croatian Danube region. The study involved Croatian veterans, representatives of veterans' associations, and experts from state institutions. A qualitative methodology was applied, adhering to ethical principles. The participation of veterans' associations as gatekeepers and co-organizers of field research helped reduce the distance between researchers and participants.

Findings indicate that resilience mechanisms do not stem from a single source but rather from a complex set of social, emotional, and spiritual factors. A desire for life and adherence to moral values, the use of humor, and reliance on faith supported veterans in enduring hardship and risky situations during the war. These mechanisms embody a strong reflexive and experiential dimension of risk (Beck 2009, 5), encompassing discovery, suffering, the anticipation of the unpredictable, fear, desire, surprise, and, at times, the expectation of death.

As confirmed in both Croatian and international research, the veteran population is highly heterogeneous (Balabanić et al. 2022, 339; Parry and Pitchford-Hyde 2023, 440–458). This heterogeneity was visible in our findings, particularly in relation to reintegration into civilian life. Participants emphasized the importance of associations for their recovery and reintegration into social life. These associations are especially important for individuals who are more difficult to include, as veterans' associations provide a safe social environment where they feel comfortable. Durkheim's sociological insights on suicide highlight the importance of social integration as a preventive barrier and underscore how the sense of usefulness and recognition by society contributes positively to recovery. Although many veterans express pride and satisfaction with their contribution, they continue to grapple with stigmatization, mental health challenges, and shifting public perceptions. Notably, media narratives contributed to feelings of stigmatization in veterans during certain post-war periods.

Society possesses mechanisms for healing and strengthening its members, while the state—through its institutions—plays a vital role in developing policies and protecting vulnerable groups. Recognition, dialogue, and inclusive engagement with veterans not only empower them but also strengthen the whole society. Although the legislative framework for veterans' care was introduced during the Homeland War, models of care were non-existent and developed through time, showing the reflexivity of institutions in adapting to pressing needs. Thus, the system was built through practice, in cooperation with various experts and the administration for the purpose of reintegrating veterans into civilian life, employment and education as efficiently

as possible. Although Beck (2009, 91), through his reflection on the cosmopolitan state, the framework of new international policies, and the discourse of the socio-environmental crisis, argues that »the task of ensuring the health and safety of citizens can no longer be performed at the national level,« the results of our research demonstrate the continued importance of national institutions—particularly in historically specific contexts such as wars that affect only a certain geographical area and do not escalate into a global conflict or catastrophe. But, for the recovery of the veteran population, it is important to also rely on the UN document »The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development« (United Nations 2015) and its goals: 3 – Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages; 4 – Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all; and 16 – Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels.

The peaceful reintegration of the Croatian Danube region represents one of the most significant achievements of the modern Croatian state and serves as a potential model for the peaceful resolution of conflicts worldwide. Although it was socially and politically demanding, peaceful reintegration stands as an example of a decisive and courageous affirmation of dialogue and of the consistent peace policy of the Republic of Croatia. Therefore, contrary to Beck (2009), the importance of the state and national institutions in building peace during the post-conflict period is clearly evident. The role of the state and the principle of inclusivity is also supported by the UN General Assembly (2020):

»Reaffirming the primary responsibility of national Governments and authorities in identifying, driving and directing priorities, strategies and activities for peacebuilding and sustaining peace, and in this regard emphasizing that inclusivity is key to advancing national peacebuilding processes and objectives in order to ensure that the needs of all segments of society are taken into account.« This role is particularly emphasized in post-conflict periods (UN General Assembly 2023).

Using the example of the veteran population in Croatia, we have shown how they addressed the risks, uncertainties, and traumas of war. Under extremely unfavorable circumstances, they developed resilience and contributed to the framework for institutional responses and recovery. They played a crucial role in shaping a free, open, and democratic society that enables the consideration of diverse perspectives and positions in decision-making processes.

References

- Asenov, Yuliyana. 2021. They don't need a »storm« – Croatia, Ukraine and war veterans. *Politics & Security* 5/4: 12–17.
- Beck, Ulrich. 1992. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London, Newbury Park, Dew Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Beck, Ulrich, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash. 1994. *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.
- Beck, Ulrich. 2009. *World at Risk*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Balabanić, Ivan, Miriam Mary Brgles, and Josip Ježovita. 2022. Analysis of Media Content about Croatian Veterans on Internet Portals. *Media, Culture and Public Relations*. 13/1-2: 1–11.
- Benčić Kužnar, Andriana. 2020. Homeland War and the Work of Memory: From Communicative to Cultural Memory. *Polemos* 23/47: 33 – 51.
- Bendra, Ivana and Vine Mihaljević. 2016. Primjena metodologije utemeljene teorije u sociološkim proučavanjima fenomena religije i religioznosti. *Bogoslovska smotra* 86/4: 891-914
- Bendra, Ivana. 2018. Uloga duhovnosti u provedbi »Nacionalnog programa psihosocijalne i zdravstvene pomoći su dionicima i stradalnicima Domovinskoga rata...«. *Bogoslovska smotra* 88/1: 103-130.
- Brgles, Miriam Mary, Josip Ježovita and Mateja Plenković. 2024. Image of Croatian Veterans in the Media. Analysis of Media Content About Croatian Veterans in the Period from 2010 to 2021. *Bogoslovska smotra* 94/2: 306-306. <https://doi.org/10.53745/bs.94.2.2>
- Cigar, Norman. 1997. Croatia's war of independence: The parameters of war termination. *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 10/2: 34–70.
- Clark, Janine Natalya. 2013. Giving Peace a Chance: Croatia's Branitelji and the Imperative of Reintegration. *Europe-Asia Studies* 65/10: 1931–1953.
- Coll, Steve. 1993. Despite U.N. embargo, weapons flood into Balkans. In: *The Washington Post* (13. II. 1993.) In: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1993/02/14/despite-un-embargo-weapons-flood-into-balkans/a3bef4f5-8ac0-49c2-ba12-44db8cc20c27/>(Accessed 16. V. 2024)
- Ćurković, Jasna. 2009. The Identity of the Croatian Veteran in the Strait of Guilt and Painful Memory: An Interdisciplinary Approach to PTSD as an Introduction to Theological Discussion. *Bogoslovska smotra* 79/2: 223–245.
- Dobrotić, Ivana. 2008. The Care System for Homeland War Veterans. *Revija za socijalnu politiku* 15/1: 57–83.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1991. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.
- House of Representatives of the Croatian Parliament. 1994. Law on Croatian Veterans. (06. 1. 1994.) In: https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/1994_01_2_11.html (Accessed 16. V. 2025).
- Hlišć, Emilija, and Stanko Šincek. 2022. The Importance of Social Participation of Croatian Veterans in the Quality of Their Lives. *Kroatologija* 13/3: 211–220.
- Jakir, Aleksandar. 2019. Croatia: Victims of Transition? The Role of Homeland War Veterans in Public Discourse in Croatia. In: Paul Taylor, Emma Murray, and

- Katherine Albertson (ed.), *Military Past, Civilian Present: International Perspectives on Veterans' Transition from the Armed Forces*, 31–42. London, Delhi: Springer.
- Kleykamp, Meredith, and Crosby Hipes. 2015. Coverage of Veterans of the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in the U.S. Media. *Sociological Forum* 30/2: 348–368.
- Knežević, Martina, Dino Krupić, and Sandra Šučurović. 2016. Coping Strategies in War Veterans 20 Years After the Exposure to Extreme Stress. *Društvena istraživanja* 25/3: 353–370.
- Kopunović Legetin, Sanja, Suzana Vuletić, and Stanislav Šota. 2019. War Crimes of Rape in the Croatian War of Independence (1991 – 1995). *Nova prisutnost* 17/2: 229–248.
- Kopunović Legetin, Sanja, Suzana Vuletić, and Stanislav Šota. 2020. Psihosocijalne posljedice ratnog zločina silovanja u Đakovačko-osječkoj nadbiskupiji tijekom Velikosrpske agresije. *Vrhbosnensia* 24/1: 125–149
- Lira, Leonard, and Janani Chandrasekar. 2020. The State of Research in Veterans Studies: A Systematic Literature Review. *Journal of Veterans Studies* 6/2: 46–65.
- Luhmann, Niklas. 1993. *Risk: A Sociological Theory*. New York: A. de Gruyter.
- Miletić, Geran-Marko, and Nenad Pokos. 2022. Employment Activity of Veterans: Experiences and Attitudes Toward Labor Market Measures. *Pilar: časopis za društvene i humanističke studije* 32/1: 175–191.
- Milekić, Sven. 2022. A Protest, Coup d'État, or Internal Party Power Struggle: What Motivated Croatian War Veterans to Hit the Streets? *Politička misao* 59/4: 215–250.
- Parry, Katy, and Jelena Pitchford-Hyde. 2023. We May Have Bad Days... That Doesn't Make Us Killers: How Military Veterans Perceive Contemporary British Media Representations of Military and Post-Military Life. *Media, War & Conflict* 16/3: 440–458.
- Popović, Božidar. 2016. From the Culture of Resilience and Gratitude to Social Recognition. *Polemos* 19/37: 33–50.
- Rihtar, Stanko, Vlado Šakić, and Antun Plenković. 2022. Public Image and Subjective Welfare of Croatian Veterans. *Pilar: časopis za društvene i humanističke studije* 31/1: 151–174.
- Roulston, Kathryn. 2014. Analysing Interviews. In: Uwe Flick (ed.), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*, 297–312. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Šučurović, Sandra, Igor Mikloušić, and Martina Knežević. 2017. *Psychosocial Adjustment of Croatian Veterans: Individual and Social Perspective*. Zagreb: Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar.
- Tematske mreže branitelji. 2023. Analysis of Social Factors Affecting the Quality of Life of the Veteran Population – Guidelines for the Future. In: <https://tematskemreze-branitelji.hr/index.php/o-projektu> (Accessed: 16. V. 2025)
- The Ministry of Croatian Veterans. 2022. Reagiranje. (13. I. 2022). In: <https://branitelji.gov.hr/vijesti/reagiranje-3998/3998> (Accessed 16. V. 2025)
- The Registry of Veterans. 2021. Registar branitelji. (n.d.). In: <https://registar.branitelji.hr/app/index.html> (Accessed 16. V. 2025)
- Tišma, Sanja, Danijel Baturina, Maja Janković, and Damir Demonja. 2023. Veterans' Social-Work Cooperatives as a Potential Model of Social Entrepreneurship in Croatia. *Nova prisutnost* 21/2: 301–315.

- UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs - Sustainable Development. 2015. Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. (n.d.). In: <https://sdgs.un.org/publications/transforming-our-world-2030-agenda-sustainable-development-17981> (Accessed 16. IX. 2025)
- UN General Assembly. 2020. *Review of the United Nations Peacebuilding Architecture: Resolution / Adopted by the General Assembly (74th sess.: 2019–2020)*. New York: United Nations.
- UN General Assembly. 2023. *Follow-up to the Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace: Resolution / Adopted by the General Assembly (77th sess.: 2022–2023)*. New York: United Nations.
- Zinn, Jens O. (ed.) 2008. *Social Theories of Risk and Uncertainty: An Introduction*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing.
- Žunec, Ozren. 2006. Absolute Sacrifice and Relative Compensation: Contradictions in the Social Status of Veterans and State Care for War Veterans and Invalids. *Polemos* 9/18: 11–42.

Language editor: Antonija Hreščan, mag. educ. philol. angl. et germ.