

“We are staying”: Youth Approaches to Anti-Nationalist Action and Memory in the Bosnian Town of Tuzla

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Through the prism of youth activism in the city of Tuzla, an exception in the region because of the continued peaceful co-existence between Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs throughout the war and in the aftermath, the authors ask the following questions: What are the key characteristics of the local politics of remembrance in the city of Tuzla? How do they differ from the dominant memory politics in Bosnia-Herzegovina? What are the key perspectives of young people in Tuzla – of those born after the war, particularly of youth activists – on the wartime past and the ways it is being integrated into their present and future by different agents of memory? Based on the interviews of nine youth activists and participant observation of the 30th anniversary commemorating the Kapija massacre, the authors find that the youth perspectives in Tuzla are not only anti-nationalist, but also linked across ethno-national lines, both locally and regionally, with other youth activists concerned for shared urgent issues, such as the promotion of the rule of law, democratic governance, gender equity, and environmental protection.

KEYWORDS: *youth activism, memory politics, civil society, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Tuzla*



In this study, we seek to understand connections between local commemorative practices and youth political activism in the aftermath of political violence that took place in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the early 1990s. We chose to study this in the town of Tuzla as an outlier case in the region, where ethnic Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs remained living together during the war and still live together despite the 1992 — 1995 violent conflict that included widespread destruction and divisions along ethnic lines in the rest of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The war that ended three decades ago is still present in the minds and daily lives of the inhabitants, and in personal and cultural memory. The trauma does not end with the generation that directly experienced the war – it is being transmitted to new generations, born and raised after armed violence had ended. That is why we decided to study the youth as we sought to examine the relationship between the contemporary memory processes and their political activism. We were intrigued by the following questions: What are the key characteristics of the local politics of remembrance in the city of Tuzla? How do they differ from the dominant memory politics in Bosnia-Herzegovina? What are the key perspectives of young people in Tuzla – of those born after the war, particularly of youth activists – on the wartime past and the ways it is being integrated into their present and future by different agents of memory? We aimed to address these questions by a combination of interviews, participant observation of one commemorative event and the analysis of memoryscape in Tuzla. Through this analysis of politics of remembrance in a multiethnic city and the perceptions and practices of the post-war generation, this study contributes to the intersection between the interdisciplinary literature on memory, nationalism, and youth activism scholarship.

/ Conceptual framework

In post-war societies, especially those that experienced wars in which civilians were targeted on the basis of their ethnic, or other cultural, identities, the practices of remembering violence play an important role for victims seeking

justice, former neighbors rebuilding trust, leaders regaining political legitimacy, and states redefining their national identities. There are usually numerous “agents” in these processes who aim to create a single “homogeneous” version of a dominant narrative of what transpired that serves certain political goals (Mannergren et al. 2024, 202). One goal in particular is to promote a conceptualization of the national identity that includes some, and excludes other individuals on the basis of their presumed ethno-religious identities.

Our definition of national identity is closely related to Benedict Anderson's concept of *nationality* and *nationalism* as “cultural artifacts” that are created as a result of “the spontaneous distillation of a complex ‘crossing’ of discrete historical forces; but that, once created, they become...capable of being transplanted...to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations” (Anderson 1983, 4). Anderson defined nations as “imagined political communities” because of the idea of a community among individuals who are effectively strangers to each other and because this community coincides with political and geographic borders that gives it, and by extension, its residents, sovereign power to rule independently of other states (1983, 4). We draw on Ernest Gellner's concept of nationalism as “a theory of political legitimacy, which requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones, and, in particular, that ethnic boundaries within a given state...should not separate the power-holders from the rest” (1983, 1). While a nation-state is a modern construct, it has certain implicit norms of familial loyalty, emotional investment, and the notion that belonging in a given community is conditional, among other factors, on the sense of duty or an obligation (Esposito 2010, 6). The explicit norms associated with a nation-state, also referred to by Eric Hobsbawm as an “invented tradition,” are meant to give it legitimacy through “a set practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, 1). These ideas based on the congruence of ethno-religious identities, or other cultural identities, and statehood, are essential in understanding how the narratives of the past can become homogeneous, especially in the aftermath of political violence and in newly formed nation-states, as in the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina that we are examining in our study.

Homogeneous accounts of past waves of violence do not leave space for “more silent or marginalized voices in a society” (Mannergren et al. 2024, 202). The exclusion of diverse perspectives and memories, in turn, may put “peace processes at risk” because the divisions created by political violence become reinforced and entrenched in societies with homogenized, politically mobilized, narratives, as in the case of Cyprus, where “the high degree of bifurcation in the memory landscape has meant that largely separate versions of peace have been developed in the north and the south of the divided island” (Mannergren et al. 2024, 203). In such societies, the acknowledgment of violence and the harm that victims endured provides recognition and dignity and can aid in the post-conflict peace building (Mannergren et al. 2024, 205).

Memory politics as part of post-conflict reconstruction has in the scholarly and policy communities been considered as an important component of transitional justice, which is considered “an international norm” and “a standard of proper state behavior” as states establish the truth and reconciliation commissions, attempt to bring perpetrators to courts, recognize victims, and engage in other practices aimed at rebuilding societies affected by wars or other forms of political violence (Subotić 2009, 5). Yet, just as Jelena Subotić has shown, domestic actors can “understand, interpret, and use international norms for their own political purposes” to avoid holding perpetrators accountable, deny violence, and by extension, the recognition of victims (2009, 5). The result are states, like Serbia, that seemingly complied with the norms while “rejecting the profound social transformation these norms require” (Subotić 2009, 5). The norms of remembering the past violence can also become too rigid, and an ideology in itself, and in this way have a counter-effect to the desired one of promoting reconciliation (David 2020). In a study of post-conflict reconciliation, Denisa Kostovicova proposed a different way to analyze reconciliation (2023, 6). She “grounds the concept of reconciliation in the principle of mutuality in public communication” (Kostovicova 2023, 8). By studying “how people talk about war crimes in search of justice,” she looks at the “quality of discourse” (Kostovicova 2023, 4–10). She argues that in such communication, reconciliation is evidenced when both “deliberative rationality,” or “upholding of deliberative virtues of quality, reason-giving, respect, common good orientation, and reciprocity in interethnic communication,” and “discursive solidarity,” or “granting recognition and dignity to members of adversary ethnic groups” are present (Kostovicova 2023, 4–5).

Memory politics in post-conflict societies can, therefore, be a source of entrenchment of divisions that had been created by violence, in cases when formality of following norms is employed for political purposes, opportunistically, or overly rigidly. In contrast, talking about past can actually lead to substantive reconciliation when there is evidence of respect, mutuality, and recognition between the members of communities who had until recently been on the opposite sides.

The substantive reconciliation requires a more localized approach to memory, rather than a state-centered one (Bucur 2009, 3). It also takes a long time and it is possible that multiple generations would need to engage in the processes of reconciliation. This brings us to the concept of “postmemory,” coined by Marianne Hirsch, who used it to refer to her own processing of memories her parents, survivors of the Holocaust, have passed on to her (Hirsch 2012, 4). In her words, the term “describes the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before...[and] *seem* to constitute memories in their own right” (Hirsch 2012, 5). In the context of Bosnia-Herzegovina, many of the people who are actively engaged in post-conflict reconciliation processes, including the efforts to remember or commemorate political violence inclusively, in a pluralistic way, and with dignity and recognition for the victims, are individuals who were either young children in the early nineties or who were born after, and whose experience with war was transmitted to them through stories of their parents and grandparents.

Building on the literature of nationalism and memory politics, we focus on youth activism as a lens through which post-conflict democratic societies address the challenges of justice, reconciliation, and peace. Youth activism as a form of political participation in different geographic and historical contexts is a growing field of study (Kirshner 2015; Conner and Rosen 2016; Arriaga and Rodriguez 2021; Assan 2024; Haas 2018; Ozgul 2020; Paschou and Durán Mogollón 2024; Stanojević et al. 2023; Wollentz et al. 2019). Rather than viewing youth as “citizens of the future,” the scholars see them as “citizens now who experience, interpret, and sometimes resist the policies that organize their everyday lives” (Kirshner 2015, 5). By activism, scholars consider “acts that challenge the status quo and seek to reconfigure asymmetrical power relations” (Conner and Rosen 2016, 2). Youth is defined differently in different studies, but generally, this group includes individuals between

teenage years and through their twenties. Even though youth activism may be studied in different historical periods and some parallels are relevant to contemporary youth activism (Haas 2018, 1), the period following neoliberal economic policies impacted the youth disproportionately through their more limited access to education and health care due to privatization, and adverse effects of criminal justice and immigration policies (Conner and Rosen 2016, 5). The literature on contemporary youth activism is especially relevant for our study given that neoliberal economic reforms were also implemented in the post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina. Among the impacts these policies had on this region are also environmental degradation as a result of foreign investment and natural resource extraction processes. Finally, another characteristic of the contemporary youth activism is their access to technology, including social media, to form connections, networks, and to organize and coordinate different activities and initiatives.

Scholars investigating the wave of the protests associated with the Arab Spring in the early 2010s also focused on these factors as drivers of the protests and on understanding political participation of the youth who constituted a significant proportion of the participants. One study of the 2011 protests in Egypt and Syria examined “the protest organization and mobilization tactics of young activists in the digital age” (Ozgul 2020, 3). The emergence of the “hybrid leaders” who connected the social media with the experienced activists on the ground was crucial in these two movements (Ozgul 2020, 225–26). A different study of activists between ages 18–35 in Cologne, Germany, and Athens, Greece, investigated the motivations and “pathways of political socialization” of the youth (Paschou and Durán Mogollón 2024, 676). The authors found that “meso-level influences,” including family, home, school, and other community-level social environments, were more influential for activists in the German context, while “macro-level influences,” such as “public transformative events” were more significant in the Greek case (Paschou and Durán Mogollón 2024, 689–90). Youth have also chosen less conventional methods of political participation than older populations. This was confirmed in a study from Serbia that was published a year before the largest student-led protest took place in this country (Stanojević et al. 2023, 32–33). Based on the analysis of the data from the IX round of the European Social Survey (ESS), which focused on the youth between 15 and 29, the authors find that “young people are less willing than older ones to participate in the most conventional

political activities” (Stanojević et al. 2023, 38—40). Some of the less conventional forms of participation include “signing petitions,” “online activism,” and “demonstrations,” among other forms of political engagement (Stanojević et al. 2023, 40). While the influence and motivations of young activists may vary from context to context, it is evident that technology and the neoliberal policies have been the main drivers and that the youth are more likely to pursue non-conventional, or non-traditional, forms of political engagement.

This study is based on qualitative methodology and interpretive analysis of the content of interviews. We sought to understand the youth activists' views of the past of their communities, of memory politics in Tuzla and in the rest of Bosnia-Herzegovina, of local and national political leaders, as well as in their day-to-day experiences of activism that may or may not include references to the past. The field research took place between May 24 and 31, 2025, and was followed by additional interviews held online through Zoom platform on 18 June 2025. We interviewed eight residents of Tuzla and one person who visited Tuzla from Serbia, all between the ages of 20 and 33. While the activists came from all major ethnic groups present in Tuzla, with regards to sex, in our sample there were six women and only three men. This is due to the prevalence of young women among activists in the city, the fact that was observed by several interviewees. We also conducted participant observation of the events surrounding the commemoration of victims of the massacre that occurred on May 25th, 1995, when 71 civilians, mainly young people in similar age ranges as our interviewees of different ethnic backgrounds, were killed and 124 were wounded by an artillery shell in the city center. Our interpretive analysis of the commemoration, in turn, included the description of the event that included the content of the speeches and the relevant symbolic elements employed in the ceremony. Finally, we assessed the memoryscape and main mnemonic practices in Tuzla related to the memory of 1992 — 1995 wartime and WWII experiences.

/ Memory Politics and Youth Activism in the Context of Bosnia-Herzegovina

Inter-ethnic cooperation that exists in Tuzla is rare in today's Bosnia-Herzegovina that experienced a violent war that lasted from 1992 to 1995 in which

neighbors turned against neighbors and where civilians were targeted on the basis of their presumed ethno-religious identities. Yugoslavia, which had formed in November 1945, was a centralized, Soviet-type, federation under the leadership of the single Communist Party consisting of six republics, including Bosnia-Herzegovina, and two autonomous provinces (Jović 2009, 57—58). In the late 1970s and early 1980s, and especially following the 1974 Constitution that gave more political power and autonomy to republics and autonomous provinces, the Serbian political question, became “the core of the political conflicts in Yugoslavia...rather than the Bosnian (ethnic) question” based on the analysis of Dejan Jović (Jović 2009, 172—73). The prelude to political violence began with the results of the first multiparty elections in December 1990 in which a non-ethnically defined reformist party, Ante Marković’s Alliance of Reform Forces (the Alliance) was expected by some to win given the previous endorsement that they had received (Lampe 1996, 362). Marković became the Yugoslav Prime Minister in January 1989 when the country faced severe economic problems and when his economic reform program, “supported and advised by American economist Jeffrey Sachs” made him popular (Jović 2009, 354). Even though the reforms were a success and the inflation was down by December 1989, the focus on export-oriented companies, located predominantly in Croatia and Slovenia, was perceived and presented by the Serbian political leaders as a “‘robbery of Serbia’ in favor of the more developed Western republics” (Jović 2009, 354).

Meanwhile, in Bosnia-Herzegovina's 1990 elections, the parties representing three ethnic groups, Bosniak Muslims, Serbs, and Croats, won most votes with the Muslim Party of the Democratic Action (SDA) under Alija Izetbegović winning the most votes, followed by the Serbian Democratic Party (SDS) under Radovan Karadžić and the Croat candidates representing the branch of Franjo Tuđman's Croatian Democratic Community (HDZ) (Lampe 1996, 362). In an effort to win the support, “during the campaign, each of the three ethnic leaders had maintained that they could work together...to protect Bosnia-Herzegovina's separate interests inside Yugoslavia,” but that changed after the campaign when they “quickly turned to the separate ethnic programs which would help to drag them into the wars of Yugoslav succession by 1992” (Lampe 1996, 362). Among the changes they sought once in power was to divide the children in Sarajevo schools “along strictly ethnic lines” (Lampe 1996, 362). Another important ethnically mixed urban center of Bosnia-Her-

zegovina was the city of Tuzla, which was, like Sarajevo, still sure that the rich interethnic history would make violence between neighbors impossible (Lampe 1996, 363). In Tuzla, non-nationalist parties won the most votes and the Alliance formed a coalition with the Communist Party, while the Reformist leader Selim Bešliagić became the city mayor (Otmačić 2025, 94). In fact, Tuzla was the only large city in Bosnia-Herzegovina “where the leftists managed to form the local government” (Armakolas 2011, 235).

The confidence that the war, like the one in neighboring Croatia, would not begin in Bosnia-Herzegovina lasted, even though it was waning, until early April of 1992 when the former Yugoslav National Army (JNA) units and the militias consisting of Serbs predominantly intensified the violence (Lampe 1996, 364). Other armies joined in as the violence escalated in 1992, including the Green Berets, which had formed in 1991, and the Croatian Defence Council (HVO), among other armed groups. At the time of the start of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, there were 131,000 residents of Tuzla, with over 50 per cent of Muslims, an equal proportion of 17 per cent each of Serbs and Croats, and around 11 per cent of people who self-declared as Yugoslavs (Otmačić 2025, 93). The city also housed “a large number of officials and soldiers JNA” and a “massive military infrastructure including one of the major military airports, four military barracks and seven warehouses of ammunitions” (Otmačić 2025, 93). One month after the war had started in Bosnia-Herzegovina, in May 1992, the inter-ethnic trust was shaken in Tuzla by the mass departures of ethnic Serb residents and the exchange of fire between the withdrawing JNA forces and the local armed forces that resulted in dozens of deaths but did not last more than a day (Otmačić 2025, 109).

Apart from this incident, Tuzla avoided the kind of interethnic violence that other communities across Bosnia-Herzegovina experienced from 1992 until 1995 (Armakolas 2011, 239). Credit for this must be given to the local leadership that “distanced itself from the radicals after the first year of the war” and “survived politically against the odds” (Armakolas 2011, 254). The moderate leaders “continued to control the municipality and to have a strong influence over local institutions and companies” (Armakolas 2011, 254). Even the artillery shell that was launched by the forces of the Army of Republika Srpska surrounding the city on May 25, 1995, “killing 71 and wounding 124 civilians, mostly young people of different ethnic origins” did not manage to divide the city along ethnic lines in the way the victims continue to be com-

memorated (Otmacić 2025, 117). Symbolically, they were buried in the same cemetery, and to this day, continue to be commemorated in a way that bring together families of three faiths of the victims together (Armakolas 2011, 255). Tuzla is in this way an exception to other places across Bosnia-Herzegovina where violence divided local communities along ethnic lines.

/ Perceived Challenges and Youth Activists' Contributions to the Society in Tuzla

In our conversations with the youth activists in Tuzla, there were a number of challenges that mattered to them, but the two that were mentioned repeatedly were the corruption and the persistence of nationalist narratives in the media, schools, and discourse of political leaders. The canton of Tuzla has other social problems, in addition to corruption and nationalist politics, such as the prevalence of femicides and violence against women.¹ The exact number of violent incidents cannot be determined because many women do not report them.² There are many causes, including the presence of criminal organizations, but the war-related traumas are also among them.³ Activists mention other social problems, including the protection of natural resources for future generations and for healthier living environment of the local residents.⁴

Some activists suffer from burnout as a result of a limited progress of their work, particularly in rooting out the corruption.⁵ The corruption is present in every aspect of life in Bosnia-Herzegovina, from the minor everyday decisions, such as buying or not a tram ticket, but also in more important ones, such as taking the job through connections for which one lacks proper qualifications.⁶ One respondent, who was only thirteen when she first started becoming involved in political activism, said that for this work, she was not expecting any recognition or awards, but just an opportunity to make an impact in her

1 Interview 7, age 25, female, May 28, 2025, Tuzla.

2 Interview 7, age 25, female, May 28, 2025, Tuzla.

3 Interview 6, age 20, female, May 28, 2025, Tuzla.

4 Interview 4, age 33, male, May 28, 2025, Tuzla.

5 Interview 2, age 26, female, May 26, 2025, Tuzla.

6 Interview 6, age 20, female, May 28, 2025, Tuzla.

society.⁷ Instead, she watches people from outside of the activist background get ahead in the political system just because they are members of the right party or somehow willing to go along with those in power while sacrificing important issues.⁸ Another activist noted that a lack of democracy and rigged elections, which are evidenced by the same people in political positions who were in power since the 1990s, represent a the most pressing issue of concern.⁹

The current political system, therefore, seems to be one of the major challenges, as one of our respondents stated – people agree that the change is needed and want a better future, as well as that the question of reconciliation is overcome, but the current political system and mechanisms of elections do not permit the people advocating for these changes to get elected.¹⁰ These issues and limited progress in bringing about the positive changes make young people feel less empowered and more likely to emigrate in search of an opportunity to make a difference.¹¹ What is needed, as one activist believes, is to encourage young people to become more politically active from the time they are in school and to organize more public debates as small steps toward a better society in Bosnia-Herzegovina.¹²

One of the other major challenges is the continuation of the nationalist narratives, which are largely present in the political discourse and in the educational institutions.¹³ There is still a lack of trust among different ethno-religious groups, and the discourse of fear is present in the media and the statements of political leaders.¹⁴ Young people, many of whom have already overcome ethnic divisions, feel trapped in the society that lacks the ability to get out of the vicious circle imposed by the current political system in which ethnic divisions are entrenched in the institutions of shared governance.¹⁵ In their view, the system keeps dividing people even though they share the same concerns and problems.¹⁶

7 Interview 2, age 26, female, May 26, 2025, Tuzla.

8 Interview 2, age 26, female, May 26, 2025, Tuzla.

9 Interview 4, age 33, male, May 28, 2025, Tuzla.

10 Interview 4, age 33, male, May 28, 2025, Tuzla.

11 Interview 2, age 26, female, May 26, 2025, Tuzla.

12 Interview 1, age 26, female, May 26, 2025, Tuzla.

13 Interview 4, age 33, male, May 28, 2025, Tuzla.

14 Interview 4, age 33, male, May 28, 2025, Tuzla.

15 Interview 4, age 33, male, May 28, 2025, Tuzla.

16 Interview 1, age 26, female, May 26, 2025, Tuzla.

Through activism, they intend to bring down the nationalism and promote unity around other pressing issues, such as environment, health care, education, infrastructure, and other similar concerns.¹⁷ Young activists want to build a “society focused on the future, not the past,” and work on problems that connect people rather than separate them, including the preservation of natural resources, quality of democracy and the rule of law, among others.¹⁸ By promoting these joint interests and joint values, nationalism will overtime become more and more irrelevant, as one of the respondents stated: “While we protect the nature, we also unite the people.”¹⁹ What is needed, in order to overcome some of the old patterns and divisions, is “openness to all narratives and taking responsibility by all sides for the crimes committed by their members.”²⁰ Tuzla, however, has an advantage over other cities and regions in Bosnia-Herzegovina, because of its history as an “anti-fascist city, and the city where the nationalist parties were never in power.”²¹ Pride in the antifascist past is clearly reflected in the landscape of memory in Tuzla, especially in the memorial complex at Slana Banja, where a series of monuments highlights the importance of the antifascist struggle. The absence of ethnic divisions contributed to a better communication, compared to other parts of the country, between local government and the residents: “You can call the mayor directly at any moment and ask for the matter to be resolved.”²² Tuzla’s response to the May 25, 1995 violence was to bury the young people in the same cemetery, regardless of their religious identities, while the act of burial, *dženaza*, was led by the religious leaders of three faiths, Muslim, Orthodox, and Catholic.²³ This was a moment when unity was showcased in Tuzla, and when “we did not allow the nationalist narrative to divide us.”²⁴ To this day, this is one of the characteristics of our city, where we do not ask people about their religious backgrounds and where this kind of ethno-nationalism never became as prominent as in other parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina.²⁵

17 Interview 4, age 33, male, May 28, 2025, Tuzla.

18 Interview 4, age 33, male, May 28, 2025, Tuzla.

19 Interview 4, age 33, male, May 28, 2025, Tuzla.

20 Interview 9, age 24, female, June 18, 2025, Zoom call.

21 Interview 1, age 26, female, May 26, 2025, Tuzla.

22 Interview 1, age 26, female, May 26, 2025, Tuzla.

23 Interview 1, age 26, female, May 26, 2025, Tuzla.

24 Interview 1, age 26, female, May 26, 2025, Tuzla.

25 Interview 1, age 26, female, May 26, 2025, Tuzla.

Even though nationalism is not a major problem in Tuzla, other problems, such as corruption, fight to protect natural resources, and gender violence, among others, still remain, as mentioned earlier. These young activists are aware of the heavy lifting that is still needed to turn Bosnia-Herzegovina into a livable country. They are willing to take on this burden and a challenge because they want to stay in their country rather than have to look for opportunities abroad as previous generations have done.

/ Postmemory and Abuses of Memory

In the context of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Tuzla more specifically, remembering political violence from the 1990s is closely intertwined with the country's identity and dominant narratives in the political and social spheres. Through the study of the perspectives of these young activists, we tried to understand how they learned about the past and the role that remembering practices play in their own lives and in their activism. Given their age, they learned about the events from this recent violent history from their families, in schools and universities, and in museums. In addition to the traumatic and violent incidents that affected the entire community, many families had specific wartime experiences that they shared with their children. That is why the concept of postmemory, referring to the memory that includes “personal, collective, and cultural trauma” transferred to the next generation, is relevant to our study among other concepts discussed earlier. To illustrate this, one of our respondents talked about the siren that sounds on May 25 at the time when the grenade was thrown, 8:55 pm, to commemorate the victims of violent attack that killed 71 young people in Tuzla in 1995.²⁶ She remembered how she went to the balcony and froze thinking if they were being attacked again because even though she knew this was expected as a commemoration.²⁷ This sensation was a reminder to her how much the “wounds of their parents were still present.” in a sense that Hirsch talked about in her writing about the post-memory among the next generation of survivors of the Holocaust (2012).²⁸

26 Interview 2, age 23, female, May 26, 2025, Tuzla.

27 Interview 2, age 23, female, May 26, 2025, Tuzla.

28 Interview 2, age 23, female, May 26, 2025, Tuzla.

In addition to learning about the past events from their parents, most activists learned about them in school. Many of them stress the negative role of primary and secondary education in shaping their views, while the universities offered a more critical, and in this way, a more positive role in their education about the past. More specifically, one respondent said that in his primary and secondary school, he noticed either silence or a nationalist-leaning curriculum that further reinforced and entrenched ethnic divisions by teaching about “ethnic us as victims” versus “ethnic them as perpetrators.”²⁹ This, in his view, promoted an ideology instead of a multi-dimensional and more complex understanding of the past.³⁰ Another activist said that in elementary school, as a result of the type of education he was receiving, he started believing that “Serbs were some kind of aliens who were going to show up and attack us” at any moment.³¹ He said that his family had a more positive influence on him than his elementary school because they were “not at all nationalistically oriented.”³² He also said that his athletic activities shaped his thinking because he travelled to sports events in Croatia and Serbia, and saw first-hand that these narratives he was learning in school “did not make any sense.”³³ Universities, in contrast, offered more critical and nuanced education about the past. One of the respondents talked about the positive influence of her professors, and especially the professor that mentored her master's thesis, because he did not misuse the evidence to suit his narrative and encouraged her to think critically both about the data and her analysis.³⁴ This shows that both the environment in which they grew up, or Tuzla as the city in which population is not as nationalistically-oriented as in other places, matter in terms of influencing the youth politically. While their families have experienced war in one way or another, their parents generally did not talk much about the war.³⁵ Most of the young activists in our sample stated more or less directly that they learned multiculturalism and tolerance within their families. Also, their personal experiences, such as playing sports with people

29 Interview 3, age 33, male, May 27, 2025, Tuzla.

30 Interview 3, age 33, male, May 27, 2025, Tuzla.

31 Interview 4, age 33, male, May 28, 2025, Tuzla.

32 Interview 4, age 33, male, May 28, 2025, Tuzla.

33 Interview 4, age 33, male, May 28, 2025, Tuzla.

34 Interview 1, age 26, female, May 26, 2025, Tuzla.

35 Interview 2, age 23, female, May 26, 2025, Tuzla.

of different ethnic background in one example, had a greater influence on shaping their perspectives regarding the past political violence than the primary- and secondary-school education that presented them with dominant political narratives.

Young activists in Tuzla are aware of frequent abuses of memory, which characterize memory politics in most of Bosnia-Herzegovina. One activist, who tried to be politically involved, recounted the story of how the party used young people as “statists at the graveyard” during one commemoration whose only purpose was the PR and a particular political agenda that did not take into account either the dignity of the victims or the young people as important citizens of the country.³⁶ This experience made this young activist even more skeptical about the traditional forms of political engagement in her community. Another respondent mentioned the approach to public memory in other parts of Bosnia, such as in Sarajevo, where “everything is about the war, and commemorative practices are full of clichés, stereotypes, and kitsch” mainly because memory work is profitable both in financial and political terms.³⁷ Media, and especially, the online media, risked to “further inflame the existing fire and exacerbate the conflict” through sensationalism and radical ideas that are especially targeting young people.³⁸ Another activist said that commemorating difficult past, such as the genocide in Srebrenica, should not make people burdened by guilt for being of ethnicity of an aggressor because that can have a counter-effect of creating a nationalist reaction.³⁹ She said that in her family, where a family member survived the Srebrenica genocide, which was a horrible and an unsettling violent event, everyone was always welcomed regardless of their ethnicity.⁴⁰ She continued to bring up the case of the grenade explosion in Tuzla that killed 71 young people showed, to illustrate that it was not important what name or religion a person was since the grenade was indiscriminate while at the same time targeting the youth knowing that *Kapija*, located in the center of the city, was the place where young people went out in the evening.⁴¹ In general our respondents provided

36 Interview 2, age 23, female, May 26, 2025, Tuzla.

37 Interview 3, age 33, male, May 27, 2025, Tuzla.

38 Interview 5, age 25, female, May 28, 2025, Tuzla.

39 Interview 2, age 23, female, May 26, 2025, Tuzla.

40 Interview 2, age 23, female, May 26, 2025, Tuzla.

41 Interview 2, age 23, female, May 26, 2025, Tuzla.

different perspectives and experiences regarding the way they learned about the past in their communities, but one commonality was that they were critical of the abuses of memory to promote narratives that victimize the ethnic in-groups and demonize the out-groups.

/ Memory Politics and Youth Activism in Tuzla

Most of the interviewed young activists expressed feeling proud of being citizens of Tuzla, the “city that is recognized for its multiethnicity, tolerance, antifascist tradition, and is generally an example of good living together.”⁴² They are aware that their city is unique in the whole of Bosnia-Herzegovina because it was never ruled by nationalist parties,⁴³ and as such it became a symbol of resistance during and after the war.⁴⁴ Moreover, one of the activists mentioned that through their activism they were “trying to spread this Tuzlan virus [of anti-nationalism] onto the whole of the country.”⁴⁵

While the respondents were all highly concerned about the young generations growing up in the rest Bosnia-Herzegovina, particularly due to the persistent and prevailing nationalist approach to everyday life and memory in the country, several of them stressed the positive effects that growing up in Tuzla – in contrast to the upbringing in other places of the country – had on their lives. Some highlighted the importance of the urban character of the city, noting that “by listening to rock music you cannot become close-minded” and observing that Tuzla helped them set their direction in life.⁴⁶ Others referred to the positive impact that growing up unexposed to ethnic divisions had on them. Some respondents recall the shock that they felt when they first found out about those divisions in other places of Bosnia-Herzegovina. For example, a 25-year-old interviewee mentioned that only recently she learned about divisions in Mostar, and this city having ethnically divided schools, which she found outrageous.⁴⁷

42 Interview 9, age 24, female, June 18, 2025, Zoom call

43 Interview 1, age 26, female, May 26, 2025, Tuzla.

44 Interview 2, age 23, female, May 26, 2025, Tuzla

45 Interview 4, age 33, male, May 28, 2025, Tuzla.

46 Interview 4, age 33, male, May 28, 2025, Tuzla.

47 Interview 5, age 25, female, May 28, 2025, Tuzla

Although memory is not central to the work of most of the interviewed activists, who are mostly focusing on other issues which they find more pressing, such as democracy, rule of law or preservation of natural resources, all respondents recognized the importance of cultural memory and remembrance of the past, for the present and the future of their society. Their thoughts on the main motivating factors for preserving the memory of the past vary. One of the activists stressed that “it is important to talk about the past because, by not talking about it, we give space to those who committed crimes during wartime, which could promote the wrong ideas and take the society in a wrong direction.”⁴⁸ Indeed, several respondents highlighted strong concerns about revisionism and denial of past wrongs. Moreover, one of them considers that “talking about the past is also talking about our resilience, about everything we and our country survived, it teaches us to take care of Bosnia-Herzegovina.”⁴⁹ However, several of respondents insisted that talking about the past should not collectivize the guilt and the blame. One of them exemplified it by stating: “Why would anyone from today’s East Sarajevo have to identify with Novak Đukić, the man who fired the grenade on the city center of Tuzla?”⁵⁰

When reflecting on the commemorative practices in Bosnia-Herzegovina, most interviewed activists pointed out that Tuzlan approach to memory of the 1990s is a unique positive example of non-nationalist commemoration in the country. While in other parts of the country they observed practices of abuse of memory for political and other purposes, they noted that in Tuzla the past is commemorated “factually” and without inciting hatred towards other ethnic groups.⁵¹ The same was also witnessed by the two authors of this article, based on our participant observation of the 2025 commemorative events dedicated to the victims of *Kapija* massacre, during which 71 mostly young persons lost their lives. We observed that the content of the speeches and the symbols used during the commemoration did not foster inter-ethnic resentments, but rather a shared sense of loss and empathy toward all the families of the victims.

All our respondents were well acquainted with the details of this yearly commemoration and some of them also participated in it. They described it

48 Interview 2, age 23, female, May 26, 2025, Tuzla.

49 Interview 2, age 23, female, May 26, 2025, Tuzla.

50 Interview 4, age 33, male, May 28, 2025, Tuzla.

51 Interview 1, age 26, female, May 26, 2025, Tuzla.

as “the trauma that connects us,”⁵² stressing that the nature of the massacre and the ethnic composition of the deceased show that the aggressor did not care of which nationality were people to be killed, because the aggressor was actually targeting “the very idea of Bosnia-Herzegovina” as a multiethnic state.⁵³ Reflecting on the 2025 commemoration, several interviewees observed the presence of both the Muslim and the Catholic religious authorities, which they saw as a positive sign of continued inter-faith collaboration in the city. However, the absence of the Orthodox priest was also noted. While most interviewees were puzzled by this, one respondent mentioned that the current Orthodox priest in Tuzla is under strong influence from Serbian Orthodox authorities and he is not truly inclined to interreligious dialogue and cooperation in Tuzla.⁵⁴ While most interviewees spoke positively about the 2025 commemoration of *Kapija*, one noted that this yearly event is becoming increasingly bleak, like “a formality” that would benefit from new and more innovative approaches to commemoration.⁵⁵

/ Memory Politics and Youth Activism in the Region

The interviewed activists from Tuzla frequently spoke about their collaboration with activist groups from other parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina, as well as from the broader region, demonstrating that they are not operating in a silo. Some of them are active across Bosnia-Herzegovina, including in *Republika Srpska*, and stress that they feel welcome everywhere because they fight for the common cause.⁵⁶ It is precisely through the struggle for common good that they hope to overcome ethnic and other divisions.

Our respondents are often inspired by the work of other activists from the region, and lately particularly by the student-led movement in Serbia. Sparked by a public tragedy – the collapse of a railway station canopy that killed 16 people in the city of Novi Sad on November 1st, 2024 – the student-led uprising in Serbia has developed into a powerful civic mobilization

52 Interview 1, age 26, female, May 26, 2025, Tuzla.

53 Interview 2, age 23, female, May 26, 2025, Tuzla.

54 Interview 3, age 33, male, May 27, 2025, Tuzla.

55 Interview 9, age 24, female, June 18, 2025, Zoom call.

56 Interview 4, age 33, male, May 28, 2025, Tuzla.

calling for institutional accountability, justice, and systemic reform (Milojević and Pantić 2025). Our respondents note with admiration the capacity of students in Serbia to mobilize for a better future, stressing that one of the keys to their success is “that they are not ethnically divided, like us in Bosnia-Herzegovina.”⁵⁷ Drawing parallels between the capacity of youth in Serbia and in Bosnia-Herzegovina to influence change, while they express admiration for the achievements of the students in Serbia, they also note with regret that persistent ethnonationalist divisions in Bosnia-Herzegovina are preventing the Bosnian society to address the real problems, because “there is always the [ethnic] other to blame.”⁵⁸

Collaboration between Tuzlan youth activists and activists from Serbia also takes place in the field of memory activism. Several respondents stressed regular participation of youth from Serbia – organized by the regional network Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR) and implemented in collaboration with several CSOs and institutions in Tuzla – in the yearly commemorative event at *Kapija*. One interviewee described being moved by the attendance of youth from Serbia at the commemoration, saying that “these are cathartic emotions; people wish well to each other.”⁵⁹ A similar feeling was expressed by the interviewee from Serbia who participated in the 2025 commemoration in Tuzla: “When we came to Tuzla for the commemoration, we felt no one is looking at us as Serbs, but rather as young people who came to pay respect for the victims,” he noted. “We heard about Tuzla being an open city, but when we got there, we could actually feel that this is so true. The spirit of Tuzla is amazing; you can feel that ethnic belonging is not a primary thing here.”⁶⁰

The same respondent explained that the broader approach that YIHR network is taking is that of joint commemorations where young people from a specific ethnic group can pay respect to the civilian victims of the war belonging to the *other* groups.⁶¹ With this kind of actions, youth in the region is challenging the dominant ethnonationalist approach to memory which

57 Interview 1, age 26, female, May 26, 2025, Tuzla.

Interview 5, age 25, female, May 28, 2025, Tuzla.

58 Interview 5, age 25, female, May 28, 2025, Tuzla.

59 Interview 2, age 23, female, May 26, 2025, Tuzla.

60 Interview 8, age 24, male, June 18, 2025, Zoom call.

61 Interview 8, age 24, male, June 18, 2025, Zoom call.

characterizes official memory politics in the entire region. Reflecting on this type of commemorative solidarity, Fridman (2022, p. 185—186) notes that “for YIHR activists regional cooperation is a way of fighting against self-victimization, through their insistence on the de-ethnicization of victims” and that “such commemorative platforms from below, in their regional form, enable the politicization of discourses of justice through demands to commemorate crimes committed in the 1990s rather than through the glorification of criminals who committed them” (Fridman 2022, 185—86).

/ Conclusion

This paper explored connections between memory politics and youth activism in a local context of Tuzla, a Bosnian town with history of inter-ethnic cooperation despite several violent incidents during the war in the 1990s. In addition to attending the commemoration of *Kapija* on May 25, we also interviewed nine local activists between the ages of 20 and 33 about their political engagement, motivations, and observations about their community. Our study takes an interdisciplinary approach while building on the scholarship of memory, nationalism, and youth activism.

We find that the youth perspectives in Tuzla are essentially anti-nationalist in orientation, not only because they defy the nationalist narratives, but also because they focus on other issues of joint concern, such as environmental protection, gender equity, and the promotion of the rule of law and democratic governance. Young activists of Tuzla are both inspired and connected with the youth activists across the region. They are sending a clear message to their communities and their political leaders – “We are staying” – and in this way challenge and change the nationalist and anti-democratic practices in this country.

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**MILA DRAGOJEVIĆ
VALENTINA OTMAČIĆ
"Mi ostajemo tu": mladi, antinacionalizam
i sjećanje u Tuzli**

Kroz prizmu aktivizma mladih u Tuzli, bosanskohercegovačkom gradu koji je poseban po kontinuiranom zajedničkom životu Bošnjaka, Hrvata i Srba tijekom i nakon rata 1992 — 1995, autorice postavljaju sljedeća pitanja: Koje su glavne karakteristike lokalnih politika sjećanja u Tuzli? Kako se one razlikuju od dominantnih politika sjećanja u Bosni i Hercegovini? Koje su ključne perspektive mladih u Tuzli – onih rođenih nakon rata, a osobito mladih aktivista – o ratnoj prošlosti i načinima na koje različiti akteri sjećanja tu prošlost integriraju u njihovu sadašnjost i budućnost? Na temelju intervjua s devetoro mladih aktivistica i aktivista te sudioničkog promatranja obilježavanja 30. godišnjice masakra na Kapiji, autorice zaključuju da perspektive mladih u Tuzli nisu samo antinacionalističke, nego uključuju i lokalno i regionalno povezivanje s mladim aktivistima drugih nacionalnosti. Pritom je fokus na zajedničkim hitnim pitanjima, po-

put vladavine prava, demokratskog upravljanja, rodne ravnopravnosti i zaštite okoliša.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: *aktivizam mladih, politike sjećanja, civilno društvo, Bosna i Hercegovina, Tuzla*