

Original Article

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Karadžorđevo and the Division of Bosnia and Herzegovina: Media Narratives and Contested Memories of Yugoslavia's Dissolution*

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Summary

Certain episodes from the dissolution of Yugoslavia are particularly propitious for the formation of contested memories. This paper focuses specifically on the narrative of a division of Bosnia and Herzegovina, allegedly orchestrated by the Croatian President Franjo Tuđman and the Serbian President Slobodan Milošević. This interpretation of the war in Croatia largely revolves around the meeting between Tuđman and Milošević in Karadžorđevo in March 1991, where they reportedly discussed the partition of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The article conceptually frames this claim as part of the contested histories and memories regarding the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Empirically, it investigates how frequently and in what ways the unproven claim about a division of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the alleged Karadžorđevo agreement appears in Croatian online media. Drawing on a corpus of articles from 22 outlets published between 2002 and 2025 and collected with the TakeLab Retriever tool, the study analyzes the frequency and stance distributions across outlets.

Keywords: Dissolution of Yugoslavia, Media Narratives, Contested Memories, Karadžorđevo, Division of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Franjo Tuđman, Slobodan Milošević

Introduction

Conflicting interpretations of history are not uncommon, particularly between states that have been in conflict with each other, but they also occur within the states themselves. Historical narratives play a crucial role in symbolic nation-building and in

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shaping collective identity, and they can be highly significant in legitimizing certain groups and in exercising social and political power. Narratives regarding the causes of conflict are invariably divergent among warring parties. The debate over the responsibility for World War I is well known, and the opposing narratives surrounding it also served as a preparatory ideological and propagandistic foundation for Hitler's rise to power and for World War II (Röhl, 2015). Similar divergences in interpretation can be observed regarding the causes and specific phases of the Korean War (Stoessinger, 2010), the failure of the Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts (Kacowicz, 2005), or the recent Russian-Ukrainian disputes over the interpretation of their shared past. These examples illustrate the vast array of conflicting historical narratives present across the world (Motyl, 2010).¹ James V. Wertsch (1997) emphasizes that history is not merely a tool for presenting the past as accurately and neutrally as possible, but also a "powerful instrument for shaping ideas and emotions". Suganami (1997) goes a step further, arguing that the causes of war do not exist independently of our narratives about them. Since the symbolic articulation of war is necessarily a narrative, its origins can only ever be "artefacts constructed retrospectively for the sake of communicating arguments and ideas". Numerous works in the field of memory studies also highlight that historiography is constructed by historians, who select sources and interpret them in narrative form, often influenced by the cultural and ideological framework to which they belong (Erll, 2011, pp. 39–40). The history versus memory debate is fundamentally grounded in a critique of historiography's claim to offer an objective interpretation of available sources, and raises the further question of which of the two disciplines commands epistemic primacy. Regardless of whether we consider it merely a part of collective memory, historiography, with its methodological tools, remains the discipline responsible for the selection, reconstruction, and interpretation of historical processes and events, in spite of all its inherent limitations. The historiographies of the successor states of the former Yugoslavia offer substantial support of this critique, as is evident in the markedly divergent interpretations of the country's dissolution, including the case examined in this paper.

The contesting narratives embedded in the collective memory of different groups further illustrate the extent to which certain historical episodes can be interpreted and instrumentalised in divergent ways. Collective memory is always constituted through the relationship between the past and present; it is not a mere reflection of historical events but a socially constructed product of contemporary political and cultural struggles over meaning (Connerton, 1989; Kansteiner, 2002). Contested memories often emerge after conflicts, when societies try to make sense of their violent past, which results in various groups constructing narratives that empha-

¹ On the relationship between narrative and history, see, for example, Stone (1979), Berkhofer (1995), Munslow (2007) and Freeman (2015).

size their own suffering and justify their actions. The contested nature of collective memory in post-conflict societies is well documented across different historical and geographical contexts, from the competing commemorative traditions of post-Civil War America (Blight, 2001) to the deeply divided memory landscapes of twentieth-century Europe (Pakier and Stråth, 2010). In former Yugoslav republics they are forged as part of the broader processes of nation-building and identity formation.

Nation-building is understood as a fluid concept encompassing the formation and consolidation of national identity through symbols, memory, language, cultural traditions, and commemorative practices (Brubaker, 1996). Nation-building in the post-communist former Yugoslav republics diverges substantially from comparable Western European processes: it was not only time-compressed, but both state- and nation-building proceeded in tandem with armed conflict (Kolstø, 2014, pp. 3–4).

The collective memory of the 1990s wars in Croatia, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina is predominantly marked by the victimisation and heroisation of one's own group or nation, leaving little space for alternative memory frameworks or for the acknowledgement of crimes committed by one's own side (Bar-Tal and Čehajić-Clancy, 2014; Pavlaković and Pauković, 2019). Antagonistic memory (Bull and Hansen, 2016; Kasianov, 2022) refers to collective memory mobilised in competitive service of one's own nation vis-à-vis the others. It is characterised by the mythologisation of selective remembrance and the deliberate forgetting of those historical episodes that do not fit the dominant constructed narrative. As Lea David (2020) convincingly demonstrated, the implementation of human rights memorialisation in the Western Balkans has failed to achieve its intended objectives; rather, the figure of the victim has been instrumentalised in the service of mobilising and legitimising particular group identities. Antagonistic memory is not exclusively an inter-ethnic or inter-national phenomenon; as the subsequent analysis will demonstrate, it can equally structure conflicts within a single national community, as illustrated by the competing Croatian narratives surrounding the alleged Tuđman-Milošević agreement on the partition of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Divergent interpretations of history were a key element in the opposing national narratives that contributed to the wartime disintegration of the state, and they have persisted to a significant extent until the present day, with the media playing a crucial role. This is particularly evident in the competing narratives about the 1990s, which continue to shape collective memory, political discourse, and the ways in which different groups understand the legacy of the conflict. Within this context, the role of the media in the disintegration of Yugoslavia has been analyzed from a variety of perspectives. A relatively substantial body of literature has clearly demonstrated the propaganda activities of domestic media, which often mirrored and reinforced national divisions and the processes of homogenization (Thompson,

1999; Mimica and Vučetić, 2001; Pauković, 2008; Kolstø, 2016). The media play a crucial role in the construction and reproduction of collective memory. They are not merely channels for transmitting narratives, social functions, and power relations arising from diverse social and cultural contexts; rather, they function as autonomous memory agents that, through their “media environment”, exert a complex influence on individual and collective cognitive processes. The media operate within different ideological, value-based, and political frameworks and preferences that influence media products. The choice of a photograph or a headline in the presentation of a media publication, regardless of the content of the text itself, can significantly influence audiences and their interpretation of a particular event. Media coverage and news related to history are always in interaction with the present; which history the media present, and in what way, depends on the vision of the future they promote through editorial policies, as well as on the personal ideological positions of the journalists themselves (Lang and Lang, 1989; Cohen *et al.*, 2018; Neiger, 2020; Fawns, 2022; Pauković, 2024, pp. 23–24). Applying this perspective to Croatian media coverage reveals patterns in handling contested historical claims.

This article examines the contested claim that Franjo Tuđman and Slobodan Milošević reached an agreement on the partition of Bosnia and Herzegovina during their 1991 meeting in Karađorđevo, conceptualizing it as part of the contested histories and memories regarding the dissolution of Yugoslavia. The first aim is to trace when and how intensively the disputed claim appears in Croatian online media, identifying periods and events in which references to Karađorđevo are amplified. The second aim is to examine how different outlets position themselves toward the claim and how these stances vary across media outlets associated with different audience profiles.

Following the theoretical background, the next section outlines competing narratives surrounding the Karađorđevo meeting and Bosnia’s division. The methodology section then presents the corpus and stance coding procedure, followed by an analysis of 402 articles from 22 Croatian news outlets (2002–2025). The article concludes by relating these findings to broader patterns of media polarization and memory contestation in Croatia.

Narratives on the Division of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Karađorđevo

The wars that emerged from the dissolution of Yugoslavia have been framed in different ways, particularly when comparing dominant narratives across the former republics involved in the conflicts. These differing interpretations often rely on framing processes that select certain facts in order to “highlight some aspects of reality over others”, while neglecting facts that do not support a particular perspective (Kuypers, 2009).

As the subsequent discussion will demonstrate, a number of narratives concerning the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the ensuing wars have advanced the thesis of a prearranged war. Central to this interpretive framework is the partition of Bosnia and Herzegovina, understood as the product of a deliberate agreement between the Croatian and Serbian political leaders Franjo Tuđman and Slobodan Milošević. The key argument of this interpretation is based on meetings and negotiations between the two leaders immediately prior to and during the war, with the central subject of these discussions being the division of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Particular significance is attributed to their meeting in Karađorđevo on 25 March 1991, as well as, to some extent, their less-known meeting on 15 April 1991 in Tikveš. The controversial nature of these meetings stems from the fact that they were held behind “closed doors” and that no official records exist to confirm the contents of the discussions.

It is important to emphasize at the outset that the aim here is not to provide a historiographical analysis of these claims, but rather to outline the main interpretations in order to contextualize the media analysis conducted in this study. Information about the content of the aforementioned meetings between Milošević and Tuđman, particularly the claim that the division of Bosnia and Herzegovina was agreed upon or discussed, derives primarily from testimonies of their closest associates, while both Milošević and Tuđman denied that any agreement on the partition of Bosnia had been reached (Tuđman, 1999, pp. 506–507; Lučić, 2003, p. 10).

Although interpretations concerning the division of Bosnia and Herzegovina appeared already in the early 1990s,² the individual who arguably contributed the most to the promotion of the thesis that Milošević and Tuđman agreed on the partition of Bosnia – particularly at the Karađorđevo meeting – was Stjepan Mesić, a close associate of Tuđman and later the President of Croatia, through his testimony before the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in 1997 and 1998 in the Tihomir Blaškić case, as well as through subsequent media appearances. The division of Bosnia and Herzegovina at Karađorđevo was also discussed in detail in the memoirs of Dušan Bilandžić, another close associate of Tuđman at the time (Bilandžić, 2006). In support of the thesis that the partition of Bosnia was discussed at the Karađorđevo meeting, Josip Manolić, also a close associate of Tuđman in the early 1990s, testified before the ICTY in 2006. Former Croatian Prime Minister (1992–1993) and Head of the Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia, Hrvoje Šarinić, asserted that the partition of Bosnia was unquestionably discussed at the Karađorđevo and Tikveš meetings, but maintained

² Notably, the event became public in 1991, even drawing the attention of the international community, for which Tuđman bears direct responsibility, and was subsequently articulated as a conspiracy theory throughout the 1990s. See more in Blanuša (2011, pp. 185–187; 211–213).

that these discussions did not lead to the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. By contrast, Croatia's long-serving Minister of Foreign Affairs (1993–2000), Mate Granić, stated in his memoirs that Tuđman had told him that no binding obligations arose from the discussions in Karađorđevo and Tikveš, during which a wide range of issues related to the crisis were discussed, including possible territorial delineations in Bosnia and Herzegovina among the three sides, but without any formal agreement being reached (Granić, 2019).

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, primarily among Bosniaks, the thesis of the partition of Bosnia and Herzegovina, including the Karađorđevo meeting, forms part of the dominant narrative of the war. This narrative is based on portraying Bosnia and Herzegovina and Bosniaks as the primary victims of the conflict and as the only side that fought (and continues to fight) for a unified, multi-ethnic, and civic state. Accordingly, the partition of Bosnia and Herzegovina constitutes an integral element of the thesis of aggression allegedly carried out by Serbia and Croatia. Such interpretative frameworks are present in political, media, and academic discourse (Tuzlainfo, 2022). These frameworks are not used solely for the interpretation of history, but also for contemporary political objectives and ongoing struggles over the constitutional organization and functioning of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Kliko *et al.*, 2021; Omeragić, 1998; Komšić, 2021).³

As previously noted, Milošević denied any agreement with Tuđman regarding the partition of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Likewise, his closest associate during the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Borisav Jović, repeatedly denied, both in his public statements and in his memoirs, that the partition of Bosnia was discussed or agreed upon at Karađorđevo. Jović maintained that Mesić fabricated these claims in order to support the argument that Milošević was pursuing the creation of a Greater Serbia, and that an additional motive was to attack Tuđman following their political conflict (Petrović, 2011). The dominant nationalist narrative in Serbia rejected the Karađorđevo and partition thesis, in part because it did not align with claims that framed the wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina as civil wars, within which Serbia's role is sought to be minimized. By contrast, the thesis of the partition of Bosnia and Herzegovina and of a prearranged war aligns more closely with

³ In 2019, Bosniak journalist Kemal Kurspahić wrote that Milošević and Tuđman agreed on the ethnic partition of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Karađorđevo, that this agreement was confirmed during the war, and that Serbian and Croatian nationalism still share “a common goal of consolidating ‘Serb’ and ‘Croat’ territories in Bosnia and Herzegovina” (Kurspahić, 2019). Željko Komšić, who has served multiple terms as the Croat member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina (and who has been criticised and contested by Croatian political actors and Croatian parties in BiH because he was elected predominantly with Bosniak votes), stated in the context of Milorad Dodik's (controversial) visit to Zagreb in September 2020 that “what Milošević and Tuđman envisioned in Karađorđevo will never be realised” (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2020).

narratives that seek to distribute responsibility for the wars in Croatia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina more evenly between Serbian and Croatian nationalisms. Additional promotion of the idea of a prearranged war and of secret agreements between Milošević and Tuđman concerning the partition of Bosnia and Herzegovina was provided by a documentary film produced by Radio Television of Serbia (RTS) in 2011, entitled *Tuđman, Milošević: A Prearranged War?*. Through various statements by actors involved in the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina are narratively framed by emphasizing the importance of different agreements between Milošević and Tuđman, including the alleged partition of Bosnia and Herzegovina at Karađorđevo (RTS Merila vremena, n.d.).

The alleged partition of Bosnia and Herzegovina between Milošević and Tuđman has also been discussed in various ways at the international level. In their influential book *The Death of Yugoslavia* (1995, pp. 143–144), published alongside the BBC documentary of the same title, Laura Silber and Allan Little state that Milošević and Tuđman held “secret talks” in Karađorđevo during which they also discussed the partition of Bosnia, citing Stjepan Mesić. However, they conclude that any such agreement was short-lived, as the rebel Serbs in Croatia launched an armed uprising of which the first casualties occurred at Plitvice. A significant contribution to the international promotion of the partition thesis was made by Paddy Ashdown, then leader of the UK Liberal Democrats, through his testimony before the ICTY in the Tihomir Blaškić case in 1998. Ashdown claimed that during the celebration of the 50th anniversary of Victory in Europe Day in London in May 1995, Tuđman sketched a map on the back of a menu card in response to Ashdown’s question about how he believed the former Yugoslavia might look in ten years. According to Ashdown’s testimony, the sketch depicted Bosnia and Herzegovina divided into two parts, between Croatia and Serbia⁴ (BBC News, 1998). Danish historian Christian A. Nielsen, who is also known as an expert in the Perković–Mustać trial in Germany and whose book on the dissolution of Yugoslavia has been translated into Croatian, argues that an agreement between Milošević and Tuđman regarding Bosnia was not possible due to the Serb population in Croatia, whose rebellion escalated shortly after the Karađorđevo meeting (Nielsen, 2021, pp. 61–62). In its 2017 judgment, the Appeals Chamber of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) confirmed in the case of the six leaders of “Herceg-Bosna” the claim from the first-instance judgment that “Tuđman advocated the division of Bosnia and Herzegovina between Croatia and Serbia, either by annexing part of Bosnia to Croatia or, if this was not possible, through the establishment within Bosnia of an autonomous Croatian territory closely linked to Croatia” (Pauković,

⁴ The criticism of Ashdown’s claims is provided by Miroslav Tuđman in his book on so-called “Tuđman’s napkin” (Tuđman, 2002).

2024, p. 86). The “Trial Chamber found that between 1990 and 1992, Tuđman participated in several meetings, including the 25 March 1991 Karađorđevo Meeting with Slobodan Milošević, concerning the finalisation of ‘plans [...] to divide BiH between Croatia and Serbia’” (Prlić and Others, 2017, p. 265). The Appeals Chamber accepted Manolić’s testimony as relevant evidence that the partition of BiH was discussed in Karađorđevo. Multiple defence challenges arguing that key witnesses lacked direct knowledge of the meeting and that no conclusive agreement was proven to have been reached were systematically dismissed by the Appeals Chamber. The court concluded that the absence of a formal agreement did not undermine the finding that the partition of BiH was the subject of the meeting. In assessing the defence arguments, the Appeals Chamber explicitly addressed the apparent contradiction between Tuđman’s public statements in favour of BiH’s independence and the evidence of his private intentions. The court found that Tuđman’s public support for BiH’s existing borders was not genuine but rather strategically motivated: he was aware that the international community opposed the division of BiH, and therefore deliberately concealed his actual position for “tactical reasons” (*ibid.*, pp. 265–269, 270, 272).

The interpretation of the partition of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Karađorđevo meeting in Croatia is largely part of broader, conflicting narratives that are reproduced in the public and political spheres, most often between the left and the right. In the more dominant right-wing narrative, established during the 1990s, Croatia’s role in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina is framed primarily through its support of and cooperation with Bosniaks. In this narrative, support for Croats in the country is presented as part of the resistance to Greater Serbian aggression that prevented the full occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The main arguments within this narrative include the cooperation between Croats and Bosniaks during the war, formalized through inter-state agreements; Croatia’s recognition of Bosnia and Herzegovina; the reception of hundreds of thousands of refugees; and, more generally, the context of the war in which Croats and Bosniaks, aside from the 1993–1994 conflict, were allies. Any notion of an agreement between Tuđman and Milošević is rejected primarily by referencing the context and chronology of the war in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is said to refute such claims. This interpretation is consistent with the Parliamentary Declaration on the Homeland War of 2000, which states that Croatia “conducted a just and legitimate, defensive and liberating war, rather than an aggressive or expansionist war against anyone” (Deklaracija o Domovinskom ratu, 2000). Within this discourse, the significance of the Karađorđevo meeting and the thesis of an agreement between Tuđman (Croats) and Milošević (Serbs) regarding the partition of Bosnia and Herzegovina is flatly denied. Such interpretations dominate the right-wing political and social spec-

trums, including both historiography and publicist literature (Tuđman and Bilić, 2005; Tuđman, 2006; Lučić, 2013).

A second, more critical narrative regarding Croatia's role in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina developed more prominently following a split within the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) in 1994, during which Stjepan Mesić left the party, primarily due to his criticism of Croatian policy toward Bosnia and Herzegovina. As previously noted, Mesić would become one of the key actors in promoting the thesis of an agreement between Tuđman and Milošević on the partition of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

This narrative gained full momentum after the HDZ lost power in 2000 and during the early years of Mesić's first presidential term, when a process of "detuđmanization" began. From the perspective of its proponents, this process entailed a distancing from the negative policies of the Tuđman era, including those related to Bosnia and Herzegovina. Within this narrative, the dominant interpretation that fails to acknowledge Croatian mistakes is criticized. The duplicity of Croatian policy at the time is emphasized, referencing support for the para-state project of Herceg-Bosna, Tuđman's positions (including the fixation on Banovina Croatia, which encompassed parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina), ICTY verdicts, and the highlighting of Croatian crimes – all framed as part of building a democratic society, confronting the past, and promoting regional reconciliation.⁵ Moreover, this narrative stresses that Croatia, at certain moments during the war, advocated the partition of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Within the continuity of this policy, the Karadordevo meeting is also interpreted as a probable occasion when the partition of Bosnia and Herzegovina was discussed or agreed upon, despite the absence of any official or written records. The opposing narratives about Croatia's role in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina are well illustrated by the first official visit of the left-leaning Croatian President Ivo Josipović (2010–2015) to Sarajevo in April 2010, during which he apologized for the negative aspects of Croatian policy toward Bosnia and Herzegovina during the 1990s, specifically for participation in policies that attempted to divide the country (Dnevnik.hr, 2010). At that time, the Croatian Prime Minister from the HDZ invited former prime ministers from the 1990s, who supported her position that Croatia had neither partitioned Bosnia and Herzegovina nor pursued an aggressive policy in the country (Malenica, 2010). The critical narrative regarding Tuđman's policies and legacy, including his approach to Bosnia and Herzego-

⁵ A good example of competing narratives are the positions expressed in a 2020 N1 television interview featuring former Foreign Minister Vesna Pusić (2011–2016), from the SDP-led government, and former Minister of European Integration Ljerkina Mintas Hodak (1998–2000), from the HDZ-led government (N1, 2020).

vina, is present not only in publicist literature but also in historiography (Lucić and Lovrenović, 2005; Bilandžić, 2006; Goldstein, 2010).

The opposing narratives briefly outlined here are relatively stable and continue to be reproduced in Croatian society.

Methodology

This study analyzes 402 articles retrieved through TakeLab Retriever, a platform that scans articles and their metadata from Croatian news outlets and performs real-time text mining (Dukić *et al.*, 2024). The search was conducted using the phrases “dogovor u Karađorđevu”, “dogovoreni rat Bosna”, “mit o Karađorđevu”, “teza o podjeli BiH”, “Tuđman Milošević sastanak”, “Karađorđevo Tuđman Milošević”, “podjela BiH”, and “podjela Bosne”. Although 33 media outlets were included in the broader dataset, the topic appeared in 22 of them: 24sata, Direktno, Dnevnik, Dnevno, Glas Slavonije, Alter, Hop, N1, HRT, Index, Jutarnji list, Lupiga, Narod, NET, Novi list, Plusportal, Priznajem, Slobodna Dalmacija, Telegram, Teleskop, Tportal, and Večernji list. The articles cover the period from January 2002 to October 2025.

The initial set of retrieved articles was manually filtered to remove duplicates and texts not directly related to the topic. One additional article was excluded because it was premium content and therefore inaccessible. Each article was treated as a single unit of analysis, and coding was based on the text of the article. The coding was conducted by two members of the research team. Both coders first jointly coded an initial subset of the material to align their understanding of the pre-defined categories, after which the coding scheme was refined and documented in a shared codebook. The remaining material was then split between the two coders, who discussed ambiguous cases as they arose to maintain consistency. The study employed manual stance coding at the article level to examine how Croatian media positioned themselves toward the claim that Tuđman and Milošević agreed on the division of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This coding procedure draws on the scholarship on stance and stance detection, which conceptualizes texts in terms of their orientation toward a specific target, proposition, or state of affairs (Burnham, 2025). Articles were classified as supporting, opposing, or neutral toward the claim. Supporting articles treated the claim as valid, credible, or historically plausible. Opposing articles treated it as false, unsubstantiated, or misleading. Neutral articles mentioned the claim without clearly endorsing or rejecting it, presented competing interpretations without obvious alignment, or referred to the issue only in passing.

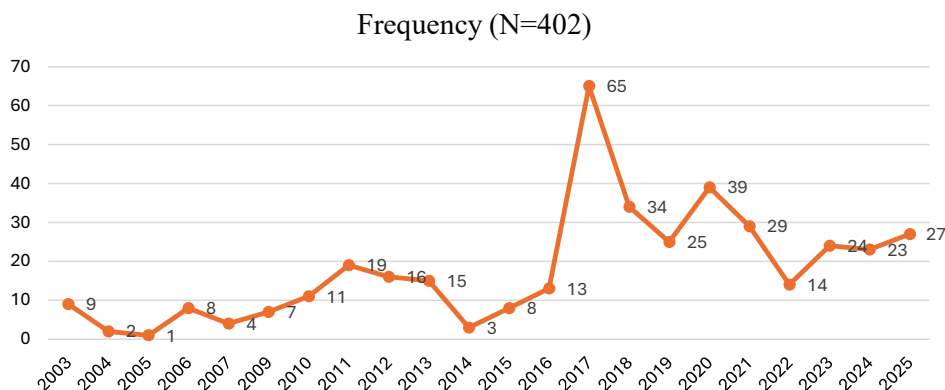
Articles coded as supporting treated the claim as valid or historically plausible, often through formulations such as “the division happened”, “there was a plan to divide Bosnia and Herzegovina”, indicating that the division of Bosnia and Herzego-

vina had been planned or agreed upon. Articles coded as opposing treated the claim as false, unsubstantiated, or misleading, often using formulations such as “the myth of Karađorđevo”, “disinformation”, “a lie”, or “without evidence”. Articles coded as neutral mentioned the claim without clearly endorsing or rejecting it, presented competing interpretations without clear alignment, or referred to it only in passing. These expressions were treated as interpretive indicators, and final classification depended on the article’s overall orientation toward the claim.

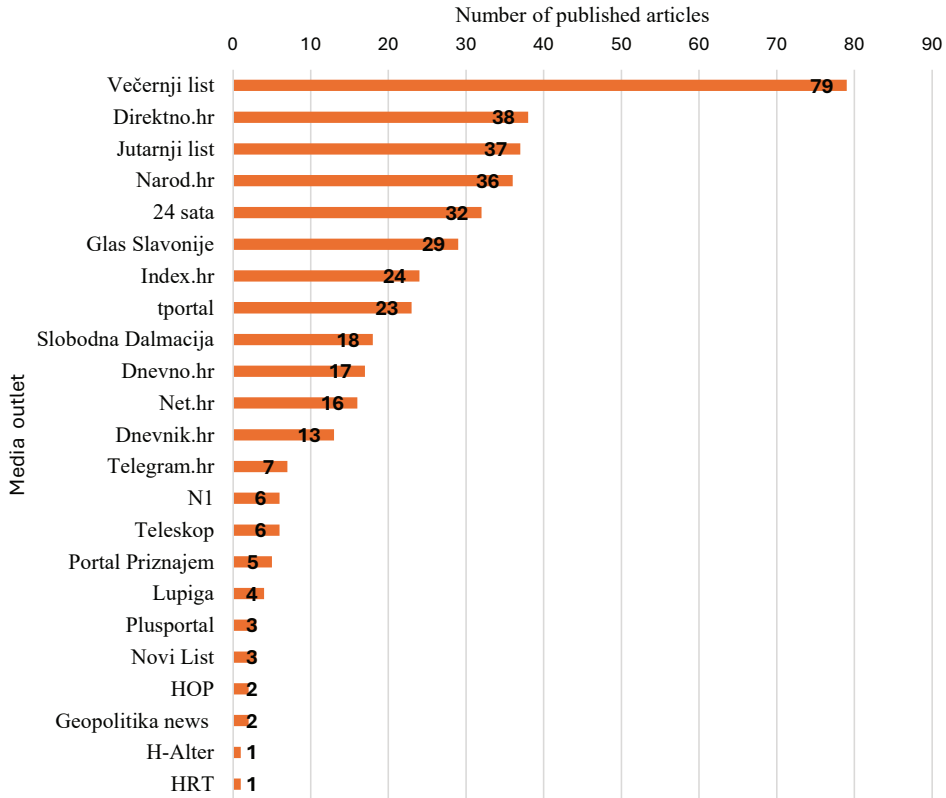
Results

Graph 1 illustrates the frequency of coverage of the disputed Karađorđevo claim from January 2002 to October 2025. The chart reveals a significant spike in 2017, when 65 articles were published. This surge coincided with several events: the suicide of Slobodan Praljak following his ICTY conviction, the publication of books addressing the division of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and interviews with individuals connected to Tuđman, Milošević, and Izetbegović. The 2017 peak shows that the disputed claim resurfaces in Croatian media when mnemonic and political stakes are heightened.

Graph 1. Frequency of Coverage



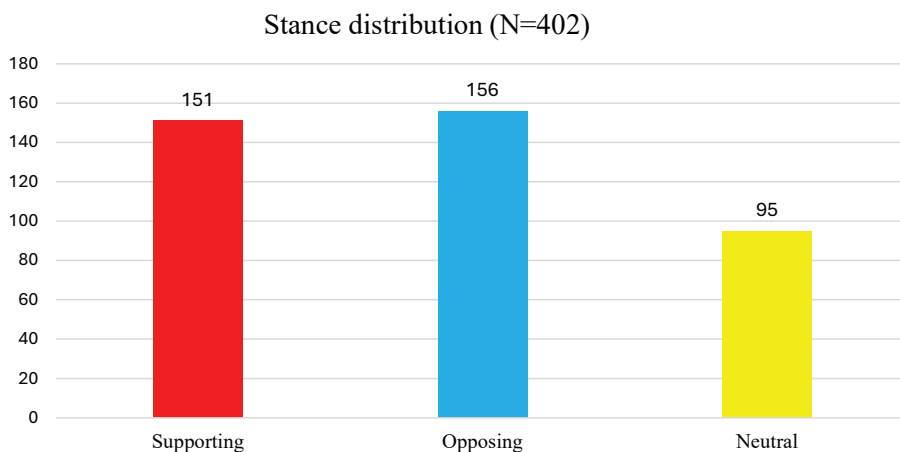
Graph 2 illustrates the distribution of 402 articles across 22 outlets. Večernji list published the most articles (79, 20% of corpus), followed by Direktno.hr (38) and Jutarnji list (37), and Narod.hr (36). These four outlets account for 47% of total coverage. Večernji list and Jutarnji list rank among Croatia’s most widely read news outlets (Reuters Digital News Report, 2024). The concentration in high-reach outlets highlights the contested claim’s prominence within mainstream Croatian media discourse.

Graph 2. Number of Articles by Media Outlets

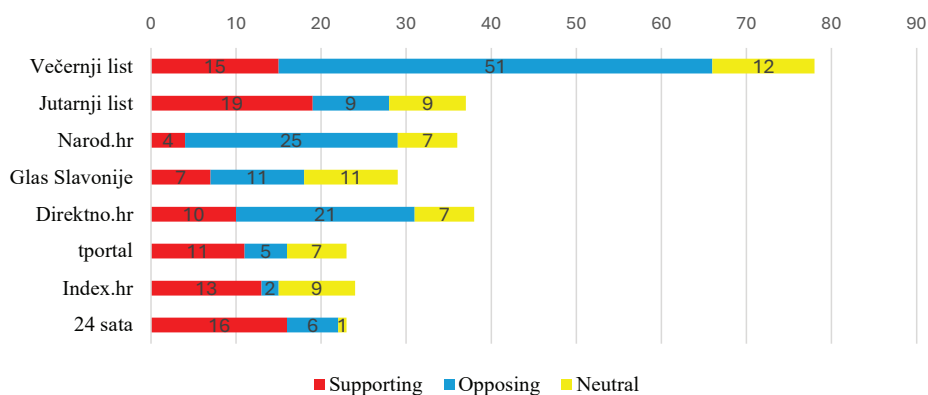
Graph 4 illustrates the distribution of supporting, opposing, and neutral articles across individual online media outlets. Read together with Graph 3, the results reveal a polarized pattern: outlets associated with comparatively right-leaning audience profiles (Večernji list, Direktno.hr) more frequently published opposing articles, whereas outlets associated with comparatively left-leaning audience profiles (Index.hr, Jutarnji list) more frequently published supporting articles. The audience profiles of the outlets in this study are interpreted through audience polarization patterns identified by Vozab and Peruško (2021) in their analysis of Croatian digital news audiences from 2017–2020, whose findings indicate that different news outlets attract audiences with distinct ideological orientations, which allows this study to relate variation in coverage of the Karađorđevo claim to broader patterns of audience polarization. This distribution suggests a patterned association

between article-level stances toward the contested claim and the audience profiles of different outlets: those with right-leaning audiences more often dispute the Karađorđevo narrative, while those with left-leaning audiences more often present it as credible.

Graph 3. Stance Distribution in Total



Graph 4. Stance Distribution by Media Outlet



This pattern is exemplified by

– an opposing stance:

Glas Slavonije: *“Certainly, among numerous pieces of disinformation disseminated to the public, one of the most mentioned fabrications is the claim that in March 1991, an agreement was reached in Karađorđevo with Slobodan Milošević about the division of Bosnia and Herzegovina”* (Gregorović, 2019). Direktno.hr: *“The story of the division of Bosnia and Herzegovina by Tuđman and Milošević is so absurd that it is completely indefensible”* (Direktno.hr, 2016). Večernji list: *“It’s miraculous how this myth is used as a fact even though there is absolutely nothing that could turn it into a fact. There is no video, audio, or documentary material whatsoever that would confirm it”* (Ivanković, 2017). Direktno.hr: *“Ivan Kiš reminds us of the lies about the supposed Tuđman-Milošević agreement on the infamous division of Bosnia. He only reminds us of the barrage of lies about war crimes committed by Croatian officers and soldiers in the Homeland War”* (Hodak, 2024). Večernji list: *“Mate Granić said that from the end of 1993 he attended all the meetings Tuđman had with Milošević, and that there was never a conversation of this kind. No agreement between Tuđman and Milošević on this subject ever existed”* (Matijević, 2023).

– a supporting stance:

Index.hr: *“Exactly 52 years later, according to the testimonies of several witnesses, a similar agreement was reached in March 1991 in Karađorđevo between Croatian President Tuđman and Slobodan Milošević, then the most powerful man in Yugoslavia, agreeing on the division of Bosnia and Herzegovina”* (Agencija Anadolujia, 2013). Dnevno.hr: *“The spirit of Karađorđevo, unfortunately, is still alive, as the followers of the politics and of the morbid cult of Tuđman and Milošević remain in power in Belgrade and Zagreb. Karađorđevo is the dark legacy of Franjo Tuđman 23 years after his death”* (Dnevno.hr, 2022). 24sata: *“Josip Manolić, the closest and most informed Tuđman associate... publicly accused Tuđman that he was ‘obsessed with the myth of territorial enlargement of Croatia and, disregarding the Bosniak nation, from the start aimed at the division of Bosnia with Serbia’”* (2025). Express / 24sata: *“Tuđman was here and told us... he had spoken with the President of Serbia about the division of Bosnia and Herzegovina, of course along ethnic lines. I was very surprised when I found this part...”* (2025). Telegram: *“Today’s Croatian politics toward Bosnia still reflect unfulfilled wartime ambitions, which, according to the agreement between Slobodan Milošević and Franjo Tuđman, envisaged the division of Bosnia into ethnically ‘pure’ territories...”* (2025).

– a neutral stance:

Večernji list: *“In Karađorđevo about the division of BiH. He said he had ‘heard something from colleagues’ about it, but ‘there was never an official confirmation*

for that” (Večernji.hr, 2016). Index.hr: *“When asked about the meeting between Milošević and Tuđman in Karađorđevo and the agreement on the division of BiH, Jović said he could not speak about it because the accused never informed him about it”* (HINA, 2003). Direktno.hr: *“Milošević pursued Tuđman because he was certain he represented the interests of the people. And when he found out, he started the process of contacting us and sought a meeting in Karađorđevo with us”* (2015).

Discussion of Results

The empirical analysis of 402 online news articles published between 2002 and 2025 showed that references to the Karađorđevo meeting and the alleged division of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as a contested claim, do not decrease over time but re-occur in distinct peaks linked to political events. The claim is not a marginal topic but remains part of the mainstream news agenda, with much of the coverage appearing in high-reach outlets such as Večernji list and Jutarnji list. At the outlet level, stance patterns further indicate that supporting, opposing, and neutral treatments of the claim are unevenly distributed across outlets whose audiences differ in ideological orientation, suggesting that audience polarization structures how this contested narrative is framed and evaluated in the media sphere, in line with audience polarization patterns identified by Vozab and Peruško (2021). These differences align with media framing literature, which shows that frames select and highlight certain aspects of reality while erasing, marginalizing or neglecting the others (Entman, 1993; Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000; Lecheler and de Vreese, 2018). This research confirms that media are not only a tool in the transmission of collective memory but an important memory agent (Bernhard and Kubik, 2014) which, through their products and editorial choices, greatly influences the understanding and interpretation of history by constantly negotiating between past events and present-day political and social contexts (Zelizer, 2022). These empirical patterns situate the narrative about Karađorđevo and the division of Bosnia and Herzegovina within broader struggles over how the dissolution of Yugoslavia is remembered and interpreted, as various episodes and causes of the conflict remain embedded within competing dominant narratives reproduced in the states that emerged from its collapse (Ramet, 2007; Pavlaković, 2020).

There are two limitations to this study that should be addressed. Firstly, the use of TakeLab Retriever was restricted to 33 national online news outlets, which may not fully capture the diversity of Croatia’s media environment. Secondly, no statistical measure of intercoder reliability was calculated, although coding was conducted by two researchers using a pre-defined codebook and continuous coordination during the coding process. Despite these limitations, these findings show how contested history, in line with theories of nation-building and antagonistic memory,

is mediated through Croatian online outlets that challenge the Karadžorđevo and the division of BIH narrative differently.

Future research could expand on this analysis in several directions. Comparative studies that include media from Bosna and Herzegovina and Serbia could examine how narratives of a “prearranged war” are constructed and contested across different national contexts. Further work could also combine content analysis with audience research, in order to explore how these media narratives are interpreted by different publics.

Conclusion: The Division of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Karadžorđevo as a Contested *Lieu de Mémoire*

Three decades after the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia, interpretations of various episodes and causes of the conflict remain embedded within official narratives reproduced in the states that emerged from Yugoslavia’s collapse. In the politics of history and collective memory, with occasional and sporadic exceptions, the victimization of one’s own nation and an antagonistic mode of remembrance remains dominant. The issue of the partition of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the meeting in Karadžorđevo belongs to those topics that appear both within competing dominant narratives among the former republics and within divergent narratives in Croatia itself. The latter stems from the dynamics of confrontation over the elements of symbolic nation-building, in which representations of the 1990s and the Homeland War occupy a central place. In this context, criticism of Franjo Tuđman and the politics of the 1990s in the Croatian public sphere calls into question the romanticized and heroic portrayal of the decade, according to which Croatia waged an exclusively defensive war and was a victim of Serbian aggression. Croatian politics toward Bosnia and Herzegovina during the war constitutes one of the numerous contested issues dividing the left and right of the political and social spectrums, particularly with regard to interpretations of the historical legacy and, consequently, its place within the processes of nation building and collective memory. Competing narratives in Croatian collective memory are the result of processes in which different memory actors selectively choose and frame historical facts in order to legitimise their own political positions and identities while delegitimising their opponents, with key interpretations of the past serving as a means of mobilisation in contemporary social and political struggles. The topic of the partition of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and particularly the Karadžorđevo meeting, due to its controversial nature and the absence of primary sources on the substance of the conversations or agreements between Tuđman and Milošević, is exceptionally well-suited for the deployment of competing narratives, selective framing, and the construction of mutually exclusive interpretations that reflect the ideological positions of the memory actors involved.

It resurfaces in media during political crises, anniversary events, or debates on war-time responsibility, often functioning as a tool for legitimizing or delegitimizing political actors (Neiger *et al.*, 2011; Maldini, 2019; Adams and Baden, 2021). This pattern is consistent with broader findings on how post-conflict societies instrumentalize historical narratives in ongoing struggles over identity and transitional justice (Teitel, 2000; Wertsch, 2002; Subotić, 2009). Right-leaning outlets tend to frame the claim as a fabrication or a political myth, while left-leaning outlets often treat it as plausible or supported by testimonies. This ideological divergence enables the idea to survive in both positive and negative forms, ensuring its continuity in public discourse rather than its disappearance.

Understanding the Karadorđevo meeting as a contested *lieu de mémoire* (Nora, 1989) clarifies why media interest in it persists over time despite fluctuating political contexts and opposing evidence. Its durability reflects not only historical uncertainty but also the cognitive, institutional, and cultural mechanisms that allow unverified or disputed claims to remain influential within a society.

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Davor Pauković, Monika Cerlin, Sandra Buratović Maštrapa

KARAĐORĐEVO I PODJELA BOSNE I HERCEGOVINE: MEDIJSKI NARATIVI I SUPROTSTAVLJENA SJEĆANJA U VEZI S RASPADOM JUGOSLAVIJE

Sažetak

Određene epizode iz raspada Jugoslavije posebno su podložne oblikovanju suprotstavljenih sjećanja. Rad se posebno usredotočuje na narativ o podjeli Bosne i Hercegovine između Hrvatske i Srbije, koju su navodno orkestrirali hrvatski predsjednik Franjo Tuđman i srbijanski predsjednik Slobodan Milošević. Takvo tumačenje rata u Hrvatskoj u velikoj se mjeri temelji na sastanku Tuđmana i Miloševića u Karađorđevu u ožujku 1991. godine, na kojem su, prema navodima, razgovarali o podjeli Bosne i Hercegovine. Članak konceptualno smješta tu tvrdnju u okvir suprotstavljenih povijesti i sjećanja vezanih uz raspad Jugoslavije. Empirijski dio rada istražuje koliko se često i na koje načine nedokazana tvrdnja o podjeli Bosne i Hercegovine te navodni dogovor

u Karađorđevu pojavljuju u hrvatskim *online* medijima. Na temelju korpusa objava iz 22 medija, objavljenih između siječnja 2002. i listopada 2025. i prikupljenih pomoću alata TakeLab Retriever, rad analizira učestalost i raspodjelu stavova među medijima.

Ključne riječi: raspad Jugoslavije, medijski narativi, suprotstavljena sjećanja, Karađorđevo, podjela Bosne i Hercegovine, Franjo Tuđman, Slobodan Milošević

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