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ANNA JAGIEŁŁO-SZOSTAK

Institute of International and Security Studies

University of Wrocław

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2492-1659>

“Homeland War” as a Marker of Memory in Bilateral Relations Between Serbia and Croatia in the light of the ontological security

Abstract

The article aims to analyze the impact of historical memory on foreign and security policy using the example of Serbia and Croatia and their bilateral relations. The basis for considerations is the concept of ontological security, which indicates the construction of the state's identity, and is implemented through political decisions and social practices (e.g. remembering important historical events). The memory is treated as a social construct. The article focuses on memory, which leads to the formation of state identity in bilateral and regional or international relations.

Historical memory as an element of memory politics in bilateral relations generates many research questions about actors-leaders and institutions who use certain mechanisms, and instruments of its creation. Leaders and institutions use historical memory to create separate identities, commemorate chosen and appropriate national heroes, celebrate important dates, historical places, and events, and lead selective narratives. The most significant elements in the analysis of historical memory of Serbia and Croatia relations are: 1. the National Security Strategy of Croatia and leaders narrative; 2. the 1990s conflict named the Homeland War and its perception by both sides 3. commemoration of official Days of Remembrance related to, among others, Vukovar, Škabrnja, or Operation “Storm”.

Keywords: Croatia, Serbia, historical memory, foreign policy, bilateral relations, Homeland War, ontological security

Introduction

Places of violence and battles in post-Yugoslav areas are located in many corners of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, but also on the territory of Croatia, such as Dubrovnik, Knin, Škabrnja, Vukovar, or Plitvička Jezera. The Croatian War of Independence remains one of the indicators of war in the 1990s and still has a huge impact on bilateral relations



between Serbia and Croatia. The Croatian War of Independence is also named the Homeland War (*Domovinski Rat*) or, less often, the Greater Serbian Aggression (*Velikosrpska agresija*). The conflict lasted from 1991 to 1995 and involved the Croatian troops and the Yugoslav National Army (YNA), mainly composed of Serbian forces¹. The goal of the Croatian side was to step out of the Socialist Federation of Yugoslavia (SFRY). The Serbs, on the other hand, due to the significant Serb minority in the Croatian territory, wanted to maintain the *status quo* – keeping Yugoslavia as one or letting Slovenia (entirely) and Croatia (partially) without its Serb-majority areas. During the war, the quasi-state of the Republic of Serbian Krajina was created and the events were called the War in Croatia or the War in Krajina. On the one hand, the Homeland War with the Vukovar and Škabrnja places remains the most significant indicator of ethnic tensions and a symbol of remembrance and collective safety of the war in Croatia. On the other hand, the Homeland War is a determinant of bilateral relations between Croatia and Serbia. These relations are based on three elements. The first element is the perception of the event in the contemporary political discourse in Serbia and Croatia. The second element is the actions on the Croatian side for an agreement on the recognition of massacres and an official Homeland War (i.e. Vukovar and Škabrnja commemoration through actions such as building memorials, or commemorating Remembrance Day, etc.). On both sides, the main goals of the foreign and security policy of Serbia and Croatia, according to the documents such as *National Security Strategy*, *National Defence Strategy*, were taken into account. The third analyzed element is the recognition and perception of the Homeland War, or its elements, by Croatia and Serbia. The aim of this article is to analyze the impact of memory on maintaining a certain routine and *status quo* of state identity on the example of bilateral relations between Serbia and Croatia in the years 2015–2023.

Theoretical approach

The basis for considerations is the concept of ontological security, which indicates the construction of the state's identity, and is implemented through political decisions and social practices (e.g. celebrating and remembering important historical events). In international relations and regarding the state's identity, ontological security considers the understanding of threats and uncertainty. It also indicates how security is related to threat management through the concepts of a certain routine (repeatable behavior), trust, biographical continuity (historical memory), and interactions occurring in the internal, regional, and international studies in which the state is the research subject. Ontological security is not a unified theory within critical security studies and international relations. Therefore, several perspectives can be identified, such as the search for projects that identify the importance of routines in interstate relations (J. Mitzen); the emphasis on the constant efforts of states to maintain a coherent narrative about themselves in two areas of analysis: the individual within the state and the state in the international arena (B.J. Steele); the focus on the reconstitution of identity through the use of securitization practices throughout society

¹ The unrecognized Republic of Serbian Krajina was affiliated with various paramilitary units, as well as Serb volunteers from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia itself (such as White Eagles or Arkan's Tigers).

(S. Croft)²; similar interest in the role of culture in the securitization of subjectivity and the reproduction of otherness (C. Kinnvall)³; ontological security and securitization (M. Malksoo). Ontological security also refers to cultural security and preservation of cultural identity (that is a part of political identity) and cultural heritage of states, including the memory of past events (E. Szyszlak, R. Wiśniewski, R. Zenderowski⁴).and might be used for the needs of security and foreign policy activities.

For this analysis, the concepts of the ontological security of the state by Jennifer Mitzen, Maria Malksoo, and Brent J. Steele seem to be the closest. J. Mitzen has established the terms of the connection between ontological security and mainstream IR theory influenced by neorealism. Mitzen takes as a starting point a neorealist framework that assumes that states are rational actors primarily seeking physical security in anarchic conditions⁵. It uses the theory of sociologist Anthony Giddens, who defines ontological security as a sense of duration and order of events and the ability to answer fundamental existential questions. Although they primarily concern the individual, Giddens points out that modernity is a culture of new and unknown risks⁶. J. Mitzen points to a realistic role-oriented narrative understood as a story that informs about current activities, e.g. in foreign policy. Mitzen points to three elements of analysis for ontological security. She indicates that ontological security is a subjective belief about who you are, which motivates you and enables you to take action. Searching for a stable identity is supported by repeatable routine behaviors, it also helps build trust and minimize uncertainty⁷ (e.g. in the context of regional threats) and chaos. Thirdly, routine behaviors⁸ (i.e. commemorating past events) define identity and the attachment of the entity to routine give a sense of agency to the state. B. Steele continues Mitzen's work and develops theories towards treating states as individual figures and the needs of states regarding their perception of their identity, which places him in the constructivist trend. He develops the self-reflexive understanding that states have about their own identity and argues that this is always subject to internal contestation and disagreement, which also drives the possibility of change⁹. B.J. Steele confronts the approach to ontological security within the framework of critical security research, and with the assumption that nation-states are primarily interested in their survival (not only physical but also ontological), including survival in the international environment. Maria Malksoo points to "the spread of security beyond the traditional sphere of physical survival". It establishes

² S. Croft, *Securizing Islam: Identity and the search for Security*, Cambridge University Press 2012.

³ C. Kinnvall, *Globalization and Religious Nationalism in India: The search for Ontological Security*, Routledge: London and New York, 2006.

⁴ *Cultural Security Theory – Selected Aspects – Case Studies*, Rafał Wiśniewski, Elżbieta Szyszlak, Radosław Zenderowski (eds.), Peter Lang Publisher, Berlin 2023.

⁵ J. Mitzen, *Ontological security in World Politics: States, Identity and the Security Dilemma*, "European Journal of International Relations", 2006, no. 12.

⁶ A. Giddens, *Nowoczesność i tożsamość. „Ja” i społeczeństwo w epoce późnej nowoczesności*, Warszawa 2002, p. 90, pp. 68–77.

⁷ J. Mitzen, *Bezpieczeństwo ontologiczne w polityce światowej: tożsamość państw i dylemat bezpieczeństwa (z j. angielskiego przełożyła Agata W. Ziętek*, in: *Stosunki międzynarodowe. Antologia tekstów źródłowych. Tom 2: Współczesne oblicza dyscypliny – po 1989 roku*, eds. A. Wojciuk, H. Schreiber, Warszawa 2022, pp. 512–515, 523–527.

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ B.J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations. Self-identity and the IR state*, Routledge 2008, pp. 58–59.

an inevitable connection between state identity and security, emphasizing the role of “national memory” in the state’s biographical self-narrative¹⁰. Following the author, it should be noted that states are still dominant when it comes to creating national memory, myths of the state’s existence, and the politics of memory. M. Malksoo analyzes the concept of mnemonic security, which he defines as “the idea that a distinct understanding of the past should be consolidated in public memory and consciousness in order to strengthen the actor’s stable sense of self as the basis of his political agency – against the background of rapidly developing ontological security in IR”¹¹. Therefore, memory is securitized and might be transferred from normal politics to existential threats. Security will be what leaders consider a threat in speech acts. The narrative might be based on identity and focuses on the discourse of justice versus unjust events. Linguistic emotion-based constructs that create counterbalances are, among others, perpetrator – victim; oppression – liberation or attack – defense. On the one hand, highlighting traumatic events from the past (such as war or conflict) in a speech act gives the state the opportunity to avoid threats. On the other hand, the securitization of historical memory tends to create a sense of uncertainty among competitors.

Referring to links between memory and ontological security, one of its elements may be the care of historical/official memory. Astrid Erll defines collective memory as a particular detail carried by groups, subject to time and space limitations. She notes that “groups are therefore characterized by highly evaluative and hierarchical memory”, which shapes identity¹². Maurice Halbwachs points out that various groups rebuild their past (“when they recreate it, they deform it at the same time”), all to maintain the unity of views. This is why society strives to remove from its memory everything that could divide individuals and distance groups from each other. In each epoch, it changes its memories in such a way that they are compatible with the changing conditions¹³ and with various policies led by the state. Memory treated as a social construct has a strong impact on bilateral relations between countries that used to be in conflict, like Serbia and Croatia. Such states strive to establish their own narrative in order to keep their identity (secure identity and routine) and unified memories of their communities, both on global and local/national levels. Commemoration of events and ontological security are based on a certain routine that reduces uncertainty and makes the issues of past events more understandable to the public. Besides, collective safety together with traumas of the past and *emotional* rhetoric of commemoration exert influence on the decision-making process kept by present political leaders or institutions. Thus, memory indicates selective and strategic use and might provoke disputes over its sphere¹⁴. A few words are needed when considering emotions. Emotions can be considered as certain constructs that are also formed by the language used in political and identity discourse, in the accentuation of the past and memory, but also in shaping foreign and security policy. As part of the discourse on the relationship between foreign and security

¹⁰ M. Malksoo, ‘*Memory must be defended*’: *Beyond the politics of mnemonic security*, “Security Dialog” 2015, 46(3), p. 2.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

¹² A. Erll, *Kultura pamięci*, Warszawa 2020, p. 37.

¹³ M. Halbwachs, *Spoleczne ramy pamięci*, Warszawa 2008, pp. 421–422.

¹⁴ B. Szacka, *Czas przeszły, pamięć, mit*, Warszawa 2006, p. 38; A. Erll, *Kultura pamięci*..., op. cit., pp. 64–65; A. Assmann, *Przestrzenie pamięci. Formy i przemiany pamięci kulturowej*, in: *Pamięć zbiorowa kulturowa. Współczesna perspektywa niemiecka*, M. Saryusz-Wolska (ed.), Universitas 2009, pp. 120–132.

policy and memory, the linguistic construct refers to certain emotions, such as: anxiety, fear, humiliation, shame, pride, hope, honor, fear, and dignity (A. Giddens, D. Moisi, F. Fukuyama). Similarly, Todd Hall points out that emotions (along with other conditions of the decision-making process) affect foreign policy, leading to outcomes that do not appear particularly emotional. Emotional diplomacy, according to him, is strategic, intentional, and “is coordinated state-level behavior that explicitly and officially projects the image of a particular emotional response toward other states”¹⁵. He focuses on the diplomacy of anger, sympathy, and guilt.

Neither memory nor history is objective and subject to interpretation, at the same time having a huge impact on security and foreign policy. The perception of memory from the perspective of internal influences (e.g. the elite and shaping national identity) and external influences (bilateral, international relations) includes places and events important for the region or neighboring countries in the research on memory and politics of memory. Zheng Wang emphasised that “key historical events – both traumas and glories – are powerful ethnic or large-group markers [...] as historical traumas can bring a group together, so can historical events instill feelings of success and triumph”¹⁶. Ethnic rootedness reveals an *Us-Them* perception, together with the mechanism of controlling the past, which takes place through a specific narrative and passing it on to the public.

Goals of the foreign and security policy of Croatia

The goals and directions of Croatia’s foreign and security policy, according to its main documents¹⁷, are oriented towards the preservation and protection of independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity as well as the interests and safety of the Croatian economy and the Croats abroad. Croatia is willing to be perceived not only as the country of the Balkan peninsula or Southeast Europe but also as a Central European and Mediterranean country. In the context of building Croatia’s external image, whose task is to foster ontological security, the legislator refers to Western values¹⁸. Strategic documents also reflect the creation of an image of a pro-European and pro-Western ally. The *National Security Strategy of Croatia* (NSSC) mentions the key organizations and structures of the United Nations, NATO (a guarantee of peace, stability, and security), the European Union, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the Council of Europe. Croatia is focused on multilateral relations to maintain security and stability in the region. The NSSC was updated in 2017 during Kolinda Grabar Kitarović’s¹⁹ presidency and shows

¹⁵ T.T. Hall, *Emotional diplomacy. Official Emotion on the International Stage*, Cornell University Press 2019, p. 2, 15.

¹⁶ Z. Wang, *Memory politics, identity and conflict*, Palgrave Macmillan 2018, p. 15.

¹⁷ S. Knežović, N. Klepo, *Croatian Foreign Policy in 3D, Zagreb 2017*, <https://irmo.hr/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/3D.pdf> [19.03.2024]; Republika Hrvatska Ministarstvo obrane, *The Republic of Croatia National Security Strategy*, Zagreb, https://www.morh.hr/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/strategy_18012018.pdf (date accessed: 18.06.2021).

¹⁸ Such as common civilization values, respect for human rights and freedoms, parliamentary democracy, and the rule of law.

¹⁹ K. Grabar Kitarović belonged to the conservative Croatian Democratic Union (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica*, HDZ) and was the president of Croatia in 2015–2020.

the actual picture of its threats, “enemies”, and identity. It is stated in the document that Croatia is located at a crossroads and in the unstable Balkan region, and must take care of national security: “the Republic of Croatia is again at a crossroads! The European area, in particular the area of Central Europe, to which Croatia belongs geographically, historically and culturally, is faced with security threats from the east and the south [...]”²⁰. Following Croatian NSSC, also Andrije Plenković, Prime Minister of Croatia from 2016 until the present, in the foreword made a collocation between the Homeland War, values, and national identity, which shaped the Croatian nation keeping it close to the West: “Values created in the victorious Homeland War are the fundamentals on which a modern Croatian security system is developed”²¹.

Another key aim is to enhance relations with neighbouring countries (post-Yugoslav), develop bilateral cooperation, and promote Croatia in the world²². One of the important goals of security and foreign policy is to protect the Croatian population in the countries of Central and Southeast Europe. The most important in this respect is Bosnia and Herzegovina²³, as the Croatian people constitute around fifteen percent of the society of BiH, and are a constitutional nation. It shows another crucial element of ontological security, which is the protection of state’s/national identity and also the protection of the diaspora living abroad.

Goals of the foreign and security policy of Serbia

Goals and directions of the security and foreign policy of Serbia are outlined in the National Security Strategy (NSS), in the expose of the Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivica Dačić²⁴ from 2018, and the Defence Strategy of Serbia from 2021 as well as in the White Paper of Defence of the Republic of Serbia 2010. The Serbian government tries to exert a multi-vector lead, “balance” or “sit on two stools (Western and Eastern)”²⁵ in its foreign policy in order to influence external actors and maintain good relations with other countries. The NSS describes Serbia as a state that, working together with the international community (EU, OSCE, the USA, Russia, China, Turkey), can be seen as a stabilizing factor in the region: “The national interest of the Republic of Serbia is to preserve the peace in the region and world”²⁶. The goals of Serbia’s foreign and security policy emphasise the striv-

²⁰ Republika Hrvatska Ministarstvo obrane, *The Republic of Croatia National...*, op. cit.

²¹ Republika Hrvatska Ministarstvo obrane, *The Republic of Croatia National...*, op. cit.

²² MVEP, Republic of Croatia, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, <http://www.mvep.hr/en/foreign-politics/foreign-policy-aims/> (date accessed: 10.09.2021).

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

²⁴ He was the Minister of Foreign Affairs from 2014 to 2020 and from 2022 until now.

²⁵ See V. Vučković, *The West is Dear, but the East is Dearer: Policy Pressures and Actors’ Preferences in Serbia*, May 2023, PSSI, Prague 2023, p. 17, https://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/10431_the-west-is-dear-but-the-east-is-dearer-policy-p pressures-and-actors-preferences-in-serbia.pdf (date accessed: 20.03.2024); K. Pawłowski, Trudna sztuka balansowania: polityka wielowektorowości Serbii w okresie pełnoskalowej agresji Rosji na Ukrainę, *Prace IEŚ* 4/2023, p. 81; L. Leszczenko, H. Giebień, A. Jagiełło-Szostak, J. Jarząbek, E. Szyszczak T. Szyszczak, *Pogranicza cywilizacji. Wpływ dylematów tożsamościowych na politykę zagraniczną i bezpieczeństwo wybranych państw Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*, Warszawa, 2019, p. 269.

²⁶ The Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Serbia, *Strategy of National Security of the Republic of Serbia*, Belgrade 2021, pp. 47–48, https://www.mod.gov.rs/multimedia/file/staticki_sadržaj/dokumenta/strategije/2021/Prilog2-StrategijaNacionalneBezbednostiRS-ENG.pdf (date accessed: 20.03.2024).

ing for “peace and stability”, which is also described by scholars and experts as *stabilitocracy*²⁷, which should be implemented by the improvement of good neighborly relations. In the name of stability and based on military neutrality, the Republic of Serbia develops partnership cooperation between the Republic of Serbia and NATO by participation in the Partnership for Peace program. Serbia also holds an observer position in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)²⁸. Serbia also shows strong cooperation with Russia and China, especially after the outbreak of war between Russia and Ukraine in 2022. Among many initiatives, Serbia emphasizes the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) cooperation and development relations with states of the Global South.

In the most recent NSS from 2021, Serbia strongly points to the challenges to its national interest, identity, and security, all of which are based on the consolidation of a specific national identity. It also identifies the “enemy” and threats rooted in the past. In the NSS of Serbia, the issues of separatism in Kosovo, extremism and greater Albania, and the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina are all mentioned in the strategy, being important points for Serbia’s security. However, according to Serbia’s NSS, regional security is greatly influenced by the inherited problems of the past, historical contradictions, and the consequences of clashes between the peoples and states of Southeast Europe, especially in the Balkans in recent history. Relations among the regional states are also burdened by the need to regulate the position of minorities, resolve the issue of missing persons and jurisdiction in the prosecution of war crimes, and the issues of the return of refugees, expelled and internally displaced persons, and restitution of their property, but also post-war reconstruction, the rebuilding of state institutions. As the Serbian NSS highlights, the risks of the outbreak of wars and other armed conflicts in Southeast Europe, although reduced, have not been eliminated²⁹. Croatia, or the bilateral relations of Serbia and Croatia, are not mentioned in any of the above-mentioned contexts. Neither was Croatia mentioned as a potential “threat”. The opposite seems to be true of the speeches of Serbian political leaders.

Homeland War memorialization in Serbia and Croatia bilateral relations

Contemporary Serbo-Croatian relations are satisfactory, and the countries perceive each other as potential partners. However, the lack of debate about the memory of war crimes, as well as recent accusations by Belgrade that Croatia is secretly supporting anti-government protests in Serbia, creates tensions. The issue of bilateral relations between Serbia and Croatia³⁰ is caused among others by past events from the period of 1990s, such as: the problem of refugees and missing persons, issues of private property, restitution of

²⁷ See F. Bieber, *The Rise (and Fall) of Balkan Stabilitocracies*, „Horizons” 2018, No. 10, pp. 176–183, <https://www.cirsd.org/en/horizons/horizons-winter-2018-issue-no-10/the-rise-and-fall-of-balkan-stabilitocracie> (date accessed: 11.03.2024); A. Domachowska, *Przywódczość polityczna w ramach „stabilokracji” a stan demokracji: przykład Serbii*, „Przegląd Europejski” 2020, vol. 1, pp. 143–159.

²⁸ M. Mitrović, *Serbia’s National Security Strategy – from where, through what and where to go*, “Wschodnioznawstwo” 2021, pp. 161–178.

²⁹ The Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Serbia, *Strategy of National...*, op. cit., p. 17.

³⁰ See: W. Hebda, *Serbsko-chorwackie stosunki polityczne na przełomie XX i XXI wieku*, Warszawa 2018, p. 376.

cultural goods, mutual accusations of ethnic cleansing before the International Criminal Court, border dispute over two islands in the Danube, or the issues of legal regulations and observance of the rights of the Croatian minority in Serbia, and the Serb minority in Croatia³¹.

Contemporary culture and politics of remembrance in Croatia and Serbia, according to Branka Vierda, are based on the identity of the winner and the victim, and the mention of war crimes and their relativization. Events such as the Battle of Vukovar or Operations “Storm” (Oluja) and “Flash” (Bljesak) are actively used in memory politics³² and remain the basis of contemporary national symbolism and post-war memory of Croats. At the moment, the narratives and memories on both sides are selective, and the process of reconciliation itself is slow. During the presidency of Ivo Josipović, between 2010 and 2015, a dialogue on the events of the 1990s was initiated, and it seems that there was a withdrawal from the political discourse of accusations in the public space in Croatia. It was fostered by mutual visits and meetings at the government level. An example may be the visit in 2010, when Boris Tadić, the president of Serbia, and Ivo Josipović, the president of Croatia, met. In the Ovčara Memorial Centre (close to Vukovar), B. Tadić apologized for the murder of Croats. In turn, in Paulin Dvor near Osijek, where 18 Serbs were murdered, I. Josipović gave a speech in which he admitted that a crime had occurred but did not apologize for this act, which was criticized by the Serbian media. The social-liberal Croatian People’s Party (*Hrvatska narodna stranka*, HNS) labeled B. Tadić as “Serbian Willi Brandt”, but the nationalist Croatian Party of Rights (*Hrvatska stranka prava*, HSP) opposed the arrival of the Serbian president.

Additionally, leaders and institutions might build ethnic solidarity by creating a common narrative and vision of the future, overcoming memory conflicts. An example is the ethnic solidarity of Serbian political leaders or Croatian leaders in the case of Vukovar or Škabrnja. It should be noted, however, that Serbia’s disagreement on recognizing some cases as genocidal (Ovčara) creates an image of an occupied “identity” that can be seen as a threat to the Serbian state. Even though B. Tadić apologized for the event, the Serbs and the Croats try to create an image of themselves as victims, not as perpetrators. Additionally, the Croats’ narrative seems to portray them as victorious.

Despite meetings and mutual assurances, the issue of mutual accusations is still alive, for example, in the case of IDP or the definition of Operation “Storm”. Then, during the presidency of K. Grabar Kitarović, the number of visits decreased, and disputes with the Serbian government were visible. Her successor, Zoran Milanović from the Social Democratic Party (*Socijaldemokratska partija Hrvatske*, SDP), who held the same position from 2020, gives the impression to be leaning toward the policy of reconciliation. The president has repeatedly criticized the use of greetings, symbols, and songs, as well as the Ustaše salute, on various occasions (e.g. after the official ceremony marking the 25th anniversary of the Military and Police Operation “Flash” in Okučani in 2020, or 28th anniversary of Operation Maslenica in 2023) and has called for a ban on their use. He pointed out that the symbolism

³¹ See: M. Korzeniewska-Wiszniwska, *Serbowie jako mniejszość w warunkach transformacji politycznej w państwach byłej Jugosławii w latach 1995–2016*, Kraków 2017.

³² B. Vierda, *Razgovor o kulturi sećanja i memorralizaciji ratova*, Webinar YIHR Srbija 2021, Facebook 11.05.2021 (date accessed: 11.05.2021).

associated with the Independent State of Croatia has nothing to do with the modern and sovereign Republic of Croatia. The president’s aspiration provokes reactions from war veterans and those political opponents who consider his actions offensive to the memory of the Homeland War³³. Moreover, he believes that dialogue is key to improving all bilateral relations and at the same time taking care of Croatian identity in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, in line with the culture of the West and the European Union³⁴.

The contemporary narration of the Homeland War in Croatian National Security Strategy (NSSC)

The Homeland War is present in the narrative of the NSSC. The Homeland War seems to be regarded as the beginning of Croatia’s independence, transformation, and democratization in line with the principles of Euro-Atlantic integration³⁵. What is of particular relevance in NSSC, the design and implementation of security policy is the concept of comprehensive action, “which was directly applied during the Homeland War, where civil, military, diplomatic, economic and political actors worked together to achieve freedom, independence and full state sovereignty”³⁶. Secondly, the Homeland War is also presented as showing the truth about historical events in Croatia; promoting cultural heritage, Croatian language and customs in relation to the Homeland War, and emphasizing the history of relations with other nations³⁷. Thirdly, there is a visible protection of those social groups that were harmed during the war. The dignity of the Homeland War is also preserved. Among the most important documents mentioned in the Croatian NSS, there is a Declaration on the Homeland War issued by the Croatian National Assembly in 2000. In the Declaration, it is stated that its legacy is unequivocally accepted by all citizens of the country. It emphasises a victorious country’s perspective. It should be noted that according to the Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR)³⁸, the *Declaration on the Homeland War* does not comply with the rulings of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. As YIHR stated, this document “is not based on the truth, monopolizes and prevents the

³³ Predsjednik.hr, *The Ustasha Salute Has Never Before Entered State Protocol*, 1 May 2020, <https://www.predsjednik.hr/en/news/the-ustasha-salute-has-never-before-entered-state-protocol/> (date accessed: 16.03.2025); Milanovic: *The Ustasha Salute has no Place in Today’s Croatia*, Sarajevo Times, 8 August 2024, <https://sarajevo-times.com/milanovic-the-ustasha-salute-have-no-place-in-todays-croatia> (date accessed: 16.03.2025); Milanovic says *ustasha salute sullies defence of homeland*, Total Croatia News, 11 May 2023, <https://total-croatia-news.com/news/politics/milanovic-says-ustasha-salute-sullies-defence-of-homeland/> (date accessed: 16.03.2025).

³⁴ Z. Milanović, *Predavanje Zorana Milanovicia*, Sveučilište u Mostaru, N1 17.07.2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GhsSAXFrNiU> (date accessed: 10.09.2021).

³⁵ Republika Hrvatska Ministarstvo obrane, *The Republic of Croatia National...*, op. cit., p. 6.

³⁶ Ibidem, p. 7.

³⁷ Ibidem, p. 39.

³⁸ Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR) is a regional network of non-governmental organisations in Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo. YIHR was founded in 2003. Its goal is not to accept war crimes in public space. YIHR insists on respecting the established facts and on both legal conviction and moral condemnation of persons responsible for crimes committed during the wars in the former Yugoslavia. Its goal is to educate young people from the region about the heritage of war through dialogue on the perspectives of democratic development of societies. See <https://yihhr.org/about-us> (16.03.2025). YIHR is considered an organization of activists holding left-wing views.

freedom of public expression on the wars of the 1990s, and closes the space for fact-based analysis, research, debate and discussion”. YIHR pinpoints that Article 2 of the Declaration states the following: “The Republic of Croatia waged a just and lawful war of defense and liberation, and not an aggressive war of conquest against anyone, in which war it defended its territory against Greater Serbia’s aggression within its internationally recognized borders.” This article is seen as an inconsistency of the Declaration with the ICTY judgments, which established the international nature of the armed conflict between the Republic of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina and the political goal of separating part of the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina and merging it with the Republic of Croatia³⁹.

Fourth, the preservation of the Homeland War values, protection of Croatian war veterans, disabled persons, and the families of the fallen and missing participants of the Homeland War and their status in the society, are key requirements for preserving the dignity of the Homeland War and the evaluation of its importance for the creation of the Croatian state and building of the Croatian society. Croatia will exert additional efforts to locate and identify Homeland War missing persons. Judicial and law enforcement bodies will continue to prosecute perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Croatia will work with particular attention on protecting the Croatian language and the affirmation of national symbols that will unify citizens⁴⁰. Moreover, the role of the security service in the creation of national identity is noticeable in preserving traditions for war veterans and paying attention to the remnants of war: “The Croatian Armed Forces and the Croatian police are an integral part of the national identity and Croatian history in example: by preserving the traditions of the Homeland War and Croatian war veterans”⁴¹. As Z. Milanović stated during the promotion of the new Croatian Armed Forces in the Croatian Defence Academy in 2023, the Homeland War created a unique, special, and different army that is loyal and continues the tradition of the Croatian Army⁴².

Finally, preservation of the memory of the Homeland War is important for the state’s identity. Thus, the Remembrance Day of the victims of Vukovar and Škabrnja has become the most significant state holiday and “the day to pay tribute and cherish the memory of all victims fallen for Croatia”⁴³.

Examples of Commemoration of the Homeland War

There are many events and places of commemoration of the Homeland War in Croatia, which are examples of maintaining the identity and routine of the state in the context of Serbo-Croatian relations. Remembrance Day is a state holiday in Croatia held on Novem-

³⁹ YIHR, *Declaration on the Homeland War Not in Compliance with Judgments of International Courts*, 29 November 2017, <https://yihr.org/press-relese-declaration-on-the-homeland-war-not-in-compliance-with-judgments-of-international-courts/> (date accessed: 23.03.2024).

⁴⁰ Republika Hrvatska Ministarstvo obrane, *The Republic of Croatia National...*, op. cit., p. 39.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 40.

⁴² Predsjednik.hr, *President Milanović tells new officers: The Homeland War has made the Croatian Army unique in Europe*, 30 August 2023, <https://www.predsjudnik.hr/en/news/president-milanovic-tells-new-officers-the-homeland-war-has-made-the-croatian-army-unique-in-europe/> (date accessed: 23.03.2024).

⁴³ Republika Hrvatska Ministarstvo obrane, *The Republic of Croatia National...*, op. cit., p. 39.

ber 18th, which was established in 2020 and is known as “Remembrance Day for all victims of the Homeland War and Remembrance” and “Day for the victims of Vukovar and Škabrnja” (*Dan sjećanja na sve žrtve Domovinskog rata* and *Dan sjećanja na žrtve Vukovara i Škabrnje*). It should be noted that in March 2020, the Croatian Parliament established *The Law on the Proclamation of Vukovar as a Place of Special Homeland Reverence*⁴⁴. In article no. 1, “Vukovar is proclaimed a place of special patriotism because it has a particularly important role in Croatian history of establishing an independent, sovereign and democratic state and is a symbol of resistance, sacrifice, victory and unity, example defense of state sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Croatia in the Homeland War”. In the article no. 7, days of special patriotism were included in the commemoration⁴⁵. Law also established places of remembrance, such as the Memorial Cemetery of Victims of the Homeland War in Vukovar and memorials of the place of mass graves of victims (Ovčara, Vučedolski vinogradi, Nova ulica, Bogdanovci, Bogdanovci – groblje), among others.

Vukovar⁴⁶ is seen as a place of special reverence. During the Remembrance Days in 2020, the first commemoration of the Croatian Parliament Speaker Gordan Jandroković commemorated the victims and condemned the Serbian crimes. Even though there was a ray of hope for reconciliation, according to the official line of the government, Vukovar has become a symbol of Croatian resistance, the struggle for freedom, heroism, and the brutality of the “Greater Serbia” project and Milošević’s regime, which is going to be a part of the memory of the Croatian people: “We remember the victim, we celebrate the heroism of the City of Vukovar [...] a crime that happened here and that must never be repeated”⁴⁷. In the Ljiljana Radonić analysis, the Memorial Centre for the Homeland War in Vukovar (as well as the Museum of the Homeland War in Karlovac) focuses on the Croatian fighters (not civilians) as “defenders”. She also notes that in sites related to the Homeland War, Serbs are depicted with reference to World War II: as Chetniks, running “concentration camps” who committed “culturocide” or a “holocaust” against Croats⁴⁸. However, the construction of the Vukovar myth is maintained by veteran circles, who also occupy a special place in Croatia’s Security Strategy, and by the right side of the political scene. The

⁴⁴ *Zakon o proglašenju Vukovara mjestom posebnog domovinskog pijeteta*, NN 25/20, 14.03.2020, <https://www.zakon.hr/z/2503/Zakon-o-progla%C5%A1enju-Vukovara-mjestom-posebnog-domovinskog-pijeteta> (date accessed: 10.03.2024).

⁴⁵ These are among others: Day of Remembrance of Vukovar Hospital 1991, Day of Remembrance for the Victims of the Homeland War and Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Vukovar and Škabrnja, Day of Remembrance of the 1991 Pine Settlement Victim, Day of Remembrance for the victims of Velepromet and Ovčara and the end of the resistance of Croatian veterans of the Homeland War in Vukovar.

⁴⁶ In Vukovar in the early 1990s, Serbs constituted 37.4% of the city’s population and Croats 43.7%. Nowadays, the town’s population comprises 64.6% Croats and 30.5% Serbs. In 1991, fighting broke out there, with one of the most infamous episodes being the murder of 200 non-Serbian civilians in a hospital. The town of Ovčara, located near Vukovar, where over 200 Croats were murdered, also went down in history. The murders were committed by YNA soldiers, mainly Serbs, and a concentration camp was established there at the beginning of the war. In 1991, Croatia had a Serbian population of 581,663. Between 1991 and 2001, the number decreased to 395,030. Such a huge decline in the Serbian population was related to the breakup of Yugoslavia and the cited warfare. *City population. Vukovar*, 2021 (date accessed: 5.04.2024).

⁴⁷ Hrvatski Sabor, *Dan sjećanja na žrtve Domovinskog rata i Dan sjećanja na žrtvu Vukovara i Škabrnje – Obilježavanje Dana sjećanja na žrtvu Vukovara 1991.–2020. “Vukovar – mjesto posebnog pijeteta”*, 18.11.2020 (date accessed: 11.09.2021).

⁴⁸ Lj. Radonić, *Croatian Homeland War Memorial Museums – Exhibiting Urbicides and Concentration Camps*, “Nationalities Papers”, 2024; 52(4), pp. 935–960.

lobbies of these circles, as Magdalena Reksć notes, translate into decisions of a state nature, which do not care about building the rule of law in accordance with European standards⁴⁹.

Another place of memorialisation – Škabrnja – has become a symbol of the birth of armed forces in the Homeland War. The Škabrnja massacre took place in 1991, when 67 Croatians were killed by Serbian troops from YNA and the so-called Serbian Autonomous Oblast Krajina⁵⁰. Thirty years after those events, the Škabrnja event is commemorated on November 18th. One of the elements of commemoration is a commemorative ceremony and a symbolic traditional memorial march called “Step by Step”, which leads to the local cemetery of St. Luke. Additionally, a three-day memorial march is held by the members of the 3rd Mechanized Battalion “Pauci” of the Guards Mechanized Brigade, from Knin to Škabrnja. During the celebrations in 2019, Damir Krstičević, the Defence Minister, highlighted: “The victims of Vukovar and Škabrnja must never be forgotten. [...] The Croatian soldiers walked the march from Knin to Škabrnja to pay respects to the fallen in the Homeland War. [...] I am glad to see the young soldiers honor the values of the Homeland War. [...] Croatia is protected by strong and respectable armed forces born in the Homeland War, to prevent the crimes from happening again”⁵¹.

A further example is the commemoration of the suffering of the civilian victims of Kijevo and Grubori⁵² during the Homeland War. The village of Kijevo, populated by Croats, was besieged by local Serbian rebels supported by units of the YNA. During the celebrations in 2021, Z. Milanović drew attention to the common identity related to, among others, religion and territory of the Croats and the victory of the people of Dalmatia and Herzegovina (the latter being a geographical region in Bosnia and Herzegovina): “Our first churches were built here, our identity is here, our roots are here, this is the cornerstone”. [...] They suffered during the war but I don’t see them as victims or those who need charity, I see them as winners. Winners who are dignified and at the same time those who forgive and have mercy”. He also stressed that Croatia, as part of the European Union and its culture, is based on forgiveness and that reconciliation and forgiveness require reciprocity. He pointed out that he is not an advocate of divisions and emphasized this in the context of the atrocities committed on Serbs by Croatian forces in Grubori during Operation “Storm”⁵³.

Operation “Storm”⁵⁴. Croatian and Serbian perception

Operation “Storm” represents a significant point in the cultures and politics of memory in Croatia (especially regarding the Homeland War) and Serbia today, and remains

⁴⁹ M. Reksć, *Chorwackie spory o pamięć o Vukovarze*, Politeja Nr 5(86), 2023, p. 272.

⁵⁰ The political leaders of Serbian Krajina, President Milan Babić and Milan Martić, were accused of war crimes. S. Milošević was indicted but without a verdict due to his death.

⁵¹ MOHR (2019), Commemoration for victims of massacre in Škabrnja, 20.11.2019, <https://www.mohr.hr/en/commemoration-for-victims-of-massacre-in-skabrnja/> (date accessed: 12.09.2021).

⁵² R. Mladić – Serbian side. The massacre in Grubori was mentioned in the act of the ICTY against the Croatian general of war Ante Gotovina, Ivan Čermak, and Mladen Markač.

⁵³ *President Says Reciprocity Important for Reconciliation and Forgiveness*, Total -Croatia -News. Com, 26.08.2021, <https://www.total-croatia-news.com/politics/55561-president-says-reciprocity-important-for-reconciliation-and-forgiveness> (date accessed: 7.09.2021).

⁵⁴ Operation Storm began on August 4, 1995.

a source of tensions, which has been visible in the following years of the "skirmishes" narrative. "Storm" was the major battle of the Homeland War and the most important factor influencing the Bosnian War in 1995. Croatia regards Operation Storm as a great victory and a patriotic war in defence of the Croatian national identity.

In the eyes of Serbs, this event appears as a crime against the Serb people. The state commemoration of the suffering of Serbs in Operation "Storm" officially began to be organized in 2015, when it was decided that August 5 would be declared a "Day of Mourning" on the territory of Serbia and the Republika Srpska (RS), one out of two entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina⁵⁵. According to the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights of Croatia, at the beginning of August 1995, about 250,000 Serbs were expelled from Croatia, and more than 600 were killed. On the other hand, the records of the Serbian Veritas Documentation and Information Centre⁵⁶ contain the names of 1,877 killed and missing Serbs from this action. Before the "Storm", more than 600,000 Serbs lived in Croatia, and today there are fewer than 150,000⁵⁷. It is worth noting that during the second commemoration Aleksandar Vučić, Serbian president, ensured the Serbian nation "that there will be no more 'Storms'. [...] Serbia does not brag about its strength, but it is strong enough to take care of its people and no one will allow such a crime anymore"⁵⁸. This shows that Serbian leaders see the event as traumatic for the entire Serbian nation, which was a victim of Croatian aggression. According to Boris Milošević, a Croatian politician of Serbian origin and the head of the Serbian National Council in Croatia (*Srpsko narodno vijeće*, SNV), in the Croatian public discourse, there is no place for Serbian victims, and Croatia does not want to face the past and take responsibility for war crimes during and after Operation "Storm"⁵⁹. The Serbian side also points to the difficult process of searching for the dead members of the Serbian community from Operation Storm. Another problem is the process of exhumation and identification of the bodies, which is slow and seen by Serbs as politicized. There are still 896 people in the Croatian Institute of Forensic Medicine who have not yet been identified⁶⁰.

In 2019, the celebrations commemorating the "Storm" events took place in Serbia on Fruška Gora⁶¹. President A. Vučić referred to the unity of the "Serbian world" and said: "When we did not have harmony between Serbia, Republika Srpska, and Republika Srpska Krajina,

⁵⁵ BiH is divided on two entities: Republika Srpska and Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

⁵⁶ Dokumentaciono informacioni centar "Veritas" was founded in 1993 by Savo Štrbac – a former minister of information in the government of the internationally unrecognized Republic of Serbian Krajina. See <https://www.veritas.org.rs/> (date access: 16.03.2025).

⁵⁷ J. Diković, "Oluja" za Hrvate pobjeda, za Srbe najveći zločin, 3.08.2021, <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/oluja-za-hrvate-pobjeda-za-srbe-najveci-zlocin/> (date accessed: 5.03.2024).

⁵⁸ Vučić: Oluja više neće biti, Balkans.Aljazeera.net 4.08.2016, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2016/8/4/vucic-oluja-vise-neece-biti> (date accessed: 10.09.2021).

⁵⁹ Ibidem.

⁶⁰ Parastos u crkvi Svetog Marka za poginule Srbe u akciji Oluja, 4.08.2021, <https://novimagazin.rs/vesti/253385-parastos-u-crkvi-svetog-marka-za-poginule-srbe-u-akciji-oluja> (date accessed: 10.04.2024).

⁶¹ There are many places of commemoration of Serbian victims during Operation Storm. Another example might be when, in 2020, Serbian President A. Vučić and Prime Minister Ana Brnabić participated in the 25th anniversary of the Croatian Operation Storm in Sremska Rača on the Serbo-Bosnian border. The expulsion and murder of the Serb population during the Croatian operations were commemorated. In turn, on August 5, an official commemoration took place in Croatia, marking "Storm" as the day of victory in the Homeland War. Vučić i Brnabić na obeležavanju godišnjice "Oluje" u Sremskoj Rači, Radio Slobodna Evropa 3.08.2020, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30764098.html> (date accessed: 8.09.2021).

‘Storm’ happened. It is our job to make sure that never happens again”⁶². Vučić added: “The Serbs have not disappeared, Serbia has not disappeared, tonight you see the people who are ready to defend their family, to love their country and to be proud of that. Don’t think that we can’t answer more strongly, we can, but we won’t”. The narrative led by the Serbian leader can also be perceived as a desire to tighten and build the so-called “Serbian world”⁶³ based on promoting Serbian political, social, economic, cultural, and religious (Orthodox) ties in the neighborhood, which is controversial in the Balkan region. Also, the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Irinej, and the leader of Bosnian Serbs, Milorad Dodik, in BiH, accused the Croatian state of ethnic cleansing of Serbs. In contrast, we can point to the words of former Croatian president K. Grabar-Kitarović who in the same year paid attention to patriotism, eternal and historical dreams of sovereign Croatia that come true: “By winning the ‘Storm’, we achieved our historical dream of a free and independent Croatia and became full members of the international community”. She emphasised patriotism, the creation of a homeland in unity, solidarity, and respect for each other, as “our defenders wanted it”⁶⁴. The last example that should be pointed out is the Serbian commemoration of the victims of Operation Storm in Prijedor in BiH on August 4th, 2023. During the ceremony, and in the opinion of A. Vučić, the Serbian president, the convoy of Serbs fleeing as part of Operation Storm in 1995 was “the saddest convoy since 1945 on European soil”. Vučić called the exodus of Serbs from Croatia “the largest ethnic cleansing on European soil since 1945.”⁶⁵ However, Prijedor, where the commemorations took place, was the site of ethnic cleansing carried out by Bosnian Serb forces during the war in BiH and a camp where non-Serbs lost their lives. Moreover, the organization of the event in Prijedor was described by the YIHR as “a gross political manipulation of the suffering of the victims in order to strengthen the ethno-nationalist politics of memory”. Croatian leader Z. Milanović criticized the statement of the President of Serbia A. Vučić and the President of Republika Srpska Milorad Dodik during the ceremony in Prijedor⁶⁶.

Conclusion

Thirty years have passed, and a selective interpretation of the events of the Homeland War in Croatia still is hampering inter-ethnic and bilateral relations. After analyzing nar-

⁶² N. Bogdanović, *Godišnjica ‘Oluje’: U Srbiji pomen, u Hrvatskoj čestitke*, 4.08.2019, Radio Slobodna Evropa, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/godisnjica-oluje-u-srbiji-pomen-u-hrvatskoj-cestitke/30091896.html> (date accessed: 11.09.2021).

⁶³ Zob. A. Jagielło-Szostak, „Serbski świat” – uprawniona idea polityczna czy kontrowersyjna polityka regionalna Serbii?, „Komentarze IES” nr 1077(52/2024), <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/kies-1077/> (date accessed: 26.03.2024); P. Howiecka, *Serbski Świat – polityka regionalna Aleksandra Vucicia*, raport OSPP, Warszawa 2022, https://www.wojsko-polskie.pl/aszwoj/u/41/d6/41d6fc5c-b22a-42a1-a8f3-bce75c51c215/ospp_raport_pazdziernik_2022_serbski_swiat_polityka_regionalna_aleksandra_vucicia.pdf (date accessed: 22.12.2023); N. Đorđević, *Serbian World – a dangerous idea?*, Emerging-europe.com 27.07.2021, <https://emerging-europe.com/news/serbian-world-a-dangerous-idea/> (date accessed: 2.04.2024).

⁶⁴ N. Bogdanović, *Godišnjica ‘Oluje’: U Srbiji pomen, u Hrvatskoj čestitke*, Radio Slobodna Evropa 4.08.2019, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/godisnjica-oluje-u-srbiji-pomen-u-hrvatskoj-cestitke/30091896.html> (date accessed: 11.09.2021).

⁶⁵ V. Tesija, M. Stojanović, *Croatia, Serbia Trade Barbs During Operation Storm Commemorations*, 5.08.2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/08/05/croatia-serbia-trade-barbs-during-operation-storm-commemorations/> (date accessed: 20.08.2023).

⁶⁶ Ibidem.

ratives and state documents, certain mechanisms of the memory description are revealed. These mechanisms are used to settle accounts with the past and constitute a repetitive routine that sanctions state identities. A coherent narrative about past events indicates the maintenance of the state's existence and identity in bilateral relations within the framework of ontological security. The aforementioned mechanisms are visible in foreign and security policy discourses and generally relate to: the construction of historical narratives, the creation of memorial sites or events, the marginalization and forgetting about the past, and the securitization of memory⁶⁷.

The construction of historical narratives through language seems to be the emotional "war of words", with terms such as victory, pride, honor, and dignity serving as emotionally loaded words. The Homeland War, in the Croatian narrative, as stressed in documents and mentioned by political leaders, is referred to as a victory – the beginning of sovereignty, freedom, and independence, and a defining moment in its history. The sacrifice and honor of the Croatian population (soldiers, civilians, veterans) are emphasized, and the fight during the Homeland War is seen as a source of pride and remains dominant in the narrative. In Croatia, Operation "Storm" is commemorated as the victory and an expression of the highest gratitude to the dignity of veterans. In turn, the Homeland War, and in particular Operation "Storm", are treated as evil by Serbia, emphasizing the suffering of its civilians and being proud of their attitude in defense of the Serbian population. In Serbian commemorations, organized together with the Republika Srpska in BiH, and dedicated to the victims, "Storm" is marked as a crime. Furthermore, the narrative of the Homeland War events is aggregated to populist politics of memory, which seems to be the tool of domestic policy, spilled over to foreign policy and diplomatic stance towards the neighbors.

Secondly, the creation of memorial sites or events such as: the Days of Remembrance in Croatia, the Vukovar and Škabrnja traditional remembrance ceremony in Croatia, or in Serbia – the Day of Remembrance for the killed and expelled Serbs in the Croatian military operation "Storm" makes the society remember and preserve the picture of the events, the one with a high emotional charge. Thirdly, the marginalization and forgetting about the past are seen. Even though both sides assure that they will never allow for conflicts or war in the future, on the other hand, they argue that they will never forget what happened. Both Croatian and Serbian state leaders have stopped the reconciliation process by not recognizing, and rather not talking about, the victims of the other party. This can create a sense of insecurity among the Serb minority in Croatia and pose a bone of contention in bilateral relations. In Serbia, the victims of the "Storm" are commemorated as victims of the largest ethnic cleansing in Europe since the Second World War, without reference to the broader context of the war in Croatia that preceded the "Storm" as well as the forced mobilization of refugees upon their arrival in Serbia⁶⁸. The indication of the memory mechanisms justifies the form of dialogue with neighboring countries, mutual perceptions, and the realization of the national interest. In the end, the securitization of historical memory combines common security with a sense of identity, unity, and sovereignty, or European values (from the side of Croatia).

⁶⁷ See L. Klymenko, M. Siddi, *Exploring the link between historical memory and foreign policy: an introduction*, "International Politics" 57, 2020, pp. 945–953.

⁶⁸ *Online diskusija: Operacija Oluja u politikama sećanja u Hrvatskoj i Srbiji 25 godina kasnije*, 3.08.2020, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/online-diskusija-operacija-oluja-u-politikama-secanja-u-hrvatskoj-i-srbiji-25-godina-kasnije/> (date accessed: 3.04.2024).

It brings to light two important conclusions. Croatia and Serbia stress and confirm not only their physical existence but, above all, how each state views itself and how it wants to be seen by others. Both can decide about their image in the internal, international arena, and the region of Europe, and act as players in the Western Balkans⁶⁹ region. Secondly, different interpretations of the past affect bilateral relations and perpetuate the language and the mindset of the “winners” and the “victims”. In fact, the characteristic narrative of both sides, both Croatian and Serbian, can be seen as a continuation of the Serbo-Croatian dispute, but this time in the space of memory. The commemoration and vision of the past recorded in official documents are preserved in the present, which is undoubtedly a form of defence of one’s own identity.

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⁶⁹ Western Balkans states are constituted by: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Albania, and Kosovo.

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