



## **Case study: Between Danger and Meaning: The "Ready for the Homeland" Salute in Croatia**

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### **About the author**

Katarina Damčević is a PhD candidate and a junior researcher at the Department of Semiotics at the University of Tartu, Estonia. Her research focuses on hate speech and contested symbols in post-conflict societies. The title of her doctoral thesis is "Semiotics of Hate Speech and Contested Symbols: The 'Za dom spremni' Ustaša Salute in Contemporary Croatia", where she analyzes how the salute has been used by different mnemonic actors to reinforce a one-sided version of the past and Croatia's post-war national identity. Katarina was a research fellow in the US based Dangerous Speech Project, and the Humanitarian Law Center in Belgrade, Serbia. She also works in the Center for Academic Writing and Communication at the University of Tartu, where her teaching and research interests revolve around writing groups and peer-feedback, writing retreat facilitation, and writing and emotional well-being.

### **About this report**

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## Summary

The ideological divisions in contemporary Croatia (post-independence) largely stem from the symbolic legacies of the Partisans and the Ustaše (singular Ustaša, from the Croatian word for insurgent), and they proliferate through various cultural layers, such as politics, sport, movies, and social networks. The Partisans were members of a guerilla force led by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia during WWII, who fought against the Axis powers. The Ustaše were appointed to rule the Nazi aligned and fascist backed Independent State of Croatia (hereinafter: NDH – *Nezavisna Država Hrvatska*) following the Axis occupation of Yugoslavia in 1941.

This report focuses on two instances of dangerous speech that occurred in Croatia in 2016 and 2020. Both revolve around the phrase *Za dom spremni* (“Ready for the Homeland”), which was used as a fascist slogan or rallying cry during World War II, analogous to the German phrase *Sieg heil* (“hail victory”) or *Heil Hitler*. *Za dom spremni* was instituted in 1941 by the NDH led by the Ustaše<sup>1</sup>, a Croatian fascist and ultranationalist organization.

The first case, from 2016, focuses on the installation of a controversial memorial plaque by former members of the Croatian Defense Forces (*HOS – Hrvatske obrambene snage*), which were active during the 1990s Croatian War of Independence<sup>2</sup>. Installed to commemorate members who were killed in that war, the plaque’s inscription included the phrase, “*Za dom spremni.*” Furthermore, the plaque was installed in the Jasenovac municipality and near the sites of the notorious WWII Jasenovac complex, where more than tens of thousands of people were killed.<sup>3</sup> While the Ustaše established multiple concentration camps between 1941 and 1945, the largest

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<sup>1</sup> The fascist Ustaša movement functioned as a terrorist organization prior to WWII. While generally rejected in contemporary Croatia (post-independence), the Ustaša legacy – such as symbols and insignia – continue to be used or supported by right-wing organizations and individuals. Ustaša symbols are part of a complex dynamic of memory politics in Croatia, with politicians often relying on the legacies of WWII and the 1990s Croatian War of Independence for their political agendas and to mobilize voters.

<sup>2</sup> The 1990s Croatian War of Independence was one in the series of large-scale conflicts that led to the Yugoslav breakup. There were a number of causes for the wars, including clashing visions of political regimes, territorial autonomy and independence, minority rights, and ethnic separatism. The war ended in 1995 as a result of the military operations *Flash and Storm* (see Baker’s *The Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s* for a thorough overview). The 1990s war is predominantly referred to as the *Homeland War* in public and media discourse, and the term itself suffers from ideological saturation. As such, it will be used in italics throughout the report.

<sup>3</sup> Mataušić, Nataša. 2003. *Jasenovac 1941.-1945.: Logor smrti i radni logor*. Javna ustanova Spomen-područje Jasenovac. Jasenovac-Zagreb.

The Jasenovac Memorial Site Museum’s website currently lists 83,145 victims of different nationalities. The information can be accessed via the following link: <http://www.jusp-jasenovac.hr/Default.aspx?sid=6711>.

was the Jasenovac complex. To date, the number of victims remains one of the most controversial aspects of political debates over the nature of the camp.<sup>4</sup>

The second case, from 2020, happened in Kustošija – a neighborhood in Croatia’s capital city Zagreb – when fans of Dinamo Zagreb (one of Croatia’s professional football teams) held a banner with the phrase *Za dom spremni* and the phrase “We’ll fuck Serbian women and children” (written in Croatian). While waving the banner the group chanted “kill, kill.”

The presented cases provide insight into the ways how the salute maintains power to trigger memory wars, as well as how some of the dominant mnemonic actors in Croatia (mis)use it to advance a one-sided version of the past.

### *Wider social and historical context*

The Ustaša movement functioned as a terrorist organization before WWII. The Ustaše were appointed to rule the NDH from 1941, after the Axis powers invaded and partitioned the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, until 1945.<sup>5</sup> *Za dom spremni* was the official salute of the NDH and during its existence, the Ustaša regime enacted genocidal laws and policies against Serbs, Jews, Roma, and Croatian antifascists. Tens of thousands of people were sent to concentration camps and murdered, among which the Jasenovac concentration camp remains the most contested site.<sup>6</sup>

The end of WWII in Europe resulted with the NDH sharing its fate with the Axis powers. While a number of Ustaša armed forces attempted to retreat through Slovenia and surrender to the

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<sup>4</sup> Pavlaković, Vjeran, and Davor Pauković (eds.). 2019. *Framing the Nation and Collective Identities. Political Rituals and Cultural Memory of the Twentieth-Century Traumas in Croatia*. London: Routledge, 12-13.

<sup>5</sup> For a thorough overview of the history of the NDH, see, for instance, *The Independent State of Croatia 1941-45*, edited by Sabrina P. Ramet (2015), *Visions of Annihilation: The Ustasha Regime and the Cultural Politics of Fascism, 1941-1945*, by Rory Yeomans (2013), and Goran Miljan’s *Croatia and the Rise of Fascism: The Youth Movement and the Ustasha During WWII* (2018).

<sup>6</sup> Pavlaković, Vjeran. 2019. Contested Sites and Fragmented Narratives: Jasenovac and Disruptions in Croatia’s Commemorative Culture. In: Pavlaković, Vjeran; Pauković, Davor (eds.), *Framing the Nation and Collective Identities. Political Rituals and Cultural Memory of the Twentieth-Century Traumas in Croatia*. London: Routledge. The Jasenovac commemoration that takes place annually became one of the central platforms from which the rehabilitation of the Ustaše from the 1990s is challenged. As Vjeran Pavlaković writes, at the heart of the Jasenovac contestations are conflicting interpretations of the nation-building processes, war legacies, and categorization of victims, perpetrators, and heroes (2019: 121). While observing the commemorations at Jasenovac from 2014 to 2017, Pavlaković analyzes the dynamic of the antifascist narrative that was initially dominant, then silenced, only to be openly challenged by revisionists as a consequence of the left-wing president and coalition government having been replaced with right-wing political actors at the time. Visit the page <http://framnat.eu/?lang=en> for more about the project focusing on Croatia’s commemorative culture, namely “Framing the Nation and Collective Identity in Croatia: Political Rituals and the Cultural Memory of Twentieth Century Traumas.”

British forces in the Austrian town of Bleiburg, this ultimately failed. The Ustaše were handed over to Tito's Partisans upon surrendering and many of the captured Ustaše, NDH soldiers, as well as civilians were executed by the Partisan units. As Pavlaković, Brentin, and Pauković write, "Bleiburg symbolizes both communist crimes at the end of the Second World War and the legacy of authoritarianism more generally". Along with Jasenovac, the Bleiburg commemoration remains one of the most controversial points of debate in Croatia but also neighboring countries.<sup>7</sup>

After the dissolution of the NDH, the Ustaše were faced with either staying in Yugoslavia while facing some form of repression from the authorities, or going back to the status of political exiles.<sup>8</sup> Headed by Josip Broz Tito – secretary general of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (1939-80) and later president of Yugoslavia (1953-80) – a campaign of "repressive erasure" was launched with the goal of banishing any remnants of the Ustaša regime; the campaign was accomplished not only on the symbolic level, but through a ban of political rights and services for the Ustaše and their collaborators.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, and following WWII, an estimated 12,000 former fascist collaborators and anti-communists from Croatia found political asylum in Germany.<sup>10</sup> Between 20,000 to 40,000 escaped through the so-called Ratlines to Argentina, Uruguay, Spain, the United States, Canada, and Australia.<sup>11</sup> At least 7,250 Croat émigrés reached Argentina between 1947 and 1949, most of them holding positions within the NDH.<sup>12</sup>

After Tito's death in 1980, the economic crises in Yugoslavia continued its increase while the presence of nationalist politicians who challenged the existing communist establishment grew

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<sup>7</sup> Bleiburg is a town in Austria where fleeing troops and members of the Nazi-aligned Independent State of Croatia surrendered and were handed to the Yugoslav Partisans in May 1945. After their defeat and following their repatriation to Yugoslavia, the Partisans executed many members of the NDH troops or transferred them to labor camps throughout the country. However, there were many who managed to flee and often found shelter in Argentina and other South American countries. Their position has been a particularly intriguing one since most members of the Croatian diaspora remain closely tied to their homeland and some maintain close connections with Croatia's extreme right while advancing a sympathetic view of the NDH and the Ustaša regime (for a more thorough overview of the topic, see Židek 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Kralj, Lovro. 2019. The Rise and Fall of the Independent State of Croatia in the Memoirs and Testimonies of the Ustasha Members. *History in Flux* 1: 167-184.

<sup>9</sup> Kralj, Lovro. 2019. The Rise and Fall of the Independent State of Croatia in the Memoirs and Testimonies of the Ustasha Members. *History in Flux* 1, p. 172.

<sup>10</sup> Tokić, Mate Nikola. 2009. Landscapes of Conflict: Unity and Disunity in post-Second World War émigré Separatism. *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 16(5), p. 740.

<sup>11</sup> Tokić, Mate Nikola. 2009. Landscapes of Conflict: Unity and Disunity in post-Second World War émigré Separatism. *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 16(5), p. 741.

<sup>12</sup> Pino, Adriano, Cingolani, Giorgio. 2018. *Nationalism and Terror: Ante Pavelić and Ustasha Terrorism from Fascism to the Cold War*. Budapest, New York: Central European University Press.

For more about the transnational dimensions of memory, see Nikolina Židek's work, for instance "Homeland celebrations far away from home: the case of the Croatian diaspora in Argentina", published in 2019.

consistently (see Baker, 2015, for a more thorough overview of the Yugoslav Wars). The Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s witnessed the appearance of myths and narratives related to WWII, which were often used to increase antagonism between different ethnic groups – specifically Serbs and Croats – and reinforce various modes of threat construction that were especially prominent in the media. For example, Serbian national media depicted Croats as the fascist Ustaše and an existential threat to Serbs, whereas Croatian national media reinforced the image of Serbs as Četniks, i.e., a Serbian nationalist guerilla force that formed in WWII.

One contributing factor was a level of media censorship present in Serbia and Croatia and advanced by the presidents Slobodan Milošević and Franjo Tuđman. After Croatia declared its independence from Yugoslavia in 1991 and established a multiparty system, the ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ – *Hrvatska demokratska zajednica*), attempted to control the media through censorship, the circulation of fabricated news, and overall antagonistic rhetoric tailored to reinforce polarization that advanced the governments' political agendas.<sup>13</sup>

Under the leadership of Slobodan Milošević – the president of Serbia from 1989 until 1997 – and Franjo Tuđman – the (first) president of Croatia from 1992 until 1999 – censorship and the systematic and reciprocal enemy construction persisted. The majority of wartime Serbian media spread fears from alleged genocidal threats from “shiptar separatists” (a derogatory term for Albanians), Croatian “ustaše”, and Bosnian-Muslim “mudžahedins”.<sup>14</sup> The majority of wartime Croatian media did not fall behind and depicted Serbs and Bosnians as mortal enemies.

In Serbian newspapers, articles about World War Two Ustaša camps began to appear (and nobody could dispute their truthfulness since camps did exist and Serbs, Roma, Jews, as well as Croats disappeared from them). Pictures of those camps began to appear more often on Serbian television. Croats were referred to as criminals, ustaše. Serbian newspapers were full of horrifying stories about “necklaces made out of fingers of Serb children”, worn by Croatian ustaše, about the “genocide” that the Croats are once again preparing against innocent Serbs. The Serbian media propaganda (orchestrated by the Serbian government and Serbian leader) finally accomplished

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Thompson, Mark. 1999 [1994]. *Forging War: The Media in Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Hercegovina*. Luton: University of Luton Press; Kurspahić, Kemal. 2003. *Prime Time Crime: Balkan Media in War and Peace*. Washington, DC: United States Institute Peace Press, and Kolstø, Pål. 2009. *Media Discourse and the Yugoslav Conflicts. Representations of Self and Other*. London: Farnham.

<sup>14</sup> Kurspahić, Kemal. 2003. *Prime Time Crime: Balkan Media in War and Peace*. Washington, DC: United States Institute Peace Press.

what it set out to: a reaction in the Croatian media. And once the Croatian media also filled with stories about “necklaces made out of fingers of Croat children”, worn by Serbian “butchers” around their necks – preparations for war were finished.<sup>15</sup> (Ugrešić in Kurspahić 2003: 78)

At least four main discursive strategies of representation were used by the media in order to frame the conflict in Yugoslavia: a) inventing enemies – polarization and justifying action against the ‘other’, legitimizing violence, homogenizing the in-group; b) inventing victims – ‘we’ as victims, ‘our’ victims, mediatization of victimization through symbolic and concrete places of conflict; c) a-historization – the understanding of the causes and nature of conflict relies predominantly on national history, and rather than being guided by scholarly evidence, it is guided by myths and emotions; d) hiding real problems/silence – directing the public’s attention towards nationhood, enemies, danger, and away from problems that affect their everyday life.<sup>16</sup>

Hateful speech against Serbs, as well as nationalistic discourse and historical revisionism have been on the rise, since the Croatia became a member of the European Union in 2013.<sup>17</sup> Since entering the EU on 1 July 2013, symbolic and physical disruptions have been a prominent part of Croatia’s commemorative culture and attitudes towards the legacies of WWII’s NDH and the 1990s *Homeland War*. This is due to political elites attempting to mobilize supporters “through the debates over fragmented and clashing narratives of twentieth-century traumas once the strategic goal of Euro-Atlantic integration was completed”.<sup>18</sup> As such, polemics over the past returned swiftly, with *Za dom spremni* becoming one of the dominant elements of reifying national identity and narratives of war.

The two cases presented in the current report illustrate the often insidious nature of hateful speech and show why such complex instances of speech should be considered dangerous speech

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<sup>15</sup> Ugrešić in: Kurspahić, Kemal. 2003. *Prime Time Crime: Balkan Media in War and Peace*. Washington, DC: United States Institute Peace Press, p. 78.

<sup>16</sup> Kolstø, Pål. 2009. *Media Discourse and the Yugoslav Conflicts. Representations of Self and Other*. London: Farnham.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Jović, Dejan. 2017. *Rat i mit: Politika identiteta u suvremenoj Hrvatskoj*. Zagreb: Fraktura, and Pavlaković, Vjeran and Davor Pauković, eds. 2019. *Framing the Nation and Collective Identities. Political Rituals and Cultural Memory of the Twentieth-Century Traumas in Croatia*. London: Routledge.

<sup>18</sup> Pavlaković, Vjeran. 2019. Contested Sites and Fragmented Narratives: Jasenovac and Disruptions in Croatia’s Commemorative Culture. In: Pavlaković, Vjeran; Pauković, Davor (eds.), *Framing the Nation and Collective Identities. Political Rituals and Cultural Memory of the Twentieth-Century Traumas in Croatia*. London: Routledge, p.119.

in a post-conflict society such as Croatia. The dangerousness of the speech I analyze in this case study is increased by the existence of trauma and past violence between groups, a context in which narratives and symbols of WWII and the 1990s war are still often used for political gain. Furthermore, the cases show how the intertwining of dangerous speech with national myths and nation-building narratives poses significant difficulties in countering such speech, as well as fostering a space conducive to dialogue.

### *Za dom spremni* (“Ready for the Homeland”)

The *Za dom spremni* salute was used in declarations and documents that were part of rigorous racial laws and genocidal policies under which Serbs, Roma, Jews, and antifascists were murdered in concentration camps between the years of 1941 and 1945. During socialist Yugoslavia (1945-1992) the salute was banned, but it reappeared yet again during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, when it was used by the paramilitary – the Croatian Defense Forces (HOS – *Hrvatske obrambene snage*) – and popularized by right-wing politicians. As a result of being intertwined with the 1990s Croatian war narrative – that frames the war as solely defensive and just, and the war veterans as creators of the independent state – any criticism of the salute is usually perceived as an attack on the official 1990s war narrative by right-wing organizations and war veterans’ associations.<sup>19</sup> The aforementioned *attack* is viewed both as an attack on the enshrined war narrative and consequently as an attack on the idea of an independent Croatia.

Namely, the official Croatian war narrative is based on the notion of the 1990s war as solely defensive and just, and an attempt to create a democratic Croatian state; accordingly, the most recent war memory must be kept alive and the war heroes must be protected.<sup>20</sup> The most relevant institutionalized narrative about the 1990s war and Croatia’s postwar national identity is the parliamentary *Homeland War Declaration*, which was a compromise between the newly elected

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<sup>19</sup> See Sokolić, Ivor. 2019. Heroes at the margins. Veterans, elites, and the narrative of war. In Pavlaković, Vjeran, and Davor Pauković (eds.), *Framing the Nation and Collective Identities. Political Rituals and Cultural Memory of the Twentieth-Century Traumas in Croatia*. London: Routledge, 143-159, and Damčević, Katarina. 2021. Cultural texts, enemies, and taboos: autocommunicative meaning-making surrounding the ‘Ready for the Homeland’ Ustaša salute in Croatia. *Social Semiotics*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2021.1883404>.

<sup>20</sup> Sokolić, Ivor. 2019. Heroes at the margins. Veterans, elites, and the narrative of war. In Pavlaković, Vjeran, and Davor Pauković (eds.), *Framing the Nation and Collective Identities. Political Rituals and Cultural Memory of the Twentieth-Century Traumas in Croatia*. London: Routledge, p. 149.



center-left coalition government and nationalists that had lost power after the death of Tuđman in December 1999.<sup>21</sup> As such, the Declaration aimed toward a political compromise and a reduction of social polarization, both of which fell short when it failed to foster a dialogue about the war and sought to define its character without any concrete research having been done.<sup>22</sup> An example of the one-sided interpretation of the 1990s war can be found in one of the initial points of the Declaration:

[...] considering that the fundamental values of the Homeland War are unambiguously accepted from the side of the Croatian people as a whole and from the side of every Croatian citizen [...].<sup>23</sup>

(NN 102/2000)

Proponents of the salute argue that it dates back to the sixteenth century and therefore should not be viewed primarily as a relic of the Ustaša regime. There are certain versions of the salute that do date back to the sixteenth century, but not the exact phrase. Dario Brentin explains that Nikola Šubić Zrinski, a Croatian-Hungarian nobleman and general, supposedly cried out “For home(land), now into battle!” during the Battle of Szigetvár in 1566. Another Croatian nobleman used the cry as motivation for his soldiers a few centuries later, when it was somewhat modified into “For the home(land)” and the troops answered “ready to die.” The popularity of the salute among the wider public, as Brentin points out, was established later through the opera *Nikola Šubić Zrinski* composed in 1876, since a widespread myth claims that *Za dom spremni* originates from the aria *U boj, u boj* (To battle, to battle) and consequently predates its “misuse” by the Ustaša

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<sup>21</sup> Grodsky, Brian. 2015. Transitional Justice and Political Goods. In: Lavinia Stan and Nadya Nedelsky (eds.), *Post-Communist Transitional Justice: Lessons from Twenty-Five Years of Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 7-29. See also Ljubojević, Ana. 2019. Remembering The Hague: The impact of international criminal justice on memory practices in Croatia. In: Pavlaković, Vjeran, and Davor Pauković (eds.), *Framing the Nation and Collective Identities. Political Rituals and Cultural Memory of the Twentieth-Century Traumas in Croatia*. London: Routledge. 177-193.

<sup>22</sup> Koren, Snježana. 2011. “Korisna prošlost?” Ratovi devedesetih u deklaracijama Hrvatskog sabora. In: Cipek, Tihomir (ed.), *Kultura sjećanja: 1991. Povijesni lomovi i svladavanje prošlosti*. Zagreb: Disput, 123-155.

<sup>23</sup> “[...] *smatrajući* da su temeljne vrijednosti Domovinskog rata jednoznačno prihvaćene od cijeloga hrvatskog naroda i svih građana Republike Hrvatske [...]” (my translation from Croatian – K.D.). Narodne Novine. Deklaracija o Domovinskom ratu (Homeland War Declaration). NN 102/2000. Zastupnički dom Hrvatskog državnog sabora. Available online at: [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2000\\_10\\_102\\_1987.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2000_10_102_1987.html)

regime. Scholarly research has since proven the myth to be false and today's dominant symbolic content – the salute as the symbol of the Ustaša regime – is far clearer.<sup>24</sup>

In recent years, *Za dom spremni* has been used in various ways: it was chanted during football matches<sup>25</sup>, inscribed on a memorial plaque near the former Ustaša concentration camp Jasenovac<sup>26</sup>, disseminated on right-wing Facebook pages<sup>27</sup>, chanted by high school graduates in Rijeka in May 2018, followed by the desecration of the town's Liberation Monument with the fascist salute<sup>28</sup>, chanted and sold as a souvenir at the annual Bleiburg commemoration<sup>29</sup>, and included on T-shirts, stickers, and similar products in the shop *Patriot Hrvatska*<sup>30</sup>, among others.

While this list demonstrates the presence of *Za dom spremni* in different contexts, I chose to focus on football and war veterans since they best illustrate the interplay of memory politics in recent years. Furthermore, it should be pointed out that a general rejection of the Ustaša legacy does exist in Croatia. However, the Ustaša legacy – such as symbols and insignia – continue to be used or supported by right-wing organizations and individuals. Ustaša symbols are part of a complex dynamic of memory politics in Croatia, with politicians often relying on the legacies of WWII and the 1990s war for their political agendas and to mobilize voters.

Both of the cases presented here constitute dangerous speech and can be better understood when observed through the corresponding framework. The next section provides historical context that helps gain a wider perspective on the issue at hand.

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<sup>24</sup> Brentin, Dario. 2016. Ready for the Homeland? Ritual, remembrance, and political extremism in Croatian football. *Nationalities Papers. The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity* 44(6), p. 4.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2015.1136996>

<sup>25</sup> Brentin, Dario. 2016. Ready for the Homeland? Ritual, remembrance, and political extremism in Croatian football. *Nationalities Papers. The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity* 44(6).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2015.1136996>

<sup>26</sup> Damčević, Katarina. 2021. Cultural texts, enemies, and taboos: autocommunicative meaning-making surrounding the 'Ready for the Homeland' Ustaša salute in Croatia. *Social Semiotics*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2021.1883404>.

<sup>27</sup> Damčević, Katarina, and Filip Rodik. 2018. Ready for the Homeland: Hate Speech on Croatian Right-Wing Public Facebook Pages. *Romanian Journal of Communication and Public Relations* 20(3): 31-52.

<sup>28</sup> Šestan-Kučić, Ingrid. 2018. „Najgora proslava u Hrvatskoj. Sa svih strana stižu osude divljanja riječkih maturanata.“ *Novilist.hr*, May 24. Accessed 10 May 2021. [https://www.novilist.hr/rijeka-regija/rijeka/najgora-proslava-u-hrvatskoj-sa-svih-strana-stizu-osude-divljanja-riječkih-maturanata/?meta\\_refresh=true](https://www.novilist.hr/rijeka-regija/rijeka/najgora-proslava-u-hrvatskoj-sa-svih-strana-stizu-osude-divljanja-riječkih-maturanata/?meta_refresh=true)

<sup>29</sup> Pavlaković, Vjeran, Dario Brentin, and Davor Pauković. 2018. The controversial commemoration: Transnational approaches to remembering Bleiburg. *Croatian Political Science Review* 55(2): 7-32.

<sup>30</sup> In 2018, a nationalist T-shirt shop and online store in Croatia attempted to celebrate the WWII Ustaša movement while at the same time avoiding and legal consequences. To do so, they created a T-shirt with a stylized letter U that stands for 'Ustaša', incorporated it into a smiley-face emoticon, and called the product 'Uncle Smiley.' As for the *Za dom spremni* salute, it was also disguised in such a way that it omitted the word 'home' and replaced it with a picture of a house.

*Case no. 1: Message – the HOS memorial plaque*

On 5 November 2016, a memorial plaque containing the WWII *Za dom spremni* fascist salute was installed by war veterans of the paramilitary units of the Croatian Defense Forces (HOS – *Hrvatske obrambene snage*) and local right-wing politicians in the town of Jasenovac. To say that the location of the plaque was controversial would be an understatement: without a preceding public discussion regarding its potential location, the plaque emerged on the façade of a kindergarten that was used as the headquarters of the Ustaša regime commander Maks Luburić<sup>31</sup>, near the town's former WWII concentration camp. Precisely because it contains the salute, the memorial plaque shortly became a controversy that reverberated widely, with many calls for its removal both locally and internationally.<sup>32</sup> The case further draw attention to the consistent rise of nationalism and historical revisionism in recent years.

*Za dom spremni* is part of the official HOS emblem. The salute was used by HOS paramilitaries with the purpose of evoking the memory of the WWII Ustaša regime and the NDH<sup>33</sup>. Namely, the acronym HOS referred to the acronym of the Ustaša armed forces active from 1944 until 1945. Furthermore, the soldiers used the ZDS salute as their official salute that was occasionally accompanied by the physical Nazi salute. HOS members also often paraded in black uniforms that resembled Ustaša uniforms, sang Ustaša songs, and celebrated 10 April, the day when NDH was founded in 1941. Velimir Veselinović further emphasizes this tendency in his research about the Croatian Party of Rights, where he shows that in order to become a HOS member, it was necessary to state a pledge that was similar to the pledge of the members of the WWII Ustaša movement:

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<sup>31</sup> For a more detailed overview see “Personalities in the History of the NDH”, in *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, Vol. 7, No. 4, 493-498.

<sup>32</sup> For instance, Milorad Pupovac – a leader of Croatia's Serb minority – criticized the lack of action concerning the plaque and expressed growing concern related to the relativization and denial of victims of the Jasenovac concentration camp. Julija Kos – a retired librarian from the Jewish community in Zagreb – also responded to the controversy by addressing a letter to the then President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, and the then Interior Minister Vlaho Orepić. See Milekić, Sven. 2016. Fascist Slogan Near Croatia Concentration Camp Sparks Anger. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/12/05/plaque-near-wwii-concentration-camp-scandalises-region-12-05-2016/>

<sup>33</sup> Veselinović, Velimir. 2019. *Hrvatska stranka prava od 1990. do 2011. Na izvoru desnoga radikalizma i populizma*. Despot infinitus d.o.o. Zagreb. See also Veselinović 2014, *Obnavljanje i djelovanje Hrvatske stranke prava, 1990-1992. Croatian Political Science Review* 51(2): 55-87.

*I (name and surname), swear to God almighty and everything I find sacred, that as a member of the Croatian defense union on land, sea, and in the air, I will obediently perform the duties entrusted upon me. That I will keep every secret and will not reveal anything to anyone. I swear that I will be a loyal, persistent fighter for the freedom of the Croatian people, that I will guard the restored statehood and defend it from internal and external enemies. If I sin, I am aware of the responsibility. For treason, I am willing to answer with my own life. Let the almighty God be my witness along with the present Croat brothers in front of whom I take this oath and single-handedly and willingly sign it. Za dom spremni!*<sup>34</sup>

As emphasized by Sokolić, militarized language is omnipresent in Croatian society and occurs across multiple cultural layers; at the elite level, in media reporting, as well as in the regional media.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Veselinović, Velimir. 2019. *Hrvatska stranka prava od 1990. do 2011. Na izvoru desnoga radikalizma i populizma*. Despot infinitus d.o.o. Zagreb, p. 120. See also Milekić, Sven. 2020. Croatia's 1990s Paramilitaries: From Government Critics to Collaborators. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/05/06/croatians-1990s-paramilitaries-from-government-critics-to-collaborators/>.

<sup>35</sup> Sokolić, Ivor. 2019. Heroes at the margins. Veterans, elites, and the narrative of war. In Pavlaković, Vjieran, and Davor Pauković (eds.), *Framing the Nation and Collective Identities. Political Rituals and Cultural Memory of the Twentieth-Century Traumas in Croatia*. London: Routledge, 143-159.



The HOS memorial plaque in Jasenovac. Photograph by Vjerran Pavlaković

### *Social and historical context*

The HOS memorial plaque was installed on 5 November 2016 and dedicated to 11 soldiers from the HOS's 'Ante Paradžik'<sup>36</sup> battalion who were killed in combat in 1991 and 1995. In the beginning of the war HOS forces functioned as paramilitaries under the control of the radical right-wing Croatian Party of Rights, only to be integrated into the regular Croatian Army in 1992. The *Za dom spremni* salute was banned in socialist Yugoslavia and resurfaced during the 1990s war when it was used by HOS paramilitaries and further popularized through right-wing politics.

### *The speaker(s)*

War veterans of the 1991-1995 *Homeland War* maintain a high position in society and politics, first and foremost in terms of their central relation to (and in) the war narrative.<sup>37</sup> Commonly referred to as *branitelji*<sup>38</sup> or "defenders", they are seen as the embodiment of the Croatian war narrative of sacrifice, defense, and victimhood and are often referred to as the creators of the Croatian state.<sup>39</sup> The so-called defenders (*branitelji*) carry a significant role for the reinforcement of Croatia's dominant – and formative – war narrative as solely just and defensive. As articulated by Marko Soldić, a *branitelj* presents "the potent actor which *defended*, and thus facilitated the

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<sup>36</sup> Ante Paradžik, one of the 1990s anti-communist dissidents, was the vice-president of the Croatian Party of Rights, alongside its president Dobroslav Paraga. The HOS functioned as the party's military wing, with Paraga as its supreme commander and Paradžik as general chief of staff.

<sup>37</sup> Sokolić, Ivor. 2019. Heroes at the margins. Veterans, elites, and the narrative of war. In Pavlaković, Vjeran, and Davor Pauković (eds.), *Framing the Nation and Collective Identities. Political Rituals and Cultural Memory of the Twentieth-Century Traumas in Croatia*. London: Routledge, 143-159.

<sup>38</sup> Relying on the word *branitelj* has a further normative significance; it is considered "safe" since it cannot be confused with Serbian (*branilac*), as well as with Yugoslavia, where a veteran was a *borac* (Soldić). The separation of Serbo-Croatian during the 1990s war has been analyzed and by the socio-linguist Snježana Kordić in her book "Jezik i nacionalizam" [Language and Nationalism] published in 2010. In the book the author adamantly argues that Croatian language had undergone a purification process in the 1990s as a result of the nationalist politics of the ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ – Hrvatska demokratska zajednica).

<sup>39</sup> See Fisher, Sharon. 2003. Contentious politics in Croatia: The war veterans' movement. In: Kopecký, P. and Mudde, C. (eds.). *Uncivil Society? Contentious Politics in Post-Communist Europe*. London: Routledge; Pavlaković, Vjeran 2014. Fulfilling the thousand-year-old dream: Strategies of symbolic nation-building in Croatia. In: Pål Kolstø (ed.), *Strategies of Symbolic Nation-Building in South Eastern Europe* Farnham: Ashgate, 19-51; Sokolić, Ivor. 2019. Heroes at the margins. Veterans, elites, and the narrative of war. In Pavlaković, Vjeran, and Davor Pauković (eds.), *Framing the Nation and Collective Identities. Political Rituals and Cultural Memory of the Twentieth-Century Traumas in Croatia*. London: Routledge, 143-159; Jakir, Aleksandar. 2019. Croatia: victims of transition? The role of Homeland War veterans in public discourse in Croatia. In Taylor, Paul, Murray, Emma, and Katherine Albertson (eds.). *Military Past, Civilian Present: International Perspectives on Veterans' Transition from the Armed Forces*. London: Springer, 31-42.



rebirth of Croatia by unselfishly sacrificing on the ‘altar of the Fatherland’<sup>40</sup>. As emphasized by Ivor Sokolić in his study about Croatian war veterans and how they construct the world around them within the frames of the war narrative, veterans are a highly important object of study for three main reasons: “their potential to cause public disruption, their role in the transmission of norms, and their political closeness to the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ – *Hrvatska demokratska zajednica*)<sup>41</sup>”. As Sokolić further writes, because of being able to exploit symbols to further political aims, “during the 1990s, the associations had nearly exclusive access to state funding, benefited from relatively positive media coverage and were relatively unified in their actions<sup>42</sup>” [such as protests and public appearances].

The category of war veterans that I am focusing on in this report carries an additional layer of significance and controversy. HOS veterans remain in a rather contentious position in contemporary Croatia; they have been seeking the same respect as is given to other 1990s war veterans while simultaneously pushing against the perception of being labelled as Ustaše. Their use of symbols associated with the regime makes this difficult. The HOS cherished Ustaša symbols, and the acronym HOS itself referenced the acronym of the Ustaša armed forces in the 1944-45 period. Not only did HOS soldiers use *Za dom spremni* as their official salute, but they often accompanied it with the physical arm salute.<sup>43</sup>

Mainstream Croatian media has frequently reported on HOS’s transgressions, such as displaying questionable insignia, as well as their role in killings, shootings, fights, and the destruction of WWII anti-fascist monuments. Such transgressions did indeed happen, however, many of the 3,000 anti-fascist monuments<sup>44</sup> that were destroyed or damaged were vandalized by

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<sup>40</sup> Soldić, Marko. 2009. A Land Fit for Heroes: Croatian Veterans of the Homeland War. MA thesis, Oslo University.

<sup>41</sup> Sokolić, Ivor. 2019. Heroes at the margins. Veterans, elites, and the narrative of war. In Pavlaković, Vjeran, and Davor Pauković (eds.), *Framing the Nation and Collective Identities. Political Rituals and Cultural Memory of the Twentieth-Century Traumas in Croatia*. London: Routledge, p. 143.

<sup>42</sup> Sokolić, Ivor. 2019. Heroes at the margins. Veterans, elites, and the narrative of war. In Pavlaković, Vjeran, and Davor Pauković (eds.), *Framing the Nation and Collective Identities. Political Rituals and Cultural Memory of the Twentieth-Century Traumas in Croatia*. London: Routledge, p.144. See also Fisher, Sharon. 2003. Contentious politics in Croatia: The war veterans’ movement. In: Kopecký, P. and Mudde, C. (eds.). *Uncivil Society? Contentious Politics in Post-Communist Europe*. London: Routledge.

<sup>43</sup> See Milekić, Sven. 2020. Croatia’s 1990s Paramilitaries: From Government Critics to Collaborators, accessible at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/05/06/croatians-1990s-paramilitaries-from-government-critics-to-collaborators/> (accessed on 20 December 2022).

<sup>44</sup> See also the recent publication by Vjeran Pavlaković titled *Memoryscapes of the Homeland War* published in 2022 by the Youth Initiative for Human Rights. The publication is also available in Croatian under the title *Krajobrazi sjećanja na Domovinski rat*.

regular Croatian units, locals, and political party activists.<sup>45</sup> After the war, efforts to secure war veteran status by HOS veterans were hindered if they did not also serve in the Croatian Army after the HOS was incorporated into the official military in 1992-93; they were subsequently recognized in a law passed by a center-left government in 2001.

In the context of the Dangerous Speech framework, there is one particular hallmark that should be emphasized when it comes to war veterans. Namely, virtue talk is a strategy that may employ different expressions and symbolism in order to link violence to qualities such as duty, honor, courage, manliness, and other related notions that can make violence seem admirable (and by extension, justified).<sup>46</sup> The fact that Croatia's war veterans – including HOS members – are often portrayed by politicians and the media as the “creators of the independent state”<sup>47</sup> – and have predominantly accepted this role for themselves – reflects this complex state of affairs. Furthermore, being linked to the dominant myth of the war as solely defensive and just – that functions as the main formative text for Croatia's contemporary national identity – only strengthens and reinforces the veterans' status. Therefore, when war veterans promote the *Za dom spremni* salute, their social status reinforces a notion of virtuous violence and makes the speech more dangerous.

Another relevant example of a dangerous speech hallmark is the threat to group integrity or purity. This rhetorical technique consists of asserting “that members of another group can cause irreparable damage to the integrity or purity of one's own group” (Dangerous Speech Project 2020). Another dimension of enemy construction is succinctly expressed by Jović, who writes that what we are witnessing is the production of imaginary Serbs through the proclamation of anyone who does not share the *Homeland War* myth as Serbs, as the *other*. *How many* Serbs there are irrelevant; they simply *are*, every one of them is one too many and therefore unacceptable.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> See Milekić, Sven. 2020. Croatia's 1990s Paramilitaries: From Government Critics to Collaborators, accessible at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/05/06/croatians-1990s-paramilitaries-from-government-critics-to-collaborators/> (accessed on 20 December 2022).

<sup>46</sup> Leader Maynard, Jonathan, and Benesch, Susan. 2016. Dangerous Speech and Dangerous Ideology: An Integrated Model for Monitoring and Prevention.” *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* 9(3), pp. 84-85.

<sup>47</sup> See Jović, Dejan. 2017. *Rat i mit: Politika identiteta u suvremenoj Hrvatskoj*. Zagreb: Fraktura

<sup>48</sup> See Jović, Dejan. 2017. *Rat i mit: Politika identiteta u suvremenoj Hrvatskoj*. Zagreb: Fraktura, p. 27.



### *Medium and mode of dissemination*

In the year following its installation, the public memorial plaque was located in a well-trafficked area in the center of the Jasenovac municipality and the near the WWII Ustaša concentration camp. To erect the plaque near the location where tens of thousands were deported and killed on the basis of commands signed with the ZDS slogan was – and is – an example of historical revisionism as well as disrespectful towards victims. As a response to the memorial plaque, historian Hrvoje Klasić also emphasized that historians have been clear when it comes to the alleged dilemma [usually coming from the far right] regarding the origins of the salute, and have demonstrated that ZDS had not been detected in any context other than within the Ustaša movement and NDH.<sup>49</sup> As with any memorial, monument, or symbol, where it is placed adds to how it is interpreted; in the case of ZDS being inscribed on the plaque, this makes it seem more acceptable and consequently may contribute to the further normalization of its presence in society.

### *Responses*

As a result of a strong backlash from both local and international politicians, scholars, and organizations, the Croatian government founded a separate body. Including predominantly experts in the field of law, history, and political science, the Council for Dealing with Consequences of the Rule of Non-Democratic Regimes was set up in order to examine how to constructively deal with the past, specifically with the legacy of the WWII-era fascist and post-WWII communist regimes. While in theory this carried the potential for opening a much-needed dialogue regarding the aforementioned topics, in practice it accomplished anything but.

The primary output of the Council was The Dialogue Document (*Dokument Dijaloga*).<sup>50</sup> The two-fold nature of The Dialogue Document consists of the narrative about Croatian experiences with the Nazi-fascist Ustaša regime as well as the subsequent single-party communist

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<sup>49</sup> Full article in Croatian is available here: <https://www.portalnovosti.com/fotogalerija-usred-jasenovca-podigli-plocu-s-ustaskim-pozdravom>.

<sup>50</sup> The full title of the of the document is: Dialogue Document: Postulates and Recommendations. On Specific Normative Regulation of Symbols, Emblems and Other Insignia of Totalitarian Regimes and Movements. It is available in Croatian:

<https://vlada.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/Vijesti/2018/02%20velja%C4%8Da/28%20velja%C4%8De/Dokument%20dijaloga.pdf> and in English:

<https://vlada.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/Vijesti/2018/05%20svibanj/5%20svibnja/DOKUMENT%20DIJALOGA%20ENG.pdf>

rule. In a thorough analysis of The Dialogue Document, Hrvoje Cvijanović points out the biased narrative of the Document's foundational postulates in evaluating both the communist and fascist regimes.<sup>51</sup> Specifically, the Document outlines the responsibility of the communist regime, but in doing so, it noticeably undermines antifascism “by converting it into an ideologeme under the guise of which mass crimes and human rights violations were committed”<sup>52</sup>. By placing communism on center stage and presenting it through the prism of antifascism is not only confusing, as Cvijanović writes, but also problematic “since antifascism is not necessarily linked with communism<sup>53</sup>”. However, when it comes to the NDH and its presentation in the Document, it is only acknowledged as a political entity that is opposed to the foundations of the Croatian Constitution; no specific crimes of the regime are mentioned, nor the proliferation of the Ustaša insignia in Croatian popular culture.

Since some conclusions published in the Dialogue Document were challenged by certain members of the Council<sup>54</sup>, the body did not vote on the final version. Members with differing views received the opportunity to express their statements as dissenting opinions. The Council ultimately presented a solution that acknowledged the *Za dom spremni* salute as unconstitutional<sup>55</sup>, but still permitted in “exceptional circumstances” such as commemorations of HOS units. Following their final meeting, the president of the Council Zvonko Kušić reiterated that the permission does not change the conclusion according to which ZDS is unconstitutional. This conclusion, however, is not only problematic but also quite paradoxical. Namely, while the Council refuses the argument according to which the salute “can be converted from an unambiguous *prima facie* fascist symbol into an ambiguous symbolic expression<sup>56</sup>”, it ultimately acknowledges the alleged ambiguous character of the salute by linking it to the Homeland War

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<sup>51</sup> Cvijanović, Hrvoje. 2018. On memory politics and memory wars: A critical analysis of the Croatian Dialogue Document. *Croatian Political Science Review* 55(4): 109-146.

<sup>52</sup> The Dialogue Document, 2018., pp. 4-5.

<sup>53</sup> Cvijanović, Hrvoje. 2018. On memory politics and memory wars: A critical analysis of the Croatian Dialogue Document. *Croatian Political Science Review* 55(4), p. 124.

<sup>54</sup> Koren, Snježana. 2019. Dialogue Document without a dialogue: Current debates on World War II in Croatia. *Poznańskie Studia Slawistyczne* 16/2019, p. 153.

<sup>55</sup> The Croatian Constitution does not acknowledge NDH, while The State Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Croatia (ZAVNOH – *Zemaljsko antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Hrvatske*) is acknowledged as one of the historical aspects that prove the continuity of Croatian statehood.

<sup>56</sup> Cvijanović, Hrvoje. 2018. On memory politics and memory wars: A critical analysis of the Croatian Dialogue Document. *Croatian Political Science Review* 55(4), p. 138. See also p. 26 of the *Dialogue Document*.

insignia “irrespective of its Ustaša origin<sup>57</sup>”. The paradox of the Council’s proposition becomes fairly clear here; even though ZDS was illegitimate from the start, it somehow obtained legitimacy due to time passing and chaotic [i.e. wartime] circumstances.<sup>58</sup> Educational initiatives should be a priority when facing controversial symbols and undemocratic regimes; even prohibition may be largely counterproductive if the narratives and ideas behind symbols are not addressed since they do not disappear, regardless of their form.

The HOS memorial plaque was relocated next to a *Homeland War* memorial park outside of the nearby town of Novska in autumn 2017, while no concrete laws or regulations were passed related to the treatment of Ustaša insignia.



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<sup>57</sup> Cvijanović, Hrvoje. 2018. On memory politics and memory wars: A critical analysis of the Croatian Dialogue Document. *Croatian Political Science Review* 55(4), p. 138.

<sup>58</sup> Cvijanović, Hrvoje. 2018. On memory politics and memory wars: A critical analysis of the Croatian Dialogue Document. *Croatian Political Science Review* 55(4), p. 139. See also Damčević, Katarina. 2021. Cultural texts, enemies, and taboos: autocommunicative meaning-making surrounding the ‘Ready for the Homeland’ Ustaša salute in Croatia. *Social Semiotics*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2021.1883404>.

The HOS memorial plaque in the new location. Photograph by Vjieran Pavlaković

*Case no. 2: Dinamo football fans – the message*

In June 2020 a group of Dinamo Zagreb football fans – members of the Bad Blue Boys ultras group<sup>59</sup> – gathered in the Croatian capital while holding up lighted flares and a banner containing the slogan “We’ll fuck Serbian women and children” and the *Za dom spremni* salute. The disturbing combination of the fascist salute and the threat of sexual violence exhibited in a public space can be characterized not only as dangerous speech, but as an open call for violence.<sup>60</sup> According to the photographer Nikola Šolić who took the photo, the Dinamo fans were chanting “Kill, kill.” Local media reports confirmed that the men also held flags of the paramilitary unit the Croatian Defense Forces, which uses ZDS actively. Both the slogan on the banner and the chant “Kill, kill” demonstrate the relevance of context, specifically a history of conflict and trauma between two or more groups. The chant connects the salute with a call for violence against Serbs since ZDS is associated with two historical periods where there was violence between Croats and Serbs.

While writing this report, another incident occurred at the UEFA Champions League match between Croatia’s Dinamo and Italy’s Milan in September 2022. Hundreds of supporters of Zagreb

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<sup>59</sup> The term *ultras* refers to a portion of a football club’s fanbase that usually consists of some of the most extreme and passionate supporters, which often includes a violent element. Football ultras first emerged as a sub-culture during the 1960s and 1970s in Italy, primarily as pseudo-paramilitary groups. Ultras tend to be organized and follow specific structures and hierarchies. While historically not many ultra football groups positioned themselves as belonging to the far right, nowadays there are more infamous groups associated with far-right ideas, neo-fascist ideologies, and deeply rooted racism (Goal 2019), see: <https://www.goal.com/en/news/what-is-a-football-ultra-serie-a-hardcore-fan-culture-explained/aohlkilvcywp1v3c8e1f1a37w>. See also Vincenzo Scalia’s article “Just a Few Rogues? Football Ultras, Clubs and Politics in Contemporary Italy (2009).

<sup>60</sup> The speaker(s) intent may be called into question here, and while that aspect is certainly relevant, it is simply too wide for the purposes of this report. What should be kept in mind though is that whether the intention to degrade and exclude accompanies a particular instance of hate speech or not, should not be the primary decisive factor in evaluating its consequences. Intentional or not, hate speech can cause significant harm for targeted groups and individuals (see Waldron 2012; the Norway reader from SS). On intentionality, see Larry Alexander’s *Free Speech and Speaker’s Intent* (1995) and Simon Thompson’s *Hate Speech and Self-Restraint* (2019).



football club Dinamo marched the streets of Milan while performing the Nazi salute before the match. The incident sparked controversy and Israel's ambassador to Croatia condemned it on Twitter.<sup>61</sup> The European Jewish Congress responded as well by expressing that such behavior is against the values of football, which should be free from any form of racism and any form of hatred.<sup>62</sup>



Photograph by Nikola Šolić

### *Social and historical context*

Football is the most popular sport among Croatian youth, and in addition to being an important pastime, it continues to carry strong cultural and political connotations. The most successful team in Croatian football history is *Dinamo Zagreb*, “having won 20 of the 28 Croatian Football League

<sup>61</sup> “Croatian Football Fans’ Nazi Salutes in Milan Outrage Israel”: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/09/15/croatian-football-fans-nazi-salutes-in-milan-outrage-israel/>

<sup>62</sup> Kurtić, Azem. 2022. Croatian Football Fans’ Nazi Salutes in Milan Outrage Israel. Accessed 15 November 2022, accessible at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/09/15/croatian-football-fans-nazi-salutes-in-milan-outrage-israel/>.

titles since the foundation of the domestic First League in 1992”<sup>63</sup> As Sindbæk writes, during the 1990s Dinamo Zagreb representatives often pointed out the role that the football club played as a symbol of Croatian identity.<sup>64</sup> The Dinamo football club has been a force in Croatian society as far back as the 1990s, when the first president regularly made appearances at Dinamo events, including important matches and celebrations, and would personally congratulate players on their results.<sup>65</sup> Situated within this complex matrix and carrying a formative role for identity construction, sport – and in particular football – often becomes an important part of young people’s lives in Croatia and a way for them to feel like they belong to a bigger collective that represents them.

Sport in Croatia functioned as an important element in nation-building processes during the Yugoslav breakup of the 1990s as well as after the end of the war in Croatia in 1995.<sup>66</sup> During the war, football matches and athletes were often represented as symbolic warriors of Croatia, a process that was fueled by politicians. Croatia’s first president Franjo Tuđman (1992-1999) famously stated that “football victories shape a nation’s identity as much as wars do”<sup>67</sup> As a consequence, the football field became a symbolic extension of the physical conflict and a space where symbols, narratives, and subsequently memories of the war are contested, and perceived enemies (the Serbs) (re)constructed.

Because of the intertwining of sport and politics in times of war and in the subsequent nation-building process, athletes remained influential social actors, especially among impressionable youth and boys in particular. Since football had a formative influence for Croatia’s post-war national identity following independence, football players not only epitomize those values but often serve as role models for younger generations. A relevant example is the case of

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<sup>63</sup> Tsai, Y. Dustin. 2020. “A Tale of Two Croatias”: How Club Football (Soccer) Teams Produce Radical Regional Divides in Croatia’s National Identity. *Nationalities Papers* 49(1), p. 131.

As Tsai further points out, *Dinamo*’s political reach extends beyond sports and plays a crucial role in shaping the cultural fabric of northern Croatia (2020, 131).

<sup>64</sup> Sindbæk, Tea. 2013. ‘A Croatian Champion with a Croatian Name’: National Identity and Uses of History in Croatian Football Culture – the Case of Dinamo Zagreb. *Sport in Society* 16(8), p.3.

<sup>65</sup> Sindbæk, Tea. 2013. ‘A Croatian Champion with a Croatian Name’: National Identity and Uses of History in Croatian Football Culture – the Case of Dinamo Zagreb. *Sport in Society* 16(8): 1009-1024.

<sup>66</sup> See Brentin, Dario. 2013. ‘A lofty battle for the nation’: The social roles of sport in Tuđman’s Croatia. *Sport in Society* 16(8): 993-1008, as well as Brentin’s chapter titled Ambassadors of Memory: „honoring the Homeland War“ in Croatian sport, published in Pavlaković, Vjeran, and Davor Pauković (eds.), *Framing the Nation and Collective Identities. Political Rituals and Cultural Memory of the Twentieth-Century Traumas*. London: Routledge.

<sup>67</sup> Cited in Brentin, Dario. 2013. A lofty battle for the nation’: The social roles of sport in Tuđman’s Croatia. *Sport in Society* 16(8), p. 993.

the Croatian football player Josip Šimunić who chanted the salute *Za dom spremni* after a football match against Iceland in 2013 and consequently faced a penalty and a ban from subsequent matches issued by FIFA.<sup>68</sup>

Narratives fueling the idea that a football match symbolically initiated the dissolution of Yugoslavia are still prevalent nowadays. Notably, in the early summer of 1990, a time characterized by increased tension and political turmoil, football-related violence escalated on 13 May during the match in the Yugoslav football league between Croatia's *Dinamo Zagreb* and Serbia's *Red Star Belgrade* at Zagreb's Maksimir stadium. The game had to be suspended due to violent clashes between the opposing set of fans that left over 60 people injured, and it is remembered as the *Maksimir riots*. While the dominant narrative surrounding the riot in post-Yugoslav societies is that they represent the symbolic date of the beginning of the dissolution of Yugoslavia, they are remembered differently.<sup>69</sup>

In Croatia, groups of football fans often use hateful speech against Serbs and evoke the 1990s war, which speech had a significant role in fueling.<sup>70</sup> As reported on by Vladislavljević and Jeremić<sup>71</sup>, hardcore football fan groups communicate hateful speech against Serbs and/or show their sympathies for the Ustaša movement. The presence and proliferation of such speech is regularly documented by the Serbian National Council that represents the Croatian Serb minority. When it comes to sporting events specifically, the Council documented 16 cases of hateful speech and ethnic intolerance at sporting events in 2019, 12 in 2018, and 14 in 2017.<sup>72</sup> One of the cases happened in February 2019, when a group of Serb water polo players were attacked in the city of

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<sup>68</sup> Brentin, Dario. 2016. Ready for the Homeland? Ritual, remembrance, and political extremism in Croatian football. *Nationalities Papers. The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity* 44(6).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2015.1136996> The Šimunić case remains extremely significant, not only related to the case presented in this report, but also since it so clearly points to the relevance of the speaker(s). When the speaker is an influential figure, like Šimunić, their speech tends to be more dangerous as a result. This may include high social status, personal charisma, as well as high official status, among others. With football playing such a key role in the nation-building processes, coupled with collective memories of conflict and trauma, Šimunić's controversial and disturbing performance is easy to deem dangerous speech.

<sup>69</sup> See Brentin, Dario. 2020. Today in 1990: A Match to Teach the Collapse of Yugoslavia. Accessed 20 November 2022, available at: <https://footballmakeshistory.eu/today-in-1990-a-match-to-teach-the-collapse-of-yugoslavia/>.

<sup>70</sup> See, for instance, Thompson, Mark. 1999 [1994]. *Forging War: The Media in Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina*. Luton: University of Luton Press, and Kolstø, Pål. 2009. *Media Discourse and the Yugoslav Conflicts. Representations of Self and Other*. London: Farnham.

<sup>71</sup> Croatian and Serbian Hooligans: Football Foes Share Love of Hate, accessed on 17 January 2023 and available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/06/19/croatian-and-serbian-hooligans-football-foes-share-love-of-hate/>

<sup>72</sup> 'Historic Revisionism, Hate Speech, and Violence Against Serbs in 2019'. Available in Croatian: [https://snv.hr/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/SNV\\_bulletin\\_19\\_ONLINE.pdf](https://snv.hr/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/SNV_bulletin_19_ONLINE.pdf)

While this specific report is unfortunately no longer (or currently) available online, other publications can be found on the following link (with some in English as well): <https://snv.hr/en/publications/>

Split. Luckily, the fight did not escalate, and the players were not wounded. The match was ultimately canceled, while the police caught the attackers.

### *Speaker(s)*

The role of the so-called “second speaker” should be mentioned here. Namely, a message does not necessarily have to be dangerous by virtue of being created by an influential speaker such as a politician, athlete, or religious leader. A speaker can make a message dangerous by distributing – and distorting – someone else’s content.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, “second” speakers can disseminate a given message to a much wider audience than the original speaker would have reached. This is the case with the Dinamo football fans group. While they did gather in a public space – a neighborhood of a city district Črnomerec in Zagreb in June 2020 – the message they were communicating reached a wider audience only after a photo of their gathering was disseminated through social media.

### *Audience*

The past – and specifically legacies of WWII and the *Homeland War* – is often instrumentalized for political ends. The continuous controversies surrounding ZDS not only demonstrate how the salute tends to blur the narratives of the aforementioned historical periods, but its power to fuel social and political polarization. This, in turn, might pave the way to further discrimination against minority groups as well as hinder any efforts towards reconciliation.

It is quite unlikely that someone would be able to inspire violence in a random group of people. The situation, however, might change if we imagine a group fearful about past or present threats of violence and a history of violent conflict. In the context of football hooliganism and Croatia’s youth specifically, associating closely with football teams does not only have a formative role for

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<sup>73</sup> See *Dangerous Speech: A Practical Guide*. 2021. Published online by the Dangerous Speech Project and available at: <https://dangerousspeech.org/guide/>.



their identity building. For many youth groups, the increased identification with a team ends up being a relevant channel of expressing their emotions through a powerful collective.<sup>74</sup>

### *Medium and mode of dissemination*

The medium of the message at hand was two-fold: originating in public space, where passers-by were able to witness it, it was later published by Nikola Šolić, a photographer who happened to be there at the time of the incident and took a photo. He posted it on his Facebook wall, where it received 346 reactions, 383 comments, and was shared 288 times as of 11 June 2020.<sup>75</sup> While the photographer was trying to point out the worrisome degree of hateful speech and nationalism among Croatia's youth, by publishing the photo he also spread the fans' message to a much wider audience. The incident, often accompanied by Šolić's photo, was further reported on by journalists, as well as shared or commented upon by scholars on Twitter and Facebook. Many people condemned the behavior of the Dinamo football fans, but some expressed support and approval of their messages.

### *Responses*

In the aftermath of the incident, politicians, scholars, as well as the general public expressed outrage towards the group of *Dinamo Zagreb* fans. Representatives of the Serbian National Council condemned the incident and expressed concern regarding the presence of hateful messages against Serbs in public while reiterating other similar incidents documented in the Council's annual report [link in footnote 52]. While Prime Minister Andrej Plenković stated that he had not seen the photo [yet], he condemned the football fan's behavior.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Tsai, Y. Dustin. 2020. "A Tale of Two Croatias": How Club Football (Soccer) Teams Produce Radical Regional Divides in Croatia's National Identity. *Nationalities Papers* 49(1), p. 136.

<sup>75</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=4011881035551105&set=a.124272017645379&type=3&theater>

<sup>76</sup> "Zagreb Fans' Obscene Anti-Serb Banner Sparks Outrage", available here: <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/06/12/zagreb-fans-obscene-anti-serb-banner-sparks-outrage/>

The seemingly continuous debate, however, has not resulted with a concrete initiative to solve and/or counter the presence and use of Ustaša insignia, both on the legal as well as educational level. As reported by Balkan Insight (28 July 2020), the Zagreb Municipality's State Attorney's Office filed an indictment accusing six members of a Dinamo Zagreb fan group of inciting violence and hatred. The State Attorney's Office stated in a press release that: "The six defendants are charged that they, along with other unknown persons – motivated by intolerance towards members of another national minority and with the intention of provoking violent forms of behavior, intolerance and hatred towards persons of other nationalities – with lighted flares, raised a banner made by the first defendant and shouted out loud words calling for violence and hatred."<sup>77</sup>

While there are diverse journalistic voices and outlets that challenge dominant narratives, welcome alternatives, and encourage critical thinking, criticisms directed towards the war, not matter how well founded, often cause a backlash from the side of right-wing politicians, extreme football fan groups, and other groups and individuals. For instance, around 2014 a judge and president of a County Court asked for changes be made to the Criminal law so that the negation of the *Homeland War* as solely defensive would be punished by prison. In that same year, Tomislav Karamarko – the then president of the HDZ party – stated that everyone will be able to say what they want within their four walls, but outside of those walls it they will need to respect the values upon which the Croatian republic was built: the *Homeland War*, the defenders, those who lost their lives in the war, the political doctrine of Franjo Tuđman, and the former (and deceased) Minister of Defence of Croatia.<sup>78</sup>

It cannot be said that Croatia suffers from a completely hermetic media sphere, but the fact that specific topics remain tabooed<sup>79</sup> and can be potentially dangerous to research and report on<sup>80</sup>,

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<sup>77</sup> "Croatia Charges Six over Anti-Serb Banner in Zagreb": <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/28/croatia-charges-six-over-anti-serb-banner-in-zagreb/>

<sup>78</sup> Klarić, Jasmin. 2019. Znate onu Karamarkovu rečenicu o slobodi govora u svoja četiri zida? Izgleda da je sve više živimo. Accessed on 17 August 2022 and available at <https://www.telegram.hr/politika-kriminal/znate-onu-karamarkovu-recenicu-o-slobodi-govora-u-svoja-cetiri-zida-izgleda-da-je-sve-vise-zivimo/>.

<sup>79</sup> See Blanuša, Nebojša. 2017. Trauma and taboo: Forbidden political questions in Croatia. *Croatian Political Science Review* 54(1-2): 170-196.

<sup>80</sup> For instance, Hrvoje Klasić – an outspoken critic of the increased relativization of the Ustaša regime in Croatia and the rise of historical revisionism – found a death threat in August 2019 in his office at the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb – signed with the *Za dom spremni* salute. While he did report it to the police, nothing was uncovered based on the anonymous threat. Klasić received more death threats in the meantime, with no favorable outcome documented (HRT online, 2021). <https://vijesti.hrt.hr/hrvatska/povjesnicar-hrvoje-klasic-primio-je-prijetnju-smrcu-1749130>

does not uncover a healthy sphere of dialogue. And while the behavior of the Dinamo football fans was condemned by the government, it remained largely on the level of a formality; no efforts towards a dialogue with diverse actors on how to educate about and counter such harmful behavior has been done, both regarding the implications of hateful speech in public as well as media literacy.

### *Incidents of Violence or Discrimination*

The research undertaken for the two case studies presented in this report found no cases of violence against Serbs or other minorities associated with the concrete examples. It is, however, relevant to point out that we cannot claim that a direct causal relation exists between the presence of hateful speech and any associated incidents; this would be difficult to both measure and document. Moreover, it is necessary to remember that, while a direct link may be difficult to uncover, the presence and relativization of hateful speech further advances polarization, discrimination, and may pave the way for future incidents and their consequent escalation. The often-insidious nature of this dynamic needs to be considered within the overall social environment.

The *Za dom spremni* salute, along with other Ustaša insignia, remain present in Croatian society, especially in popular culture. There has also been an increase of murals dedicated to the *Homeland War*, which either support or reinforce the dominant war narrative, while others challenge it. In April 2023, changes to the “Law on misdemeanors against public order and peace” (*Zakon o prekršajima protiv javnog reda i mira*<sup>81</sup>) have been proposed and include a significant increase in fines as a consequence of using Ustaša symbols and insignia.<sup>82</sup> It is yet to be seen how this initiative develops, however, focusing solely on bans is not a constructive long-term solution. Emphasis should always be on education and the development of wide social initiatives that include contributions ranging from scholars, journalists, politicians, educators, and the like.

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<sup>81</sup> <https://www.zakon.hr/z/279/Zakon-o-prekr%C5%A1ajima-protiv-javnog-reda-i-mira>

<sup>82</sup> Marić, Jagoda. 2023. Civilizacijski iskorak! Uvode se goleme kazne za ustaški pozdrav, tko vikne ‘ZDS’ ostat će bez četiri place. Accessed on 25 April 2023, available at: <https://www.novolist.hr/novosti/hrvatska/civilizacijski-iskorak-uvode-se-goleme-kazne-za-ustaski-pozdrav-tko-vikne-zds-ostat-ce-bez-cetiri-place/>.

