

Laboratory

Memory and Media in the Western Balkans

Reporting and Storytelling

Final Report

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The first part of the laboratory, coordinated by Marco Abram and Serena Epis (OBCT/CCI), introduced the concepts of public and collective memory concerning significant historical events in Southeast Europe. The second part centered on case studies of journalists who, due to their reporting on these events, became targets of threats and intimidation.

The students' contributions are presented in chapters, each dedicated to a significant case study from three post-Yugoslav countries.

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Challenging the dominant memory: freedom of expression and the risks for journalists in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Francesco Berto, Irene Borella, Bianca Colli, Stefano D'Anna

There is a twilight zone between history and memory, between the past as a generalized record and the past as part of, or background to, one's own life¹. Because of this blurred boundary, memory plays a crucial role in shaping and defining history, not merely as an individual belonging experience but also as a social construct actively shaped in the present. The collective memory represents a social group's relationship with the past and, for this reason, the same event can be remembered in different ways depending on the social group that narrates it. An example of this pluralism of memories can be found in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a state in which the collective memory regarding the Yugoslav Wars varies significantly across different regions. As stated by Moll (2013)², this country is characterized by the coexistence of three main different memories, molded by the ethnic composition of local populations: the Bosniak, the Bosnian Serb and the Bosnian Croat ethnonational historical narratives.³

Focusing on the Herzegovinian area, the dominant memory about the Yugoslav Wars largely aligns with Croatian nationalist narratives, advocating for a separate Croat entity within BiH due to their minority status in the Federation and the risk of identity loss. Especially in the Croat-dominated cantons, ties to Croatia remain more prominent, with school textbooks depicting Bosnian Croats primarily as part of the Croatian nation⁴. Three main points support this perspective. First, the 2013 census data shows that Croats made up the 98.8% of the West Herzegovina Canton's population and 53.5% in Herzegovina-Neretva Canton⁵. This demographic majority established a Croatian cultural and social influence, contributing to the prevailing Croat-centered memory in the region. Second, Herzegovina's post-war monuments, such as in Mostar, reinforce Croatian identity. For example, the Memorial Cross on Hum Hill, a large symbol of Catholicism and Croat nationalism, is a prominent and visible reminder of Croat identity and faith for Croats in the region⁶. However, it has been divisive; Bosniaks in Mostar view it as a provocative symbol that exacerbates ethnic divides, contrasting with the Old Bridge, which they see as a unifying cultural symbol from the Ottoman era. Last, in West Herzegovina Canton, Croatian symbols still dominate the canton flag, despite the Constitutional Court ruling them unconstitutional when used in neighboring Canton 10 for excluding Bosniak and Serb identities⁷. Regardless of this ruling, these symbols remain on the flag, making it closely resemble that of the Croatian Republic of Herzeg-Bosnia (1991–1994) and emphasizing the

¹ Hobsbawm, E. *The age of empire* (London, 2002)

² Moll, N. (2013). Fragmented memories in a fragmented country: memory competition and political identity-building in today's Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Nationalities Papers*, 41(6), 910–935.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2013.768220>

³ Division and Denial and Nothing Else? Culture of History and Memory Politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina
12. Apr 2015 - DOI 10.25626/0036. Nicolas Moll

⁴ <https://www.cultures-of-history.uni-jena.de/index.php?id=67#part2>

⁵ <http://www.statistika.ba/?lang=en#link4>

⁶ <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/318-representing-competing-entities-postwar-mostar>

⁷ <https://www.crwflags.com/fotw/flags/ba-10.html>

canton's Croatian identity⁸. These elements together illustrate the demographic and cultural Croatian influence in the area, reinforcing the idea that the dominant memory in Herzegovina about the Yugoslav Wars is primarily aligned with Croatian cultural and historical perspectives.

Bosnia Herzegovina towards the european integration process

Bosnia Herzegovina's path toward EU membership began in 2016 with the submission of its application. In 2022, it was granted candidate status. In March 2024, all 27 EU leaders agreed to open accession talks with Bosnia and Herzegovina. In its 2024 assessment, the European Commission acknowledged some progress in Bosnia's political landscape but highlighted several key challenges that remain: a) constitutional reform; b) strengthening institutions; c) improving coordination on EU matters; d) safeguarding civil society; e) ensuring transparency in public funding. The Commission's 2024 report also pointed to a hostile environment for media freedom, including pressures from high-ranking politicians. There is no official nationwide data on threats and attacks against journalists and media workers, nor on their judicial follow-up. While freedom of expression and the press are formally guaranteed, the Commission stressed that their enforcement remains inadequate. Bosnia Herzegovina still needs to improve several reforms to protect journalists and freedom of expression and also to fulfill the European Media Freedom Act. Journalism still remains a precarious profession, as stated by the Commission, with low wages and little job security. Furthermore, the "high number of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP) fuels self-censorship" (EC, 2024)⁹.

Alternative memories in Herzegovina

Today different national memories hinder the formation of a single collective memory in Bosnia Herzegovina since every national group acknowledges only the war crimes that its people suffered, not the ones they perpetrated. In fact, each memory is imposed by a generation of politicians and bureaucrats who applaud war criminals and want them to be remembered as heroes by future generations too, complicating the path to a comprehensive memory¹⁰. The illuminating book by Monika Palmberger, *"How Generations Remember"*, portrays the divisive narratives taught in the schools of Mostar (for example, the date when the war broke out is disputed: Bosnian-Serb and Bosniak textbooks cite April 6, 1992, while Croat-Bosnian books mark it as October 5, 1991 when the Croatian city of Ravno was attacked by the Serbs¹¹). The book gives a clear picture of different generational perspectives: older people link the 1990s war to WWII factions, whereas younger individuals view their peers in a less divided manner. Croat-Bosnian Parliamentarians complain about the unjust Bosnian Parliamentary Assembly's that grant more rights to Bosniaks and the Serb-Bosnians: Croat Bosnians MPs lack veto power and their delegation does not fully represent Croat political interests, as it relies on Bosniak votes.

⁸ <https://www.crwflags.com/fotw/flags/ba-08.html>

⁹ https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/451db011-6779-40ea-b34b-a0eeda451746_en?filename=Bosnia%20and%20Herzegovina%20Report%202024.pdf

¹⁰ Ivanov H. et al. (2024). Decade of Remembrance: Memory Politics and Commemorative Practices in the Post-Yugoslav Countries. *RECOM Reconciliation Network*, p. 55.. Belgrade (RS)

¹¹ Palmberger M., *How Generations Remember* (London, 2016)

The role of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in memory policies

The ICTY was established to prosecute war crimes committed during the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s. This United Nations court of law operated until 2017, significantly influencing international humanitarian law by providing victims with a platform to share their memories and traumatic experiences. The Tribunal held numerous individuals accountable for war crimes and crimes against humanity¹². A fair and just trial, beyond its judicial aspects, can serve as an important foundation for building memory policies that overcome divisions. As will be seen in the following paragraphs, the tribunal's rulings still play a significant role in the remembrance of the war crimes committed in the former Yugoslavia; some journalists from the region have faced threats related to what happened during the trials in the Hague.

More than 90 war criminals were convicted by the ICTY. One of the most infamous was Slobodan Praljak, also known as "Brada", accused and convicted of multiple war crimes committed in the self-proclaimed Croatian Republic of Herceg-Bosnia¹³. Specifically, he was found guilty of:

- **Four counts of grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions** (cruel treatment, unlawful deportation, inhuman treatment, etc.).
- **Six counts of violations of the laws or customs of war** (destruction or willful damage to institutions dedicated to religion or education, etc.).
- **Five counts of crimes against humanity** (persecution on political, racial, and religious grounds; murder; deportation, etc.).

He is particularly remembered for his role in the destruction of Mostar's Bridge¹⁴, which occurred in November 1993. Ultimately sentenced to 20 years in prison, he committed suicide by drinking poison in the courtroom during the pronouncement of the appeal judgment against him in November 2017¹⁵.

Labeled as a "hero" for someone, on the other hand many agreed with the harsh verdict of the International Criminal Court "war criminal". These words, deemed disrespectful by Croatian nationalists, outraged many, leading them to direct their anger at the journalists who had written such remarks about Praljak.

The threats to journalists and media reporters

Today the Bosnian society has proved to be very much divided and violent, particularly so against journalists. Thanks to portals like Mapping Media Freedom, it is possible to have a real count of the crimes committed against journalists all over Europe. In this research, the attacks against free press that occurred in Bosnia have been analysed in the year 2024 and the results are very dramatic: until December 12th, there have been fourteen attacks on journalists, among them, many threats, assaults, defamation, intimidation by police officers have been found, legal incidents and more¹⁶.

¹² [ICTY Official Website](https://www.icty.org/x/cases/prlic/ind/en/prl-ii040304e.htm)

¹³ <https://www.icty.org/x/cases/prlic/ind/en/prl-ii040304e.htm>

¹⁴ <https://www.balkanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Bosnia-Herzegovina/Mostar-the-Old-One-twenty-years-later-143828>

¹⁵ <https://www.irmct.org/en/news/dutch-authorities-conclude-criminal-investigation-slobodan-praljak%E2%80%99s-death>

¹⁶ <https://www.mappingmediafreedom.org/> (Accessed: 12 December 2024)

The particular nature of these episodes is dramatic: public officials and private individuals were responsible for the largest share of offenses, three each, among them threats of journalists by mayors and ministers, a DDoS attack and assaults. In contrast, both the police and public entities were involved in 1 case each of intimidation and censorship. Criminal clans, private entrepreneurs/legal professionals, and media portals each contributed with two episodes each: the offenses ranged from police intimidation and online harassment by top officials to death threats issued by criminal figures, legal actions against journalists and targeted discrediting campaigns by media portals. Although Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU candidate status, granted in December 2022, media freedom reforms have stalled in recent years, with some areas even regressing. International pressure and EU-backed reform recommendations have yet to yield significant positive changes, further deepening the stagnation. Despite EU candidate status, reforms have stalled, and international pressure has failed to achieve significant improvements. Media freedom in the country has deteriorated, especially in Republika Srpska, with restrictive legislative initiatives widening the gap between the RS and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina¹⁷. While the situation between the two entities is becoming increasingly divergent, there are legitimate concerns that negative trends or legal changes in Republika Srpska could extend to the Federation. Implementing reforms in line with EU recommendations at the national level will require significant political will and consensus, which is currently hindered by major political challenges. However, advancing media freedom remains essential for democratic development and Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU accession.

Among the many journalists covering the Hague International Criminal Court's sentence about Praljak there was Sanel Kajan, working for the regional private broadcaster Al Jazeera Balkans (AJB) as journalist and correspondent. Kajan was mostly targeted for using his voice in order to announce a special show on the International Court Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) trial on AJB.

As reported on *Mapping Media Freedom*¹⁸, the journalist was directed to a serious number of threatening messages, that Kajan decided to denounce to the police. These horrible death threats were mostly sent by Kajan's fellow citizens, Bosnian Croats, who arose to defend Praljak. Among the many that can be read on the journalist's Facebook page, sentences like *"You won't be alive for a long time. I promise you this"* and *"Shame on you, you unbaptised Satan"* cannot be ignored. Indeed, these messages did not remain unnoticed, as the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media¹⁹, Harlem Désir, called on the authorities of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina in order to investigate these numerous threats, trying to ensure journalists the needed safety. Désir called upon authorities as they have *"an obligation to ensure that journalists have safe working conditions"*, as reported on *Balkan Insight*²⁰.

However, Kajan's case can be inscribed in a more generalised atmosphere of rivalry and contrasting memories. Nonetheless, Sanel Kajan is originally from Mostar. Thus witness the troubled situation the Balkan region keeps facing, an area where nationalisms still hold tight, and where memory is dividing its people.

¹⁷

<https://www.ecpmf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/bosnia-and-herzegovina-media-freedom-in-survival-mode-1-1.pdf>

¹⁸ [Croatia: Journalists targeted after reporting on sentences imposed on "war criminals" - Mapping Media Freedom](#)

¹⁹ <https://www.osce.org/fom/360491>

²⁰ <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/12/06/bosnian-journalists-condemn-praljak-verdict-death-threats-12-06-2017/>

Two Individual Stories, Two Different Memories

The examples introduced just above highlight how individual and collective memories can differ between perpetrators and victims. The Croatian government officially stated that the Hague process was unjust for the six Croats from Bosnia and Herzegovina²¹, as well as for the Croatian people. Croatian President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović even described Praljak as “a man who preferred to die rather than live as a convict for crimes he did not commit”²² and to this day he is still considered a national hero in Croatia and Croat-Bosnia. Conversely, the Bosniak community perceives Praljak and the Croatian occupation as unjustified, cruel, and criminal. The case of Sanel Kajan demonstrates how the use of an objective term such as “war criminal” can still create divisions and trigger tensions within both Bosnian and Croatian societies.

In conclusion, the memory of the war and the war crimes committed in the 1990s reflects the deep divisions that still persist in Bosnia and Herzegovinian society, where three distinct ethnic groups correspond to three separate collective memories. This polarization continues to influence and endanger journalists covering these issues, as objectively recounting events and using terms like “war criminal” remains risky in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The contrasting cases of Slobodan Praljak and Sanel Kajan illustrate the region’s tense atmosphere, where divisive memories and both physical and psychological violence constantly threaten BiH’s multiethnic fabric.

This chapter has been turned into a videoclip available on the on the SPGI Department YouTube channel:



[Challenging the dominant memory in Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), written and produced by: Francesco Berto, Irene Borella, Bianca Colli, Stefano D’Anna.

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²¹ <https://vlada.gov.hr/news/pm-praljak-s-act-speaks-of-deep-moral-injustice-towards-bosnian-croats/22949>

²² [Tpi: Praljak, presidente Croazia critica giudici dell'Aja - Politica - Ansa.it](#)

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Croatian collective Memory and media freedom: The case of Drago Hedl

Riccardo Andrenacci and Renzo Giovanni Bresciani

Introduction

The 1990s Yugoslav Wars had a fundamental impact on Croatian society, as they did on all the other states that emerged from Yugoslavia's dissolution. Each Country received a different legacy from this violent conflict, characterized by an ethno-nationalist connotation, and developed different, often opposing, collective memories that still condition the respective narratives on these events. The following article will attempt to illustrate the features of Croatian collective memory and its evolution over time, from the "Homeland War" narration to the entrance of new re-elaborations of the past, with some steps towards recognizing different memories. Then, we will discuss the case of Drago Hedl, a Croatian journalist who, due to his investigations on war crimes during the Croatian independence war, at odds with his Country's dominant memory, suffered from several threats, beatings, and accusations of treason. This case will allow us to discuss the current state of media freedom in Croatia and the recent violations against journalists.

Collective Memory in Croatia

The Croatian collective memory of the Yugoslav Wars was crafted by the myth of the "Homeland War": Croatia is seen as a victim, compelled to fight a defensive war against the Serbian invasion, which then is gloriously won by the heroic Croatian troops who manage to defeat the invaders²³. This bivalence of victimization and heroism is respectively symbolized by two fundamental events: the siege of Vukovar (1991) and the "Operation Storm" (1995)²⁴. This fundamental myth of Croatia's identity led to a militarized memory²⁵, strictly focusing on commemorations and monuments that glorify Croatia's military heroism²⁶.

This interpretation of the conflict was officially affirmed in 2000, when the Croatian National Assembly passed a "Declaration on Homeland War", according to which the Croatian defense against the illegitimate Serbian aggression not only constituted a fundamental step for its transition towards a democratic regime in line with western values, but it also gave a significant contribution in resolving that international crisis²⁷. This reading of the conflict was elevated as the only interpretation possible, and it would have to be universally accepted by all the Croatian citizens, totally excluding any possible alternative or critical reading of it. Before this declaration, a clear position had already been stated by Milan Vuković, the then President of the

²³ Horelt, M.-A., & Renner, J. (2008). *Denting a Heroic Picture: A Narrative Analysis of Collective Memory in Post-War Croatia*. Perspectives, 16(2), 5–27, p. 15.

²⁴ Banjevlav, T. (2012). Conflicting Memories, Competing Narratives and Contested Histories in Croatia's Post-war Commemorative Practices. *Politička Misao : Časopis Za Politologiju*, 49(5), 7–31.

²⁵ Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso. (2017). *Guerre jugoslave, militarizzazione della memoria*. OBC Transeuropa.

²⁶ Banjevlav, T. (2012). *Memory of War or War over Memory? The Official Politics of Remembering in 1990s Croatia*, p. 7.

²⁷ Horelt, M.-A., & Renner, J. (2008). *Denting a Heroic Picture: A Narrative Analysis of Collective Memory in Post-War Croatia*. Perspectives, 16(2), 5–27, p. 15.

Supreme Court of Croatia, who declared that the Croats could not have committed any war crime since they were fighting a defensive war²⁸.

In recent years, many steps have been taken to reach a new self-awareness about the conflict through a slow process of re-elaboration of the past to promote reconciliation by establishing the facts and, simultaneously, recognizing different “memories”. One fundamental event for this process was the 2010 meeting between Croat President Ivo Josipović and Serbia President Boris Tadić for the 19th anniversary of Vukovar’s siege. On this historical occasion, the Serbian President apologized for the war crimes committed by the Serbs in the city, with a consequent apology by Josipović for the Croatian war crimes committed in Krajina²⁹. These institutional demonstrations of mutual solidarity showed the ongoing evolution of Croatian collective memory towards more complex and self-critical views, even though the “Homeland War” myth is still widespread and often promoted³⁰. A significant contribution has been - and continues to be - given by the world of civil society, where organizations such as “Documenta - Center for Dealing with the Past” and “Youth Initiative for Human Rights” carry on the battle to deal with Croatian past and establish factual truth about the conflict, to achieve a reconciliation with the former enemy and the remembrance of all the victims of the conflict, beyond their national belonging. Another fundamental means to disrupt the one-sided narrative of the conflict is constituted by journalism. Among the many personalities who have contributed to raising awareness about Croatian crimes in the conflict, it is necessary to mention the journalist Drago Hedl, whose case will be illustrated below.

Drago Hedl’s Case Study

Drago Hedl, a prominent Croatian investigative journalist, has exposed corruption and unethical practices within the political and private élites. Starting in 1991, Hedl covered the war in Osijek as a reporter for a journal from Split (Slobodna Dalmacija), reporting on crimes against the Serbian population during the early stages of the conflict³¹. His investigation between 1993 and 2005 revealed that Serbian civilians had been tortured and thrown into the Drava River and General Branimir Glavas was pointed as the one responsible for the crimes³². Despite facing numerous threats from powerful individuals and institutions, Hedl’s work led to a trial in 2006 against Glavas for war crimes³³.

Hedl’s journalism has had a profound impact on Croatia’s public discourse: his fearless reporting on corruption, government manipulation and organized crime has helped to shape and inform

²⁸ Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa. (2012). *Croazia: il giornalista che ha rivelato i crimini di guerra di Osijek*. <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/aree/Croazia/Croazia-il-giornalista-che-ha-rivelato-i-crimini-di-guerra-di-Osijek-14220>

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³¹ Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa. (2015). *Drago Hedl: il mestiere del giornalista, tra minacce e umiliazioni*. <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/aree/Croazia/Drago-Hedl-il-mestiere-del-giornalista-tra-minacce-e-umiliazioni-182250>

³² Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa. (2015). *Croazia: le camicie nere di Branimir Glavaš*. <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/aree/Croazia/Croazia-le-camicie-nere-di-Branimir-Glavas-165298>

³³ Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa. (2015). *Glavas libero e riletto*. <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/aree/Croazia/Glavas-libero-e-riletto-40072>

the public opinion in the country. By confronting powerful figures, his work has stimulated public debates about justice, accountability, and transparency. Hedl's investigations have not only exposed critical issues, but they have also fostered a culture where the public sphere is more active in demanding answers from institutions. His influence extends beyond reporting, as his articles inspire significant societal discussions on governance and the rule of law.

Hedl's case highlights the challenges journalists face in Croatia, where press freedom is under constant threat despite the country's nominal media independence. Journalists face legal harassment, intimidation, and violence, which hinder their ability to report freely. The Croatian government's increasing pressure on the media, through legal and political means, exacerbates these dangers. Hedl's struggle underscores the precarious state of media freedom and the need for stronger protections for journalists and his case serves as a reminder of the importance of safeguarding press independence in Croatia's evolving media landscape.

Media Freedom and Challenges in Croatia

Media freedom in Croatia is a complex issue. While the country enjoys a relatively free press compared to other nations in the region, the media environment remains far from ideal standards. Freedom House classifies Croatia as "partly free"³⁴, reflecting both democratic achievements and ongoing challenges to media independence. The media landscape is highly polarized, with outlets often aligning with political or business interests, which limits the diversity of critical viewpoints.

Journalists in Croatia face several obstacles, including financial constraints, political pressure, and threats to their safety. Despite constitutional guarantees of press freedom, many journalists struggle with legal and financial challenges in their work. One of the growing concerns is the use of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), which powerful individuals or corporations use to silence investigative reporters. SLAPPs are designed to drain journalists' resources and intimidate them into curtailing critical reporting, creating a chilling effect that stifles press freedom.

Despite these challenges, media independence remains vital for Croatia's democracy and investigative journalists play a crucial role in ensuring transparency, revealing societal issues that might otherwise remain hidden.

In addition to political polarization, the relationship between the media and government has grown increasingly strained. The European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) has highlighted increasing attacks on the Croatian press under the HDZ government, further complicating the work of investigative reporters³⁵. Journalists investigating corruption or government malpractice often face not only legal threats³⁶ but also intimidation or violence. These pressures deter critical reporting, as journalists fear retaliation.

According to mapping media freedom, in 2024, there were 24 reported attacks on journalists in Croatia³⁷, a troubling statistic that underscores the growing risks faced by the press. Most of

³⁴ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/croatia/freedom-world/2024>

³⁵ Media Freedom Rapid Response Report: <https://www.mfrr.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/MFRR-Croatia-Report-2025.pdf>

³⁶ Vuk Tesija. (2023, July 20). *Croatia's Proposed Media Law Condemned as "Death for Journalism."* Balkan Insight. <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/07/20/croatias-proposed-media-law-condemned-as-death-for-journalism/>

³⁷ Mapping Media Freedom Website. <https://www.mappingmediafreedom.org/>

these attacks were verbal, with journalists receiving threats, but there were also instances of physical assaults. The offenders behind these attacks were often private figures, such as owners of shipping companies, and local politicians who felt threatened by investigative reporting.

The key concerns driving these attacks are closely linked to corruption within both the private and public sectors together with censorship, another major issue, with some critics of the government or powerful business interests facing increasing pressure to silence their voices.

As Croatia navigates its media landscape, safeguarding a free and independent press will be essential for its democratic development. The increasing political interference³⁸ must be addressed through significant reforms to protect journalists' rights and ensure press freedom. While challenges remain, investigative journalists continue to serve as crucial watchdogs in holding power accountable, underscoring the need for continued efforts to protect the integrity of the press in the country.

Conclusion

In this short report, we saw how Croatian collective memory has evolved over the years and how closely it is connected to the issue of media freedom. The case of Drago Hedl demonstrates that a free press is not only crucial for Croatia to deal with its past and achieve reconciliation with the former enemy, but it's also a fundamental element for safeguarding its democratic development.

This chapter has been turned into a videoclip available on the on the SPGI Department YouTube channel:



[Croatian Collective Memory. The case of Drago Hedl](#), written and produced by:
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³⁸ Vuk Tesija. (2024, January 18). *Croatian Parliament Urged to Vote Down "Dangerous Law for Journalism"*. Balkan Insight. <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/01/18/croatian-parliament-urged-to-vote-down-dangerous-law-for-journalism/>

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Freedom of Speech in Serbia: The case of Marko Vidojković

Elina Kabanova, Matilde Lencioni, Alessia Pellicanò

Dominant memory and internal challenge in serbia

The memory of the wars of the 1990s in Serbia remains a subject of ongoing discussion, shaped by state-supported narratives, historical interpretations, and alternative perspectives from civil society groups. The dominant memory framework promoted in official discourse largely portrays the conflicts as defensive in nature, emphasizing Serbian victimhood, especially the experiences of displaced populations, while glorifying episodes of heroism. This narrative is reinforced through official commemorations, educational materials, and political rhetoric, whereas alternative perspectives advocating for a broader historical accountability continue to shape discussions within Serbia and beyond.

A central issue in Serbia's memory politics is the classification of the Srebrenica events of 1995. In 2007, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled that the Bosnian Serb forces were held responsible for the mass killing of over 8,000 Bosniak men and boys in Srebrenica.³⁹ ICJ investigations found that, being verified the "specific intent" and the aim for "destruction in its entirety or in substantial part" of the Bosniak group, the Srebrenica massacre constitutes genocide.⁴⁰ While the ICJ did not hold Serbia directly responsible, it concluded that Serbia had an obligation to prevent the tragedy.⁴¹ However, the interpretation of this ruling remains debated, both within political discourse and among historians.

³⁹ ICJ, "Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide" (Bosnia and Herzegovina v. Serbia and Montenegro), Judgment, I.C.J. Reports 2007, 290

⁴⁰ Ibidem, 293

⁴¹ Ibidem, 456

A significant moment in these discussions occurred in May 2024, when the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution officially recognizing July 11 as International Srebrenica Genocide Remembrance Day, while it condemns “any denial of the Srebrenica genocide as a historical event”.⁴² The Serbian government voiced concerns about this resolution, suggesting that it might lead to misinterpretations. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, speaking at the UN General Assembly, argued that this resolution is an undemocratic decision in the system of Nations that stems from political considerations.⁴³

While the dominant memory framework remains influential, alternative perspectives on history do exist in Serbia, largely supported by civil society organizations, historians, and international institutions. Groups such as Women in Black have been holding annual commemorations for Srebrenica victims in Belgrade since the 1990s.⁴⁴ Similar organizations advocate for a more inclusive recognition of historical events, although such initiatives sometimes generate public debate and differing viewpoints within Serbian society.

Their contest has also moved on the issue of the Serbian official calendar. Since right after the end of the war, various activists have commemorated the Srebrenica genocide - before the 11th was internationally picked - on the 10th of July. This calendar was followed by those, including Women in Black, who silently vigil in Belgrade square to remember the 8372 victims “on the eve of the official memorial and burial service in Potočari, Bosnia-Herzegovina”.⁴⁵ By diving into the Women in Black official website, we learn this type of nonviolent protest was still ongoing as of 10th July, 2024 and, in accordance with the latest UN Assembly resolution, it is now advocating for the 11th July to be proclaimed a national commemoration in Serbia.⁴⁶

On a global level, obviously, the way Serbia approaches memory politics has broader implications in terms of international relations and European integration. In a joint statement, the High Representative/Vice-President Borrell and the Commissioner Várhelyi, on behalf of the EU, have encouraged “the leaders to reject divisive rhetoric and act with truth, justice, trust, and dialogue”.⁴⁷ Notwithstanding EU cautious suggestions, Serbia continues to navigate these expectations focusing on balancing domestic perspectives about history. However, as scholar Obradović-Wochnik underscores, EU membership for Serbia depends on its promotion of transitional justice in the country.⁴⁸

⁴² United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) “General Assembly Adopts Resolution on Srebrenica Genocide, Designating International Day of Reflection, Commemoration”, 2024, UN doc A/78/L.67/Rev.1

⁴³ Stojanovic M., Visnjic B., Baletic K. and Kurtic A., “Srebrenica Survivors Hail UN Genocide Resolution, Serbs Question Vote’s Legitimacy”, *Balkan Insight*, May 23, 2024, <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/05/23/srebrenica-survivors-hail-un-genocide-resolution-serbs-question-votes-legitimacy/> [last access: 10 March 2025]

⁴⁴ Baiocchi M. L., “WOMEN IN BLACK: MOBILIZATION INTO ANTI-NATIONALIST, ANTI-MILITARIST, FEMINIST ACTIVISM IN SERBIA”. *CEU Political Science Journal* 04:469-500. p. 473. This study is insightful for what concerns witnesses released by Women in Black participants.

⁴⁵ Fridman O., “Alternative calendars and memory work in Serbia: Anti-war activism after Milošević”, 2015, *Memory Studies*, 8(2), 212-226. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698014558661> [last access: 10 March 2025]

⁴⁶ Zene U Crnom, “We shall never forget the Srebrenica genocide!”, <https://zeneucrnom.org/en/12-o-nama/naslovna/2406-we-shall-never-forget-the-srebrenica-genocide> [last access: 10 March 2025]

⁴⁷ European Commission, “Joint statement by High Representative/Vice-President Borrell and Commissioner Várhelyi on the 29th anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide”, 10 July 2024, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/joint-statement-high-representativevice-president-borrell-and-commissioner-varhelyi-29th-anniversary-2024-07-10_en [last access: 10 March 2025]

⁴⁸ Obradović-Wochnik, J. “Serbian Civil Society as an Exclusionary Space: NGOs, the Public and ‘Coming to Terms with the Past’”. In: Bojicic-Dzelilovic, V., Ker-Lindsay, J., Kostovicova, D. (eds) “Civil Society and Transitions in the Western

In conclusion, discussions surrounding dominant memory and internal challenges in Serbia reflect the broader complexity of post-conflict reconciliation. The government emphasizes national experiences and narratives, while some civil society actors and international organizations fight for broader engagement with historical accountability. These ongoing debates highlight the plurality of memory perspectives coexisting in Serbia, demonstrating how historical interpretation continues to evolve in response to social and political developments.

Our journalist: Marko Vidojković

Born in Belgrade in 1975, Marko Vidojković is a Serbian journalist and writer.⁴⁹ After studying at the Law school of Belgrade University, he began writing in 1998.⁵⁰ At first, he wrote numerous short stories in journals and anthologies, and later on, he started his book production, being the first, in 2001, the novel, *Ples sitnih demoni* (*The Dance of Small-Time Demons*), followed by its sequel *Đavo je moj drug* (*The Devil Is a Friend of Mine*).⁵¹

During his career, Marko Vidojković has become one of the best-known writers in Serbia. He has become relevant in the country's political landscape since publishing various novels, articles, and podcasts that openly and irreverently criticize the social and political situation in the country, in particular concerning Aleksandar Vučić's authoritarian drift. Marko's attitude is characterised by a direct - sometimes blunt - fashion that we had the chance to experience firsthand by interviewing him. It comes with no surprise that his literary language is frank.

About the content, it is his distinctive trait to portray lost and angry young people in the background of Serbia. Not by chance, the novel that had made him famous was a fiction about the 1996-97 student protests in Belgrade named *Kandže* (*The Claws*).⁵² Stopping here we can grasp only a pinch of his commitment. In fact, he is also a columnist for various newspapers and portals (*Danas*, *Buka*, etc.) and, furthermore, co-author with Nenad Kulačin of the podcast *Dobar, loš, zao* (*The good, the ugly, the bad*).⁵³

By reason of his civic engagement, he has been the target of a series of verbal attacks from the top-ranking authorities. Besides contrasting the government, the author is often explicitly critical of the Serbian population's failure to acknowledge the crimes committed in Srebrenica. In detail, one of his most forthright criticisms appears in the article written for Banja Luka's newsletter *Buka* where he set an ironic dialogue between a hypothetical teacher and the children of a first-grade school in Republika Srpska.⁵⁴ Reading these lines - translated in Italian by OBCT - the author makes the children express negationist arguments as part of a revisionist

Balkans.", New Perspectives on South-East Europe Series. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2013. p. 210

https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137296252_13 [last access: 10 March 2025]

⁴⁹ Traduki, "Marko Vidojković - Author", <https://database.traduki.eu/people/marko-vidojkovic-2/> [last access: 10 March 2025]

⁵⁰ Ibidem

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⁵² Osservatorio Balcani Caucaso e Transeuropa (OBCT), "Lo scrittore Marko Vidojković costretto a lasciare la Serbia", 6 March 2023,

<https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/aree/Serbia/Lo-scrittore-Marko-Vidojkovic-costretto-a-lasciare-la-Serbia> [last access: 10 March 2025]

⁵³ Ibidem

⁵⁴ Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa, "Marko Vidojković: la sentenza", 17 June 2021,

<https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/aree/Bosnia-Erzegovina/Marko-Vidojkovic-la-sentenza-211297> [last access: 11 March 2025]

and Serb-victimhood rhetoric widespread in Serbia. His provocative tone emphasizes the gap between confirmed historical facts and the distorted narrative being transmitted by school and family. In conclusion, the narration clearly shows how Vidojković strongly condemns the distorted narrative about Srebrenica that refuses the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia judgment of genocide.

In 2023, following a statement from PEN (International association of poets, essayists, and writers), Vidojković was forced to leave Serbia due to life threats directed at him and his wife.⁵⁵ Despite moving abroad, he does not stop his activity.⁵⁶ In the meantime, as he confessed to us, he feels to be in a limbo, unwelcomed in his own country. Justice is moving. The PEN had intervened actively to prompt authorities to punish those who were responsible and to safeguard Vidojković's security.⁵⁷

Future perspectives for Serbia: in the European Union?

The latest developments in the Serbian scenario are clear-cut evidence of how fragile its political stability is. Following the collapse of the recently-renovated Novi Sad station canopy, what at the beginning were student protests, asking for punishment of those responsible for the 15 deaths, gradually grew in strength resulting in a full-blown contestation of the government in power.⁵⁸ Mass protests arose chiefly in Belgrade, but not only, contesting its widespread corruption.⁵⁹ In the face of these animated uprisings, the Prime Minister Miloš Vučević was forced to resign and the dilemma now is cabinet reshuffle or anticipated parliamentary elections.⁶⁰

By looking at the bigger picture, structural more than episodic problems emerge. In terms of democracy, the EU itself is cautiously critical about Serbia. It recognises "irregularities in the December 2023 elections" by the voice of ODIHR.⁶¹ For what concerns the check-and-balances system, improvements are needed on the "effectiveness, autonomy and transparency of Parliament, and the role of the parliamentary opposition".⁶² Deepening the voice recently in the spotlight, "Fight against corruption", the EU Commission calls for a "robust criminal justice response to high-level corruption" despite observing that overall "some progress" are achieved.⁶³

Whether we insist on the slight progress or on the work ahead of Serbia, perceptions change. Respectively, on these basis, some could argue that the EU is more interested in building a so-called "stabilitocracy", while some others could frame Serbia's slow pace towards European

⁵⁵ Nova.sr, "Zašto je Marko Vidojković hitno izmešten iz Srbije", 06 Mar 2023, <https://n1info.rs/vesti/zasto-je-marko-vidojkovic-hitno-izmesten-iz-srbije/> [last access: 10 March 2025]

⁵⁶ Ibidem

⁵⁷ Ibidem

⁵⁸ Delauney G., Fury over Serbia station tragedy prompts first arrests, BBC, 22 November 2024 <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0qdyg8yn5yo> [last access: 31 January 2025]

⁵⁹ Moratti M., La Serbia che protesta, Osservatorio Balcani Caucaso e Transeuropa, 28 January 2025 <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/aree/Serbia/La-Serbia-che-protesta-235838> [last access: 4 February 2025]

⁶⁰ Delauney G., Gozzi L., Serbian PM quits after months of mass protests, BBC, 29 January 2025 <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c1m5x1j3p2yo> [last access: 31 January 2025]

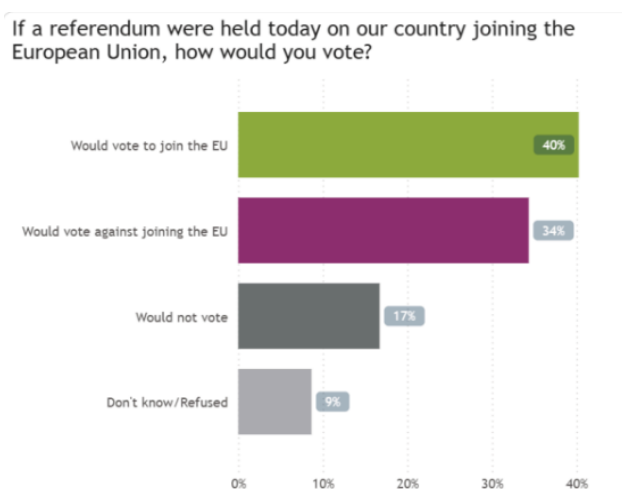
⁶¹ European Commission, COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT- Serbia 2024 Report, 30 October 2024, p. 22 https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/3c8c2d7f-bff7-44eb-b868-414730cc5902_en?filename=Serbia%20Report%202024.pdf [last access: 31 January 2025]

⁶² Ibidem, p. 23

⁶³ Ibidem, p. 6-7

integration as an effect of the decade-long phenomenon of “enlargement fatigue”.

Be it as it may, in the near future, Serbia is required to further commit in aligning with the EU *acquis* if full membership really is “its strategic goal” as the latest report reiterated here and there.⁶⁴ Of course, given this remains the will of Serbian people. In fact, doubts are raised considering that Serbia's consent towards the EU had touched its nadir at 40%, the IRI poll noted.⁶⁵ This gap between the government and the civil society should not be underestimated, on the contrary, it deserves a sincere confrontation.



Source: IRI 2024 Western Balkans Poll

To make it possible, an environment where freedom of thought, of speech and of assembly are fully implemented is the only way for a democratic discussion about the future of Serbia as a State, before than as an EU member. On this point, the EU Report suggests to this candidate country to “implement the new media laws”, to “strengthen the protection and safety of journalists” and to “ensure transparent and equitable co-funding for media content”.⁶⁶

To conclude, applying these considerations to our case study, we could state that the witness offered by journalist Marko Vidojković could take on a broader meaning. With his unorthodox view, he is contributing to cultural pluralism. Symmetrically, the life threats he received represent attempts at silencing differences of opinions, in other words, are breaches that affect the Serbian democracy's health. From this perspective, growing tensions of today, symptomatic of a lack of freedom, should be addressed logically prior to any discussion on European Union membership.

⁶⁴ Ibidem. With the search bar, “some progress” appeared 15 times.

⁶⁵ Weinberg H., IRI 2024 Western Balkans Poll, 14 May 2024, <https://www.iri.org/news/iri-2024-western-balkans-poll/> [last access: 4 February 2025]

⁶⁶ European Commission, COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT, p. 7

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