

Contested Narratives of Bleiburg in the Context of WWII Remembrance in Croatia

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Introduction

In the spring of 2019, one of the main media topics in Croatia was the possible Austrian ban of commemoration in Bleiburg, a small town on the Austro-Slovenian border. The Bleiburg anniversary memorializes soldiers¹ and civilians who collaborated with the Ustaša and Domobrani,² and who were handed over to communist partisan forces and killed at the end of WW II, in May 1945. Tensions between the Croatian organizers and religious and state institutions of the host country, Austria, intensified public debate vis-à-vis the WW II legacy in Croatia.

The unusually high media and audience interest for the 74th anniversary of communist crimes was due to a reversal in the Austrian relationship to the Bleiburg commemoration and the debate it triggered in the Croatian public sphere. The process of dealing with the uncomfortable past in Croatia, expressed through both victim and perpetrator narratives, takes on a particular meaning at the Bleiburg commemoration, the main *lieu de memoire* (Nora 1989), in the Croatian repertoire of contested memories.

Following a theoretical perspective on memory and populism studies and employing discourse analysis, this chapter analyzes the changes in memory politics related to the annual Bleiburg commemorations. The Bleiburg commemoration is controversial regarding several issues: *what* happened? *who* were the victims? and *what* was their *number*? *where* were the crimes committed? *what* does Bleiburg mean today? and *why* is this topic still so persistent in the public discourse?

The Context of Bleiburg

As the pro-Nazi Independent State of Croatia [NDH – *Nezavisna Država Hrvatska*] collapsed at the very end of WW II, the Ustaša political leadership and military units were accompanied by civilians as the Ustaša army withdrew from the occupied territories. They fled the partisan advance through Slovenia towards Austria where they hoped to surrender to the Allies and escape communist repression and vengeance. The Austrian town of Bleiburg is where these forces were handed over to the Yugoslav antifascist partisans, led by Josip Broz Tito. Thousands of Germans, Montenegrin and Serbian Četniks, and Slovenian White Guards were captured and/or executed (Rulitz 2016). The prisoners were sent on death marches across Yugoslavia, and tens of thousands were liquidated without proper trials and buried in mass graves in Slovenia and Croatia.

Although the central commemoration takes place on the field in Bleiburg, historian Igor Graovac (2007: 75) argues that “neither war nor mass crimes were committed in the actual place of Bleiburg, but only a limited number of killings took place, primarily military casualties suffered during the closing battles against the Allies and the partisans, who were part of the Allies.”

¹ Mainly Croatian and Bosnian Muslim soldiers, i.e., Ustaša and Domobrani, but also thousands of Germans, Montenegrin and Serbian Četniks, Slovenian White Guards, and Cossacks.

² Home Guards were members of the Independent State of Croatia's army.

The first commemoration of “the Bleiburg Massacre and the Way of the Cross,” as the event is officially called³, took place in 1952. In the following year, the newly established Bleiburg Honorary Guard [PBV – *Počasni bleiburški vod*] took over the organization of the annual commemoration. WW II commemorations are arenas of contested memories that reflect how Croatian society deals with the past and how it understands national identity. During the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), the commemoration was primarily remembered by relatives of the victims and political émigrés, i.e., anti-communist dissidents, as the Titoist regime suppressed any form of public memory about this massacre. On the other hand, the antifascist movement led by Tito's partisans elevated the so-called People's Liberation War to a founding myth of brotherhood and unity, exploiting the victors' narrative to unify society. Consequently, the perpetrator narrative surrounding the crimes of the Independent State of Croatia or Serbian Četnik movement was silenced, and the victim thesis concerning Ustaša, Četnik and communist crimes was downscaled⁴.

From 1990, however, political delegations and exponents of public life began attending the Bleiburg commemoration. Vjeran Pavlaković (2010) argued that the first Croatian president, Franjo Tuđman, recognized the symbolic power of Bleiburg, and decided “to control it rather than allow his political opponents to use it against him.” Therefore, in 1995, after the break-up of Yugoslavia and the end of armed conflict, the Croatian Parliament took over the organization of the Bleiburg commemoration. None of the subsequent Croatian presidents or prime ministers, however, ever visited the Bleiburg commemoration, albeit some paid a visit and laid wreaths at the memorial site. State sponsorship was revoked in 2012 during the central-left government, only to be re-established in 2016 following the regime change.

Even though totalitarian, authoritarian and democratic regimes in the past century “used history extensively for their own legitimization (...), the discourse on some aspects of WW II and the post-war period still show diverging interpretations” (Pauković 2019). In fact, one of the main impacts of the Bleiburg commemoration is on present-day political debates about the past, which are widely exploited during electoral campaigns and on the daily political agenda.

Over the years, Bleiburg became an important *lieu de memoire* symbolizing “both communist crimes at the end of WW II and the legacy of communist authoritarianism more generally” (Pavlaković, Bentin and Pauković 2018). The wide symbolic field connected to the Bleiburg event contributed to the way the event was framed in the official memory calendar as the “Remembrance Day for Croatian Victims in the Struggle for Freedom and Independence” [*Dan spomena na hrvatske žrtve u borbi za slobodu i nezavisnost*]. Therefore, the day of remembrance not only describes the dead as exclusively ethnic Croatian victims, but proposes a historical continuity and understanding that the “struggle for freedom and independence” was the link between modern day Croatia and the WW II pro-Nazi para-state.

The recent official politics of remembrance of Bleiburg followed the anti-totalitarian memory culture that East European member states added to the predominantly antifascist memory politics present in the EU. The new discourse regarding WW II and the post-war period was developed and backed by official declarations and legal provisions. With regard to international documents, it is important to recall the resolutions of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

³ The title used by the organizers describes both the presumed clash on the field at Bleiburg and the death marches to Yugoslav territories.

⁴ See for example, Jović (2012).

(CoE).⁵ In addition to accepting these documents, the Croatian Parliament adopted a number of acts and declarations that include the *Declaration on Anti-fascism* (2005), positively evaluating Croatia's antifascist foundations and pursuant to the Council of Europe resolutions, the *Declaration on the Condemnation of Crimes Committed during the Totalitarian Communist Regime in Croatia 1945-1990* (2006). In 2011, the central-right Croatian Democratic Union-led government [*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica, HDZ*] adopted August 23rd as a Memorial Day of Remembrance of Victims of Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes, during which the Bleiburg legacy is often evoked. In recent years, however, representatives of civil society from Croatia, Slovenia, Italy and Austria have organized counter protests in order to express their disagreement with the "Ustaša party". Although these protests gather no more than 100 people (in comparison to several tens of thousands present each year at the Unterloibach field (another pilgrimage site), their message, strengthened with ever more opposing voices from the Austrian public sphere, was echoed during the official Bleiburg commemoration: "These days whole Europe stood up, many things were written: where do those people find such information and disinformation? All we want to do is pray to God".⁶

Such a change in the plot was caused by the nature of the event reported to the Austrian religious and state authorities, namely, the Bleiburg commemoration was officially presented (and the permission for its organization was released upon this request) as a religious service to the victims of communist crimes.⁷ However, the non-religious elements of the commemoration were questioned and criticized by Austrian state representatives. In 2019, Catholic Church representatives from the region of Carinthia first issued a ban on the Bleiburg commemoration saying "part of the event is politically instrumentalized and a component of national political ritual contributing to selective perception and interpretation of history" (Pavić 2019). In order to respond to growing criticism from outside of Croatia, the commemoration contained only a religious service, and the transcript of the mass was provided in both Croatian and German to the journalists who followed the event.

The Bleiburg commemoration is frequently seen and compared to another, albeit diametrically different, WW II commemoration – the one dedicated to victims of the Jasenovac concentration camp⁸. Indeed, some scholars argue that Jasenovac and Bleiburg relate to each other as myth and counter-myth.⁹

⁵ *Resolution 1096 on measures to dismantle the heritage of former communist totalitarian systems* (1996) and *Resolution 1481 on the need for international condemnation of crimes of totalitarian communist regimes* (2006), followed by three documents issued by the European Parliament: *the EU Framework Decision on combating certain forms and expressions of racism and xenophobia by means of criminal law* (2008); and the *European Parliament resolution on European conscience and totalitarianism* (2009), together with the *Declaration of the European Parliament on the proclamation of 23 August as European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism* (2008).

⁶ Želimir Puljić, bishop of Zadar, 2018.

⁷ Even though the annual commemoration is held on private property, the permit for the religious service is under the competence of Catholic Church representatives in Carinthia.

⁸ Jasenovac was the biggest concentration and extermination camp that existed during the Independent State of Croatia, in which the Ustaša killed mostly Serbs, Jews, Roma and Croatian antifascists. A heated public debate started in Croatia during the 1990s about the number of Jasenovac victims. The number ranged from 40,000, which was the number quoted by Franjo Tuđman in his book *Bespuća hrvatske zbiljnosti*, to 1,000,000. Although the exact number will probably never be known, rigorous scientific research argues that the

Memory Politics and Populism as a Discursive Style

This research explores how collective memory about (post-) WW II crimes is shaped in Croatia, and the social processes through which such memory is produced, performed, and maintained. It understands collective memory as the selective and cumulative process through which collectivities, from groups to nations, make use of and meaningful sense of the past. The interaction between cognitive (individual) and social (collective) memory (Halbwachs 1992) is established and manifested symbolically through a “body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose ‘cultivation’ serves to stabilize and convey that society’s self-image” (Assman and Czaplicka 1995: 132). Through this media and related ritual practices, the stories and myths that congeal as collective memory serve as the foundation upon which collective identity rests.

Social anthropology has already proved that memorialization practices, and particularly commemorations of war events, are used, first of all, to legitimize the ruling ideology and to build a state/national/ethnic identity. From the perspective of the state, the goals of public commemorations and memorials are more often related to nation-building and defining an “imagined community” (Anderson 2006). Particularly Billig’s (1995) theoretical framework of “banal nationalism” seems significant in arguing that national identity is predominantly produced and reproduced in a variety of social fields and cultural forms. This performative character of contemporary identity formation (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008) draws attention to their dynamic character and the frequent drawing on symbolic repertoire from popular images, rituals, and sites.

This chapter analyzes speeches delivered at the Bleiburg commemoration through the content and context of memory politics and identity that are at the heart of everyday political debates. Focus is also placed on the means and discursive strategies that facilitate the creation of memory. In other words, populism is analysed as a linguistic phenomenon that dialectically relates to memory politics through discourse. This contribution follows Michael Kazin's theoretical approach to populism as discursive style, i.e., “a language used by those who claim to speak for the majority (...) who work hard and love their country” (Kazin 1995: 1). In particular, rather than treating populism as a coherent ideology or as a series of social movements, Kazin (1995: 5) analyzes it as a “flexible mode of persuasion” (1995: 3) and as “a persistent yet mutable style of political rhetoric”. He explains that with the migration of populism from left to right “the vocabulary of grassroots rebellion now served to thwart and reverse social and cultural change rather than to promote it” (Kazin 1995: 4). Finally, populism tends too easily to become a “language of the dispirited, vengeful, and the cynical” (Kazin 1995: 283), especially in times of perceived decline.

Methodological Approach

This research follows the methodology of critical discourse analysis (CDA) which sees both written and spoken “discourse” as a form of social practice (Wodak et. al. 1999: 157). CDA claims that specific forms of social identities, like gender or national identity, are discursively, through language, produced, reproduced, transformed and deconstructed. Therefore, the intersection of memory politics and populist discourse at the annual Bleiburg commemoration is

number ranges between 80,000 and 100,000. For the number of victims and structure of the Jasenovac site, see: www.jusp-jasenovac.hr. See also Mataušić (2003).

⁹ See, for example, Perica (2002), MacDonald (2002), Kolsto (2002).

analyzed within the broader contextual framework of identity and its relationship to power. Hence, the “entry-level analysis” focuses on the thematic dimension of a text, i.e., the content of the analyzed text and main thematic frames, while “in-depth analysis” reveals the linguistic strategies in use. Compared to narrative, a “frame” is a smaller discursive unit that is concerned with dissecting how an issue is defined and problematized, and the effect that this has on the broader discussion of the issue. A common view on frames defines them as patterns of cognition and interpretation generated by emphasizing certain aspects of reality and hiding or minimizing others (Entman 2003), thus they are seen as “organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world” (Reese 2001: 11).

Employing Ruth Wodak’s (2015) analytical tool that categorizes and explains discursive strategies of the politics of fear, populist language practices are explored, together with their juxtaposition to historical narratives. The starting point is that both populist discursive style and memory politics possess important binary divisions between the categories of “Us” and “Them”. I focus on the discourse of political elites and representatives of religious groups – on their interactions leading to the production of the politics of fear. Fear, understood as a driving force, is specifically pertinent to this research as it engages not only with populist discursive style, but also communicates with identity politics and power relations within society. The process of “normalization of nationalistic, xenophobic, racist and anti-Semitic rhetoric (...) primarily works with ‘fear’: fear of change, of globalization, of loss of welfare, of climate change, of changing gender roles; in principle, almost anything can be constructed as a threat to ‘Us’, an imagined homogenous people inside a well-protected territory” (Wodak 2015: x).

This research deals with main themes and linguistic strategies used in commemorative speeches, and realisation of such strategies. Additionally, it employs a network of related notions in order to explain hidden discourse patterns and isolate structural singularities. The primary source materials were official speeches delivered at the commemoration in the past five years – during both the period of institutional support by the Croatian Parliament and the period of lack of support. The website of the *Framing the Nation and Collective Identity in Croatia: Political Rituals and the Cultural Memory of Twentieth Century Traumas* (FRAMNAT) project¹⁰ was consulted for the transcripts of the 2014-2017 speeches. In addition, institutional changes in Austria affecting the Bleiburg commemoration were followed primarily regarding the legal provisions related to WW II memorialization. This transnational dimension of memory politics supports the idea that Central and Southeastern Europe are not unique or detached from European and global trends and tendencies in democratization practices, mnemonic activities or manifestations of populism.

Analysis of the Commemorative Speeches 2014-2019

The annual commemoration starts at the cemetery in front of the church, in the village of Unterloibach. Participants then form a procession led by members of the Catholic clergy, directed towards the Bleiburg field stage and chapel that were built in 2007 on the PBV’s property. Usually, political speeches are given first, by (mainly) envoys of the highest rank political figures, as well as representatives of PBV, the Croatian diaspora and (local) Austrian authorities. The religious service is an integral part of the commemoration and is regularly held by a high-ranking Catholic clergy member (bishop or cardinal). Additionally, a representative of

¹⁰ A four-year project financed by the Croatian Science Foundation (HRZZ); more information can be found at: www.framnat.eu.

the Croatian Islamic community also delivers a religious message. Since 2015, however, the Mass was hosted first, underscoring the central role of the Catholic Church in this mnemonic practice.

Before analysis of the speeches, it is important to outline how the audience is positioned and to whom the speakers actually deliver their talks. Just next to the stage and chapel is the VIP area occupied by invited members of the political elite, media and other creators of public opinion and public memory (e.g., intellectuals, civil society members, victims' family members associations¹¹). The relatives of the victims and survivors of the death marches stand facing the rest of the audience, as a continuation of the stage. Such spatial disposition plays a symbolic role in the immediate perception of witnesses and *martyrs*. The largest part of the audience is placed behind the VIP area. The participants to the commemoration usually carry Croatian flags and religious banners, as well as t-shirts whose design is connected to Bleiburg. The choice of a flag belonging to NDH, in opposition to the modern-day flag, as well as the inscriptions carried or printed on visitors' clothes, have been a matter of contestation for years. As the event was consequently often interpreted as a gathering of neo-fascists, **strict security protocol was imposed by the Austrian police in 2018, banning any writing on the flags and banners¹² and only permitting the exclusive use of the current Croatian flag.** The instalment of a large tent which previously hosted "a commemoration within commemoration" was also banned since it functioned as a meeting place for the ideologically most fervent participants, where Ustaša souvenirs and memorabilia could be openly purchased. **Participants who stayed inside the tent could not hear or see the speeches or religious ceremonies. They opted to prioritise their physical presence, i.e. *to be there*, rather than actively participate and experience the content of the mnemonic practice.**

Frame analysis resulted in individualizing two main *foci* of commemorative practice in Bleiburg. One dimension represents the framing of Bleiburg *historical events* and is related to the narrative and/or facts about what happened in May 1945. Alternatively, each speech has its own framing of the Bleiburg *commemoration* and the way in which memory politics (should) work(s). It speaks to the *present* and reflects the current societal challenges related to this contested mnemonic practice. Even though the Bleiburg commemoration is a matter of multiple controversies, political speeches do not take any critical stance towards the need to commemorate the post-WW II communist crimes at the Unterloibach field. **The reason for this is simple: the very presence of participants at the Bleiburg commemoration acts as a selection process in political, cultural and historical terms. However, the debates and disputes on everyday political agendas regarding the Bleiburg commemoration are mirrored in the way the commemoration itself is framed and therefore deserve special attention in the analytical part of this research.** Finally, this research distinguishes the differences between various mnemonic actors and pays particular attention to the temporal dimension of the framing process, i.e., changes in frames/narratives.

The Framing of Bleiburg Historical Events

The "Croatian Uniqueness" Frame

¹¹ Ideologically belonging mostly to the right-wing political spectrum.

¹² **Flags with *topoi*** of the visitors' places of origin used to be very frequent in Bleiburg. However, in order to control and ban the use of the fascist salute or similar messages, the Austrian police forbid the exposure of any written material during the commemorative event.

Although the events known as the 1945 Bleiburg Massacre and the Way of the Cross involved many ethnic and military groups¹³, the commemorative event at the Bleiburg field is addressed mainly to the Croatian public and is framed around “Croatian victimhood” (Pauković 2019). The selective process resulting in *who participates* at the commemoration also touches upon the choices of *who is remembered*. What MacDonald (2002) labelled as the “Bleiburg myth” has several layers of meaning connected to the topic of Croatian victimhood and tragedy. First, the Bleiburg massacre serves to counter the Jasenovac genocide as more bloodshed related to WW II. Secondly, it is used to demonstrate discontinuity from the SFRY ruled by the communist regime. Finally, the killings illustrate Croatia’s own “Way of the Cross” (MacDonald 2002: 171).

The number and identity of the victims is a major point of debate and disagreement. Most criticism comes from opponents of the commemoration and are expressed outside of the Remembrance Day anniversaries. However, the number and identity of the victims is not presented with a unanimous voice even in the political speeches. The “slaughter of Croatian soldiers and civilians”¹⁴, although nationally appropriated, is the most general description of the victims’ identity. This description does not enter into the details regarding the causes and consequences that provoked post-war crimes, but rather outlines that the Bleiburg victims did not die in vain, and were “inspiration for all Croatian struggles to obtain freedom and the Croatian state”.¹⁵ Most frequently, however, the speeches insist that innocent civilians were “killed without any trial”¹⁶, while soldiers were “unarmed and unjustly killed”¹⁷. In order to highlight the suffering and martyrdom of members of the military, as well as to strengthen the victimhood narrative, there are several reminders of the “defeated army”.¹⁸ Framing the loss as a defeat and not as a place of suffering recognizes the soldiers as the predominant component of Bleiburg victims and highlights the military nature of the commemoration itself.

The “Croatian Uniqueness” frame, addressing the particularities and exclusivity of Croatian suffering and victimhood, is used by all mnemonic actors speaking at the commemoration. Even though there have been no substantial developments or changes of the frame in the past five years, different discursive styles are clearly visible and relate to their function as agents of memory. For example, representatives of the religious communities, on one hand, delivered the longest speeches and, on the other, employed a distinct linguistic and cognitive register of emotions related to the selection of the *right* memory. Political representatives concentrated on the dichotomies pertaining to the *politics of fear* and compared the quest for the truth in opposition to previous processes of forgetting and silencing of the memory:

The field we are standing on today has multiple symbolisms of one nation [*narod*]. Symbol of tragedy, suffering and injustice. Symbol of silence and forbidden history (...) But it can be a symbol of hope, of a better future (...) and the coexistence [*suživot*] of differences that we can achieve only with the truth. That is how Bleiburg could become the biggest symbol of our togetherness [*zajedništvo*].¹⁹

¹³ There are countless commemorative events dedicated to post-war communist crimes in the region of Carinthia whose importance varyingly depends on the ethnic or social group that organizes the commemorations.

¹⁴ Željko Raguž, representative of the Croatian national council in BIH, 2017.

¹⁵ Željko Raguž.

¹⁶ Željko Reiner, Vice-President of Croatian Parliament, 2014.

¹⁷ Idriz Bešić, representative of the Islamic community, 2016.

¹⁸ Željko Reiner, President of the Croatian Parliament, 2016.

¹⁹ Bruna Eših, envoy of the President of the Republic of Croatia, 2015

The trope “togetherness” was repeatedly and increasingly used in political speeches in Croatia as a counterpoint to the well-known socialist Yugoslav notion of “brotherhood and unity” [*bratstvo i jedinstvo*]. It also serves to depict a desire for the continuity of the sovereign Croatian state and distancing from the SFRY.

There is a slight variation between political speeches delivered during the period of official parliamentary sponsorship and the period of absence of its support (in 2014 and 2015). MPs spoke in their own names and often called for the expression of emotions:

We have gathered not because of *hatred* against someone, not even against those who committed these horrible crimes. We have gathered here because of *love* (...) towards all those innocents who were killed here because they held opinions different from their assassins, killed only because they loved Croatia [emphasis added].²⁰

The reasons given to explain the post-war crimes illustrate a populist rebellion against those who do not like Croatia, and consequently “are not with Us”. The *Croatian uniqueness* frame describes Bleiburg as the “place of the permanent memory of the greatest Croatian tragedy”²¹, where the participants gather because of their “love for Croatia and Croatian ancestry [*rod*]”²². Political speeches carefully highlight Bleiburg as a symbolic place of memory of communist crimes and not as the actual battlefield or massacre site. **There is, however, systematic appropriation of the event within the boundaries of the Croatian nation:** “Bleiburg, at the time a last flame of the hope and belief in freedom and protection, today is one the symbols of suffering of the Croatian nation and one of the worst crimes against the humanity”.²³

Exaggeration and hyperbole are commonly employed to describe the scope and breadth of the Bleiburg events, for example: “tribulation of our nation in *the biggest exodus in history*”²⁴, “symbol and *metaphor of all Croatian sufferings*”²⁵, “*greatest tragedy in the history of the Croatian nation*”²⁶ and “difficult chapter in Croatian history that, with its victims, represents *the collapse of humanity and humanism*”²⁷ [emphasis added]. The uniqueness of WW II in Croatian and Yugoslav space in general is often described in comparison to the broader context of the war: “May 1945 was remembered in world history as the month of the end of WW II in Europe. In Croatia that month is remembered also as a month of slaughter of innocent people to whom this place guards the memory.”²⁸ This element overlaps with the next frame analyzed in the research.

“Bleiburg and the Global” Frame

This frame includes a myriad of cases compared to the Bleiburg massacre. **Not only are post-WW II crimes discursively connected in commemorative speeches to the more recent conflicts of**

²⁰ Željko Reiner, 2014.

²¹ Zlatan Ževrnja, governor of the county of Split-Dalmatia, 2014.

²² Zlatan Ževrnja.

²³ Borjana Kršto, representative of the HDZ party from BIH, 2016.

²⁴ Idriz Bešić, 2016.

²⁵ Goran Jandroković, President of the Croatian Parliament, 2017.

²⁶ Željko Raguž, 2017.

²⁷ Goran Jandroković, 2018.

²⁸ Mate Uzinić, bishop of Dubrovnik, 2014.

the 20th century, but they also broaden the Bleiburg events to include the memory of all communist crimes and totalitarian repression. This analysis highlights the phenomenon of *competitive victimhood*.

As already mentioned, following the first Croatian President Franjo Tuđman's idea of “national reconciliation”²⁹, different mnemonic actors use the Bleiburg commemoration as an argument connecting the modern, independent and sovereign Republic of Croatia to the WW II Ustaša state of the NDH. Consequently, the 1991-1995 Croatian war for independence, commonly labelled the “Homeland War”, and the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina are often addressed and compared to the struggles in WW II: “Behind Bleiburg and other execution sites of WW II (...) stand different horrible events and crimes [that] (...) unfortunately happened again in Vukovar and in Srebrenica”.³⁰

The wars of the 1990s are evoked in speeches as similar events, and there are attempts to relate them in a causal continuity: “We were not able to explore and count all the victims of Bleiburg and the Way of the Cross, yet new victims arrived from the Homeland War”.³¹ Bleiburg is defined as a warning for possible future conflicts, together with “warnings from Srebrenica, Jazovka and Vukovar”.³² The victims of the “Bleiburg tragedy and all the Ways of the Cross” are grouped together with “victims of the Homeland War (...) and all the victims of the totalitarian regime” in order to “always remember their story and never repeat such tragedies”.³³ Sometimes, the generalizations are broadened to include all of WW II at the global level: “Among tens of millions of human beings whose dignity was brutally violated or whose life was taken (...) there were also many tens and even hundreds of thousands of our co-nationals, young and old, men and women, girls and children, Croats”.³⁴ Yet, some speakers insist on outlining the Bleiburg killings as worse than crimes from the 1990s: “Today one can often hear that in some places the worst crimes occurred in Europe after the end of WW II. Some of those crimes are rightly labelled as the worst of all war crimes [sic], the crime of genocide. Nevertheless, the suffering of the Croats at Bleiburg is, in its size, multiple times bigger than those crimes, a fact that is unjustly silenced even from the Croatian side”.³⁵

A point frequently raised is that the victims of the Bleiburg massacre must be remembered equally with the victims of other conflicts: “Victims of the Bleiburg tragedy and of the Ways of the Cross, victims of the Homeland War in which our freedom and independence was fought, as well as all the victims of totalitarian regimes must always be remembered so that their story and tragedy never happens again”.³⁶ In particular, victims of the fascist regime, most notably those of the Jasenovac concentration camp, are connected to the Bleiburg victims, as if the reasons and historical circumstances are similar in both cases: “We are here [in Bleiburg] today to pay respect to thousands of victims of communism who were killed here or were taken to different execution sites along the Ways of the Cross, across the former Yugoslavia. Of course, not all of

²⁹ This refers to reconciliation between the antifascist (communist-led partisan movement) and profascist (Ustaša movement) factions of the Croatian national corpus. For more details, see Pavlakovic (2010).

³⁰ Idriz Bešić, 2016.

³¹ Tomislav Sopta, representative of the PBV, 2015.

³² Aziz Hasanović, president of the Islamic community in Croatia, 2015.

³³ Goran Jandroković, 2017.

³⁴ Franjo Komarica, bishop of Banjaluka, 2016.

³⁵ Željko Raguž, 2017.

³⁶ Goran Jandroković, 2017.

them were killed here, on this very field, but this is the place that symbolizes all those execution sites (...), just like Jasenovac symbolizes all Ustaša execution sites.”³⁷ **These relativization and justification strategies are employed in order to avoid explaining the circumstances that led to the post-communist crimes and to downplay the previous Ustaša regime's wrongdoings.** Jasenovac is also mentioned when explaining how respectful one should be towards all the victims, irrespective of the situations and reasons for their deaths. **Over the years, the Bleiburg killings acquired an important symbolic role in personifying all communist crimes, especially those committed after the end of WW II.** It has thus become “a heartbreaking place that symbolizes many hundreds of known and many more unknown and unexplored mass graves of our co-nationals (...) liquidated in violation of international law during and after WW II”.³⁸

Insistence on the communist threat introduced the topic of democracy into speeches, as opposed to the totalitarian system of SFRY. Interestingly, by false deduction, Bleiburg victims are thus portrayed as fighters for a democratic and free Croatia: “The Communist government (...) killed the hope to construct a democratic society founded on [principles of] pluralism, rule of law, protection of basic rights and acceptance of different ideals and freedoms.”³⁹ Furthermore, the antifascist struggle is artificially separated from the communist movement in SFRY, as if “patriotic antifascist mass resistance in WW II (...) was used in the communist struggle to take over the government”.⁴⁰

Finally, **communism and its “criminal five-pointed star”⁴¹ is defined as the enemy during the Homeland War, and thus a logical continuity with WW II is established:** “We cannot not ask here today if those people [members of the incumbent state officials who revoked parliamentary sponsorship] also do not remember 1991, if they forgot *under which sign* crimes were committed in Borovo selo, Skabrnja and Vukovar (...) Isn't Vukovar alone enough to remember that sign as the sign of supreme evil?! Why are we standing on this field full of painful memories? To prevent tragedy from repeating itself [emphasis added].⁴²

Framing of the Bleiburg commemoration

The "Duty to Remember" Frame

This frame was **mostly used in the period when there was no official sponsorship for the organization of the Bleiburg anniversary.** Main linguistic/discursive strategies applied here **relied on the politics of fear – fear of silencing *the truth* or fear of discrimination.** Other populist discursive style features outline animosity between “the elites” and “the people” and a sense of crisis or threat to a particular group are also employed. Moreover, **human rights discourse** with a set of pertinent narratives and beliefs is used to promote the idea of organizing a commemoration sponsored by the political regime in power. For example, the right to “pay respect to one's own dead (...) whoever the victims were”⁴³ is presented as a fundamental human right. Similarly, a request for overcoming all ideologies is made: “Our contemporary positioning cannot stem from the ideological clashes of WW II because in those clashes one kind of non-human ideology was

³⁷ Željko Reiner, 2016.

³⁸ Franjo Komarica, 2016.

³⁹ Goran Jandrokovic, 2018.

⁴⁰ Josip Bozanić, cardinal of Zagreb, 2015.

⁴¹ Zlatan Ževrnja, 2014.

⁴² Zlatan Ževrnja.

⁴³ Bruna Esih, envoy of the President Kolinda Grabar Kitarević, 2015.

defeated. Our position is younger and stronger, it is in the values of democracy and togetherness that was lived and demonstrated in the defence of Croatia in the Homeland War.”⁴⁴ In addition to a human rights argument for sponsorship, democratic values and national unity were evoked.

There was a strong call for a sense of duty to remember and obligation to embark on a quest for the truth. In order to counter the government's decision to revoke their patronage of commemoration, most of the speakers in 2014 and 2015 insisted on notions of truth and innocent victims as arguments in favour of sponsorship: “Therefore, wherever there are clear and transparent facts that crimes have been committed on civilians, wounded, unarmed soldiers or any war or post-war victim, commemoration should be held at the highest national level.”⁴⁵ Such a populist statement in practice works only in one direction and very seldom within the “perpetrator community”, where remembrance of victims is silenced. In this case a strategy of linguistic syllogism is utilized, beginning with something specific and ending with something general.

The period until 1990 was described as a period of silencing memory and the politics of fear. Consequently, speakers at the commemoration attempted to connect memory politics from 2012-2016 to the silencing that went on in SFRY, when “silence was imposed, memory suppressed, fear propagated and remembrance punished”.⁴⁶ While supporters of the Bleiburg commemoration tried to establish continuity between the SDP government and SFRY memory politics (by labelling it, *inter alia*, as “successor of the communist party”⁴⁷), the government attempted to move the official commemoration from Bleiburg to Tezno in 2012 arguing for the authenticity of the actual place of the post-war killings. That same year the government also proposed to change the name of the Memorial Day to the Day of Remembrance of Victims of the Way of the Cross (Cigljenčki 2012), albeit without any real determination to actually implement the proposal.

"European Values" Frame

The framing of commemorative events, as it happened with the framing of historical facts, mirrors attempts to, on one hand, remain in the national context and, on the other, place the anniversary on the broader European map. The European dimension is expressed through two main elements: 1) legal framework, i.e., declarations and conventions dealing with the legacy of totalitarian regimes, and 2) sense of shared cultural space.

The “European Values” frame is usually employed as part of the discursive strategy of legitimation and justification, in particular, the strategy of heteronomization or “emphasis on extra-national dependence” (De Cillia, Reisigl, Wodak 1999). The 2006 EU declaration already mentioned and, to a lesser extent, two CoE resolutions, serve to confirm the legality of the commemoration and the need for state support in promoting and organizing the event. The commemoration is thus understood as a responsibility to “condemn every non-democratic, authoritarian and totalitarian regime, (...) to pay respect to each victim who diligently, courageously and honourably opposed every form of such a regime”.⁴⁸ The content of the legal

⁴⁴ Josip Bozanić, 2015.

⁴⁵ Bruna Esih, 2015.

⁴⁶ Josip Bozanić, 2015.

⁴⁷ Zlatan Ževrnja, 2014. Founded in 1990, the SDP party was the successor of the League of Communists of Croatia, however it never followed the LCC party program.

⁴⁸ Željko Raguž, 2017.

provisions is stretched not only to “condemning communist crimes”, but also to “requesting investigations of the truth”⁴⁹. **Legitimation and de-legitimation strategies** recall “historical science [sic] that established who killed tens of thousands of soldiers and civilians without tribunal and trial (...) and yet there are deniers of committed crimes of the Yugoslav communist regime who swear to European values”.⁵⁰

Besides institutional efforts to put the Bleiburg commemoration on the European map, i.e., in compliance with the legal provisions of the Union, the event is framed as part of the European cultural space and civilization, pertaining to “European moral and ethical values”.⁵¹ Such values also include “condemning communist crimes (...) that both Europe and we must judge, not only because of the past, but because of the young generations who cannot be raised on lies, false truth and silencing of the truth”.⁵² As in the previous frame, human rights discourse recalls that dealing with the past is used to promote and justify the commemorative practice in Bleiburg.

Conclusion

The six most recent commemorative annual events at the Bleiburg field (from 2014 to 2019) occurred at a time of important political changes in the Republic of Croatia and its memory politics. Generally, memory politics are closely related to ideological cleavages within the society, but were, until 2013 and the joining of Croatia to the EU, performed in a “controlled atmosphere”. Main political figures, like the President or Prime Minister, were never seen directly participating in the event due to the controversial messaging and politicization of what was supposed to be a religious service to the victims of post-WW II communist crimes. This choice also influenced the tone of the speeches delivered at the Bleiburg commemoration, as the speakers are overwhelmingly on the right-wing political spectrum.

Increased ideological homogeneity, however, also produced different frames of *what* is being commemorated and *how* commemoration is performed. Both the historical facts and the event itself were seen in two different ways – through a lens pointing inward, i.e., within the frames of domestic affairs, and the one pointing outward, i.e., in relation to the broader geographic and cultural spheres. Accordingly, the framing process registered important changes: 1) in the case of the impact of domestic factors, such as the establishment of sponsorship or regime change, new frames *defied* the narratives that triggered the changes; whereas 2) in the case of the impact of external factors, like Austrian criticism of the nature of the commemoration, new frames were *complied to by the narrative*. Namely, all illegal elements were removed from the commemoration site and the whole mnemonic practice was reduced to a religious ceremony. In the former case, new speeches revealed the disagreement while using human rights discourse and populist rhetoric to relativize and justify the strategies.

This analysis could not be performed without keeping in mind wider, European trends in commemorating communist crimes and repression. For example, the very recent *European Parliament resolution on the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe*⁵³ highlighted that “remembering the victims of totalitarian regimes and recognizing and raising awareness of the shared European legacy of crimes committed by communist, Nazi and other

⁴⁹ Dragan Covic, President of the House of peoples of the BiH Parliament, 2015.

⁵⁰ Željko Raguž, 2017.

⁵¹ Franjo Komarica, 2016.

⁵² Željko Reiner, 2014.

⁵³ http://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2019-0097_EN.html

dictatorships is of vital importance for the unity of Europe and its people”⁵⁴. Here, all totalitarian regimes are put together without any critical reasoning. This helps Bleiburg commemoration supporters to unquestioningly accept its messaging. Consequently, mourning the victims is successfully transformed into a political event aimed at relativizing and justifying a certain set of historical facts.

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⁵⁴ http://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2019-0097_EN.html

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