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Paper presented at the 2021 ASN World Convention, 5-8 May 2021

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Preventing Violence by Preserving Multiple and Nonbelligerent Group Identities: Lessons from Wartime Gorski kotar (Croatia) and Tuzla (Bosnia-Herzegovina)¹

Violence is fomented by the imposition of singular and belligerent identities on gullible people, championed by proficient artisans of terror (Amartya Sen, Identity and Violence, 2006, p. 2)

Abstract

In war-torn countries, ethnic and other group identities are usually associated with violence. Political elites often influence and benefit from group identification dynamics to mobilize in-groups for own, particular interests. In that process they frequently manipulate with the salience and content of those identities. However, group identities can also contribute to peace. In this article I examine the contribution of group identities to the preservation of local peace by drawing on the experiences of two communities which resisted violence during the 1991-1995 war of dissolution of Yugoslavia. Despite the external context of armed violence and widespread inter-ethnic hostilities championed by political elites as artisans of terror, the ethnically mixed communities of Tuzla in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Gorski kotar in Croatia maintained local peace. This article illustrates how preserving and nurturing multiple and non-violent group identities

¹ Prepared for the 2021 Annual World Convention of the Association for the Study of Nationalities, this paper builds on my doctoral research at the University of Bradford (UK). It further evolves and deepens the analysis on group identity dynamics, which was one of the focus areas of my PhD thesis defended in 2018.

has significantly contributed to the successful resistance of those communities to violence, providing critical lessons from the past, for the future.

Key words

group identity; resistance to violence; Tuzla, Gorski kotar; Yugoslav war, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, peacebuilding; multiple social identities; violence prevention

Introduction

Belonging to specific groups is one of the human needs and a major source of human dignity and self-esteem (Kelman, 1997). Social identification and motivational theories (Tajfel, 1981; Jenkins, 2009; Brewer, 2011) show that identities are central to how people make sense of the world and how they behave in it. Defining social identity, Brewer (2011, p. 125) notes that it «involves the attachment of one's sense of self and self-interest to the collective as a whole. When a group identity is both important and salient, the individual is motivated to enhance group welfare and protect group interests, including defending the group boundaries from encroachment, protecting group values from dilution and preserving group integrity».

There is compelling evidence that identities gain increased importance in the contexts of high uncertainty, when the function of group membership is to provide self-definition and guidance for behaviour in otherwise ambiguous social situations (Brewer, 2011). This phenomenon was observed prior and during the breakdown of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, when complex and multiple social identities of the country's inhabitants got strongly influenced by the overwhelming circumstances of a collapse of a state combined with the new political agendas of the elites.

The interplay between group identities and 1991-1995 violence in the former Yugoslavia has been in the focus on many scholars, contributing to the generalized perception of that war as an ethnic conflict. The existing research shows significant tumult in the sphere of group identification processes in Yugoslavia prior to and during the war. As

the political leaders and the international community pursued the option of nation-states as the only possible solution to the problem of breakdown of Yugoslavia, ethnic or national identities gained significant salience and were often imposed as the only relevant group identity of each individual. They also gained new, belligerent traits contributing to the growing whirlwind of violence in several Yugoslav republic, including in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The observation of Amartya Sen expressed in the quote opening this paper– the imposition of singular and belligerent identities by political leaders as artisans of terror - materialized in most parts of these two newly formed states and led to widespread violence.

However, there were at least two large communities in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina which remained ethnically mixed during the 1991-1995 war and preserved local level peace despite surrounding violence. Peace in this context is not conceived solely as the absence of armed violence, but as the absence of all three types of violence – direct, structural and cultural – as defined by Johan Galtung (1990). Between 2014 and 2018 I conducted research in those two communities, combining analysis of the influential texts produced immediately prior or during the wartime, mostly focusing on political and media discourse, with semi-structured interviews with selected inhabitants of the two communities. My research showed that the approach of the members of those two communities to group identification prior and during the armed conflict in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina was one of the key contributors to the preservation of local peace despite widespread surrounding violence.

Building on the existing analytical framework for identity measurement and on my recent field research conducted in the communities of Gorski kotar in Croatia and Tuzla in Bosnia-Herzegovina, in this paper I undertake a comparative analysis of the group identities' dynamics in these two communities, contrasting them with the group identity dynamics that were prevailing in the rest of these two countries.

Recognizing that the concept of identity, including group identity, is still elusive and debated in the academic world, in this paper I also take into account the highly malleable nature of ethnic identity as analytical category which can be used to differentiate groups by a variety of dimensions. As noted by Elcheroth and Spini (2011,

p. 176) «ethnicity has the potential to form a mythical narrative for a community», and it «actually functions as a practical meta-category, grouping together a rather diverse set of social dimensions used to make sense out of collective antagonisms and violence».

In my work I adopt and apply a constructivist approach to group identities, which considers the nature of group identities, including ethnic and national identities, to be evolving and contextual. Campbell (1998, p.88) explains the difference between the primordialist position to ethnicity, which holds that «ethnicity is “a brute social fact” expressing the essential or innate character of the group», and the instrumentalist / constructivist position which holds that the ethnicity is a «response to particular circumstances», a «resource created by members of a community to bring people together and to mobilize them». The content and use of different group identities as a resource in the mobilization of the communities for war or for peace is at the focus of this paper.

In my analysis I use the terms group identity, collective identity and social identity interchangeably, referring to «that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership» (Tajfel, 1981, p. 255). I make use of the analytical framework offered by Abdelal et al. (2009, p. 18), who define «collective identity as a social category that varies along two dimensions – content and contestation. Content describes the meaning of a collective identity [...] and may take the form of four, nonmutually exclusive types: constitutive norms, social purposes, relational comparisons [...] and cognitive models. Contestation refers to the degree of agreement within a group over the content of the shared category».

This analytical framework is central to my work as I immerse into the most influential wartime discourses and practices, as well as into the semi-structured interviews conducted with inhabitants of Tuzla and Gorski kotar, to draw insights on the content and contestation of multiple group identities on those territories. Through identification and analysis of *constitutive norms* (formal and informal rules defining group membership), *social purposes* (goals shared by members of a group), *relational comparisons* (the way a group defines other identity groups) and *cognitive models*

(worldviews or understanding of political and material conditions and interests of the group) forming group identities in these two communities, I attempt to provide my contribution to knowledge on the interlink between group identities' dynamics and resistance to violence in those two communities.

Selected key trends in the evolution of group identities in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina prior and during the Yugoslav war 1991-1995

Building on the conceptual framework stressing the contextual and evolving nature of group identities, through the analysis of existing literature and the most influential discourses and practices, including the ones of key political leaders, institutional texts and media, I observed three generic trends in the evolution of group identities in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. These include the social identity insecurity that was caused by recurrent top-down interventions into the categories of group identities, the sudden extreme salience of ethnic identity overshadowing all other group identities of the population, as well as several significant shifts in the content of ethnic identities which gained violent traits.

These dynamics should be understood in the context of increasing instability and dissolution of a state and taking into account the agendas of the main political actors. One could argue that they are a consequence of the context of insecurity, but also that they contributed to unsafety and violence. Here I am analyzing these dynamics primarily in contrast with the dynamics which prevailed in Gorski kotar and Tuzla as two oases of peace.

Recurrent top-down interventions into the formal categories of group identities caused social identity insecurity

As all people, prior to the 1991-1995 war inhabitants of former Yugoslavia displayed multiple social identities, formal and informal ones. Formally, there was a distinction between citizenship and national/ethnic belonging of each individual. We were all citizens

of Yugoslavia – reflecting our state of residence - of different national or ethnic belonging, which was a personal choice that we were asked to confirm during the country-wide census.

Interestingly, and as a clear exemplification of the evolving and contextual nature of group identities, the list of national and ethnic categories to choose from differed from one census to another. The census was usually held every 10 years and new categories were added and some old ones removed, without any other reason than the political agendas of the time, always following a top-down approach. As expressed by Bringa (1993, p. 85) «while in the West ethnic and national identities might be imagined and manipulated by individuals and communities, in socialist regimes it is the state that does the imagining».

For example, the term “Muslim” was added as national category option in 1971, and it was replaced in the midst of war, in 1993, with the term “Bosniak”. Analysing several identity-related studies and surveys carried out in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the 1980s, Sarac-Rujanac (2012) informs that they clearly indicated that the inhabitants of that republic were against artificial identifications and changes in identity. This only confirms that the individual and collective identity feelings had little influence over the administrative changes made in identity terminology.

Jovic (2013) rightly points out that the changes in group identity terminology in former Yugoslavia deeply encroached upon personal lives of individuals, creating some level of social identity uncertainty among the population. In the context of the breakdown of the state of Yugoslavia, the role of that uncertainty in contributing to the entrenching of the population in ethnic groups and subsequent spread of violence cannot be underestimated. Faced with the collapse of the system that was aimed at providing them with safety and security, and exposed to the intense political and media discourse of the new leaders promising new ethno-nationalist states, most inhabitants of Yugoslavia felt compelled to seek recourse of safety in their ethnically or nationally defined groups and to defend the objectives of those groups at any cost.

“Pinned to the wall of nationhood” – the sudden salience and homogenization of national (or ethnic) identity

As Yugoslavia was falling apart, several ethnic groups, led by the new nationalist elites, started pursuing the difficult pathway to own state. While Yugoslav space was socially heterogeneous, the idea of nation-states as the only possible solution to its breakdown led to sacrificing that heterogeneity. To achieve their goals, nationalist elites opted for redressing the mismatch between the territory and the population through the imposition of the homogeneous political space over heterogeneous social realities (Hobsbawm, 1993). While securing the link between people and territory, the elites positioned themselves as saviors of own ethnic groups, vilifying the other ethnic groups as a threat. This was a prelude and a justification for expulsing them from the ethnically homogeneous territory.

In that context, ethnic identity gained major salience, overshadowing all other group identities of most population. This is what Sen refers to by the term of “imposition of single identities”. Slavenka Drakulic, a renowned journalist and writer who left Croatia at the beginning of the war after being exposed to denigration and retaliation for her non-nationalist ideas, described this phenomenon in the following terms: «Along with millions of other Croats, I was pinned to the wall of nationhood—not only by outside pressure from Serbia and the Federal Army but by national homogenization within Croatia itself. That is what the war is doing to us, reducing us to one dimension: the Nation. The trouble with this nationhood, however, is that whereas before I was defined by my education, my job, my ideas, my character—and, yes, my nationality too—now I feel stripped of all that. I am nobody because I am not a person any more. I am one of 4.5 million Croats» (Drakulic, 1993, p. 51).

It is unfortunate that the only “solution” to the problem of Yugoslavia that was envisioned, not only by the local elites but also by the international community, was the traditional option of the nation-state, as it led to justifying violence used to ensure consistency between people and territory. Dayton agreement, brokered in USA in 1995 to stop the armed hostilities in Bosnia-Herzegovina, is a clear example of that. By

focusing on “redressing the mismatch” between people and territory along ethnic lines, Dayton agreement caused «flattening and suffocation of trans-ethnic sensibilities» (Hromadzic, 2013, p. 263). It forcibly reduced the complexity of social identities to one dimension – the ethnicity. In this way, it took away the relevance and the power from supra-ethnic categories and political views.

While they were gaining exclusive salience, ethnic identities were also subject to homogenization, mainly through silencing of diverging views on how one can “be Croat”, “be Serb” or “be Muslim or Bosniak”. Newly developed identity traits, described below, became part of the binding content of the politically driven ethnic identities.

To kill or to dye for the nation – the belligerent evolution of the content of ethnic identities

The new, highly politicized role of ethnic identities and their incremented salience led to new developments in the content of those group identities. I will analyse them using the analytical framework of Abdelal et al. (2009), distinguishing four types of content of social identity, i.e. constitutive norms, relational comparisons, social purposes and worldviews of in-groups.

With regards to constitutive norms as rules defining what is appropriate and what is not, *a major increase in the levels of acceptance of violence committed by members of own group towards out-groups* was observed, particularly if those out-groups belonged to the ethnic group “disturbing” the homogeneity of territorial space. Forced displacement of civilians from the territory “belonging” to a specific ethnic majority, evictions from homes or workplace purely based on person’s ethnic origin, intimidation, discrimination and many other human rights violations were taking place with the vocal or silent approval of the majority, which often did not make any difference between the civilians and the combatants of the “enemy group”. Violence against the “others” – often one’s own neighbours, colleagues or acquaintances – suddenly became something normal or at least acceptable, as long as it was committed in an apparent interest of own ethnic group. Closing the communication channels, where communication with members of the

opposite group was perceived as a treason of own group, leading to the dehumanization of out-groups, certainly contributed to the acceptance of violence.

The key “new” social purpose of the ethnic groups was defined as establishing of own state or state-like sovereign territory, and unconditional loyalty to that aim was expected from each member of the ethnic group, regardless of the cost that sovereignty had. Loyalty to the group was defined in terms of readiness to die and kill for the territory imagined by the political leadership. The new social purposes clearly established that the territory was more valuable than human lives.

New relational comparisons led groups to invest their efforts in the search for differences and denial of common identity aspects. This was reflected, among other, in the artificial modifications in the language, whereby several ethnic groups tried to “clean-up” their own language from the terminology or syntax that appeared as originating from other groups. The linguistic puritanism was promoted at all levels as another sign of loyalty to the group. Religious beliefs, which played only a marginal role in the group identification processes in the past, suddenly became salient as the principal aspect of differentiation among ethnic groups. Catholic and Orthodox churches, as well as Mosques, suddenly got invaded by the “new believers”.

The newly developed dominant worldview was that violence was inevitable as the only or the fastest mean of meeting the interests of own ethnic group. In such context, entering in communication with members of others group was condemned as betrayal. Making efforts to ignore or deny their common Slavic origin, a joint state and a common language that in Yugoslavia was called Serbo-Croatian, different ethnic groups started developing the narratives on own uniqueness. This included an astonishing capacity to deny or alter numerous aspects of own group identities entertained in the recent past. Jovic (2013, p. 148) observes that «(t)he previous Us, which now becomes an Enemy Other, has a constitutive function for the new identity. For many individuals a ritual and public rejection of previous identity often was a condition for being accepted in the new Us group». This might explain why so many people suddenly claimed that they were religious when in the past they were not, that they have never been members of the Communist Party when

many of them actually were, etc. It appears that *the modification of memories took place in the process of construction of “new identity”*.

These trends in the evolution of group identities were observed in most parts of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, as in some other parts of Yugoslavia, contributing to the polarization of the population and setting the grounds for the inter-group violence. However, the communities of Gorski kotar and Tuzla had a largely different experience which is analysed in the continuation of this paper.

Gorski kotar (Croatia): inclusive, non-violent identities preserved

Gorski kotar is a region in Western Croatia with some 27,000 inhabitants living in 9 municipalities. The region is situated at a junction of several roads connecting central Europe and northern Adriatic. Since 16th century its demographic structure was influenced by the influx of Orthodox Vlachs, who were recruited by the authorities of the Habsburg Monarchy as members of its military force in the so-called Military Frontier area. This cordon area, which included south-eastern parts of Gorski kotar, was formed by the Habsburgs to protect the Monarchy against the incursions of the Ottomans. At the beginning of the 19th century Vlachs embraced the Serbian national feeling and since then were called Serbs (Markovic, 2003). As a result, and until today, the region has a large population of ethnic Serbs living together with the ethnic majority Croats.

The characteristics of the geographic space of Gorski kotar, such as scarcity of fertile land and rough mountain climate, certainly influenced the shaping of the social space in the region, which is characterized by the non-separation of different ethnic groups. The region also became a significant transit area, particularly after the construction of the railway, attracting a large number of people from abroad. This phenomenon is well reflected in the linguistic diversity which turned Gorski kotar into a region in Croatia with the highest number of dialects and accents co-existing on a very small territory.

During WWII, interethnic violence was triggered in Gorski kotar by two notorious regimes – the fascist Italy supporting the Chetnik movement which was perpetrating crimes against Croats in the region (Goldstein, 2013) and the pro-Nazi Ustasha regime,

which disseminated terror and violence against ethnic Serbs (*Gorski kotar*, 1981). The National Liberation Movement (NLM), which was formed in resistance to those Axis Powers, gained massive support among the inhabitants of Gorski kotar. Opposed to ethnic divisions, the NLM was promoting the idea of brotherhood and unity of Southern Slavs, which was at the heart of the formation of Yugoslavia.

The first multiparty elections that were held in Croatia in 1990 were critical across the country, including in Gorski kotar. While in most Croatia the majority vote was given to the nationalist Croatian Democratic Union, in most of Gorski kotar citizens elected leadership from The League of Communists of Croatia – Party of Democratic Reform, the successor of Yugoslav Communist Party which continued to promote inter-ethnic cooperation. The election of the non-nationalists certainly helped in keeping the threat of violence away from the region, but was in itself not sufficient as could be observed from many other ethnically mixed areas which got ravaged by violence. In my research I found that preservation of multiple social identities, with high salience of regional social identity characterized by nonbelligerent traits, gave a significant contribution to the preservation of peace in Gorski kotar.

While in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in the overall context of dissolution of Yugoslavia and promoted by nationalist leaders, the ethnic or national identity increased in salience and overshadowed all other social identities in almost all Croatia, evidence shows that this was not the case in Gorski kotar. Here the authentic, territorially defined regional identity – belonging to the group of inhabitants of Gorski kotar - remained salient and its content played a strong role in the preservation of inter-ethnic peace and cooperation in the region. Examining the influential discourses produced during the 1990s, I observed that the inhabitants of Gorski kotar referred to their regional identity – “we, the people of Gorski kotar”, or “mi, Gorani” in the local language - with a lot of pride and often highlighting the aspects of that identity which were critical for preserving peace. Using the conceptual framework of Abdelal et al. (2009), I analyzed the content of this regional group identity.

One of its key constitutive norms that I observed is *inclusiveness*, *openness* of the inhabitants to integrate into their social group anyone who lives on that territory and

contributes to the community. All ethnic groups and other groups were considered equally included, even the officers and soldiers of the Yugoslav National Army (YNA) present on the territory of Delnice.

«In Delnice military barracks, like in many others, live honest people, fellow citizens and planners of better future» (Radio Delnice, News, 16 September 1991)

While in many other parts of Croatia violent conflict was triggered by the escalation of armed violence between newly forming Croatian armed forces and Yugoslav Army forces, the former struggling for the independence of Croatia and the latter expected to defend the unity of Yugoslav territory, here in Gorski kotar the inclusive approach to group identities was fostered and contributed to the peaceful withdrawal of the YNA personnel from the region. The inclusiveness was closely interlinked with and contributing to the *sense of joint responsibility for the destiny of people of Gorski kotar*, as in-groups feel responsible for the group they belong to. This was even more important in the context of Gorski kotar, given the massive presence of weapons and explosives in the region. The main social purpose of the group of people identifying themselves as inhabitants of Gorski kotar was to prevent loss of life and to protect the well-being of their community.

In terms of relational comparisons – the definition of the own group by what it is not – the analysis of the discourses and practices of Gorski kotar showed that the people of Gorski kotar identified themselves as “not aggressive”, “not extremist” and also “not homogeneous”, features that played a critical role during wartime.

«We are not homogeneous. We are neither for one side, nor for the other [laughter]. The region of Gorski kotar is not an aggressive region. We are relatively peace-loving». (Interviewee from Gorski kotar)

Those relational comparisons placed the community of Gorski kotar on the opposite side of the spectrum when compared to exclusive and increasingly violent ethnic group identities. Being non-homogeneous, or *embracing diversity*, is one of the important worldviews displayed by the community of Gorski kotar. It was often building on the

positive past experiences and contribution of different members of the community to the common good, which were celebrated and often recalled, strengthening the ties within the regional identity group and preventing divisions along ethnic and other lines.

«People of Gorski Kotar, all the folk of Delnice, lived until recently with the soldiers from entire Yugoslavia almost without differentiating them from our own sons. There was no holiday, no event or occasion that we didn't share. During community works, the hardworking hands of soldiers and officers have been creating benefits for the town and the villages. We have spent many New Year's Eves in the Army Hall, we have accumulated a lot of common experiences; here many have formed their families». (Radio Delnice, News, 17 September 1991)

The inclusiveness in the sense of recognizing and embracing differences is closely interlinked with the strong sense of *interdependence* and the related high value attached to *dialogue and cooperation*. These have been reflecting as prevailing cognitive models of the inhabitants of Gorski kotar throughout my contacts with them as well as in their texts and actions. While in the dominant nationalist discourses in Croatia communication and cooperation with persons of ethnic outgroups were mostly perceived as a sign of cowardice and treason of own ethnic group, even in the areas with no armed violence, the spirit of dialogue and cooperation was maintained and nurtured in Gorski kotar and helped overcome the emerging challenges and threats.

A character of *serenity, sobriety and rationality*, which was strongly differing from the emotionally loaded visceral discourses and actions of people with high salience of ethnic identity, was another aspect of cognitive models in Gorski kotar that I observed. In numerous examples of local discourse and practice I found that this cognitive model was closely influenced by the *consideration of future consequences*. Wolf et al. (2009) indicate that recognizing the future consequences of each side's actions supports cooperative behaviour, which generally results from long-range thinking.

I found numerous examples of consideration of future consequences. An inhabitant of Gomirje, a village of Gorski kotar with Serb majority, quoted by Tatalovic (1996, p. 328), said:

«We knew that everything would be solved easily if no blood was shed. But when even a drop of blood is spilt, it is hard to get back to how it was before».

Also, Radio Delnice was warning about the potential consequences of different actions:

«Some facts are irrefutable: the wheel of change, however strong its goodness or evilness might be, continues turning. *We have to be aware of the consequences NOW. The history will judge us*» (Radio Delnice, News, 17 September 1991)

While regional group identity with its nonviolent content was salient among most inhabitants of Gorski kotar, it was still not the only social identity that shaped the views, values and actions of the population. Inhabitants of Gorski kotar were also influenced by other types of their social identities, including their different ethnic belonging or their professional group identities, such as being members of the army or police forces. Therefore, social identities of the inhabitants of Gorski kotar need to be considered in their multiplicity, different levels of salience, as well as cross-cutting and sometimes mutually exclusive loyalty structures.

The non-prevalence of ethnic identification can be linked to the group identity discourses used by the local and regional authorities and the media in the region. The analysis of their discourses shows that they used far less references to the ethnic belonging when compared with the discourse of the authorities and media at national level. While dominant discourses were abundant with ethnic terminology, the terms that were most frequently used when referring to or addressing the population in Gorski kotar were the terms *inhabitants, people/folks (of Gorski kotar) and citizens*. When referring to the inhabitants of Serb ethnic belonging, the terms «our Serbs» or «the Serbs of Gorski kotar» were often used, implying a distinction between them and the Serbs from other parts of Croatia or from Serbia. Such terminology often implicitly contained a value judgement, whereby «our» Serbs were attributed positive connotations belonging to all inhabitants of Gorski kotar (cooperative, civilized, non-violent), in contrast to «just» Serbs who were usually perceived in a more negative light and ascribed negative characteristics typical for the Croatian ethnic group views of the Serbs (non-cooperative, uncivilized, violent).

When making reference to violent acts or threat of violence by members of the other ethnic group, inhabitants of Gorski kotar occasionally made use of terminology from the WWII, calling the opponents by the names of Ustashas and Chetniks. Although in its primary meaning referring to the past, this terminology contains high emotional load and was used also for the 1990 events when referring to atrocities, barbarianism, or fear of those. For example, in a highly tense moment of final negotiations, before YNA withdrew its military personnel from the barracks in Gorski kotar, Horvat (2003, p.378) describes his feelings about the YNA military commander in charge:

«I really trust him and I don't hide it. He is a soldier from head to toe, but a rational soldier. *He disagrees with us in everything, but he is not a Chetnik*».

Maintaining multiple social identities in the context of violent conflict in the country often led to loyalty dualism. As described by Franjo Starcevic, one of the local leaders of Croatian nationality who was proactively pursuing communication and peace with the Serb local leaders:

«I thought to myself: you want peace in Gorski kotar between Croats and Serbs while the Croatian soldiers go to Lika region to fight against the rebel Serbs – is it a treason if you make peace arrangements with Serbs? Luckily, our *Serbs* here were thinking the same way [as us] when considering peace and war: are they betraying Yugoslavia if they accept peace with Croats» (Manjine za manjine, p. 116).

Yugoslav National Army officials were also facing severe group loyalty tensions and maintaining multiple social identities. Having to choose between opposing worldviews was particularly difficult for military personnel, as they are trained to follow orders. By insisting on their belonging to the community of Gorski kotar as fellow citizens, the authorities of Gorski kotar were reducing the salience of two other types of social identities of YNA military personnel that were both becoming salient and getting belligerent traits: their ethnic identity (the commanders were mostly Serbs) and their identity as members of YNA (they swore to protect the integrity of Yugoslavia). However, their peaceful withdrawal from the town of Delnice demonstrates that the non-belligerent content of their

identity as members of Gorski kotar community prevailed in their approach to dealing with the conflict.

As indicated by Rocas and Brewer (2002), when coping with multiple social identities individuals adopt different forms of identity management and sometimes activate different cultural identities under different conditions or mental or emotional stress. From the practices and outcomes related to the management of conflict in Gorski kotar (no armed clashes or other hostilities between Croats and Serbs, preserved inter-ethnic relationships, peaceful departure of YNA), it can be concluded that the values and norms of the Gorski kotar group identity – valuing the heterogeneous social space, propensity to dialogue and cooperation, sobriety and rationality, among other – prevailed over the loyalty of inhabitants to their respective ethnic and other groups, giving a major contribution to the preservation of peace and social capital in the region.

Tuzla (Bosnia-Herzegovina): citizen's identity at the forefront

Tuzla is a city in north-eastern Bosnia-Herzegovina which was widely known in the former Yugoslavia for its industry and salt mines. The production of salt, which started in 19th century, marked the history of Tuzla and attracted people from around the wider region, contributing to the high diversity of the city's population. As an illustration of that diversity, Bajric (2000) noted that at the beginning of the 20th century more than ten languages were spoken in the city. Tuzla also had a strong anti-fascist tradition and a history of positive relationships between different ethnic groups living on its territory.

During the elections held in Bosnia-Herzegovina on November 18, 1990, the first multiparty elections after the WWII, the citizens of Tuzla gave a majority vote to the alliance of former communist party and other non-nationalist parties. Their representative Selim Beslagic was elected mayor of the city, formally titled President of the Municipal Assembly.

As the only city where non-nationalists won the elections and formed the local government, Tuzla was exceptional. In the rest of Bosnia-Herzegovina nationalist parties had succeeded in promoting salience of ethnic identities, instigating inter-ethnic

fear and presenting ethnic leaders as “saviors” of own ethnic groups, which brought them electoral victory in 107 out of 109 municipalities of the country, initiating an irreversible process of ethnic fracturing in the country.

During the pre-war political crisis, lasting from the November 1990 elections until the outbreak of armed hostilities in Bosnia-Herzegovina in April 1992, as well as throughout the wartime period lasting from 1992 until 1995, during which Tuzla was exposed to severe hardship including shelling, hunger and massive influx of displaced persons, the local government and the great majority of the citizens did not succumb to intensive and continuous nationalist pressures promoting inter-ethnic divisions and violence. Instead, they remained a bastion of inter-ethnic tolerance and cooperation, challenging the discourse of the so called ethnic war in the country. Moreover, the community of Tuzla inverted the «problem» of ethnic heterogeneity of Bosnia-Herzegovina into a solution at the local level. In that effort, they strongly relied on their group identity attributes, which will be analysed below.

When war broke out in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1992, as per the census conducted a year before, more than 50 per cent of Tuzla’s inhabitants were Muslims, some 17 per cent were Croats and other 17 per cent were Serbs, while some 11 per cent had declared as Yugoslavs. The three largest ethnic groups, which could be distinguished mainly by their religion, had a history of mostly positive inter-group relations. Importantly, as I could identify through my research in the community of Tuzla, the inhabitants of the city had also developed a strong joint group identity as *citizens of Tuzla*. This type of group identity included a combination of geographical and ideological traits and its content and salience played an important role in the preservation of local level peace in Tuzla.

In geographical terms, this type of group identity included all people living on the territory of the city of Tuzla, but also, and more importantly, a set of values and worldviews they had in common. This included *cherishing positive past experiences* among different ethnic groups, which were a *source of pride and positive self-image* for the city’s inhabitants:

«Somehow we managed to avoid all the wars. There is a legend that blood and salt do not go together. This was the case during WWII, and also now (...) Tuzla was saved, maybe indeed because nationalism was “surgically removed” from our community, because we were like that, we were multi-ethnic» (Interviewee from Tuzla).

In ideological terms, the citizens’ identity was communicated as citizens’ option, defined as follows by the mayor of Tuzla in his public announcement made on 19th April 1992:

«The outcome of the first multiparty parliamentary elections confirmed the “citizens’ option”, the political view that *government in Bosnia should serve the interests of all citizens regardless of their ethnic or religious background*» (Beslagic, 1998, p. 18).

He further expanded on this definition of citizens’ option by underlining some of its key attributes, in a public announcement of 12th May 1992:

«Our political goal is the citizens’ option. This means political, legal and social *equality of all citizens* regardless of their religious, ethnic and political affiliations. We divide and evaluate people according to their *abilities* and the *contribution* they make by their work, and not according to their religion, ethnicity and the like» (Beslagic, 1998, p. 23).

As could be observed from the above quotes, citizens’ identity option was directly opposed to ethnic identity “option” and, as such, a counter-proposal for the solution of the “problem of Bosnia-Herzegovina” *Advocates of citizens’ option did not consider the multi-ethnicity as a threat, but rather as the greatest value and the main aspect of their social identity which was under attack and had to be defended.* Where most leaders, including the international community, saw a problem, Tuzla’s leadership and most citizens saw a source of strength and a social identity trait which was not negotiable. *Equality* and *inter-ethnic cooperation* were considered as key values among citizens of Tuzla who were highly aware of mutual *interdependence*.

«We are deeply aware of the fact that our society cannot be good for Muslims if it isn't good for Serbs, Croats and others who live here. Conversely, it cannot be good for Serbs and Croats if it isn't good for Muslims» (Beslagic, 1998, p. 24)

The above mindfulness of mutual interdependence is strongly diverging from the dominant discourses of nationalist identities, which proposed that the precondition of the well-being of own ethnic group is the expulsion or subjugation of other, usually minority groups.

Mutual interdependence is also linked to the mutual sense of accountability, and was benefiting from the positive experiences from the past that were often recalled to reinforce the values of citizens' identity. In a public announcement of June 9, 1992, following a burglary in the Orthodox bishop's palace, the mayor of the city reminds the citizens:

«May I remind you that our city kept itself free of nationalism during the WWII. The Mayor then was Hadzi Hasanaga Pasic, and the Mufti a man by the name of Kurt. Together with the citizens of Tuzla they refused to permit genocide against the Serbs and did not allow the Orthodox church and the bishop's palace to be burned down[...] This is Tuzla, and in Tuzla we will not allow any vandalism or barbaric behaviour» (Beslagic, 1998, pp. 39-40)

Building on the positive past, the Mayor sends a clear message that himself and his administration were following the same path as their predecessors, and that they would not allow anything to happen now that would later be a cause for shame. *Shame* as a *sense of accountability to the community* and *awareness of possible long-term consequences* are two important characteristics of the civic social identity of Tuzla. Relational comparisons are clearly translated in the above claims of *non-vandalism* and *non-barbarianism*, pointing at the values of *civilization*, *decency* and *order*.

The analysis of the conducted interviews also shows that my respondents were referring to the *religious belonging rather than the ethnic belonging* as one of the distinguishing identity aspects among the co-citizens of Tuzla. An interviewee who worked in the media stated that they paid a lot of attention to avoid the terms Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks, replacing them with the terms Orthodox, Catholics and Muslims,

when referring to the citizens of Tuzla. By *narrowing their differences from the scope of ethnicity to the scope of religion*, the promoters of citizens' identity established a different balance between commonalities and differences among inhabitants of Tuzla.

The *value attached to human life above all other objective* is another trait of citizen's identity that I observed. Unlike in the nationalist and ethnic identity discourses where war is considered as "sacred", "just" or at least acceptable in order to achieve own group's goals, *in the civic social identity discourse of Tuzla war was considered solely as a human disaster*. Fatmir Alispahic, one of the founders of the Forum of Tuzla Citizens (FTC), explains:

«War, even the defensive one, is the time of evil. It is only *our roots that can lead us towards the good*. This is why, in the context of the general B-H picture, we need to revitalize the values that make Tuzla European city, in order to be useful to ourselves and others as a firm and moral mobilization force. Because *only if we remain what we had always been we will have the strength to mentally and physically overcome the nothingness of the aggressor*» (*Front Slobode*, 1993)

The civic social identity discourse was *strongly Tuzla-centric*, and *relying on the positive self-image*, as it was building on the values and traditions rooted in Tuzla of which most citizens were proud. However, at the same time this discourse was reflecting high levels of *Bosnian patriotism* in its deepest sense. Contrary to those elites and international community who believed that Bosnia-Herzegovina could exist fragmented by ethnic majority and minority principle, the authorities and citizens of Tuzla defended the view that this would lead to ghettoization and that such Bosnia-Herzegovina would lose its essence. In fact, as it was this very essence that was under attack, it had to be saved for Bosnia-Herzegovina to be saved:

«It was not a civil war, it was an aggression, a desire to divide Bosnia [...] After all, Bosnia has been existing for thousands of years, and it is us, the humans, who die» (Interviewee 11)

This kind of rational offered an alternative approach to the violent conflict in the country, based on an alternative view of the problem in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Using the

terminology crafted by Campbell (1998, p. xi), this alternative approach contained «the problematization of the problematizations that reduced Bosnia to a problem».

The salience of group identification with the community of citizens of Tuzla, coupled with and supported by the political orientation named citizen's option, remained high throughout the wartime and significantly contributed to the preservation of inter-ethnic peace in Tuzla. While maintaining their multiple social identities and sometimes also facing tensions between loyalty to their ethnic groups and loyalty to the community of citizens of Tuzla, when dealing with the threat of violence most inhabitants of the city adhered to the values and norms of citizen's identity. The ethnic exclusion or supremacy of any ethnic group was in direct conflict with the values of citizens' identity, and preserving ethnic diversity and peace was the main social purpose of that group which was successfully realized prior to, during and after the war.

The role of group identities in preventing violence and preserving peace in Gorski kotar and Tuzla: conclusions and lessons learned

The experiences of preservation of multiple group identities and the prevalence of non-belligerent group identities in the communities of Gorski kotar and Tuzla offer numerous insights and valuable lessons learned.

While multiple social identities were present in all former Yugoslavia, their evolution prior and during the 1991-1995 conflict differed in these two oases of peace compared with the rest of the territory of the country. While the overall tendency in both Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina was the *dominance* of ethnic identity overshadowing all other group identities, in Tuzla and Gorski kotar multiple identities were preserved with high salience of identification with the local community. Applying the conceptual framework on social identity complexity and multiple in-group memberships developed by Roccas and Brewer (2016), it is evident that in the two oases of peace the prevalent approach to multiple identities during war was *compartmentalization*, whereas one group membership becomes the primary basis of social identity in a certain context. While preserving their multiple identities, in the context of dealing with the threat of violence

members of the communities of Gorski kotar and Tuzla adhered to the norms, values and social purposes of their local community group identity.

High salience of identification with local community - being proud “inhabitants of Gorski kotar” and “citizens of Tuzla” - was observed in those communities prior to and during the violent conflict in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina and undoubtedly played an important role in the preservation of local peace, as the content of those group identities was clearly non-nationalist and non-violent. The analysis of the content of group identities in Tuzla and Gorski kotar shows some commonalities and mutually interlinked traits contributing to peace. These can be grouped as follows: openness and inclusiveness of the two groups combined with high value attached to heterogeneous social space; deep belief in the equality of all members of community; strong sense for interdependence of human beings; valuing common past and awareness of long-term consequences of human actions; non-barbarianism, sobriety and tendency to cooperate.

Valuing the heterogeneous social space as *conditio sine qua non* of local group identity is particularly enlightening. In both oases of peace heterogeneity was considered an indispensable part of group identity, which could not be sacrificed for any “higher” objective. This was in direct opposition to the primary social purpose of the renewed ethnic identity groups, which were striving to live on a sovereign, ethnically homogeneous territory regardless of the human and other cost that achieving this objective could entail. The message from the two communities in the oases of peace could be summarized in following words: *“We are diverse. This is not a problem, on the contrary this makes us who we are. Without diversity we are not”*.

My analysis further indicates that multiple and non-violent group identification processes in the communities of Gorski kotar and Tuzla, in combination with their trust in the local governments, reduced uncertainty and supported the satisfaction of needs for self-esteem, belonging and safety of their citizens, without them having to resort to the protection of exclusive ethnic groups and their nationalist leaders.

The described content of local group identities certainly impacted the outcomes of the elections in 1990s, as both communities elected non-nationalist leaders. Once elected,

the leaderships of Gorski kotar and Tuzla, together with several other influential actors in those communities, continued strategically preserving and promoting multiple identities and their nonbelligerent content as one of the key strategies for preventing community-level violence. As observed by Kelman (1997, p.336) «the formulations of group identity by political leaders, in particular, have a major impact on how their communities think about it and, ultimately, how they feel about it». The ways in which local political leaders in the two oases of peace were talking about group identities - both by not suppressing ethnic identities but making them an invaluable part of a broader, geographically defined group identities, and by promoting the salience of the latter – strongly supported peace at the local level.

Importantly, the content of the prevailing local group identities helped the two communities develop alternative views on what the violent conflict was about, who the parties in that conflict were and how the conflict should be solved. Rather than being gullible and adopting the dominant approach of dealing with the conflicts in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina as inter-ethnic problems that should be solved by ethnic fracturing, these two communities were treating nationalism and violence itself as a problem to be solved. This is critical because the way we perceive and deal with conflicts also influences future behaviors.

Gagnon (2004, pp. 11-12) states that «violence may be constitutive, that is, its goal may be to construct actors or meanings or relationships that did not previously exist». He further argues that «the ethnic conflicts in the former Yugoslavia were an attempt to force a reconceptualization of ethnicity itself for political ends». Along the same lines, we can assume that non-violence may have a constitutive role, too. It constructs meanings and relationships, or reinforces and reconfirms the ones that already existed, in this case positive relationships of cooperation and mutual support of members of communities with high salience of locally defined nonbelligerent identities.

The importance and potential implications of these experiences go beyond the two oases of peace. The study of the interplay between group identities and conflict shows that identities often change as a consequence of violent conflict (rather than being a cause of conflict). In the case of violent conflict in Croatia, Sekulic et al. (2006, p. 797)

provide evidence that dismisses the common views of inter-ethnic hostility as a cause of violence in Croatia and find strong support for concluding that «the events of the war itself and especially elite manipulation of public images of these events are strongly implicated in rising intolerance during the war». This intolerance has consequences also in the post-war period and could lead to new hostilities.

However, as argued by Kelman (1997), group identities, including ethnic and national identity, are a social construction which is flexible and evolving over time, and as such can be renegotiated and reconstructed. By contributing to the complexity of wartime memories with positive experiences of multiple, nonbelligerent identities which supported peace in two ethnically mixed areas of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, the narratives from Gorski kotar and Tuzla have the potential to influence the evolution of our understanding and behaviors in any context where group identities play a constitutive role.

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