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## A Protest, Coup d'État, or Internal Party Power Struggle: What Motivated Croatian War Veterans to Hit the Streets?

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SVEN MILEKIĆ  
Maynooth University

### *Summary*

The paper investigates war veterans as organisers of contentious politics in post-war Croatia, by looking into two significant protests. Already amid the 1990s War in Croatia, the first veteran associations were tied to the army or governing Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ). After the HDZ government ignored their demands in 1996, the main association gathering disabled veterans announced a protest, shocking the regime. After defusing the situation by meeting most of veteran demands, the protest against the Government was transformed into a support rally for officials who helped the protesters' cause. In 2014, veteran associations initiated a protest over, at first, officials' speculations about PTSD cases among the local Serb population, framed among the veterans as "aggressors". As Prime Minister Zoran Milanović refused to dismiss the Minister of Veterans and his associates, the veteran protest outlasted the Government, including violent episodes in the government building's vicinity and ending in April 2016. The article proceeds to analyse the disruptiveness of the protest, the repertoire and violence used, as well as frames of meaning with which protesters justified their collective actions and wished to appeal to wider constituencies. The article attempts to analyse the motives behind the protest and links of protesters with different political actors – mostly HDZ – trying to show if veterans acted as independent political actors or only as an extended arm of politicians. By using veteran associations' documents, archival documents, media reports and literature, the paper wishes to place the two case studies into the body of literature that describes the decades-long patron-client relationship between veterans, HDZ and the state.

*Keywords:* Croatia, Homeland War, Social Movements, War Veterans, Protests, Protest Politics, Memory, Disruptive Politics, Contentious Politics

## Introduction

The article deals with the movement of Croatian veterans from the 1990s War in post-war Croatia. Established during the War, the post-socialist Croatian state, first in the symbolical and later in the material sense, promoted war veterans as a social group deserving special treatment, building what Dolenc (2017) sees as “a soldier’s state”. In such a state, as Dolenc and Širinić (2020) argued, veterans organised in numerous associations asserted themselves as “pivotal political actors”. Within the context of their relationship with the state and dominant political parties, the veterans either strengthen the regime or enter contentious episodes to destabilise it (*ibid.*, p. 241).

In most cases, these contentious veteran episodes came during prolonged periods of veteran unrests over a variety of issues: veteran welfare, Croatia’s cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia (ICTY), adhering to national minority legislation or memory politics. Dolenc and Širinić (2020) present these contentious veteran episodes in relations to Croatia’s dominant political party, the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ). One of the first researchers on the topic, Fisher (2003), viewed the veteran movement similar to Dolenc and Širinić, as a segment of society closely tied to HDZ. For Fisher, the period of veteran contention against the centre-left government in the early 2000s (when HDZ was in opposition) was a sign that the veterans’ movement “appeared more political than a part of civil society” (*ibid.*, p. 87).

Other researchers touched upon or used different veteran protests as case studies to emphasise different features of the veteran movement. Boduszyński and Pavlaković (2019) analysed different protest periods from the early 2000s on to show how veteran associations and groups took part in the creation of Croatia’s hegemonic narrative about the 1990s War. Soldić (2009) analysed veteran protest periods to portray – among other things – their alienation from Croatian society and aligning with the political ambitions of HDZ, at the expense of creating a negative public image. Finally, Grgurinović (2018) takes two veteran protest periods as case studies to show the correlation between the levels of disruptiveness of their actions and public support for their cause, as well as discursive frames they use to justify their actions and delegitimise their opponents.

This article also focuses on periods in which veterans engaged in contentious politics. Using media reports, but also previously never consulted sources – internal documentation of veteran associations, Office of the Croatian President, and parliamentary Committee for War Veterans – and secondary literature, the article sets two protests of disabled veterans as its case studies. The article looks into veterans’ reasons for these protests and their correlation with interests and activities of other political actors.

First is the protest at St. Mark's Square in Zagreb organised by the nationwide association, Croatian Military Disabled of the Homeland War (HVIDR), on 15 September 1996 (Barišić and Prišćan, 1996). This was the first massive post-war veteran protest in a semi-autocratic environment that did not look kindly on disruptive politics. The case study investigates a 100-days-long process heading to the protest itself, during which HVIDR articulated their demands regarding the new Law on Defenders (veterans) and Croatia's post-war rebuilding.

The second case study is the sit-in 2014-2016 protest in front of the War Veterans' Ministry in Zagreb. The 555-days-long protest at 66 Savska Road – address of the Ministry – was the longest protest in Croatia's history. Officially organised by the Association of 100 Per Cent Disabled Croatian Defenders (Association 100) and other associations, the protest started on 20 October 2014 in front of the Ministry, as a reaction to its officials' statements that protesters found deeply insulting (Suša, 2014). Almost immediately, the protesters' demands grew, and they installed a tent in front of the Ministry,<sup>1</sup> remaining there until disbanding the protest in April 2016.

The article looks at the two case studies 18 years apart as two contentious episodes, a contentious relationship between protesting veteran groups and the state. In that aspect, the article tries to reconstruct – through available sources – organisational networks behind veteran mobilisations in these two protest cycles. Although in both case studies the veterans protested the government, the article will investigate motives behind the protesters, by trying to answer if protesters acted independently or if they were only a tool of individual politicians, parties, or fractions within parties. Therefore, the article would provide the background of the protest leaders, some of which were tied to political options other than HDZ. The article would provide an overview and analysis on how protesters changed their repertoire of collective actions – and the level of disruptiveness and violence applied – to mitigate bargaining with political actors or staying in line with the government's tolerance of that repertoire (especially during the semi-authoritarian period). Finally, the article will analyse the discourse – the frames of meaning (Tarrow, 1993, p. 286) – used by protesters in the attempt to frame their cause.

Analysis of the two case studies would offer a clear identification of goals the protesters achieved, as well as the political and social change that followed these protest cycles.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In certain periods, Croatian war veterans act as a social movement, defined by Diani as “networks of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups, or associations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared col-

<sup>1</sup> Hence the derogative name often used for them, the “tent men” (*šatorasi* in Croatian).

lective identity” (Diani and Bison, 2004, p. 282). Social movements “combine sustained campaigns of claim making” through different public performances, while drawing these activities from networks, associations and traditions – social movement bases (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015, p. 11). In the case of Croatian veterans, their social movement bases include associations – often existing within coordinations, alliances and communities on local, regional or national levels – *ad hoc* (protest or pressure) groups and individual veteran leaders – persons who enjoy certain prestige within the community. As recorded in other social movements (Della Porta and Diani, 2006, pp. 161-162), these entities differ in the level of formal hierarchy they have, in whether they pursue wider societal goals, while some of them become institutionalised. Despite the fragmentation, all these entities and individuals share the common “defender” identity – with certain specificities, like those who served in the police or military, volunteers or disabled veterans. Like in other social movements, the membership criteria are unstable and defined by actors involved (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015, p. 284). Therefore, debates among veterans on “who is or isn’t a defender” are common, appearing over time in relation to either welfare, social capital, or prestige in society.

The article looks into the relationship between the state (government, ministries, top politicians and governing parties) and the veteran movement within the concept of contentious politics. McAdam *et al.* defined contentious politics as “episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claim and their objects when (a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the claim and (b) the claims would, if realized, affect the interest of at least one of the claimants” (2001, p. 5). In contentious politics, actors make claims towards authorities – with governments acting as claimants, target of claims or third parties – using the different forms of collective action in the public sphere with institutional procedures, while forging alliances with other actors (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015, p. 7). Simply put, contentious politics lay upon the intersection of contention, politics and collective actions (*ibid.*). These collective actions include marches, protests, forming specialised institutions, petitions, public statements and the like (*ibid.*, p. 11). Forms of collective actions undertaken by the organisers of contentious politics are not always solely tools for demanding rights and privileges, but sometimes these actions represent or re-enact exactly those rights that are sought (Tarrow, 1993, p. 286).

The key element of some forms of collective actions, such as protests, is disruptiveness, aiming at influencing political or social change (Wang and Piazza, 2016, p. 1677). Organisers of contentious politics draw from a wide repertoire of collective actions to reach their goal, based on how much “one experience with the making of collective claims affects the new experience” (Tilly, 2008, p. 15). Besides being tied to a certain national context – a set of collective actions traditionally used in a state – repertoires change through time as some forms and tradi-

tions of collective actions that were once common are no longer performed (Tilly, 1978, pp. 151-166). The repertoire are collective actions that people know how to do and which are expected from the general population, within “a culturally sanctioned and empirically limited set of options” (*ibid.*, p. 151). As these repertoires are tied to “patterns of repression” (government’s toleration for certain forms of actions) (*ibid.*, p. 170), different types of regimes (democracies, hybrid or autocratic regimes) limit the repertoire of contention for the organisers of collective actions. Of four main forms of repertoires, the one most tied to collective contention is a “strong repertoire”, where participants enact on available scripts within which they improvise to a limited degree (Tilly, 2008, p. 15).

Organisers of contentious politics often turn to protests – which are the main focus of this article – due to their potential to “disrupt the routines of life in ways that protesters hope will disarm, dismay, and disrupt opponents” (Tarrow, 2011, p. 99). Disruptive behaviour is only a threat of violence (*ibid.*, p. 101), while it has potential to turn into violence. As the repertoires change during protest cycles, violence serves as an escalation of these repertoires within the cycle – sometimes happening at the margins (Della Porta, 2008, pp. 222-223). Tilly categorises violence in contentious politics in six different forms, differing in the level of coordination and organisation, violence and number of involved individuals and groups (Tilly, 2003).

This article focuses on disruptive behaviour, as it demonstrates a movement’s dedication to its own goals (Tarrow, 2011, p. 101). Finally, disruption broadens the circle of conflict (*ibid.*), as bystanders are implicated through protesters’ activities that disrupt their lives and pressure authorities to react. The level of disruptiveness or violence used depends on protest tactics, which Wang and Piazza divide into non-disruptive, non-violent disruptive and violent disruptive (2016, p. 1676). The protests tactics – levels of disruptiveness and violence used – depends on a social movement’s targets and how much their “claims appeal to diverse constituencies” (*ibid.*, pp. 1699-1703). As its disruptive phase dies out, a social movement institutionalises its struggle, looking for concrete benefits for its supporters through bargaining and negotiations (Piven and Cloward, 1977, pp. 81-82).

Thus, the article looks into the 1996 and 2014 protests of Croatian war veterans as two contentious episodes or protest cycles (Della Porta, 2008, p. 222). It analyses the form they took – non-disruptive, non-violent disruptive and violent disruptive (if there was such behaviour) – as well as levels to which they grabbed the attention of the government and political elites. The article will investigate the public support that the protests gained and whether they were successful in broadening the circle of conflict – in relation to the trade-off in the levels of disruptive actions and violence used. Finally, the article identifies the frames of meaning which the protesters set to “justify and dignify collective action”, serving to mobilise the masses during a protest cycle (Tarrow, 1993, p. 286), for both case studies.

## Defenders from the Homeland War

As part of the break-up of Yugoslavia, from 1991 to 1995, Croatian forces fought against the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA), Serbian paramilitaries and Serb rebels. The conflict, referred to in Croatia as the *Homeland War* (*Domovinski rat* in Croatian), is widely seen as the central event in the country's history, the birthplace of the modern Croatian nation (Jović, 2017, p. 12; Pavlaković, 2021, pp. 25-26). The memory of the War is encapsulated in its hegemonic, dominant narrative, simplifying the character of the conflict, and focussing on parts seen as useful for nation-building. Outlining this narrative, the parliamentary *Declaration on the Homeland War* states that Croatia led "a just and legitimate, defensive and liberating, not an aggressive and conquering war against anyone in which it defended its territories from *Greater-Serbian aggression* within its internationally recognised borders" (*Narodne novine*, 2000).

The phrase "Greater-Serbian aggression" emphasises Croatia's view of itself as both victim and victor of the War (Jović, 2017, pp. 201-203). In this sense, through lived wartime experience amplified by state media, the *Homeland War* would become "the cornerstone of Croatian cultural victim trauma" (Koska and Matan, 2017, p. 130), with victims seen as a sacrifice for establishing an independent state. The *Homeland War* also relies on heroism, personified in the role of *defenders* (*branitelji* in Croatian), soldiers that defended and liberated the homeland from the *Greater-Serbian aggression* (Boduszyński and Pavlaković, 2019, p. 803). While civil wars do not instantly evoke aggressor/villain and victim/hero dichotomies (Soldić, 2009, p. 97), the fixation on the *Greater-Serbian aggression* is one of the reasons why *defenders* are not perceived in the same way as veterans elsewhere.

As argued by Pavlaković, their name denotes that they are still defending, as if they were still active soldiers in an ongoing war (Boduszyński and Pavlaković, 2019, p. 822). This goes hand-in-hand with the nationalist trope of never-ending war as an element of the dominant war narrative. As described by Jović and Sokolić, veterans and nationalists act as if the *Homeland War* is still fought against Croatia's domestic and foreign enemies. Sokolić showed the presence of this narrative trait among different groups in society, including veterans (Sokolić, 2018, pp. 69-72), while Jović demonstrated how conservative politicians called for battle over the interpretation of the War. If this battle were to be lost, it would jeopardise all previous achievements of the *Homeland War*: Croatia's independence and territorial unity (Jović, 2017, pp. 199-200).

Veterans' defence of the *Homeland War* memory, of its hegemonic narrative, is constantly present since the early days of the veteran movement. Veteran associations react to specific state policies, voices in society or the international community, which they see as dangerous for Croatia's ontological security. According

to this view, if the War and its achievements were to be re-interpreted, it could put into question the very existence and independence of Croatia. In this sense, the interpretation of historical events is perceived as crucial for the nation's existence. In "defending the homeland", veteran groups constantly promote and reinforce the dominant narrative. By shaping the War memory, veteran groups act as leading memory entrepreneurs in Croatian society. As this sanitised view of the *Homeland War* was propelled into a "fundamental value", some veteran associations promote themselves as the group that deserves a special position in society. The position was earned with "the holly sacrifice" that Croatian veterans "placed at the altar of the homeland" (Hranjski, 1992, p. 10). Their sacrifice works as their investment in the joint nationalist project: the Croatian state. As a shoemaker is the owner of the shoes he produced, veterans, as those who "created" the country, own Croatia (Jović, 2017, p. 315). At times, this ownership gives them the power of sovereign (*ibid.*, pp. 334-335). This means that veterans should not only control the memory of the War but also decide upon the general direction of the country – which they own. In this sense, veteran associations act as one of the main veto players (Čepo, 2020, p. 144), preventing different policies or initiatives set out by central or local governments, vetoing changes that may disrupt the *status quo* or question their position in society.

Croatian veterans use their symbolic capital to attain perks and political influence, co-creating a militarised country or "a soldier's state" (Dolenec, 2017). During the 1990s, by combining crony capitalism and populism, Croatian President Franjo Tuđman and his centre-right HDZ built a paternalist and clientelist state (*ibid.*, p. 66), "a three-way client-patron relationship between the state, HDZ, and the veteran population" (Dolenec and Širinić, 2020, p. 257). Thus, already in 1993, presidential advisors advised Tuđman to officially support the founding of a nationwide Association of Croatian Veterans of the Homeland War (UHVDR). State officials thought they could use UHVDR as an umbrella organisation for monitoring other veteran associations, directing the association according to state policies (Kašpar, 1993) and thus controlling veterans. Although veterans are a heterogeneous body of different ideological positions, "political symbiosis" between main associations and HDZ was visible early on. These associations acted as networks "exercising political agency on a wide range of political issues, often merging with those of key HDZ figures" (Stubbs and Zrinščak, 2015, p. 405). Therefore, when HDZ is in power, these associations reinforce the government's legitimacy while they "weaken opposition claims to power" (Dolenec and Širinić, 2020, p. 241). When HDZ is in opposition, veteran associations become contentious, destabilising the incumbent government (*ibid.*).

However, it is possible that the links between veteran associations and HDZ are not solely a result of clientelism but also of congruent political beliefs, as members of veteran associations tend to gravitate towards the right (Bagić *et al.*, 2020,

p. 217). Thus, as their membership is visibly politically biased, this eased the political activation of these associations as key vessels for veteran mobilisation (Dolenec and Širinić, 2020). Although veterans are a heterogeneous population according to numerous socio-demographic characteristics, they are also a social group whose members have a shared veteran identity coming from a historical event formulated in collective memory (Bagić *et al.*, 2020, p. 218). It would also be wrong to assume that the relationship between HDZ and veterans (and their associations) was always straightforward or harmonious, as there was a difference within the heterogeneous veteran movement, with radically different cultural and socio-economic characteristics. There are considerable differences within the associations' membership between those who enjoy social and economic privileges due to their ties to HDZ and those who do not (Dolenec and Širinić, 2020, p. 246). An additional disruptive element is within the very nature of the client-patron relationship, where the client's power lies on the possibility to "go rogue" on their political ally if it goes in an undesired policy direction (Dolenec, 2017, p. 71).

In the end, not all veteran associations were HDZ's loyal clientelist partners but instead built their identity opposing the dominant party.<sup>2</sup> Other associations changed or adjusted their loyalty and cooperated relatively effectively with HDZ and centre-left governments.<sup>3</sup> Some associations did not form strong links to the regime (as they were ignored) or their allegiance changed over time. Nevertheless, by 1995, HDZ made a visible presence in the leadership of almost all prominent veteran associations, as it penetrated the rest of civil society, sports, culture, and academia.

Despite links to the regime's clientelist network, veterans can also be seen as "the losers of transition" (Jakir, 2019), especially in connection with the transformation and privatisation of once socially-owned companies during the 1990s. Through voucher privatisation, veterans were handed stocks of these newly privatised companies, and many impoverished veterans sold their shares for a fraction of their value (Jurković, 1993). In other cases, veteran associations claimed different

<sup>2</sup> The Association of the Croatian Defenders-Volunteers of the Homeland War (UHBDDR) and Independent Croatian Volunteers (NDH) represented two such associations from the mid-1990s on – with UHBDDR eventually becoming an association loyal to HDZ. These two associations were often articulating far-right sentiments, tied to extreme anti-Serb positions, nostalgia for the World War II fascist Ustaša movement combined with criticism of HDZ's corruption, especially tied to the privatisation and transformation process. In later period, Defenders of Croatia represented an association opposing HDZ and President Tudman, but coming from moderate positions, linked to HDZ moderate dissidents – like Josip Manolić.

<sup>3</sup> UHVDR and Association of the Croatian Volunteers of the Homeland War (UHDDR) are prime examples.



machinations at hand prevented them from acquiring shares of prominent, profitable companies (Bošković, 1996, pp. 13-14). In the end, the 1996-1997 voucher privatisation did not bring much good for veterans, but rather large profits for market speculators (Begić *et al.*, 2007, p. 24).

Additionally, during the 1990s, the regime transformed many veterans into passive receivers of welfare. Research has shown that most state measures for veterans were primarily compensatory-oriented, while a lot less were integration-oriented (Dobrotić, 2008, pp. 61, 80). This approach, oriented more to compensatory measures, has transformed veterans into a social group addicted to welfare (*ibid.*, p. 80) while not integrated into a peaceful, post-war society. Thus, in the end, as in other post-war societies, Croatian veterans are victims of transitions from war to peace. This dependence on welfare and lack of real integration into society isolated many veterans, feeling like they do not know where they belong (Jakir, 2019, p. 39) while less prone to negotiating and understanding the needs of other groups. The veteran dissatisfaction with the post-war society and political establishment was mainly formulated in multiple iterations of the catchphrase: “Is this what we fought for?” (Madi, 1996, p. 6; Liović, 1998a).

While this dissatisfaction made some veterans prone to political manipulation, some veteran groups opted to act as independent political actors and negotiate their positions for certain gains. By cooperating with HDZ or against it, through the years, veteran associations asserted themselves as pivotal political players, capable of blocking government policies, disrupting the rule of law and slowing down reconciliation processes (Dolenec and Širinić, 2020). On multiple occasions, veteran associations or *ad hoc* groups used protests or threats of protest – and indirectly violence or disruption of greater capacity – to push their agenda.

### **1996 – The Rise of the Disabled Veterans**

With conflict ending in 1995, Croatia faced the dire post-war reality. With a failing economy, the state had to care for the massive number of demobilised and disabled veterans. Thus, in 1996, receiving welfare or struggling on the bare existential minimum, 40,000 veterans were unemployed (Žunec, 2006, p. 28), with 46 per cent living in a bad financial situation, while some 15 per cent were without any income (UHVDR, 1996a). Furthermore, half of the veterans believed that they regressed compared to those who did not participate in the war directly, while 45 per cent thought that society did not help them in their civic integration (*ibid.*).

Despite numerous veteran groups, the ones with the biggest legitimacy in the public sphere were disabled veterans. The regime recognised their importance early on, and in 1992, under the umbrella of the Defence Ministry, disabled veterans formed HVIDR (Rajković, 1996, p. 10). From the start funded and housed by

the Ministry, HVIDR became closely tied to the powerful Defence Minister Gojko Šušak, who felt morally obligated towards the association (Šušak, 1996) and disabled veterans who “gave parts of their bodies” in “building their homeland” (Rajković, 1996, p. 10). In return, HVIDR publicly demonstrated their allegiance to Šušak (Liović, 1998b), playing their part in this client-patron relationship.

HVIDR immediately took the initiative to pressure the state to pass the new Law on Defenders, focusing on benefits for disabled veterans. All veteran associations saw the Law as an opportunity to further formalise and institutionalise the veteran cause, transforming them from an entitlement to a privileged or social status group.

However, as drafting of the Law did not progress at all, at HVIDR's convention in May 1996 the disappointed members accused the state of not implementing existing laws (HVIDR, 1996a, p. 2) while calling for the new Law. HVIDR demanded state subvention of rents, better implementation of healthcare measures, same pensions for active and reserve forces, jobs, and a moratorium on selling property owned by the Defence Ministry (*ibid.*, p. 5). Besides these socio-economic demands, HVIDR asked for symbolic recognition in introducing the *Homeland War* into the Constitution and some unrealistic demands: amnesty for war crimes and a law guaranteeing HVIDR special state care (*ibid.*). HVIDR gave the government 100 days to fulfil their numerous demands, or it would stage a protest or enter parliamentary politics (*ibid.*). This initiated the first protest cycle in the short Croatian post-socialist history.

In 1996, due to the semi-authoritarian character of the regime, the protesters were limited in the repertoire they could use, as every protest against the government or HDZ could be framed as a protest against Croatia itself. However, HVIDR saw the veterans as those responsible for HDZ's rule of the country (Mustapić, 1996, p. 8), and therefore entitled to more than those who could be accused of anti-Croatian activities. As a major veteran association threatened direct political activation as an opponent to HDZ for the first time, it was a nuisance for the party. HVIDR officials thought the timing was right for such a radical move – or at least a bluff – as disabled veterans had a higher moral ground than officials. The regime that put so much energy in emphasising war merits became a victim of its own discursively outlined patriotism.

Also on the symbolical level, HVIDR demanded introducing the definition of the *Homeland War* and veterans, as well as war profiteers and deserters, into the Constitution (Liović, 1996a). Such demands were a part of the process of transforming the *Homeland War* into a value. The approach argues that Croatian society should treasure the *Homeland War* similar to other values: freedom, democracy, human rights, or the rule of law. Therefore, while veterans wanted to establish the

War as a value for the sake of prestige, the government did not want associations to “wield” this symbol.

Besides war profiteers, now HVIDR put forward the trope of the faceless bureaucrat, cold-heartedly deciding upon the destiny of veterans. This populist trope, pursued in times of financial and social hardships, was popularised in Yugoslavia by Slobodan Milošević – then leader of Serbian Communists – in the late 1980s, leading to the so-called “anti-bureaucratic revolution”. Similar to the veterans’ trope, Serbian (Milošević’s) authoritarian populism portrayed bureaucracy as a group alienated from the nation, “devouring the Serbian national identity from within” (Salecl, 1994, p. 22). The trope of alienated bureaucracy helped Milošević in concentrating power in his hands while crushing the potential resistance to his rule in Serbia (Vladislavljević, 2008). In the 1990s, Tuđman also used the bureaucracy as a scapegoat for the lack of policy implementation and clientelism, claiming that the bureaucracy is staffed by cadres from Yugoslav times, with “elements that were against Croatian national democratic interests” even before the independence (*Glasnik HDZ*, 1993).

Tuđman’s view of bureaucracy was compatible with opinions of HVIDR officials, who suggested that some bureaucrats should be stripped of Croatian citizenship (Pandžić, 1996, p. 37). HVIDR used Yugoslavia as “a scarecrow” to present the state administration and media as inherently anti-Croatian (HVIDR, 1996b, p. 15). HVIDR and other veteran associations articulated their anger as the battle against it following the trope of inefficient and corrupt bureaucracy. In their view, this bureaucracy was dismissive of their suffering, using administrative instruments to cut veteran benefits, breaking and bending existing laws while helping non-fighters obtain certain benefits. Veterans saw this bureaucracy within the executive branch, often not specifying where exactly (Priščan, 1996a).

HVIDR officials blamed the executive branch for not implementing laws passed by the legislative (UHVD, 1996b, p. 4). According to HVIDR, disabled veterans did not enjoy sufficient support from “a part of the government” (*ibid.*) and the only institution it condoned was the Defence Ministry (and especially Minister Šušak), along with a few other officials (Liović, 1996b, pp. 6-7). According to this interpretation, if there were any Šušak’s shortcomings, it was because the Government did not allocate enough money to the Defence Ministry. At the same time, although it avoided mentioning any specific names in their statements, HVIDR strongly implied the persons in question so that the media could read out whom they saw as culprits for their ill-treatment (Madi, 1996, p. 6).

HVIDR’s rhetoric was almost perfectly aligned with the split that many commentators noticed in the government and HDZ in those years. One was a nationalist hard-line faction led by Šušak, which advocated bigger spending for disabled

veterans, war victims and military. The other faction, led then by Prime Minister Zlatko Mateša, was widely known as the “techno-managers”. This technocratic group focused on economic reforms and further companies’ privatisation while trying to control the growing social welfare that would enlarge Croatia’s public debt (Mihaljević, 2018).

Unsatisfied with the government’s reaction after two months, HVIDR confirmed that the association would go forward with the planned protest on St. Mark’s Square – where the Government and Parliament are located – on 15 September (Priščan, 1996a). As HVIDR started its countdown of 100 days from 30 May, this meant that they gave the Parliament some 45 days, before the summer break, to pass the new Law on Defenders, change some other laws and introduce the *Homeland War* into the Constitution – demands that were rather unrealistic. Additionally, according to the Constitution, the Parliament was coming back into session only on 16 September, showing how HVIDR’s demands were not feasible. To make them even more unrealistic, in September, HVIDR stated it wanted to revise the privatisation and transformation process (*ibid.*; Liović, 1996c). This showed that protesters were trying to innovate, widen the repertoire, and appeal to the wider constituencies.

The whole period from May showed a rapid veteran radicalisation, even within associations loyal to the regime, such as HVIDR. Already on its Convention in May, the association claimed that even Tuđman and Šušak avoided talking to HVIDR representatives for months (HVIDR, 1996a, p. 2). In their magazine, HVIDR ran a cartoon of Tuđman, showing him as a greedy and unsympathetic politician. Keeping in mind his semi-autocratic style rule and the state’s grip over the media, such a portrayal of Tuđman was almost non-existing in newspapers. The media also broke the story of how HVIDR officials stated that they “didn’t need President Tuđman... in 1991” as much as they did not him in 1996 (Priščan, 1996b). Tuđman’s advisor Slobodan Lang also warned the President that the protest could be misused, causing incidents that “may lead to tragic consequences” (Lang, 1996a).

Despite certain difficulties with developing a strategic approach in resolving the issue of disabled veterans (Lang, 1996b), the government started to work on the new Law on Defenders while the Parliament scheduled the discussion on the draft immediately after the summer break. However, HVIDR still insisted on organising the protest while blaming the Government and Parliament for not starting to draft the Law before summer (Liović, 1996d, p. 28). HVIDR also got support from Šušak, who explained that the protest would raise awareness of disabled veterans’ issues in society (Ć., 1996). This correlation between Šušak’s support and newest criticism against the government triggered the speculation that HVIDR was a part of inter-governmental and inter-HDZ power struggle, with Šušak’s clique trying to weaken the techno-managers or even topple down Mateša. Šušak was accused of

**Picture 1.** Cartoon Ridiculing Croatian President Franjo Tuđman and His Famous Slogan “We Have Croatia” by Showing People Who Want Their Share of the Homeland



Source: *Glasiilo Saveza Hrvatskih ratnih vojnih invalida Domovinskoga rata*, August 1996.

using the disabled veterans’ dissatisfaction for political repositioning and re-affirmation as the most powerful politician after Tuđman. HVIDR’s naming of Šušak as one of the speakers at the protest strengthened these speculations (Butković, 1996), while HVIDR officials announced that their members would publicly express their support for him at the event (Madi, 1996, p. 6).

Despite talks of Šušak’s attempted *coup*, another thing that caused unease was speculation on violence breaking out in some future protests of disabled veterans, offered by HVIDR’s President Marinko Liović (Liović, 1996c). While Liović made this comment as leverage and indirect threat – as disruptive behaviour usually is –

**Picture 2.** How HVIDR Members Expressed Their Struggle for Croatia in Their Magazine



Source: *Glasilno Saveza Hrvatskih ratnih vojnih invalida Domovinskoga rata*, August 1996.

other veteran and war victims' associations did not look kindly on such speculations, as even a peaceful protest against the state was unpatriotic in their eyes. At their meeting three days before the protest, other veteran and war victims' association leaders criticised HVIDR for focusing solely on disabled veterans. Some accused HVIDR of ignoring the government's work to resolve the issue while hiding the real culprits in the Defence Ministry, among others of Liović himself (as Ministry's employee). Finally, veteran leaders were worried that international media would instrumentalise the protest for counter-Croatian activities, showing they would support a very limited repertoire. For all these reasons, veteran associations at the meeting supported the HVIDR struggle for disabled veterans' rights, but not the protest itself (UHVDR, 1996b, pp. 7-12). The meeting showed how heterogeneous the veteran movement was, with many perceiving their struggle as a zero-sum game. Some veteran leaders were not keen on HVIDR's activities, characterising them as "politics".

On the side of the state, Tuđman decided to intervene directly upon Lang's advice, telling the President to lead his men again, as he did in the War "when they were armed only with faith in his word" (Lang, 1996a). As an overarching political figure, Tuđman served as a bridge between the two camps in HDZ and the Govern-

ment. Due to the semi-presidential system – which sometimes functioned as a fully presidential one – Tuđman was the central political figure and had the last say.<sup>4</sup>

By visiting the HVIDR's Assembly a day before the announced protest, Tuđman successfully defused the situation. While he appealed to them to resist manipulations of their cause, Tuđman promised complete state care for disabled veterans. He again warned the gathered about “old bureaucrats who didn't come to terms with the idea of Croatia's freedom, democracy and independence”. Tuđman announced the revision of the privatisation and transformation process, promising to punish the guilty ones, even the minority from HDZ. He stressed that although veterans could be unsatisfied with how much the state did for them, they should not help “opponents of Croatia's democratic government” (Priščan, 1996c). Gathered HVIDR members applauded him as they knew his political power over other political institutions. Veterans did not see Tuđman as a politician but a supreme commander, transcending all political particularities. In the sense of political myths, veterans saw Tuđman as “the wise old man”, the “father of the nation” or a “good king” (Jović, 2017, p. 361).

In the last days heading to the protest, HVIDR organised a press conference with high representatives of the regular and military police to reassure the public that there was no intention of a violent toppling of the government. The event was transformed into a highly-regulated exclusive gathering of HVIDR members – with a few hundred members of other veteran associations – with special accreditations, transported from across Croatia at state expense, with the public banned from joining in (Priščan, 1996b).

Some 3,500 HVIDR members gathered at St. Mark's Square on 15 September in what turned out to be an event supporting government implementation of laws. While Mateša did not come – probably fearing bad reception – Šušak was the star of the protest, vouching to fulfil the “supreme commander's” (Tuđman's) wishes. He said that upon taking power in 1990, HDZ promised no retributions against old officials and bureaucrats but that there would be “purges”. Šušak added that the protest was proof that the pace of these purges was dissatisfying – again pointing a finger towards the unnamed and faceless bureaucrats working against veterans (Barišić and Priščan, 1996). Šušak intentionally used such language to appeal to radicalised HVIDR members and HDZ voters. The protest went without incidents, receiving a special public commendation from the police (Priščan, 1996d).

HVIDR's contentious period of 1996 ended with the protest, although associations' complaints regarding the Law, its implementation, bureaucrats, and the de-

<sup>4</sup> At the meeting of HDZ's National Council, Mateša stated how the role of the government is to implement state policies articulated by Tuđman. This showed the level of the government's subordination to Tuđman's wishes (Žižić, 2019, p. 146).

sign of Croatian society would continue into the 1997-1999 period, only to explode in the early 2000s. After President Tuđman's death in December 1999, HDZ lost the 2000 general elections to the centre-left coalition led by the Social-Democratic Party of Croatia (SDP). In an attempt to speed up Croatia's EU path, the new Government pushed for a better compliance with the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia (ICTY) when it came to potential suspects among Croatian officers. Thus, as ICTY's investigators started looking into crimes committed by Croatian forces, veteran associations and *ad hoc* groups, logistically and politically supported by HDZ and other right-wing parties and groups, launched a series of protests and obstructions which partially slowed down the Government's activities. It culminated with all-time low ICTY-Croatia cooperation in 2002, after the Government practically refused to extradite general Janko Bobetko, accused of war crimes committed during the 1993 military operation "Medak Pocket" (Duka, 2005, pp. 88-96, 104-105; Goldstein, 2021, pp. 291, 295-306; Pavelić, 2010, pp. 23-31, 36-41, 44-57, 80-91; Peskin, 2005, pp. 218-221; Udovičić, 2011, pp. 117-121).

### **1991 vs Yugoslavia, 2014 vs Yugoslavs**

Unlike the events of 1996, the veteran sit-in protest of 2014-2016 took place in a radically different setting. The immediate post-war period was over, and Croatia was now a member of the EU. The centre-left government led by SDP battled the recession that started under the previous HDZ-led government. As a part of democratic backsliding, climaxing between 2013 and 2018 (Čepo, 2020, p. 142), the SDP-led government and minority groups met with a strong conservative backlash from civil society (Lendvai and Stubbs, 2015, pp. 460-461) – including conservative groups focused on battling secularism, LGBT, sexual and reproductive rights, while promoting far-right historical negationism (Kasapović, 2018; Lendvai and Stubbs, 2015, pp. 460-461; Petričušić *et al.*, 2017).

Veteran groups were an important part of this conservative wave. In 2013, a group of Vukovar veterans founded the "Headquarters for the Defence of Croatian Vukovar", opposing the introduction of Cyrillic script on signs on institutions in the town. While signs with Latin and Cyrillic script were implemented to fulfil Serbian minority rights, the Headquarters claimed that Vukovar was a sacred place due to the 1991 wartime legacy (Boduszynski and Pavlaković, 2019, p. 808). These groups started to destroy the Cyrillic signs in the following months, sometimes scuffling with the police (*ibid.*, p. 809). Institutionalising their fight, the Headquarters gathered signatures for amending the Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities, which would lift the standards for introducing minority languages and scripts in multicultural communities. Amid that campaign, on 18 November, commemorated as the Day of the Fall of Vukovar, the Headquarters blocked the

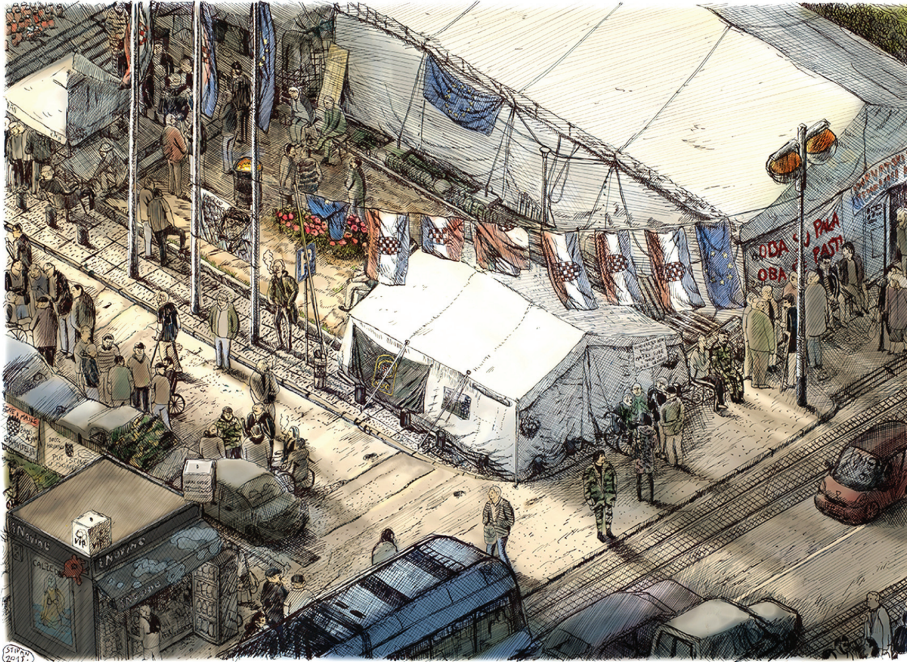


state representatives from taking part in the commemoration. Despite gathering signatures needed for triggering the referendum, the Constitutional Court rejected their plea on the count of its unconstitutionality (*ibid.*).

This conservative wave corresponded with the same shift in HDZ, as Tomislav Karamarko became party president in 2012. Seeking to again “re-Tudmanise” HDZ (Čulić, 2014, p. 181), Karamarko turned the party to the right, putting the policing of interpretations of the past high on his agenda. Thus, he warned that people should not freely state their personal opinion about the *Homeland War* in public. Also, in his “anti-Communist manifesto”, he promised the lustration of intellectuals allegedly tied to the former Communist regime (Milekić, 2015b). Besides the political rhetoric using the wartime legacy, Karamarko’s HDZ directly or indirectly supported the aforementioned right-wing groups and parties (Sokolić, 2018, pp. 19, 54; Čulić, 2014, pp. 181-182), similarly as the party had done during the 2000-2003 centre-left government.

In October 2014, HDZ’s pressure for policing the War narrative and interpretation of the past started to creep into the political establishment. In a move praised by both SDP and HDZ, President Ivo Josipović sacked his chief analyst and university professor Dejan Jović for his academic opinion that Croatia’s 1991 independence referendum, although maybe democratic, was certainly not liberal (Krasnec *et al.*, 2014). With this move, right-wingers “caught” the authorities fostering hostile questioning of patriotic truths (Bajto, 2014) connected to the dominant *Homeland War* narrative.

Thus, only a day after Jović’s removal, veteran leader Đuro Glogoški called for the resignation of Bojan Glavašević, the Assistant to the War Veterans’ Minister Predrag Matić. Glogoški, the President of the Association of 100% Croatian Disabled War Veterans from the 1<sup>st</sup> Tier, harshly criticised Glavašević’s statement of potential PTSD cases within the Croatian Serb community that directly experienced the 1990s War. Speaking at a conference in Vukovar on 26 September 2014, Glavašević asked why is there such a high number of registered PTSD cases among Croatian veterans – the winning army – while there are no PTSD cases among former members of Serb units – who lost the war (Tportal.hr/Hina, 2014). Veteran representatives found this statement offensive, while Glogoški claimed that Glavašević “equalised the aggressor and the victim” – a common fear among veterans (Sokolić, 2018, p. 99) – and offended “not only Croatian defenders but also all that is Croatian” (PolitikaPlus/Hina, 2014). Despite his background, as a son whose father was killed as a reporter in Vukovar in 1991, Glavašević became a target of various veteran groups. War Veterans Minister Matić refused to sack Glavašević, claiming he had Serb civilian victims in mind when discussing potential PTSD cases (Rašović, 2014b).

**Picture 3.** Savska Protest Camp

Source: Stipan Tadić, “Šatoraši”, 40 x 30 cm, ink on paper, 2015.

After Glogoški met with Matić in the Ministry in Zagreb on 20 October 2014, demanding not only Glavašević’s resignation but also additional benefits, veterans came in front of the building. Blocking the traffic on Savska Road, where the Ministry is located, veterans started their sit-in protest by setting a tent and a campfire. Claiming that Matić is making empty promises, protesters now demanded his resignation as well because he and his associates tolerated “the disrespect for the dignity of a Croatian defender” (Suša, 2014).<sup>5</sup> As one of the female disabled veterans passed away the second night, and one protester set himself on fire a few days later, subsequently surviving (Milekić, 2014), the protest quickly became the central political and media event, as protesters successfully communicated their cause with the wider audiences – if only through tragedies.

Besides Glavašević’s statement, the causes for the protest were somewhat puzzling, as there was no evidence that the Government sought to diminish or limit

<sup>5</sup> As Prime Minister Zoran Milanović refused to sack Matić, protesters soon demanded his resignation as well, therefore attempting to topple the government (Rašović, 2014c).

veteran rights (Lendvai and Stubbs, 2015, p. 460). Protesters often stressed individual examples of disabled veterans not receiving proper care to illustrate the general lack of care for disabled veterans (Grgurinović, 2018, p. 25), stressing the socio-economic factors. In widening their repertoire, associations supporting the protest – calling themselves “100% for Croatia” – wrote a letter to the parliamentary Committee for War Veterans, listing all the legal changes that allegedly lowered their protection and rights (Associations..., 2014). Such a repertoire was not novel in the Croatian veteran movement, as other associations and groups made similar pleas for legal changes.

At times, protesters also used the straw man argument to discursively frame government officials. Therefore, protesters spread rumours that the police would violently remove them from the premises (Pušić, 2015), or that the Government wanted to “give the same rights [as veterans] to Serbs” (Dolenec, 2014, p. 37). Protesters also claimed that the Government planned to diminish their rights through law amendments (Grgurinović, 2018, pp. 24-25) or even abolish the Veterans Ministry (Rašović, 2015b). Protesters discursively framed the Government as incompetent and parasitic (Grgurinović, 2018, pp. 22, 28), while they primarily targeted Matić due to his harsh remarks against them (Matić, 2014; 2015b).

However, at times, it seemed as if protesters did not have a coherent plan of their activities and goals (Rašović, 2015d), often changing their demands and priorities (Bajto, 2014), with no alternative plan of action other than continuing the protest (UHVDR, 2014). Thus, despite initial concessions made by the Government – postponing the introduction of specific laws (Committee for War Veterans, 2014b) – veterans continued their protest (Dolenec, 2014, p. 37). According to a reporter’s talk with protesters, the reason for starting the protest was not so much about material needs, as much it was a response of an ontological nature. Allegedly, protesters feared being forgotten and erased from history without meaning and purpose for Croatian society to move away from the War (Hudelist, 2014).

Therefore, fearing their symbolic position in society, protesters demanded the drafting of a constitutional law on veterans (Hudelist, 2015, p. 14), something veteran associations tried back in 2011 (Šurina, 2011). The advocacy of a constitutional law lies upon veteran wishes to become one of the country’s foundations – tendencies among associations since the mid-1990s. After the *Homeland War* and veterans’ role in the conflict were included in the constitution in 2010, a constitutional law would lift them into the level of only two categories protected by such laws: Constitutional Court and rights of national minorities. By becoming a constitutional category, the transformation of the *Homeland War* into a value – like democracy, freedom, human rights, or the rule of law – would be completed. Also, such a law would guarantee that their status could not be changed by a simple change of government, as a 2/3 majority in the parliament can only amend constitutional laws.

For Savska protesters, this guaranteed a depoliticization of veterans as they would no longer be used in daily politics, depending on the political option in power, since both governing majority and opposition would have to agree on amending the law (Associations..., 2014, p. 8).

Trying to discredit the Government as the one not representing the Croatian people, Savska protesters used the frame of “Yugoslavism” (Grgurinović, 2018, pp. 27-28) fused with wartime symbolism, ethnonationalism, and anti-Communism. Protesters demonstrated these beliefs on banners hanging in their camp. A banner with Tuđman’s photo in military uniform used his words to portray the officials as “Yugo-communist leftovers” that are “tying themselves to the black devil himself” to conspire against Croatia’s freedom and independence (Komnenović, 2014, p. 53). The other banner displayed at the tent wrote “1991: Against Yugoslavia, 2014: Against Yugoslavs” (*ibid.*), portraying the officials as Yugoslavs – the biggest peril for Croatia’s existence according to ethnonationalists (Jović, 2017, pp. 231-233). The banner reading “1991 – they both fell, 2015 – they both will fall”, while probably referencing how Milanović and Josipović (formerly also SDP member) would lose their respective elections, had multiple meanings. The banner also connected state officials and JNA planes taken down in 1991 (Komnenović, 2014, p. 53), thus normalising violence that could be used against political opponents (Jović, 2017, p. 332). Although symptomatic for the veteran movement in the earlier period (1996 and the early 2000s), such anti-Communist and anti-Yugoslav rhetoric coincided with the revival of such rhetoric in HDZ under Karamarko (Blanuša, 2017, pp. 174-175; Goldstein, 2021, pp. 385-393, 395-396; Jović, 2017, pp. 28, 114, 174, 193, 213, 331).

As they shared an interest – toppling the government – HDZ supported the protest, trying to utilise the protesters’ symbolic importance as “creators” of the country for destabilising and weakening the government (Puljić Šego and Rašović, 2015, p. 5). As this perception was widely accepted, Savska protesters were accused of *coup d'état* (Ljubojević, 2015), with many commentators claiming that the protesters were not representing the veterans in general and paid lip service for HDZ, the actual organiser of the protest (Grgurinović, 2018, pp. 29-30). Thus, Matić stated that the initial reason for the protest was to take the media focus from the arrest of Zagreb Mayor Milan Bandić – politically tied to HDZ – a day before the protest began. According to Matić, the protest afterwards served the purpose of helping the election campaign of HDZ’s presidential candidate Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović. Finally, the protest would be used for HDZ’s campaign for the parliamentary elections in the fall of 2015 (Matić, 2015a, pp. 17-18).

Regardless of how truthful such claims were, links between HDZ (and its partners) and protesters were hard to ignore. The protest was initially organised by

Mirko Ljubičić *Šveps*, President of Zagreb's HVIDR branch, who was also an assistant to the executive director of Zagreb Holding, the city's massive company running many public services (Bajto, 2014). While Ljubičić may have done this to help Bandić personally, it is a fact that Zagreb Mayor was HDZ's crucial political partner in the city assembly. After the 2015 and 2016 parliamentary elections, Bandić's party supported HDZ's governments. As the President of the national HVIDR was Josip Đakić, HDZ's MP, tied with protest leaders (Matić, 2015a, p. 18), the party allegedly co-opted the protest, removing Ljubičić from HVIDR's leadership for alleged corruption, thus removing him from the protest's main organisers (Stojmenović, 2014; 7Dnevno, 2015).<sup>6</sup> Some protesters from Savska later admitted that HDZ had an essential role in the organisation through its Main Secretary Milijan Brkić (Bajruši, 2018; Brkulj, 2015), Karamarko's close associate from police days. Even the tent itself was donated by the Croatian Red Cross, run by HDZ members (Hina, 2015).

Furthermore, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, who won the presidential elections in January 2015, partially built her campaign on her relationship with Savska protests, visiting them on multiple occasions, including the night when she won the elections and her first day in office. Although she offered her service as a facilitator of protesters' dialogue with institutions, her neutrality was questioned when she named one protest leader her advisor for veterans (Dolenec, 2017, p. 71).

Other things also largely influenced the public perception of protesters. Unlike HVIDR's in 1996, the Savska protest openly played with the use of violence, threats, and chauvinistic slurs. Protesters often insulted, belittled, or threatened Matić and his associations in person, sometimes even resorting to physical violence. On other occasions, Glavašević and Matić received threats at their homes (Matić, 2014, p. 24; Glavašević, 2015). These violent episodes strengthened the Government's counter-framing of the protest as an undemocratic, unconstitutional *coup d'état* (Grgurinović, 2018, p. 31).

The Government's concessions also tarnished the image of Savska protesters as brave fighters against the system. Even though protesters never registered the protest with the police, the Ministry supplied their tent with infrastructure. Additionally, reporters revealed that Glogoški, a fully disabled person, did not spend nights in the tent but rather in a state-owned house used for housing disabled veterans needing urgent medical treatment (Bajto, 2015).<sup>7</sup> Although some disabled veterans

<sup>6</sup> When Ljubičić was removed as President of HVIDR Zagreb, security guards from Klemm's private security company oversaw keeping Ljubičić out of the association's office, which some interpreted as internal struggle among Savska protest organisers (Babić, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Another thing that probably triggered the lack of support for protesters was Matić's public disclosure of Glogoški's pension with disability benefits, shattering the image of the state ignoring disabled veterans (Rašović, 2015a).

stayed overnight on certain occasions, as the protest continued for months, sometimes it looked like the protesters' tent was there for symbolism, without really housing disabled veterans, with younger men in military uniforms instead (Matić, 2015b), becoming a sort of "Potemkin's village".

Although protesters claimed to be fighting for "a better society for all" and calling on the unity of the people (Grgurinović, 2018, p. 24), the Savska protest was progressively losing public support. The loss of support was probably a combination of multiple factors: disruptiveness, length of the protest, the successfulness of counter-discursive frames of the Government (*ibid.*, pp. 18-22). With dropping support, groups organised smaller counter-protests that did not trigger a more significant response (Brkulj, 2015). However, as some of these counter-protesters were veterans themselves, it showed that all veterans did not unanimously condone the protesters' actions. Also, other mainstream associations, such as UHVDR<sup>8</sup>, generally supported the protesters' claims but did not support the protesters' repertoire: the methods used and the lack of institutional dialogue and respect for a democratically elected government. Internally, UHVDR's leadership was also puzzled over the real reasons and goals of the protest (UHVDR, 2014).

The lack of institutional dialogue was part of the protesters' repertoire, opting for a strategy of displacement or replacement of political institutions. With their tent, protesters wished to replace the parliament and government as central locations of political deliberation. On the level of expanding the repertoire of collective actions, by promoting the tent as the centre of political representation and deliberation, Savska protesters wanted to point to the need they claimed was missing: legitimate representors of veterans' interest. Protesters thought their merits in "creating" the country – losing parts of their bodies and health – obliged the officials to come to their tent, where veteran and other policies would be discussed. Catholic Church representatives, opposition politicians or those who sought political power also visited the tent (Al Jazeera, 2014; Rašović, 2015c; 2015e), receiving symbolic approval in the eyes of protesters. The ally of protesters in the Parliament, Đakić, called all Committee for War Veterans members and other MPs to come to the tent and talk to protesters to better understand their problems (Committee for War Veterans, 2014a). However, this strategy was only partially successful, as, in the end, state officials refused to come to their camp for round tables, refusing to normalise their demands (Rašović, 2015f).

Therefore, the second strategy was moving the protest around, thus innovating within the repertoire, while enhancing the disruptiveness of the protest, and becoming

<sup>8</sup> Although UHVDR changed its name to the Association of Volunteers and Veterans of the Homeland War (UDVDR), I use only UHVDR for the sake of clarity.

ing harder to ignore. Protesters staged walking protests, going around Zagreb's centre, even coming in front of Milanović's apartment (Buljan, 2015), blocking traffic and conveying their messages (Klauški, 2014). When claiming that they would visit the main political institutions, the protesters did this in the form of indirect threats of toppling down the government (Rašović, 2014d) or statements implying that violence could, unfortunately, break out (Klauški, 2014). Their politicised disruption of everyday civic life probably antagonised the general population against their cause (Postnikov, 2014).

Finally, as officials ignored the protesters, they turned to ultimatums. On 28 May 2015, Savska protesters rallied on St. Mark's Square, demanding to talk to the Prime Minister, advocating their old demands. Ignored again by Milanović, the police asked them to disperse at 10 pm – according to regulation. Claiming that it was not a protest, veterans refused to leave, entered a smaller scuffle with the police, and retreated into St. Mark's church, where the legal status of religious objects protected them according to the concord with the Holy See. Gathered in the church and surrounded by riot police outside, protesters spent a night there (Korljan *et al.*, 2015), while veterans who stayed in the camp blocked the prominent Savska Street using gas tanks (Sm and Np, 2015), causing unease in public. Protesters framed the skirmish as “war that is not over yet”, but has “only started” (Arslani, 2015). The scuffle with the police became even more violent the next day, as Savska protesters broke through a few police barricades on the way to the church. Trying to show the protest as a popular revolt, Glogoški even called the riot police to disobey their orders and join them (Mamić, 2015; Arslani, 2015).

Only after these dramatic, widely condemned events, Milanović agreed to meet the protesters, but only after a few days, as a sign that no one could blackmail him (Grgurinović, 2018, p. 31). The whole event was framed into a political dispute between SDP and Milanović on one side and HDZ and Karamarko on the other. While SDP accused HDZ of orchestrating the protest – with veterans as their puppets used for toppling the government – Karamarko rejected such ideas, claiming Milanović left protesters no other option (Toma, 2015).

At a televised meeting, Milanović, Matić and Defence Minister Ante Kotromanović met with protest leaders dressed in ceremonial uniforms contributing to a militarised and machoistic atmosphere. While protesters complained about how they were portrayed in the media or by politicians, their demands were often not elaborated in length or again used the straw man fallacy. Besides material benefits, Glavašević's resignation and plea for the constitutional law, protesters now demanded a register of aggressors – a list of Serbs who fought against Croatian forces. This demand was another blow to Croatia's post-war reconciliation, as the state declared a general amnesty for all Serbs that rebelled against Croatia with the

exception of war criminals. Although Milanović rejected this and most of their demands, the meeting was concluded amicably and without real progress (Goldstein, 2021, p. 396; Penić, 2015).

As talks broke down, protesters remained in front of the Ministry building until April 2016, a few months after SDP lost the elections to HDZ and a month after one of the protesters, Tomo Medved, became War Veterans Minister (Dolenec, 2017, p. 71). Between June 2015 and April 2016, and especially during the summer of 2015 (Goldstein, 2021, p. 396), Savska protesters were no longer in the centre of media or public attention, taking part in smaller actions and public appearances (Milekić, 2015a).

## Conclusion

Both the 1996 and 2014-2016 protests showed the mobilising potential of the veteran movement, becoming major political events. They also showed veterans' disruptive potential by blocking policies and triggering new ones, pressuring officials into compliance and disrupting the everyday life of citizens through road blockades and marches – with only the 2014 protest disrupting civilian's daily life. Therefore, the 1996 protest was almost completely non-disruptive, while the only non-violent disruption included the pressure exerted on the legislative process and a peaceful assembly that favoured one group of public officials at the expense of others. The 2014 protest was mostly non-violently disruptive – the occupation of the public space, numerous marches and moving protests blocking major roads – with short bursts of low-level violence.

The protests partially succeeded in articulating some of veterans' legal, socio-economic, and symbolic problems. Thus, the public could hear some authentic veteran voices despite the apparent political bias of associations organising these protests. However, it is questionable to what level did both protests (or protest cycles) trigger real social or political change, broaden the circle of conflict or change in public's perception of veterans and their struggle. The 2014 protest was losing public support the longer it continued and especially after violence was used. The violence used was low-level and somewhat corresponding to what Tilly described as opportunism (Tilly, 2003, pp. 130-150) and scattered attacks (*ibid.*, pp. 170-193). Although the Savska protest did disrupt the everyday and political life of Croatia during its peak period, blocking certain reforms and gaining some concessions, it did not change much before the general elections in late 2015.

In both cases, protesters did not focus only on improving socio-economic needs. Especially in the Savska protest, fulfilling symbolic needs included defending the dominant *Homeland War* narrative by blocking alternative interpretations – potential PTSD cases in the Serb community – thereby contributing to sanctifica-



tion of cultural victim trauma and silencing cultural perpetrator trauma (Blanuša, 2017, p. 193). In return, fulfilling symbolic needs served as the basis for their socio-economic benefits: those receiving help for treating PTSD are victims and heroes.

When it comes to frames of meaning, both protest cycles framed their struggle as something created at the intersection of entitlement and patriotism. Veterans framed themselves as both deserving the financial and symbolic benefits, as well as those who are protecting the outcomes of a victorious and virtuous war that lies in the foundation of Croatia's contemporary nation-building process set-up by former President Tuđman. In both study cases, protesters used the usual tropes of the Croatian right-wing populism based on anti-Yugoslav, anti-Communist, and anti-Serb sentiments. As protesters in both cases promoted militaristic ideas, they emanated a general disrespect and dislike for (some) democratic procedures, institutions, and politicians (in general). The noticeable difference between the two case studies was that in the 1996 protest cycle, protesters did not frame all the authorities as traitors, but rhetorically sought allies among them. An additional difference between them was the fact that only in the second protest cycle protesters invested a bit more energy in trying to gather support of wider constituencies, by pointing to Croatia's struggling economy and life of "the little man".

In terms of the repertoire, the 1996 protesters had a very limited repertoire of collective actions at their disposal due to the existing patterns of repression – Tuđman's regime was not tolerant of public expressions of dissatisfaction, as protests against the government were seen as "protests against Croatia". Therefore, even protesters avoided the word "protest", transforming the event into gathering of support for government's work on veteran issues – with a few small instances of indirect threats if their expectations were not met. Additionally, protesters' insults against Tuđman and Šušak in the weeks leading to the protest and caricatures of the former were seen as highly contentious if not belligerent actions for the authorities. Therefore, their repertoire remained limited, in Tilly's classification relatively rigid (Tilly, 2008, p. 15).

When it came to the 2014 protest, the regime was already radically less repressive and transformed in the sense of civic opportunities for expressing public dissatisfaction.<sup>9</sup> Acting as a truly disruptive event, organisers of the Savska protest also expressed more imagination in performing collective actions, as protesters tried to emulate what they saw as absent: legitimate political representation and central position in Croatia's post-war society. Therefore, although their repertoire remained "strong" (*ibid.*), at times it seemed as if the protest went off the script. Like the 1996 protest, this was characterised in the 2014 one by numerous and often changing de-

<sup>9</sup> In 2012, Milanović's Government removed the legal ban on protests held at St. Mark's Square (Hina, 2012).

mands made by protesters, showing the lack of focus and coordination of veteran associations, often acting as they go. Triggering the protests, veteran leaders found themselves in the media spotlight, something they were not accustomed to. Lacking political and negotiating skills, protesters often did not articulate their demands. Although a possible sign of outside prompting by HDZ and other political parties, it could also be a result of “composite mobilisation of various strands of motivation and incentives pulled together” (Dolenec and Širinić, 2020, p. 246), where different veteran groups advocated their demands together. It is highly likely that in the Savska protest, different protest leaders pursued different goals; political, socio-economic, or cultural ones. Additionally, the 1996 protest demonstrated how government officials and members of the ruling party (HDZ) could find themselves at both sides of the contentious politics.

However, despite veteran claims that there was no outside help in organising these protests, the article demonstrated clientelist and political networks at hand, showing how real organisers, or at least helpers, remained hidden from public view. Thus in 1996, HVIDR enjoyed Šušak’s support. In 2014, members of HVIDR, headed by an HDZ official, pulled strings of the protest behind the curtain (UHVDR, 2014) while putting forward other veteran groups free of party connections. In both 1996 and 2014-2016, protest leaders were often hiding HDZ’s or Defence Ministry’s hand in organising the protest. HDZ – or at least some groups within the party – offered logistical, organisational help and evident political support for protesters. In both cases, HDZ leaders – Šušak, Karamarko and Grabar-Kitarović – rode the protest waves to boost their image, as protesters’ goals were compatible with theirs: facing the techno-managers in the intra-party power struggle or toppling SDP’s government.

However, this correlation between protesters’ and HDZ’s (or its hard-line faction’s) goals was possibly not only a result of the client-patron relationship but instead of the congruent nature of their political beliefs (Bagić *et al.*, 2020, p. 217) or interests. As both HDZ and veteran associations built their identity on the Tudmanist narrative of the War (Jović, 2017, pp. 197-199), functioning in a semi-autocratic environment, it is no surprise that both actors used similar rhetoric and techniques of advocating political change – or *status quo*. Some of these techniques resembled *coup d’état*, using violence and threats of violence to topple the democratically elected government. However, this was often only an expression of the profoundly machoistic and militaristic population that built their identity during the war. While, in both cases, this resulted from autocratic mindsets of ringleaders – Liović, Glogoški, Klemm – these violent disruptions were caused by a lack of contingency plans for advocating their interests. The lack of successful articulation of the demands gave birth to destructive behaviour.

There is a common perception that protesters served HDZ's bidding in both cases, acting as mere puppets on a string. While this could be argued for some individuals, some evidence claim that it was the other way around: that protesters set demands that HDZ or its fractions co-opted. It is especially the case with the Savska protest. While media often claimed that Karamarko was behind the organisation of the protest and other initiatives coming from the conservative civil society – marriage and anti-Cyrillic referendum – maybe these conservative groups outlined HDZ's political direction. Unlike Tuđman's HDZ in the 1990s, which set the tone for the Catholic Church and various right-wing actors, Karamarko set HDZ's political agenda according to ideas coming from these marginal right-wing groups and parties and the Church (Čulić, 2014, pp. 181-183). Feeling that Karamarko's conservative (counter)revolution lacked ideological fuel, right-wing groups filled the gap, using HDZ to promote their agenda.

Although the 1996 protest may have strengthened Šušak's position within HDZ and the Government, it is questionable whether the Savska protest benefited Karamarko. As the public support for the Savska protest fell through time (Grgurinović, 2018, pp. 18-22), it is somewhat unlikely that it greatly benefited HDZ in an electoral sense. Although HDZ's support of the Savska protest probably rallied far-right votes, it likely came at the expense of centrist votes (Torre, 2015). It also caused rifts within the party, as some moderate party leaders did not support the protesters and their methods (Prgomet, 2015). Although HDZ and its candidates eventually won the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2014-2015, it is possible that these victories came despite their support for the protest.

Finally, the long-term outcome of the Savska protest was the re-establishing of the dominant narrative of the *Homeland War* and postponing some aspects of post-war reconciliation. Milanović and SDP would embrace this legacy with a militaristic celebration of Operation Storm's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary and decision to name the Zagreb airport after Tuđman in 2015. Milanović additionally tarnished his image when he secretly met with the Savska protesters in the summer of 2016 for electoral purposes, actively participating in ethnonationalist discussions (Klauški, 2016). Thus, by 2016, the centre-left establishment almost completely complied with the dominant view of Croatia's contemporary history, not questioning the symbolic position of the memory of the *Homeland War* and its prominent actors.

The article has presented an extensive analysis of the two case studies, two significant protest cycles in the 30-year-long history of the Croatian veteran movement. The article contributes to better understanding of the war veterans and their mobilisation on the ground, as they still represent an influential status group, unofficial main memory entrepreneurs and veto players in Croatian society. The article has an added comparative value as it analyses and compares veteran protests taking place

in two almost radically different social and political contexts. The 1996 protest took place in a semi-authoritarian regime that has only recently come out of the conflict, with the regime that looked at contentious politics with large scepticism. The second protest took place almost two decades after the war, as Croatia was already a member of the EU and had a somewhat functional parliamentary democracy with larger tolerance for civic activism and disruptive politics. Deriving from previous research – especially by Dolenc, Širinić, and Grgurinović – the article offers a slightly more detailed and nuanced view of the dynamics within the main client-patron relationship between the veteran groups and HDZ.

The limitations of the article represent ground for future research. Thus, the article offers an insight into two protest cycles through media reports and literature, supplemented with some – never consulted – archival sources. However, as some institutions remained completely or partially closed to researchers – Croatian War Veterans and Defence Ministries – these sources may offer some additional insight on both protests. What would offer an additional perspective on both protests and veteran activism in Croatia and in general, would be interviews with direct participants of these protests, as well as other interested parties – state and party officials. This would offer a deeper understanding of the agency behind the protests, as well as internal motivation for entering contentious politics.

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*Mailing Address:*

**Sven Milekić** is a PhD student at the Maynooth University, W23 F2H6, Maynooth, County Kildare, Ireland. *E-mail:* sven.milekic.2019@mumail.ie