

ENEMY MINORITY:
NEGOTIATING ETHNIC DIFFERENCE IN POST-WAR VUKOVAR

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the experience of Croatian Serbs in the post-conflict context of Vukovar, focusing on how they navigate their identities as a marginalized “enemy minority” within the Croatian nation-state. Through an ethnographic lens, the research investigates the complex and often contradictory ways in which individuals and institutions within the Serb community perform, negotiate, and reconstruct their identities, shaped by both the legacies of violence and the dominant Croatian national narrative surrounding the Serb community. Drawing on concepts such as ontological security, spatial governmentality, and the continuum of violence, the thesis examines how inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic tensions manifest in everyday life, influencing social dynamics and the broader processes of belonging and exclusion. By exploring key themes such as memory, language practises, youth violence, gender regimes in nationalism, and minority subject formation, this dissertation reveals the ways in which the Serb community in Vukovar both resists and perpetuates the dominant ethnic divisions of post-conflict Croatian society.

The research employs a combination of qualitative methods, including participant observation and semi-structured interviews, to examine how Serbs in Vukovar cope with their stigmatized ethnic identity. The thesis argues that while the Serb community is politically disempowered, it remains a significant presence within the national discourse, continually framed as the “Other.” The dissertation introduces the concept of “enemy minority,” a category distinct from other minority groups, where difference is perceived as a threat to the nation-state’s ontological security. This theoretical framework allows for a nuanced understanding of how certain minorities, particularly those with histories of inter-ethnic violence, negotiate their place in a post-conflict society.

The five chapters of this dissertation explore distinct yet interconnected aspects of Serb life in Vukovar: the politics of memory and commemoration, linguistic practises and boundary-making, the role of minority education in reinforcing national narratives, the gendered regimes of ethnic divisions, and alternative conceptions of citizenship and the future. In doing so, it underscores the complexity and fluidity of ethnic identity in post-Yugoslav Croatia, emphasizing the importance of recognizing the diverse and contested ways in which Serbs live with their “enemy” status. Through this lens, the dissertation contributes to broader discussions on nationalism, minority rights, post-socialism, and the politics of belonging in the contemporary European context.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

BBB	Bad Blue Boys
DP	Homeland Movement
EU	European Union
HDZ	Croatian Democratic Union
ICTY	International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia
JNA	Yugoslav People's Army
NDH	Independent State of Croatia
RSK	Republic of Serbian Krajina
SAO Krajina	Serbian Autonomous Oblast of Krajina
SDP	Social Democratic Party of Croatia
SDF	Serb Democratic Forum
SDS	Serb Democratic Party
SDSS	Independent Democratic Serb Party
SFRJ	Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia
SNV	Serb National Council
SSS	Independent Serbian Party
TO	Territorial Defence Forces
UN	United Nations
ZNG	Croatian National Guard
ZVO	Joint Council of Municipalities

INTRODUCTION:
“WHO AMONG YOU IS A SERB?”
THE EVOLUTION OF AN ENEMY MINORITY

“But I’m closer to you than you are to yourself
and this, my enemy friend,
is the definition of distance.”
—Fady Joudah

A little over half a year into my fieldwork in Vukovar, the easternmost city in Croatia, I was sitting in the sunlit kitchen of the apartment I had rented from a friendly young family. I was catching up on some field notes and drinking my coffee when my partner, who had been visiting and working in the living room, popped his head into the room.

Danijel: “I overheard the children playing around your building just now...”

Dragana: “Oh. Yeah, there are quite a few kids in the building, a young family also lives above me. They can be a little loud sometimes.”

Danijel: “It’s not that. They were playing Croats and Serbs... you know... instead of cops and robbers. With Serbs as their bad guys.”

My eyes widened. We both listened intently, straining our ears, attempting to make sense of the children’s playful cries, whose echoes could still be heard. Thirty years after the end of the siege, after a Peaceful Reintegration and an accession into the European Union, the perception of the Serb minority is still shaped by collective trauma and memories of violence which allow “the Serb” figure to be perceived as dangerous and immoral. The fact that this truth was revealed by children born well after the end of the conflict was also significant. This encounter made me reflect on the social mechanisms and processes that allow such views to persist, even decades after the end of the war. It also raised questions about how children come to normalize stark perceptions of ethnic difference, to the point of re-enacting them through play. This disconcerting moment offers insight into the everyday experiences of Serbs living in Vukovar, revealing how deeply ingrained narratives of ethnicity and morality continue to shape the present.

In his 2019 article “Who Among You Is a Serb?,” the author, Boris Dežulović, narrates how a group of fifteen young Croat men approached a group of young people passing by them on the boardwalk of Supetar, a village off the coast of Split.¹ They asked them a single question: who among them is a Serb? The youths, a girl from Varaždin and three young men from Vukovar, had come to the coast for seasonal work in tourism. All four of them, including a passer-by who attempted to come to their aid, were physically assaulted for giving—presumably—the wrong answer. It would turn out to be one of three such incidents that year.²

¹ The article in question can be found here: <https://www.portalnovosti.com/tko-je-od-vas-srbin>.

² For details on the other incidents, see the following article: <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/08/22/croatian-serbs-attacked-by-masked-assailants-in-two-bars/>.

Dežulović concludes the piece by arguing that a Serb in Croatia is not defined by the ethnicity of their mother or father, the paternal line being the dominant way in which ethnicity is “read” in the region. Instead, he argues that a Serb is defined situationally, based on the needs or perceptions of the Croatian nation-state: “when the homeland calls, every citizen is a Serb” (*kad Domovina zove, svaki je gradjanin Srbin*). The author assumes that the reader understands that, in Croatia, “a Serb” is always the designated “Other.” Even Croats fear being “transformed” into Serbs if their actions are perceived as being antagonistic to the Croatian nation-state. In other words, the label ‘Serb’ is not only a “spoiled identity” (Goffman 1963), but also a shifting and practical one.

Negotiating one’s Serb-ness in contemporary Croatia becomes a delicately managed performance, one that is often necessary to prevent anything from ordinary unpleasantness to overt discrimination, to physical violence. In this thesis, I ask the following questions: how do Serbs in Vukovar construct, negotiate, and perform their minoritized identities in a post-conflict context and how do these processes of subject formation shape their social reality and sense of belonging within Croatian society? How do legacies of violence continue to shape the social, political, and cultural dynamics of the Serb community in Vukovar? And how do the grey areas and complexities of ethnic divisions—including both inter-ethnic tensions between Serbs and Croats and intra-ethnic divisions within the Serb community—manifest in everyday life and influence broader social dynamics?

In this dissertation, I introduce a new conceptual tool to make sense of the role, positionality, and experience of a particular type of minoritized subject: an *enemy minority*. Unlike other minorities, enemy minorities are discursively constructed as a threat to the state, despite their *de facto* political disempowerment and marginalisation in society. This unique framing complicates their ability to engage with minority rights discourse. I argue that the enemy minority figure emerges from systemic efforts to maintain ontological security—understood as the drive to stabilize the nation-state’s identity as aligned with that of the dominant population (Laing 1960; Giddens 1991). The presence of such a minority is perceived as subversive to the “stories that states tell” (Subotić 2013) about themselves. Enemy minorities emerge as an inevitability in a world in which nationalism is the dominant ideology, where national projects are expected to produce ethnically homogenous spaces and properly patriotic subjects.

In Croatia, the Serb community is constructed as an enemy minority because they embody a fundamentally antagonistic role within the dominant Croatian nation-state narrative. Despite their small demographic presence and political disempowerment, Serbs challenge the nationalist biographical narrative of the Croatian nation-state through their contesting collective memory. This challenge is critical to the ontological security of the nation-state, as memory “creates the ‘person’ of the state” (Steele 2008: 20). As a result, the histories of the Serb community are being falsified or erased, graffitied calls for genocide regularly deface buildings, people are

discriminated against in issues pertaining to citizenship, housing, employment, constitutional rights, and verbal and physical attacks are commonplace. In towns like Vukovar, populist politicians secure electoral support by framing the recognition of Serb minority rights as a threat to social cohesion. Unlike other national minorities in Croatia, whose demands for minority rights may annoy nationalists but are mostly tolerated, the perceived difference of the Serb community is constructed as fundamentally incompatible with the European ideal of multiculturalism.³

It should be noted that the Croatian Serb community was not always politically disempowered, despite always having been a demographic minority. From 1918 to 1941, due to the Serbia's hegemony in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, the Serb community in Croatia enjoyed several advantages over their Croat neighbours, such as disproportionate representation in the military and the gendarmerie (Banac 1984).⁴ During the socialist period that followed, Serbs and Croats were constitutionally recognized as the constitutive peoples of Croatia due to Yugoslav multinationalism and its doctrine of *bratstvo i jedinstvo* (brotherhood and unity). And from 1991 to 1995, in the irredentist proto-state of the Republic of Serbian Krajina (hereafter RSK or Krajina), the territory saw ethnic cleansing, discrimination, and violence against non-Serbs. In the case of Croatian Serbs, these violent histories and power dynamics, on which I will elaborate later, also inform the Croatian nation-state's conceptualization of their community as an enemy within, but they are not the original source of the enemy minority rhetoric. It is also important to note that the position of enemy minorities is not fixed. For instance, Italians were once viewed as an enemy minority in Croatia, particularly during the interwar period and World War II, when nationalist tensions and territorial disputes with Italy fuelled animosity toward them.

Enemy minorities can, however, be constructed as ontologically threatening to nation-states even without histories of violence or oppression against the majority population. National histories are products of nation-building, wherein certain aspects of history are emphasized while inconvenient ones are omitted or suppressed. Populist actors often exaggerate or even fabricate violent histories to justify the marginalization of enemy minorities. Regardless of the presence of violent histories, enemy minorities are perceived as threats because their existence fundamentally challenges the ontological security of the nation-state—understood as the “subjective sense of who one is” (Mitzen 2006: 344). Scholars of international relations have shown that when nation-states “feel” ontologically insecure, they respond in various ways, such as securitizing others (Darwich 2016), manipulating their biographical narratives (Subotić 2016), or by attempting to improve their standing in the international community (Zarakol 2011).

³ While national minorities such as the Hungarians, Ukrainians, and Ruthenians and their demands for minority rights are tolerated, this is not the case for the Roma minority. The Croatian Roma continue to experience disproportional amounts of discrimination attributed to deeply ingrained racism.

⁴ While Banac's 1984 book is a seminal work of unquestioned quality, I must note the overt flirtations with neo-fascism that this historian started in the 1990s.

Right-wing populist ideologies often frame enemy minorities as outsiders—invading and aggressive forces that are perceived as fundamentally foreign. However, the concept of autochthony presents an intriguing challenge to the ontologically insecure nation-state. In settler societies, indigenous groups are often portrayed as enemy minorities, as their claim to the land directly threatens the nation-state’s biographical narrative, which is grounded in settler colonialism and white supremacy. In non-settler societies, on the other hand, autochthonous minorities can provoke a desire for purification among the majority population, even when the enemy minority’s numbers are small. As Appadurai (2006: 53) suggests, “small numbers represent a tiny obstacle between majority and totality or total purity.” It is precisely the minimal nature of this difference—what Freud (1930) referred to as the “narcissism of small differences”—that breeds an “anxiety of incompleteness” (Appadurai 2006: 56) within the state. This unresolved tension can fuel the rage and violence that leads to genocidal actions against such minorities, as their presence challenges the nation-state’s sense of self.

Finally, enemy minorities can be perceived as disloyal citizens and supporters of alternative national projects and claims to the same land, such as Palestinian citizens of Israel (Rozin 2024), Russian-speaking minorities in post-Soviet spaces (Dzenovska 2018), Albanians in Serbia (Djordjević and Pavlović 2022), or Kurds in Turkey (Günay 2019), among many others. In fact, throughout history and in the present, groups have been identified as fifth columns by both authoritarian and democratic governments and used as political tools to galvanise the rest of the imagined community (see Mylonas and Radnitz 2022). However, these claims are not merely the result of discursive manipulation by populist politicians. They are enabled by the exclusivist narratives thorough which nation-states define themselves, and by a broader anxiety among majority populations that such narratives could be challenged or delegitimized.

The key in identifying an enemy minority lies in its discursive framing as a threat to the ontological security of the nation-state. Whether or not there is a history of violence or oppression, and whether or not the minority is autochthonous to the land, enemy minorities are contingent categories. They become the target of nation-state hostility depending on the particular ontological crisis the nation-state faces at a given moment, irrespective of whether these crises are “perceived, self-inflicted, or exaggerated” (Subotić 2018: 298). While scholars of international relations have largely focused on the actions that nation-states take in response to such crises, my analysis foregrounds the enemy minority as a social category that is constituted through these crises and that, in turn, shapes how various actors within society relate to one another. The concept of the enemy minority thus offers a lens for understanding how social groups are differentiated, how boundaries are drawn and maintained, and how collective identities are formed—not only in relation to the nation-state, but also through interactions within society itself. In doing so, it moves beyond the traditional scope of minority rights discourse, offering insight into the everyday processes through which social hierarchies are produced and sustained.

In the case of Croatia, the nation-state is built on the constitutionally enshrined claim that the War of Croatian Independence was a defensive war against “Greater Serbian Aggression,” which stands in contrast to the narrative of Croatian Serbs who experienced the conflict as a civil war. Disagreements over the past—and ultimately, over the self-narrative of the nation-state—reaches beyond the 1990s and into the 1940s. The state continues to deny the genocide against Serbs perpetrated by Croatia’s fascist Ustaša regime during World War II (see Subotić 2019). Most recently, the state-led revisionist campaign has pressured the director of the Jasenovac Memorial Museum, which memorializes the largest World War II death camp outside Poland, to alter all plaques by removing the word ‘genocide’ from references to Ustaša persecution of Serbs. This request led to his resignation and an uproar from the local Serb community and antifascist organizations.⁵ The fear of the nation-state to be identified with genocide—in Croatia but also in Serbia, Turkey, Israel, Canada, and so on—seems to lie in the fear that the nation-state itself can thus be delegitimized, despite the fact that genocide and ethnic cleansing have become hazards of democratic nation-states (Mann 2005; Appadurai 2006).

This dissertation focuses on the consequences of belonging to an enemy minority for processes of subject formation on the individual level. In fact, the concept of ontological security and the management of the anxiety related to it was initially conceptualized on the individual level, as it relates to the subject (Laing 1960; Giddens 1991). If the “schemas of intelligibility” (Butler 2010:5) in nation-states offer recognition to minoritized individuals and groups as national subjects, then it is difficult to break out of (national) subjectivity as an ontological necessity. The cultivation of alternative modes of self-relation becomes unimaginable because these social categories, despite normalizing power relations which define and contain the subject, also “guarantee social existence” (Butler 2004: 191). Consequently, this ethnography aims to understand the ways in which members of the enemy minority group relate to themselves, others, and the world as they negotiate their stigmatized ethnic difference. Focusing on key aspects in national subject formation such as memory, language practices, ethnically divided schools, youth violence, and political parties, this analysis—though limited in scope—sheds light on crucial factors in subject formation within the context of national identity and post-conflict dynamics.

Enemy Minority traces the afterlife of an enemy minority in the periphery of the European Union. This particular enemy minority—the Croatian Serbs—lives in the shadow of the discredited project of Yugoslav socialism and its ideology of “brotherhood and unity,” as well as in the wake of a violent conflict which created severe cleavages in Croatian society. This ethnography traces how Croatian Serbs imagine and put into practice different kinds of political subjectivities in order to live with their position as enemy minorities, while, at the same time, often reinforcing the national framework which binds them.

⁵ See the following article for details: <https://www.portalnovosti.com/kako-negirati-genocid>, as well as the following piece by historian Rory Yeomans on genocide denial in Croatia: <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/07/04/croatia-must-stop-downplaying-the-genocidal-crimes-of-the-ustasa/>.

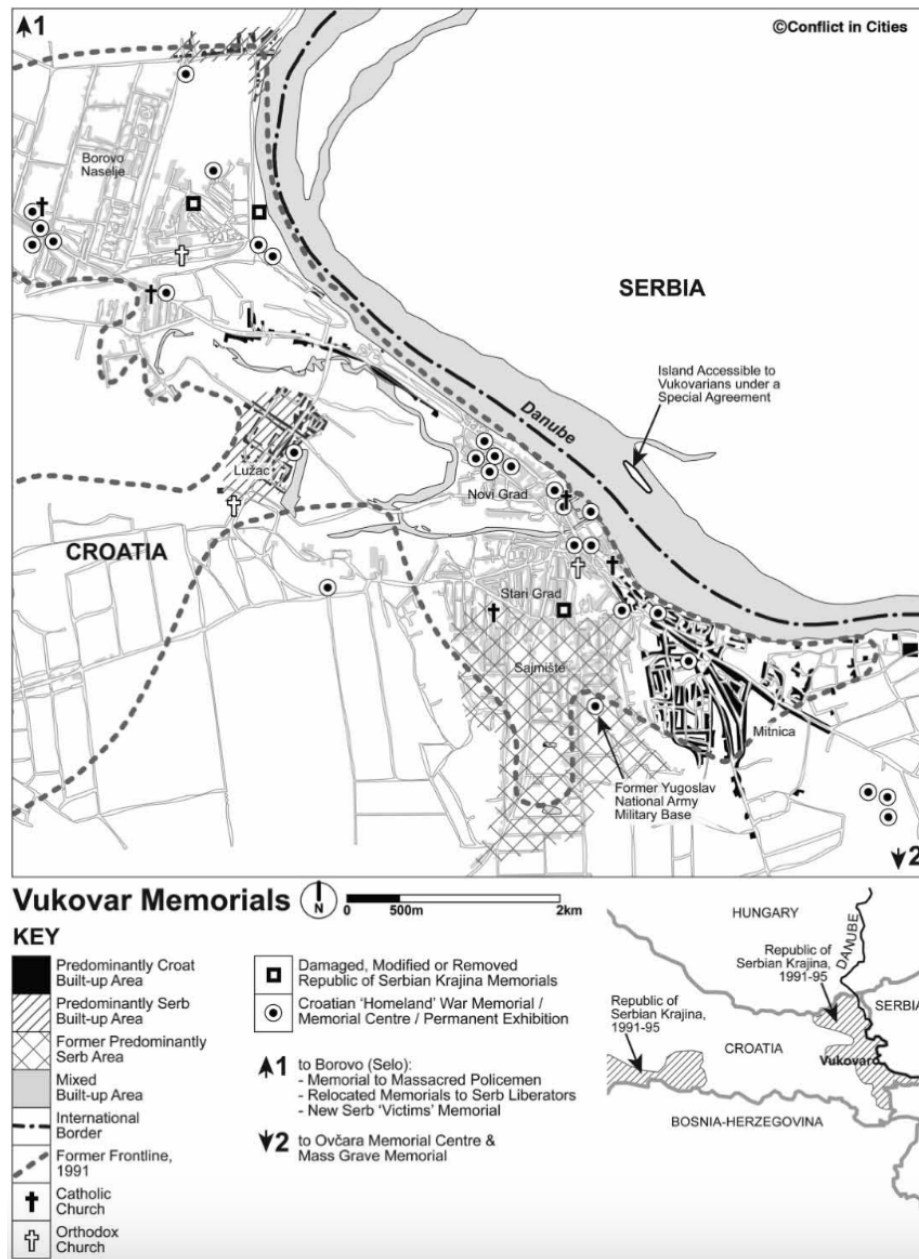


Figure 1: A map of Vukovar and Borovo Naselje, focused on the main Serb and Croat memorial sites. (Source: Conflict in Cities 2012).

This dissertation makes the case that Croatian Serbs as an enemy minority are manoeuvring within the confines of the late-liberal framework that now defines the post-Yugoslav context, one in which liberal forms of recognition dictate which differences are tolerable and which are not. These manoeuvres are rarely actually subversive and are often complicit in the violent ideologies that define their everyday life—nationalism, patriarchy, heteronormativity—while, at the same time, generating new forms of social life. In the five chapters of this dissertation, I demonstrate how Vukovarian Serbs organize alternative forms of commemoration, play with linguistic boundaries

and forms, interpret the Croatian history curriculum, are impacted by the gendered consequences of ethno-nationalist division, and imagine different futures for themselves. The terrain of social life for Croatian Serbs is not homogenous, however, as inconsistencies and contestations within the community creates conflict that must also be negotiated. In particular, this ethnography highlights various tensions, which illustrates how minorities ought not to be understood as fixed entities, but rather “in terms of the field of differentiated and competitive positions or stances” in which different organisations, political parties, or individuals compete over the representation of the group (Brubaker 1995: 113; also Bourdieu 1985).

“THE SMALLER THE NATION, THE LONGER ITS HISTORY”⁶:

The town of Vukovar, named after the Vuka river which it straddles, sits on the bank of the Danube River, a force of nature seriously undersold by the local tourism industry. “The Danube current is strong and treacherous, and you should never try to swim in it,” Darija, a middle-aged Serb woman from Vukovar, dutifully warned me as we approached the small motorboat on our way to Ada Island. Soon, I stood knee-deep in its murky waters—grossed out by the idea of catfish nibbling at my toes—and gazed back at the Vukovar skyline, shielding my eyes from the blazing August sun.

Despite archaeological findings which indicate that the region was inhabited for over five thousand years, by people whose identities were founded on geographical location, religious practises, and a shared language, my narration of Vukovar begins in the wake of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars—when the seeds of ethnic nationalism were planted in South-Eastern Europe.⁷ Occupied by the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires, the Balkan region became a fertile ground for competing national projects of its own. Elites pushed for the nationalisation of the Croatian people and the creation of an independent Croatian nation-state, while others advocated for the dominance of the Serbian national project in the region. At the same time, the Yugoslav national project, which offered an alternative national unity of Southern Slavs, was promoted by intellectuals such as Ljudevit Gaj and Josip Juraj Strossmayer. All were vying for the hearts of people who had predominantly identified themselves religiously in lands which were continuously in the hands of foreign empires.⁸ By the end of the First World War, as the sun set on the age of empires in the region, the Yugoslav national project won out and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes—later the Kingdom of Yugoslavia—was established. Its Belgrade-centred

⁶ This is the title of a chapter in Dubravka Ugrešić’s book, entitled *Europe in Sepia*, in which she satirizes nationalists and the nationalist historiography which (re)emerged with full force in the 1990s.

⁷ One of my favourite places in Vukovar is the remarkable Vučedol Museum, located on the outskirts of town. Embedded into the surrounding landscape, this museum showcases the archaeological findings of the Vučedol civilization which inhabited the banks of the Danube in the Bronze Age. It is perhaps the only place in Vukovar where the words ‘Serb’ and ‘Croat’ are not used to describe the people affiliated with this region. This was a welcome respite from my fieldwork.

⁸ As Malešević (2006: 47-48) emphasizes, group designation does not automatically translate into individual attachment or action, and being categorized as part of a nation does not mean one necessarily identifies with it or behaves accordingly. Treating national identity as synonymous with nation or nationalism risks naturalizing a causal link between culture, power, and identity, which obscures their complexity and can serve to legitimize political violence.

government can best be characterised as a Serbian hegemony, in which Serbian politicians treated the victory and sacrifice of Serbia during World War I as an infinitely “resalable commodity” (Banac 1984: 171) used to dominate the state. These political tensions culminated in the 1928 assassination of Stjepan Radić, a prominent Croat politician, in parliament by a Serbian politician and, eventually, the 1934 assassination of the Serbian king Aleksandar I in Marseille by the Croatian fascist organisation—the Ustaša.



Figure 2: A pre-WWII era postcard of Vukovar. It reads “Greetings from Vukovar, view from the Danube” in *naš jezik* (see Chapter 2) and German. In the top right corner, the former synagogue is visible.

Before 1941, the township of Vukovar was an important administrative seat and numbered approximately 12 000 inhabitants, most of which were newly nationalised Croats and Serbs, many of whom previously identified as Catholics and Orthodox. Tensions between local Serbs and Croats escalated in the latter half of the 1930s as the political stability of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia deteriorated. In the late 1930s, as grievances in Croatia over Serbian hegemony intensified, the popularity of the Ustaša movement grew on the local level (Matijević 2024).

Vukovarian Croats and Serbs shared the town with twelve other national and religious groups, including Hungarians, Germans, Ruthenians, Ukrainians, Slovaks, Roma, and Jews (Figure 2). Most were farmers, merchants, or craftspeople, benefiting from the trade and traffic generated by the river port, as the shoe and textile industry expanded. In fact, the working-class roots of the town made it the location of the second congress of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia in 1920, a fact proudly shared by Strahinja, a teacher at a local Serb language school. Built to be a grand hotel, the majestic building is located in the heart of Vukovar. Known as the Worker’s Hall

(*Radnički Dom*) from its purchase in 1919 to present day, it hosted the Second Congress of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia in 1920. During my time in Vukovar, it sat empty.

The Second World War came to Croatia in April 1941, when Axis forces invaded and dismantled the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Nazi Germany and fascist Italy established the Independent State of Croatia (*Nezavisna Država Hrvatska*, hereafter NDH), appointing the far-right Ustaša movement at its head. The territory of the new state stretched out over most of today's Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and parts of northern Serbia. The Ustaša regime enacted its ideological project of national purification through racist laws which chiefly targeted the ethnonational minorities the Ustaša ideology identified as subversive—Serbs, Jews, and the Roma—as well as Croat opponents of the state, the so-called “renegade Croats.” At the same time, the regime empowered other ethnonational groups—primarily Croats, Germans, and Italians (Matijević 2024). The Ustaša carried out the Holocaust as well as the genocide against the Roma community in Croatia, viewing them as racially defined groups which could not be integrated and must be eliminated. At the same time, in what has been described as “intertwined genocides” (Korb 2025, see also Matijević 2024), the regime carried out a genocide against NDH's Serb community, conceptualizing them as a mix of inferior races and ‘Croats-of-old’ (Matijević 2024) whose “political Serbianization” was an ontological threat to the newly independent Croatian state (cited in Yeoman 2013: 16). In fact, the Ustaša regime erased Serbs as a population category in the NDH; Serbs were intentionally not legally defined and instead strategically labelled as “Greek-Easterners” (*grčko-istočnjaci*). This ambiguous label allowed the Ustaša regime to approach the “Serb question” with a variety of flexible policies at different times and locations: systemic expulsions, forced ethno-national conversions, and physical annihilation (Matijević 2024).

On the ground in Vukovar, the Ustaša policies and dynamics of violence were informed by local realities. The town sits at the intersection of Slavonia and Syrmia, whose fertile soil makes the area the breadbasket of the lower Pannonian region. At the time, the developed industrial sector in Vukovar was unrivalled by other provincial Croatian towns. As a result, unlike in the regions of Lika and Kordun, the regime initially avoided mass killings in favour of forced conversions to Catholicism—and later Croatian Orthodoxy—in an attempt to avoid the disruption of food production. The Ustaša regime created the Croatian Orthodox church some six months after the forced conversion campaign was put into effect, when it became evident that the forced conversion of such a large number of Orthodox Serbs into Catholic Croats was not only unpopular but also inefficient (Matijević 2022). From June to September 1941, the Ustaša emptied entire Serb villages as elites, Thessaloniki volunteers⁹, and members of the Serbian Orthodox clergy were forcibly deported to Occupied Serbia, until the Nazis closed the border (Škiljan 2012). While Serb villagers in the Lika and Kordun region were being executed by the hundreds by Ustaša death squads in the

⁹ The Thessaloniki volunteers (*solunski dobrovoljci*) were Serbian soldiers who participated in the Thessaloniki Front military campaign after the invasion of Serbia during World War I. In the interwar period, many of them were granted a plot of land in Croatia for their volunteer service by the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, earning them the ire of local Ustaša who viewed them as agents of Serbia.

woods or sent to death camps, the Serbs from the Vukovar region avoided this fate until the Partisan resistance took root on the local level. The mass killings of Vukovarian Serbs mostly took the form of counter-insurgency violence, first focusing primarily on young men being taken hostage, accused of being members of the communist resistance, the Partisans, or being executed in the aftermath of Partisan military gains, to later encompass entire communities. In fact, the communist resistance movement in Vukovar, which was initially limited (Majski 1985), grew as the Serbs fleeing from Ustaša terror joined the Partisans en masse (Pavlaković and Perak 2017).¹⁰ Throughout the war, local Partisans attempted to prevent the Ustaša and German forces from reaping the harvest from Slavonia (Majski 1985) and engaged in extensive sabotage. As the war progressed and the Ustaša regime became more unstable, the reprisal killings became more brutal and widespread (Matijević 2024). In Vukovar, most of these executions took place in Dudik, on the outskirts of town, a field named after the mulberry trees which grow there to this day. By the end of the war, the Ustaša cleansed Vukovar of its Jewish and Roma population—most of whom perished in the Jasenovac death camp—and approximately 500 Serbs were executed (see Gojko and Majski 1977). The violence unleashed by the Ustaša regime tore the fabric of social life, scarring the landscape and forever altering the demographic picture.

The Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia was established in the wake of World War II, led by Josip Broz Tito, the leader of the Partisan resistance movement. Legitimised by the fact that Yugoslavia liberated itself, without the help of the Red Army, Tito was able to turn his back on Stalin and establish a unique Yugoslav—workers' self-management—brand of socialism. Prioritising industrialization and the education of the masses, the regime adopted the slogan of “brotherhood and unity” (*bratstvo i jedinstvo*), in an attempt to combat nationalism among Serbs and Croats, and to stress the common interests of the Southern Slavs. In Croatia, both Serbs and Croats were constitutionally recognized as the state's constitutive nations (*konstitutivni narodi*), relegating the label of minorities (*narodnosti*) to non-Slavs in the region.¹¹ All victims of the

¹⁰ The Partisan communist resistance was an ethnically diverse movement. As the Serbs became targets of Ustaša terror, they initially swelled the ranks of the Partisans and made up its majority until the second half of 1943, when Croats became the majority in the Partisan ranks in Croatia (Tomasevich 2002: 412). However, it should be noted that some Serbs joined the Četniks instead, who fought for the restoration of royalist Yugoslavia, collaborated with Axis members, and committed atrocities against Croat and Muslim civilians (see footnote 12).

¹¹ In socialist Yugoslavia, the categories of ‘minority’ and ‘majority’ were rejected as offensive and unequal (Jović 2011). Instead, Croats, Serbs, Bosniaks (from 1961), Slovenes, Montenegrins, and Macedonians were recognized as *konstitutivni narodi* (constitutive peoples), while other groups were classified as *narodnosti* (nationalities). Each republic also defined its own *narodi*—for example, Croatia had two (Croats and Serbs), while Bosnia and Herzegovina had three (Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs)—who were regarded as collective bearers of republican statehood. The category of ‘national minority’ was seen as outdated and tied to the pre-socialist past.

In practice, *narodi* were never treated as minorities, even where they were demographically smaller (such as Serbs in Croatia). But this also meant they were not granted the institutional protections often associated with minority status, such as separate schools. By contrast, *narodnosti* could have their position institutionalized if they formed a regional majority (ex: Albanians in Kosovo). Where they were in the minority (ex: Albanians in Croatia), their status was little different from that of *narodi* in regions where they were less represented (Jović 2001).

Ustaša regime, Serb Četnik¹² paramilitaries and Axis occupiers were rebranded as “victims of fascism,” and textbooks focused on the victories of the Partisans over the Germans and Italians, downplaying the role of local fascists in the violence (Subotić 2019).



Figure 3: A 1930s-era postcard featuring the newly constructed shoe factory *Borovo* in Borovo Naselje.

The town of Vukovar experienced a veritable demographic boom in the aftermath of World War II, as the industrial sector blossomed in the post-war elation and worker-oriented atmosphere. At the same time, collective guilt was placed on the local German community, who were interned or expelled unless they could prove that they did not collaborate with the Nazis. Their homes were confiscated by the socialist regime and redistributed to members of the Partisan movement (see Janjetović 2005; Portmann 2004). Companies such as *Borovo*, *Vuteks*, and *Vupik* were collectively owned and self-managed by its workers, all of which were key aspects of Yugoslavia’s unique worker’s self-management brand of socialism. In fact, the suburb of Borovo Naselje is defined by its socialist apartment buildings and townhouses, initially built by industrialist Tomaš Bata in the 1930s to house the workers of *Borovo* and expanded by the socialist regime (Figure 3). Jasmina, a woman from Borovo Naselje who identifies as an engineer rather than a Serb or Croat, stressed the importance of the industrial history of Vukovar, lamenting that it is constantly overshadowed by recent histories of violence.

¹² The Chetnik (*Četnik*) movement was a WWII-era guerrilla force backed by the Serbian monarchy exiled in London. Members of the Chetniks were known to collaborate with the Nazis and the Ustaša and were responsible for many massacres against Croats and Bosniaks. Serbian paramilitaries and nationalists often revived Chetnik iconography in the 1990s and afterwards. In fact, the Serbian government has recently rehabilitated Draža Mihajlović, the leader of the Chetniks. In contemporary Croatia, the word “Chetnik” is often used derogatorily and interchangeably with “Serb,” often by members of the Croatian veteran groups and other far-right nationalists.

NARRATING THE SIEGE: BEFORE, DURING, AFTER

In the wake of the fall of the Berlin wall, the deepening economic crisis, and the re-emergence of nationalist politics, the socialist regime disintegrated in the fires of inter-ethnic violence. The delicate Yugoslav equilibrium established by Tito—particularly its attempt to constrain the political dominance of Serbia—was shattered by Slobodan Milošević’s rise to power in the Serbian Communist Party in 1987. His nationalist rhetoric not only bastardised and delegitimized Yugoslavism, but also paved the way for other nationalist revivals in the region. While Milošević was gaining political support in Serbia, the first democratic elections in Croatia were held in 1990, bringing to power the HDZ (Croatian Democratic Union) under the leadership of Franjo Tudjman. The Tudjman campaign rhetoric argued that Yugoslavia was an unnatural imposition and that deep cultural—civilizational, even—differences existed between the “European” Croats and the “Byzantine” Serbs (Bellamy 2003). Largely funded by the fascist Croatian diaspora in Argentina, Australia, the US, and Canada, the new regime reintroduced the iconography of the NDH, purged the public sector from Serbs—especially the administrative sector and the police—and cleansed the Croatian language from Serbian impurities (Brubaker 1996: 71). The political dominance of the HDZ was also made possible through the “discrete but crucial” support of the Catholic Church (Ramet 2008, see also Perica 2002). In fact, Croatia did not transition from socialism to liberal democracy, but rather into the competitive authoritarian regime of President Franjo Tudjman and the HDZ where, while democratic institutions were put into place, they were tools to be used by the HDZ to obtain and maintain political authority (Levitsky and Way 2002: 52 cited in Sokolić 2019). Tudjman’s ideological condemnation of Yugoslavism and “flirtation with the Ustaša” (Pavlaković 2008) in an attempt to bring about national reconciliation between descendants of the Ustaša and Croat antifascists opened the door to outright historical revisionism and the rehabilitation of the Ustaša regime (Uzelac 1998, 2006; Đurašković 2016; Gagnon 2004; Goldstein and Hutinec 2007). Most importantly, the new Croatian constitution demoted Serbs from their previous status as constitutive people of the Croatian state, making them a national minority.

Scholars such as Brubaker (1996: 72) caution against analysing the 1990s in Croatia from a “dyadic” view, which treats Croatian Serbs as “passive dupes, vehicles, or objects of manipulative designs originating from Serbia.” Instead, he argues that scholars should adopt a “triadic” view of the conflict, one in which Croatian Serbs are understood as political actors in their own right alongside the Serbian and Croatian states. In fact, he stresses the following:

“Although representations of wartime atrocities—often greatly exaggerated—were indeed widely propagated from Belgrade, memories of and stories about the murderous wartime Independent State of Croatia, and especially about the gruesome fate of many Croatian and Bosnian Serbs (Bosnia having been incorporated into the wartime Croatian state), were not imports. They were locally rooted, sustained within family and village circles, and transmitted to the post-war

generations, especially in the ethnically mixed and partly Serb-majority borderland regions where (outside of Bosnia) most atrocities against Serb civilians had occurred, and where (again excluding Bosnia) the main Partisan as well as the few Chetnik strongholds in Croatia had been located.” (72)

Thus, when violent skirmishes started breaking out across Croatia, some Croatian Serbs fled the country, others relocated to Serb-majority regions, while others were mobilized into local Territorial Defence Forces (*teritorialna odbrana*) or the Yugoslav National Army (JNA).¹³ As many as 60,000 draft-age Croatian Serb men fled to Serbia in order to avoid partaking in the war (Norman 1993: 319). Many of those who decided to participate in the conflict did so because they deeply feared—fears which were fuelled by Serbian and local nationalists as well as intergenerational trauma—that the atrocities of the 1940s could occur again. These sporadic clashes—many of which mysteriously occurred at night while civilians remained in their homes, listening to the gunfire in the distance—turned into outright military offensives when the JNA intervened. By this time, the JNA had been deserted by many non-Serbs who correctly identified it as an extension of Milošević’s power.¹⁴

Inter-ethnic violence reached Vukovar in the spring of 1991. Serb villages around Vukovar, such as Borovo Selo, were barricaded as tensions rose in the aftermath of Tudjman’s election, his administration’s discriminatory policies, and the political demotion of Croatian Serbs. These local tensions culminated in the Battle of Borovo Selo on May 2, 1991, where Serb militias ambushed a large squad of Croat policemen on their way to facilitate replacing the Yugoslav flag in the village with a Croatian one, killing twelve of them. At the same time, as Croatia declared its independence on June 25, 1991—after holding a referendum in late May which Croatian Serbs boycotted—clashes intensified and the JNA intervened in increasingly brutal ways. Meanwhile, convicted war criminal, Tomislav Merčep, then HDZ politician and paramilitary leader, was placed in charge of national defence in Vukovar, a position he used to run the town as his personal fiefdom. From June to August 1991, 86 Serb civilians disappeared or were killed at the hands of Merčep’s men before he was relocated to Zagreb (Youth Initiative for Human Rights 2011). The shelling around Vukovar began already in June 1991, turning into a full-blown siege by August 25, 1991.

¹³ Military service was compulsory in socialist Yugoslavia for all men once they reached the age of majority. Most women were also trained in combat and first aid in compulsory classes. To supplement the JNA in the event of an invasion from an external enemy, civilians were trained in Territorial Defence Forces, which had access to caches of weapons. The forces were organized locally through various avenues such as factories and universities. In 1991, men were mobilized into the Territorial Defence Forces or the JNA depending on their corresponding combat arms and ranking.

¹⁴ Throughout the War of Croatian Independence, the relations between local JNA reservists and their Serbian officers were often tense. What began as a reassuring presence turned into resentment as it became clear that the Serbian officers were reluctant to engage in battle, sending only locals to the frontlines. As the conflict dragged on, support from the JNA waned and Serbian officers were perceived as an embodiment of Milošević’s corruption and political instrumentalization of the Croatian Serbs. Both the JNA and the Serbian paramilitaries were viewed with disdain by local reservists, who understood the former to be profiteers and the latter to be hooligans (Norman 1993).

Some Vukovarian civilians—both Serb and Croat—left town as clashes became increasingly more violent throughout the summer of 1991, some joining their relatives in Western Croatia or Serbia, and others leaving the country altogether. Many civilians, however, decided to stay in Vukovar, believing that the escalation of violence would be prevented by the intervention of the JNA and that civilians would not be harmed. This was the case of Ana, a Croat woman married to a Serb man, who survived the siege. “I remember asking myself what kind of war this was... Why were they targeting civilians, why didn’t they just leave us alone?” she told me. As the JNA indiscriminately shelled the town and *de facto* sided with the Serb side of the conflict, reality soon sank in. The siege was defined by incessant shelling and an improvised urban resistance movement, turning every corner of the town into a battleground. For 87 long days, as the JNA, Serbian paramilitaries, the TO, and their Croat adversaries fought over the town, civilians were trapped in their basements, cut off from access to food or water. Due to the brutality of the assault and the scale of destruction, the siege of Vukovar is widely considered the most dramatic episode of the Croatian War of Independence.



Figure 4: The devastated ruins of Vukovar in the wake of the 1991 siege. (Source: Balkan Insight)

For Ana, however, recounting her experience chronologically was impossible. It became clear to me that she could only distinguish the days by the food that she was able to scavenge for her family. Running from shelter to shelter, her family risked their lives every time they emerged from the underground. She did not know it at the time, but while she was hiding in the basement with her husband and children, her parents had been murdered by a member of a Serbian paramilitary group who had thrown grenades into every basement on that particular street. On another occasion

during the siege, a member of the Croatian National Guard (ZNG) had burst into the family's shelter, demanding that they hand over any Serbs hiding there. Ana's husband, Stevan, was escorted out to be executed, but survived when his captor was injured by shrapnel. Such senseless and random acts of cruelty were common as paramilitary groups took their frustrations out on vulnerable civilians (Figure 5). Street by street, the town of Vukovar was brutalised and taken over by the JNA, officially ending the siege on November 18, 1991. Once considered the people's army, it had become an army which could not—rather, would not—guarantee its subjects safety from itself.



Figure 5: The retrieval of dead bodies in the wake of the 1991 siege in Vukovar. (Source: Balkan Insight)

In the wake of the siege, journalist Boris Dežulović was barely able to negotiate his way past a few Serbian paramilitary checkpoints, while his JNA escort tried to convince him not to go. He described the following scene when he entered what was left of “the city that doesn’t exist”:

“Our jeep has trouble breaking through the remains of Vukovar. The streets are a mess, littered with bricks, beams, roof tiles, soil... and bloody blankets under which a hundred corpses were lying until yesterday. The entrance to almost every side street is blocked with yellow tape and big signs with ‘mined’ written on them... One man is gently pushing a woman into a car, but she doesn’t want to get in. She is wailing, her entire body convulsing, as she looks at the place where their home

once stood. On the house on the opposite side of the street a Četnik flag is flapping in the wind, inscribed with the words ‘Freedom or Death.’”¹⁵

I include this excerpt in order to paint a picture of the devastation of the siege, both material and psychological, as well as the irony of the ‘Freedom or Death’ flag surrounded by death and destruction: for Četniks arriving in Vukovar, freedom was the death of the Other. To the Serb side, Vukovar had been liberated. To the Croatian side, Vukovar had fallen.¹⁶ The end of the siege marked the beginning of the Krajina epoch in Vukovar, a rather understudied period in Croatian history.

As civilians emerged from their basements, they soon learned that “liberation” was not going to be granted to everyone. While Ana and her three children were bused out of Vukovar and took up residence in Serbia for the duration of the war, her husband Stevan, like many Vukovarian Serbs, decided to remain in Vukovar to protect their property. Many of their Croat neighbours—those without significant connections (*veze*) to Serbs—did not have the same options. Civilians, mostly women, children, and the elderly, were led out of the city in a long column. Many Croat men were held back, interrogated, tortured, and killed in the local *Velepromet* industrial storage site. Hundreds were taken as war prisoners and interred in camps in Serbia, where they were subjected to more torture. Even the factory and warehouses of *Borovo*, once a symbol of industrial prosperity and hope, were used for wartime violence.

Meanwhile, hundreds of wounded people (some combatants, some civilians) were trapped in the Vukovar hospital as the JNA gained control of the city. Approximately 300 Croat men were forcibly removed from the hospital, some were separated and taken to internment camps in Serbia but the majority of the prisoners—most were Croats, but the group comprised of all individuals who were identified as combatants on the Croatian side—were bused to Ovčara farm, a deserted farm on the outskirts of the city near the village of Grabovo. Here, with the full knowledge of the JNA, the detainees were tortured before they were ultimately executed and buried in a mass grave. At Ovčara farm, at least 260 people were massacred at the hands of Serbian paramilitaries and local TOs (ICTY 2007). A dozen prisoners were taken back to Vukovar, presumably because their Serb neighbours had recognized and vouched for them. As Schellenberg (2015) notes, what happened at Ovčara was not only an unprecedented event in Europe since the end of World War II, but its scale and impunity set the tone for what was to come during the disintegration of Yugoslavia.

¹⁵ For the rest of the reprinted article, see: <https://www.lupiga.com/vijesti/iz-ratnog-vukovara-zvat-ce-ga-hrvatskim-staljingradom-i-srpskim-galipoljem-bio-je-medjutim-vukovar-bio-je-grad>.

¹⁶ Here I am drawing attention to two competing and nationalist narratives about the past, one which views the siege as a liberation and the other as an occupation. However, it is important to understand that, on the ground, some Serbs and Croats do not adhere to either view or see the outcome of the siege in a complex manner.

As the dust settled on the city that was no more, and as journalists were prevented from witnessing the horrors unfolding on the ground, some Vukovarian Serbs began returning to their ravaged homes. Ljuba, an elderly Serb woman, told me that she had left Vukovar by crossing the Danube on a flimsy boat and returned to her apartment as soon as she was able to, “while corpses still littered the ground.” And so, that frosty November, the rule of Krajina began.

“THE WILD WEST”: REPUBLIKA SRPSKA KRAJINA

The Serbian Autonomous Oblast of Krajina (SAO Krajina) had declared its autonomy in October 1990 in the aftermath of Tudjman’s election and the beginning of anti-Serb discriminatory practices enabled by his administration. By December 1991, SAO Krajina declared itself the Republic of Serbian Krajina (RSK), expanding its reach to include all irredentist Serb regions across Croatia. At its height, the self-declared Serb proto state stretched out across approximately 26.5% of what is today Croatian territory (Barić 2014).

There is almost no research on what everyday life looked like in Krajina, so I am only able to paint a picture of this social history through stories I have heard from my interlocutors or my own family, who resided in Beli Manastir, a small town in the neighbouring county of Baranja. All of my interlocutors agree on one thing: Krajina was lawless, it was the “Wild West.” Abandoned homes of Croats and other non-Serbs were looted, illegal smuggling proliferated, and human rights were violated.¹⁷ Everyday life for the non-Serbs who decided to stay in Krajina was characterized by intimidation and discrimination. Suzana, a middle-aged woman whose mother is a Croat, told me that her mother was never able to find work in Krajina. “Nobody wanted to hire a Croat,” she said.

In Vukovar, most of the destroyed buildings and roads were not being renovated; many streets remained without street lighting, glass was replaced with nylon, and none of the apartment buildings had heating or working elevators. Life continued—coffee shops, restaurants, boutiques, and sports clubs reopened—but did not remain unaffected by the war. Empty (or occupied) houses which were still usable were filled with Serb refugees from other regions of Croatia or Bosnia and Herzegovina. These houses were marked with signs which read: “occupied, Serbian” (*zauzeto srpsko*), which was supposed to be a guarantee against looting. Due to the town’s reliance on Serbia, which was at the time under international sanctions, massive inflation and shortages were common for goods such as fuel, cigarettes, and wood logs (Bradarić 2021). Weapons were so readily available that many of my interlocutors knew of someone whose child had been killed by playing with grenades they had accidentally found. I find the words of a Vukovarian Serb who had lived in the town while it was under RSK control particularly apt, “today, when I think about all of that, I can only say—never again (*ne ponovilo se*).” (Bradarić 2021: 113).

¹⁷ A common joke at the time was that cars being sold with registration plates from Vukovar (VU) meant that they had probably been stolen (*vjerovatno/verovatno ukradeno*).

In the final months of 1994, the international community drafted a proposed basis for negotiations in order to find a political settlement for the Croatian War of Independence. The proposal, known as the Z-4 Plan, would have guaranteed an autonomous Krajina within Croatia. It would have included autonomy for areas with a Serb majority according to the 1991 census, including its own currency, parliament, police force and fiscal policy. While Tudjman found the proposal too autonomous and favoured an integrationist approach, he accepted the plan as a starting point. The political leadership of Krajina was by this time dominated by hardliners. They rejected the proposal, likely due to a lack of trust in the intentions of the Croatian government, but mostly because they continued to hope for a future outside of an independent Croatia (Caspersen 2003).

By August 1995, the Croatian Army and the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina jointly launched Operation Storm, a military campaign aimed at recapturing Krajina territory. Knin, the capital of RSK, was recaptured, leading to the complete collapse of the Krajina command structure.¹⁸ As the Croatian Army advanced, Tudjman launched a radio campaign in which he reassured Croatian Serbs, telling them that the armed forces would ensure the safety of civilians.¹⁹ Despite these reassurances, Croatian Serb civilians fled en masse, creating a humanitarian crisis as approximately 250,000 people fled to Serbia through Bosnia and Herzegovina (Mesić and Bagić 2016). These massive columns of fleeing civilians were fleetingly bombarded by Croatian Army jets, and VERITAS Documentation and Information Centre estimates that 1542 Serb civilians were killed or went missing during Operation Storm, but the precise number is disputed (Clark 2013a). This number also includes the civilians (mostly elderly people) who stayed behind and were murdered in their homes by members of the Croatian Army. While most refugees sought shelter outside of Croatia, many ended up in Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Syrmia, since these regions were still under the control of RSK armed forces. In Vukovar, many incoming refugees were “given” Croat homes—some were abandoned, some were still inhabited—to resolve the sudden housing crisis.

During my fieldwork, thirty years after the destruction of Vukovar and twenty-six years after the collapse of RSK, I sometimes encountered the same nationalist denial and delusion that characterized the Krajina period. However, I noticed that there seems to be a generational gap when it comes to the way that Krajina is remembered. While I was sharing a car with two Serbs born in the 1990s, I asked them what music they liked to listen to. They laughed and said that they

¹⁸ Operation Storm was the product of a resuscitated alliance between the Croatian and Bosniak sides, who had been at war throughout the 1990s as a result of Tudjman’s territorial ambitions in Bosnia and Herzegovina: the establishment of the political entity of Herceg-Bosna. In fact, the partition of Bosnia and Herzegovina had been discussed between Milošević and Tudjman during their meeting in Karadjordjevo in 1991. During Operation Storm, the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina was seeking to achieve its own military goals in Western Bosnia.

¹⁹ In the aftermath of Operation Storm, Tudjman stressed that his appeal to the Serb civilians was made for the sake of the international community. In fact, he compared Serbs to “a cancer of Croatian society” (Lenkova 1998; HRW 1999) and declared in his 1997 annual speech that the decrease in the numbers of the Serbs in Croatia should be regarded as a special achievement (Djurić 2010).

would show me. They turned up the volume as the following lyrics boomed through the car speakers:

*Gradiće te srpski sokolovi,
srpske kćeri i srpski sinovi.
Bićeš lepši neg' što beše grade,
svaki dušman to nek dobro znade,
Dunav teče a košava duva,
Vukovaru sad te Srbin čuva.*

You will be (re)built by Serb falcons,
Serb daughters and Serb sons.
You will be more beautiful than you were,
let every enemy know this well.
The Danube flows and the cold wind blows,
Vukovar, now a Serb protects you.

Knowing what I know about life in Krajina, I found the misleading and exclusionist promises of this song upsetting as well as ironic. When I spoke to older individuals—who were adults or teenagers in the time of Krajina—I received more measured answers. Consider the words of Milorad, a middle-aged Serb man from Borovo Selo:

“Krajina was the Wild West! A lot of Croats just assume that because I am a Serb I enjoyed living in Krajina or that I wish we could go back to it. They are very surprised when I tell them that Krajina was a terrible country. It wasn't safe. It wasn't safe for us.”

During the conversation that followed, Milorad stressed the fact that he and his family—all Serbs—were not safe in Krajina. It is important to note, however, that life in Vukovar during the Krajina epoch was even worse for the most vulnerable members of its society: non-Serbs.

AN UNEASY PEACE: THE PEACEFUL REINTEGRATION

While the Western reaches of Krajina were militarily reconquered in 1995, the remaining Serb-controlled regions in Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and the Western Sirmia shared a long border with Serbia, prompting the international community to fear a re-escalation of the conflict if the Croatian Army opted for a military resolution. The international community pressured both sides for a peaceful approach which would reintegrate the remains of Krajina into independent Croatia. As a result of their military defeat, however, Croatian Serbs were no longer in a strong position to negotiate and territorial autonomy was no longer on the table. Furthermore, the political leadership of Croatian Serbs in these regions favoured a more moderate approach, which was also backed by Serbia. It was at this time that the Vukovar-based Independent Democratic Serb Party (*Samostalna Demokratska Srpska Stranka*, hereafter SDSS), the current dominant political party for Croatian Serbs, emerged through a merger of the SSS (*Samostalna Srpska Stranka*) led by Milorad Pupovac, a linguist and moderate Serb politician from Zagreb, and the remnants of SDS (*Srpska Demokratska Stranka*), the Knin-based political party which led irredentist Croatian Serbs since 1991. Their demands shifted towards cultural autonomy, giving up on the idea of territorial autonomy altogether.

The Erdut Agreement was signed on November 12, 1995 and established a Transitional Administration for the Danube region of Croatia, which lasted until January 1998. The agreement aimed to facilitate the Peaceful Reintegration (*Mirna Reintegracija*) of this region into Croatia. It prioritised the protection of human and minority rights, ensuring educational and cultural autonomy. It also guaranteed the return of refugees and established inter-communal power sharing, one aspect of which required police forces to consist of an equal number of Serbs and Croats. In Vukovar, as a result of its unique wartime population movements, the term “returnee” (*povratnik*) is primarily associated with Croats who returned after the Peaceful Reintegration, while “stayee” (*ostalnik*) is linked to Serbs who remained in Vukovar since 1991. Finally, the Agreement established the Joint Council of Municipalities (*Zajedničko Vijeće Općina* hereafter ZVO) for localities with a Serb majority, an elected consultative body with the purpose of implementing cultural autonomy.

On the ground, the Peaceful Reintegration was a period many Serbs experienced as tense and uncertain, as every aspect of daily life began to change and, gradually, the balance of power shifted once again. Required to surrender their weapons at local police stations, many Serb soldiers feared that Croats would not respect the agreement and ambush them, emboldened by their military success in the West. Consider my exchange with Darija, whom we met before, as we discussed her life during this transition period.

Darija: “It was hard. We had been paid in dinars [during Krajina] and we suddenly switched to the kuna²⁰. When my husband got his first paycheck in the new currency, we struggled to find Serbs in the marketplace who would be willing to accept being paid in kuna. And you know, back then, we shopped only in Serb-owned stores and stands.”

Dragana: “Why did Serbs not want to accept the kuna? Weren’t they just happy to get paid?”

Darija, rolling her eyes: “They were in denial! They were spiteful (*inatili su se*) because they did not want to accept the fact that this was Croatia now. I remember that only a few Serbs at the marketplace were smart enough to get with the times!”

Darija’s words illustrate the tense atmosphere of the Reintegration period, characterized by a deep sense of mistrust between the Serb stayees and the Croat returnees, as well as the unwillingness of some Serbs to accept their fate in the independent Croatian state. The experience of reintegration was not an easy one for returning Croats either, who were also unsettled by the territorial, juridic, and political changes, which altered every aspect of social life. It was not the same Vukovar they

²⁰ The kuna was the currency of Croatia from 1994 to 2023, when Croatia switched to the euro. It is important to note that many Croatian Serbs were disturbed by the fact that the kuna was also the name of the currency of the NDH from 1941 to 1945.

had left; everything, “from education, politics, economy, urban architecture, identity, and cultural boundaries” (Kardov 2006: 12), was different. However, from the end of 1998 to 2002, an average of seven returnees a day went back to Vukovar (Kardov 2006) which, combined with the continued exodus of local Serbs, significantly altered the demographic picture and the positions of power.

As phone lines reopened, threatening phone calls started, aimed at intimidating and encouraging Serbs to abandon their attempts to reintegrate. Bureaucratic violence was rampant: not only were Serb returns in Western Croatia being purposely prevented and slowed, but obtaining simple paperwork was often made impossible out of spite (Leutkoff 2002; Blitz 2008; Koska 2008; Škiljan 2016). Gordana, a Serb woman in her sixties, told me: “one of their bureaucrats recognized me, he was from the same village as my sister. He refused to issue my daughter her *domovnica* (certificate of citizenship), so we had to go to the neighbouring town to get our paperwork.” Acts of violence and harassment, which had proliferated before the war as tensions rose, became common once again. As old Croat neighbours returned to their homes, many Serbs found old friends and acquaintances unwilling to greet them in public, due to resentment or simply fear of being ostracised by their own communities (Kardov 2002; 2006; Koska 2008). However, as Čedomir, a middle-aged Serb man told me, Croats had also been under immense social pressure to behave in this manner. He said, “You know, after three shots of brandy (*rakija*), my Croat friend tells me today that he didn’t have a choice back then. He didn’t want to ignore me, but he had to.”

The tensions stemming from the Reintegration resulted in another wave of Serb departures after Operation Storm. By 1996, 15 000 Serbs had departed and by 1998 approximately 25-30 Serbs were leaving each day (Klemenčić & Schofield 2001: 39). Those who remained were perceived by the international community as moderates who were willing to live in a Croatian state, while those who decided to leave were often perceived as nationalists, war criminals, or people with guilty consciences (Klemenčić & Schofield 2001: 41). However, the reality on the ground was more complex. Unable to take the tense reality of Reintegration, many Serbs, who initially wanted to remain in Croatia after the end of hostilities, were discriminated against, harassed, or intimidated into leaving their homes. In fact, the UN Special Envoy for Human Rights had asked the Croatian government to publish the complete list of those it considered war criminals so that those who are not on it could remain. However, arrests of Croatian Serbs suspected for war crimes in the 1990s continue to this day.²¹ As a result, there are Croatian Serbs who refuse to return to Croatia for political reasons while many are unable to do so for fear of being detained.

TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE AND MINORITY RIGHTS

As the Peaceful Reintegration process came to an end in 1998, it was the death of Tudjman in 1999 and the electoral loss of the HDZ in the 2000 parliamentary elections to a centre-left coalition that

²¹ The most recent incident at the time this dissertation was written occurred in July 2024 with the arrest of five former members of the Territorial Defence Forces in the town of Orolik, a village located between Vukovar and Vinkovac. See the following article: <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/foto-uhiceni-bivsi-srpski-teritorijalci-1991-su-mucili-hrvatske-civile-i-gardiste/2581525.aspx>.

began Croatia's process of transition to a liberal democracy. The new government began cooperating with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), its Brussels-oriented politics allowing the Tribunal to be more effective than in neighbouring states (Subotić 2009; Nettelfield 2010). However, Sokolić (2019) notes that Ivo Sanader's government painted compliance as a legal obligation and attempted to challenge ICTY indictments before domestic audiences. This is because joining the EU was a goal supported by politicians across all ideological lines, likely due to the fact that Croatian national identity is rooted in a sense of European-ness and a desire to distance itself from the Balkans (Zambelli 2010).

On the ground, while elites cooperated with ICTY requests, civil society (notably war veterans' and victims' organisations), and the media pushed for the rejection of the court's jurisdiction. The state did not hold out against public backlash. In fact, the Croatian National Assembly issued the Declaration on the Homeland War (*Deklaracija o Domovinskom Ratu*) in 2000 as well as the Declaration on Operation Storm (*Deklaracija o Oluji*) in 2006, both of which outline the official narrative on the war of Croatian Independence (Narodne Novine 2000; Narodne Novine 2006). These declarations articulate that the war was legitimate and defensive, and that a distinction must be made between the Greater Serbian Aggressor and the Croatian state as its victim (Banjeglav 2012; Jović 2009; 2017; Koren 2011; Pavlaković 2014). Unsurprisingly, due to the incompatibility between this stance and ICTY judgments, there is continued widespread belief in the Croatian public that Croat citizens did not perpetuate war crimes and that the Croatian government did not have expansionist ambitions in the 1990s (Lamont 2004). Furthermore, some ICTY judgments further emboldened Croatian nationalists. The acquittal of Ante Gotovina in 2012 for the mass ethnic cleansing of Croatian Serbs during Operation Storm triggered "a long pent-up national orgasm" (Ugrešić 2014: 49) and cemented into place the idea of a clean and just war.

In Vukovar, the legacy of the Tribunal is disappointing, reflecting a "messier, more nuanced and interactive process of transitional justice" (Sokolić 2019: 6-7). In fact, Clark (2013b) argues that the Tribunal has held so few trials in relation to Vukovar, leading to a deep sense of dissatisfaction with the ICTY and continued distrust between neighbours. Since guilt was not individualised, Vukovarians continue to resort to notions of collective guilt as a way to make sense of unanswered questions. According to Clark (2013b), neither Serbs or Croats in Vukovar feel they have received justice at the Tribunal, which encourages locals to (re)produce ethnically-defined victimhood narratives.

Croatia adopted the first Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities in 2002, which guarantees the right to education in their own language and script, representation in the Croatian Parliament, as well as the right to local self-government statutes. The law also stipulates that when a national minority makes up more than one-third of a local population, the minority is entitled to its own language and script in public official use. As a result of the 2011 census, the government was obligated to put bilingual signs up on buildings of state institutions in Vukovar in late 2012.

This move provoked protests in Vukovar and other parts in Croatia, which were led by veteran associations, right-wing political parties, and media, all of whom portrayed Cyrillic as “the enemy script” (Banjeglav 2021). The signs were ripped down and destroyed during these riots (Figure 6). Una, a Serb woman from Vukovar, laughed when she told me that she had found herself downtown when the riots were occurring. Her boyfriend, a Croat policeman, saw her and insisted on taking her home. “He told me it was better if I went home, he was afraid that something might happen to me,” she said.

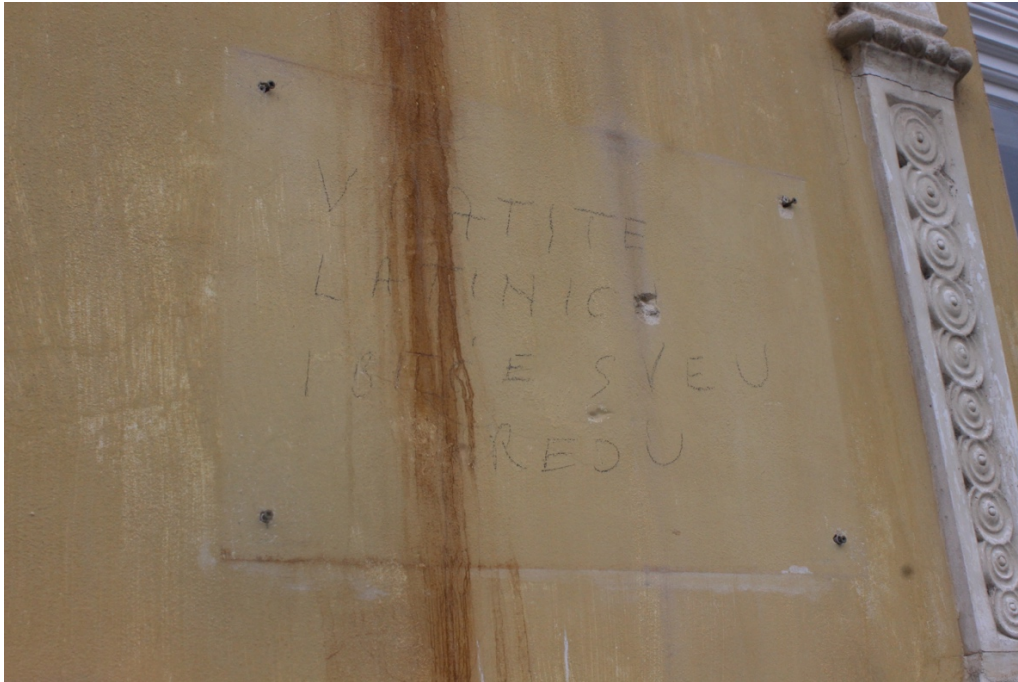


Figure 6: Where a bilingual plaque once stood on the Croatian Pension Insurance Agency, someone has written “bring back the Latin script and everything will be alright” (*vratite latinicu i bit će sve u redu*).

In early November 2013, the Vukovar city council, in which right-wing parties formed a majority, voted to change the city’s statute and to exempt it from Croatian minority rights legislation. Due to its suffering during the siege, the city was proclaimed a “city of special homeland piety” (*mjesto posebnog domovinskog pijeteta*) causing a year-long political crisis and stand-off between Zagreb and Vukovar. A legal battle ensued until a new statute was passed in 2015, which required “conditions to be met” in order for the collective rights of the Serb ethnic minority to be ensured. Year after year, Ivan Penava, the current mayor of Vukovar, argued that the local conditions of tolerance and dialogue had not been met to introduce the bilingual signs. This lasted until the 2021 census, which resolved the issue by determining that Serbs no longer make up one-third of the population of Vukovar.²²

²² Penava and his associates attempted to discredit the 2011 census which revealed that Serbs made up 34.87% of the total population in Vukovar, claiming that it was riddled with “false data” (*lažni podaci*). He argues that Serbs did not leave in the last decade, but rather that the 2021 census is a more accurate representation of the demographic situation in Vukovar. Banjeglav (2021) notes that the media speculates that Penava anticipated that the 2021 census would

In 2013, Croatia formally joined the European Union after a long process of negotiations which began in 2004. However, EU membership heralded the revival of national discourse and the return of identity disputes regarding the Croatian state. In fact, the period after Croatia's accession into the EU has been described as a "conservative revolution" (Koska and Matan 2017: 121). It appears that, once the external pressure was removed, the incentive to institutionalise constitutional promises also disappeared. As a result, the Serb National Council (hereafter SNV), the umbrella organisation of Serb cultural institutions in Croatia, has noted a trend of rising anti-Serb violence, hate speech, and revisionism since 2013 (Ponoš 2021).



Figure 7: While few, unrenovated houses bearing the shrapnel holes of the siege still remained throughout the town.

CONTEMPORARY VUKOVAR: LIVING WITH EMPTINESS

As we stood around the traditional bonfire of the Orthodox Christmas celebration on the grounds of the St. Petka Paraskeva church, Darija introduced me to several of her friends and relatives visiting Vukovar for the holidays. As we walked away, I remarked, "it seems to me that everyone in this town is just waiting for a loved one to come home." Darija, with tears in her eyes, solemnly nodded. Her own son had left Vukovar several years ago to work in Norway. The accession of Croatia into the European Union had another unwanted side-effect: the departure of the youth in search for a better future. This is particularly the case in Vukovar, where the unemployment rate

show a smaller percentage of Serbs in the city (as a result of local demographic trends) and intentionally postponed the resolution of the issue. See the following interview with Penava in 2022: <https://n1info.hr/vijesti/ovo-je-dokaz-da-je-netko-na-proslom-popisu-prikazao-lazne-podatke-u-vukovaru/#dmid=00000000-0000-0000-0000-000000000000>.

is approximately 27% (HZZ 2022). According to the 2021 census, the total population of Vukovar is approximately 23 000 citizens. While Croatia lost nearly 10% of its population in the last decade, the Vukovar-Syrmia county has lost the most amount of people, nearly 20% of its population from the last census. In fact, the city of Vukovar itself has lost 15% of its population, despite the massive number of investments that the state has provided for the symbolic city.

During my time in Vukovar, most of my interlocutors have cited the dire economic situation as the primary reason for the local exodus. During the 1990s, Croatia went through two simultaneous transitions, a shift to liberal democracy and a shift to the neo-liberal economic model. As Sokolić (2019) notes, the economic transition was marked by corruption led by an elite class of businessmen and politicians, privatising the state-owned factories and companies and enriching a small group of people. This was the fate of Vukovar's prosperous local industries, which have dramatically reduced its employment capabilities. As a result of the new regime of deserving citizenship in Croatia, war veterans have become a disproportionately influential group in civil society, carrying more political weight than trade unions (Koska and Matan 2017). Thus, while rampant unemployment has affected every Vukovarian, stable employment opportunities have become contingent on one's ethnic identity and participation in the war. Given these realities, Serbs in Vukovar do not have high chances of finding employment in what remains of the town's industrial or public sector. In fact, equal access to public sector jobs, infrastructure, and goods and services are some of the dominant issues for Croatian Serbs today (Koska and Matan 2017: 142). Consequently, local Serbs are almost exclusively employed in the private sector or by Serb institutions such as the ZVO or the local Serbian language schools. Local Croat youths are also negatively influenced by the clientelism of local political parties and the dismal economic situation. Without significant social or political connections, many young Croats are also being driven out of the town.

Furthermore, the political atmosphere in the town has become so tense that many young people—particularly the ones who had decided to date across the ethnic line (see Chapter 3 and Chapter 4)—find it insufferable. The trauma of local Vukovarians is routinely exploited by nationalist politicians, who thrive on the perpetuation of inter-ethnic tensions and the demonization of local Serbs. A former high school principal, Ivan Penava rose in the ranks of the HDZ and became mayor of Vukovar in 2014, capitalising on and bolstering the crisis created by the anti-Cyrillic riots. In 2020, he joined the newly founded far-right Homeland Movement (*Domovinski Pokret*, hereafter DP) party, becoming its president a year later. While preservation of the nation and the family are high ranking issues for the DP, it is its anti-Serb rhetoric that has become a defining factor. As a result, minority rights—such as the Cyrillic script and the divided minority language schools—are constantly at the forefront of political debate. The municipal government overtly flirts with fascist iconography in its posters for the state-sanctioned commemoration of the siege of Vukovar, while removing anti-fascist sites of memory from the local tourism board maps. In fact, Penava has declared the closure of the Serbian language schools a top priority in local politics,

sparkling concerns of employment loss, demographic decline, and assimilation for the Vukovarian Serb community. These concerns of assimilation must be understood in light of the legacy of genocide and assimilation undertaken by the Ustaša regime, which are histories that are being denied and banalized by members of the DP. As a result of these political machinations, Vukovar remains a city haunted by its recent histories of inter-ethnic violence.

In everyday life, these tensions are most visible—and affectively experienced—in the invisible but ubiquitous ethnic division of social space. I routinely asked all my young interlocutors how a space became associated with ethnicity, but none could tell me with certainty whether it was the ethnicity of the owner or the ethnicity of the clientele that was the determining factor. “When you’re from here, you just *know*,” they kept insisting, laughing at my Canadian naiveté. In reality, the ethnicization of businesses, restaurants, cafés, even entire neighbourhoods, leads to the calcification of ethnicity, making alternative—anti or post—ethnic identities not only invisible but, ultimately, unimaginable.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE LITERATURE

My dissertation has been informed by the vast scholarly literature on post-conflict and post-socialist contexts and temporalities, by contemporary studies of nationalism, as well as the literature in political anthropology on the processes of minority subject formation in modern times. My own ethnography of Serbs in Vukovar seeks to contribute to all four fields of inquiry.

First, by choosing to conduct my ethnographic analysis in Vukovar, a town defined by its traumatic experience in the War of Croatian Independence, my research builds on the literature of post-conflict studies. The fragility of post-conflict societies and the high likelihood of continued violence has been analysed through a variety of disciplinary lenses. Memory studies in particular have proliferated in their focus on this context, with Pavlaković et al. (2013; 2018; 2019) and Banjeglav (2012) exploring in depth mnemonic practises and their political function in the Croatian case. In an attempt to move beyond memory in Vukovar, my thesis fits in well with detailed ethnographies of post-conflict regions, which explore how the aftermath of wartime violence is experienced by communities on the local level in the Western Balkans (Helms 2013; Schäuble 2014; Jansen 2015; Hromadžić 2015; Baker 2010; Kurtović 2021) and elsewhere (Wilson 2001; Shaw 2007; Cobban 2006).

My focus on the Serb community in Vukovar seeks to fill a particular void in the post-conflict literature, one created by the tendency of researchers to focus on victimised groups rather than perceived perpetrators in an attempt to provide recognition of their suffering (Taylor 1997; Mookherjee 2011). While the value of recognition is undeniable, the need to complicate the dichotomy between victims and perpetrators has been highlighted by social scientists from a vast array of area studies (cf. Borer 2003; Hourmat 2016; Jankowitz 2018; Rothberg 2019). In the case of the Western Balkans, research on the experiences of Serbs during and after the war has only

begun to emerge. Most recent research has been focused on the case of Sarajevan Serbs (Golubović 2019; 2020a; 2020b) or on the reintegration of returnees (Koska and Matan 2017) and their plight in retrieving lost property (Leutloff 2002). My ethnographic focus on the everyday lives of Vukovarian Serbs, a methodologically approach requiring long-term fieldwork, has not been undertaken before.

Secondly, the case of Croatia in the context of post-socialist scholarly literature is also unique in the post-Yugoslav region, given its success in joining the European Union in 2013. Studies of post socialism in Croatia reflected wider trends in a veritable transition literature (Verdery 1996), with a focus on the failings of privatisation, corruption, and transitional justice (Leutloff 2002; Hofman 2015; Tregoures 2017; Ramet and Matić 2007; Ramet et al. 2008). Despite these shortcomings, in the period leading up to EU accession, Croatia's political leadership pressed for cooperation with the ICTY and the protection of minority rights. However, this period of liberalisation was followed by a wave of nationalism characterised by increased historical revisionism and violence against minorities once accession into the EU was achieved in 2013.

In line with Malešević (2013; 2019), this dissertation treats nationalism not as a passing or episodic phenomenon, nor as a series of “new” nationalisms, but as a durable and “grounded” social force that continues to shape modern societies. In addition to engaging with classical theories of nationalism, it also takes up contemporary approaches that examine the everyday and mundane dimensions of nationalist life. It answers the call of Hobsbawm (1991: 10) to analyse nationalism “from below, that is in terms of the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people, which are not necessarily national and still less nationalist.”

My dissertation reveals how the everyday dynamics of nationalism are made visible in Vukovar through seemingly routine arenas of life: linguistic choices that index belonging or exclusion, educational practises that naturalize division, memorial rituals that structure public space and collective memory, and gender regimes that inscribe national difference onto bodies and relations. By attending to these quotidian sites, my work demonstrates how ordinary social interactions become politically charged and how nationalism endures not only through state institutions or elite discourse but also through micro-practises that sustain collective identity. In this sense, it adds to and extends the literatures on everyday and banal nationalism (Billig 1995; Edensor 2002; Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008), highlighting the significance of the mundane in sustaining powerful nationalist projects. At the same time, my research contributes to debates on national indifference (King 2002; Judson 2006; Zahra 2008; 2010; Bjork 2008) by demonstrating the limits of indifference in contexts where ethnic belonging is relentlessly politicized and monitored. While scholarship on national indifference has emphasized the possibility of disengagement or apathy toward national identity, the Vukovar case reveals how such strategies are rendered precarious in tense post-conflict environments. Taken together, these interventions underscore the importance

of situating nationalism not only at the level of ideology, institutions, or elite discourse, but also in the texture of everyday life.

The “return” of Croatian nationalism gave rise to a literature which explores the post-EU accession period, a temporal focus contextualised not only by the post-socialist experience but also by the disenchantment with the European Union and its values. My thesis embeds itself in the literature which seeks to problematize Croatia’s transition to neoliberal democracy and the adoption of European virtues (Sokolić 2019; Blanuša 2016; Cipek 2017; Jović 2017). A large portion of this literature deals with historical revisionism, nationalism, and memory, in particular the distortion and appropriation of World War II and Holocaust memory (see Goldstein and Goldstein 2002; Cipek 2011; Goldstein 2016; Subotić 2019). My dissertation contributes to the ethnographic scholarship whose focus has zeroed in on the challenges of everyday life in the aftermath of EU accession in peripheral regions, where European values are interpreted, enacted, and challenged (Schäuble 2014).

Finally, *Enemy Minority* contributes to a growing scholarship in political anthropology which seek to complexify our understanding of the processes of production of political subjectivity in the Balkan sphere (Kurtović 2011; 2015; 2019; Razsa 2015; Jansen 2000; Gilbert 2018; Greenberg 2014) and elsewhere (Cheskin 2016). My dissertation argues that members of the Serb community in Vukovar are attempting to find their place—as individuals and as a collective—as newly minoritized subjects in contemporary Croatia while, at the same time, dealing with the stigma associated with their identities. In doing so, this dissertation challenges the prevailing narrative, amplified by dominant war discourses and party politics, which suggests that the Serb community in Croatia is exploiting its minority status and still harbours irredentist aspirations (Jović 2017: 254, cited in Sokolić 2019: 120-21).

This dissertation contributes to the literature which explores the interplay between national inclusion and exclusion, and aims to understand how the creation of ethnic and national minorities is a constitutive element of imagining the national community (see Wimmer 2002). With its focus on a minority community and the community’s attempts to regain a sense of control over their subjectivity, my research also draws on literature which problematizes multiculturalism and its management of difference (Povinelli 2002; Brown 2006; Hage 1998; Dzenovska 2018). In this light, one of my goals in this dissertation is to call into question associations of Europeanness with goodness (Hesse 2007; Mignolo 2007) which are quite common in the post-Yugoslav region (Bakić-Hayden 1995) by exploring the paradox between nationalism and cosmopolitanism. In fact, notions of Europeanness are at times strategically mobilised and at times vehemently rejected in the strategic manoeuvring I have observed in my fieldwork. I demonstrate how the minoritized subject in the peripheries of the European Union is forged and disciplined, as well as the limits of individual and collective agency to challenge the ideological mechanisms at work, namely the supremacy of the nation-state.

RESEARCH METHODS, ETHICS, AND POSITIONALITY

The majority of my fieldwork was conducted between September 2021 and December 2022, with a follow-up trip in the fall of 2024. Additionally, I spent several weeks in 2019 in Croatia preparing the terrain for my future research. During my time in Vukovar, I employed standard ethnographic research methods, including participant-observation, formal and informal interviewing, focus groups, and integration into the daily life of the Serb community. I participated in commemorations, political meetings, workshops, lectures, and seminars. I attended cultural events, film screenings, theatre performances, as well as parties and intimate gatherings. I organized a total of two focus group discussions with senior high school students in the Model A program at the Nikola Tesla Tehnička Škola in Borovo Naselje—one group of all boys and one group of all girls, each consisting of 5-6 students. I spent many afternoons drinking coffee with my interlocutors, where my usual order, *produžena sa mlekom*²³, also served as a prompt for ethnographic possibilities. My time in Vukovar also included daily analysis of media discourse—both local and regional, as well as print and broadcast—where I paid special attention not only to social and political events, but also to mundane and everyday content such as reality TV shows and cultural programs. My daily routine also included the monitoring of social media. I kept a close eye on the profiles of local NGOs, youth organisations, and political parties in order to stay up to date with events as well as discussions happening online. My ethnographic research also benefited from archival research at the National and University Library in Zagreb, where I consulted newspaper archives, as well as the Archive of Serbs in Zagreb, where I was given access to an archive of video and audio testimonies from both the 1990s and the 1940s. Both of these archives helped contextualise my ethnographic research in historical as well as regional terms.

My choice of Vukovar as the primary site of my fieldwork is based on a few key factors, including demographics, wartime experience, and the political atmosphere. According to the most recent census, the town of Vukovar has approximately 23 000 inhabitants, of which Croats make up 63,02% and Serbs make up 29,73%, the rest being undeclared or other minorities such as Ruthenians, Ukrainians, and Hungarians. Despite its plummeting statistics, the town is still the only urban centre with such a significant post-war Serb population, one which was, up until the last census, even entitled to “bilingual” plaques on public buildings. The traumatic experience of the siege, the post-siege massacre of Croats, as well as the Krajina-era discrimination against non-Serbs, makes Vukovar a site with “too much memory” (Clark 2013b) to be conducive to reconciliation between local Serbs and Croats. This is amplified by the fact that collective trauma is instrumentalized by local far-right politicians, obscuring decades of peaceful coexistence among its citizens during and before socialism. In short, there is no more complicated place to be a Serb in Croatia than in Vukovar, where neighbourhoods are integrated but cross-ethnic connections are limited, and everyday life is divided (Kardov 2002). I was initially concerned with the fact that

²³ The “Serbian” variant of ‘milk’ is *mleko*, while the “Croatian” variant is *mlijeko*. Ordering coffee in an overtly “Serbian” register immediately outed my ethnic identity to both the wait staff and my interlocutors (see Chapter 2).

Vukovar is an exceptional site in Croatia due to the magnitude of wartime violence and destruction, as well as its significant urban Serb population. I wondered how different the experience of Serbness could be in less controversial or more multicultural spaces such as Zagreb or Rijeka. However, I quickly realised that a comparative and ethnographic approach would not be feasible in the amount of time I had allotted to fieldwork because of the sensitive nature of my research questions. I accepted that a deeper dive into a singular case was worth pursuing, since Vukovar's Serb community is vastly understudied, despite the massive amount of research conducted on the town. Furthermore, the terrain of Vukovar can be difficult to penetrate, which given my positionality, I felt would be a significant contribution to our understanding of the everyday life of an enemy minority in Croatia.

Mladen, one of my key interlocutors, once told me that I always “ask such uncomfortable questions.” This moment early on in my fieldwork was an important reality check. I became painfully aware that, despite the fact that I had opted for an ethnographic approach in order to foster egalitarian and empathetic research relationships (Madison 2005; Atkinson and Hammersley 2007), I could not parachute into this tense and traumatised space and ask whatever questions came to my mind. Mladen's words make the case for slow scholarship as resistance to neoliberal temporal regimes (Mountz et al. 2015) as well as in post-conflict or vulnerable contexts (Krause 2021; Winfield 2022), where trust is built slowly and where the best tactic is to allow people to tell you things on their own accord. As a result, it was sometimes necessary to accept limited or uneven immersion in the field as a matter of ethical research strategy rather than a flaw (see Prvulović 2023). To build trust, multiple interviews were often necessary. At times, more “mobile” interview methods (Evans and Jones 2011) were more conducive to trust-building, such as interviews during walks, drives, or while completing tasks.

I made the methodological decision to focus my research exclusively on one ethnic group: Croatian Serbs. This is an unpopular approach in most sociological and anthropological research on the Western Balkans, where scholars have sought to highlight the fluidity, hybridity, or irrelevance of ethnic identity (Kolind 2008; Markowitz 2010; Čapo Žmegač 2007; Dragojević 2013). It is an even more controversial decision given that Vukovar is a location defined by the suffering of another ethnic group: local Croats. In fact, as Golubović (2020b) notes, there is a moral bias in anthropology towards narrating the experience of the victim in an effort to provide recognition. There are many non-ethnic forms of identification that are frequently used in everyday life in Vukovar—such as veterans (*branitelji*), shelter dwellers (*podrumaši*), returnees (*povratnici*), those who stayed (*ostalnici*), newcomers (*pridošlice*, *dodjoši*), and old settlers (*starosjedioci*) (Kardov 2006). These are relevant intra-ethnic categories for both Croats and Serbs, since they can indicate important social differences, such as class or political influence. However, ethnic affiliation is often implied, even if it is not always accurate, for instance: veterans and returnees are usually Croats and those who stayed are usually Serbs. Most of the scepticism toward my approach from academic colleagues was inspired by uninformed assumptions: that Croatian Serbs are comfortable

enough in Croatia to openly discuss their experiences, that Croatian Serbs reject the label of minority, or that Croatian Serbs are weaponizing victimhood in their continued irredentist aspirations.

My decision to focus exclusively on Vukovarian Serbs was strategic and deliberate, justified by conceptual as well as methodological concerns. The relatively high rate of Serb presence in Vukovar, despite the low overall rate of return to Croatia after the war, makes this community an exceptional case in Croatia. Moreover, the fact that Vukovar is the site of psychological trauma makes the stigmatised and newly minoritized Serb community a unique case study of post-conflict life as well as minority subjectivity in the Western Balkans. This perspective has been largely overlooked in the social science literature, as there is no exclusive post-war ethnographic study of the community anywhere in Croatia. This is likely the product of the stigmatisation of the Serb community and their collective label as “aggressors,” making the study of perpetrators an unpopular one in academic fields predisposed to amplify marginalised voices. It is also a consequence of the conceptual move “beyond ethnicity” by sociologists and anthropologists (see Bougarel et al. 2007), who aim to problematize essentialist discourse on ethnic identity. However, this trend also runs the risk of downplaying the continued salience of ethnicity in post-conflict spaces instead of enabling us to critically analyse how the “political fiction of the nation can crystallise, at certain moments, as a powerful compelling reality” (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 5).

Like Jansen (2002: 86), I believe that refusing to use the categories that my interlocutors recognize would be “ethnographically incorrect, theoretically uncritical, and politically disrespectful to people of all nationalities who had been victimised because of those labels.” While these categories remain entrenched, it is equally important to recognize, as evidenced in instances such as Una’s relationship with the Croat cop and in countless examples throughout my dissertation, that social life escapes political and ideological boundaries. The contradictions and fluidities of everyday interactions are often obscured from view, or de-centred in favour of the ethnic lens that dominates political discourse. For Vukovarian Serbs—and, in many cases, Croatian Serbs more broadly—the possibility of moving “beyond ethnicity” is complicated but not impossible, requiring intentionality. In the context of Vukovar, where ethnic identity continues to shape the contours of daily life, living and imagining oneself outside these entrenched categories demands a deliberate and sustained effort to challenge and transcend the framework within which they are defined.

Another important consideration in my decision to focus exclusively on Serbs was the fact that the atmosphere in Vukovar remains tense, making research on “both sides” methodologically challenging. The first few months of my fieldwork were slow; I had trouble finding willing participants and the Serb institutions were aloof, until I asked a colleague in Zagreb to make a call. While the fact that I look younger than my age and that I am a woman might have played into this, I suspect that my connection with a Canadian university made local elites suspicious of my intentions. It became evident that in order to gain access to a community that is wary of foreign

and majority population researchers, I would have to focus on building relationships. Like Golubović (2020b), I decided to make methodological use of my own legibility as a Serb in order to gain access to a terrain which would otherwise remain out of reach.

The downside to this is evident: I was only able to get small glimpses into the everyday lives of local Croats. Also, many assumptions were made about my ideological positioning, making me privy to some highly ethno-nationalist and eyebrow-raising content. However, due to my own positionality, I must admit that I am not confident in my ability to gain significant access to the highly traumatised Croat community in Vukovar. This is perhaps a project better left for someone else to undertake.

Another significant consequence of my methodological decision to focus on the Serb community and to concentrate on the “subjective, immutable, and inescapable *feeling* of ethnicity” (Golubović 2019: 15) as a social experience is the unintended reification of the identitarian angle. By selecting sites of minoritization, I recognize that this approach naturally limits the scope of the project, making my findings only one facet of a much broader, more complex social experience. While I collected data on various practical aspects of life in Vukovar—such as how people secure their livelihoods, make decisions about whether to stay or leave, and envision their futures—I observed that these decisions were often at least partially shaped by ethnic identity. Employment opportunities, for instance, are significantly constrained by ethnic belonging—Serbs may find it harder to access work in the public sector because ethnic quotas are not respected, and prejudice is prevalent. A young Serb told me that he wanted to leave for Germany because he did not want to be “a stranger in his own country.” Similarly, decisions about education—whether to attend university in Serbia or Croatia—are partially influenced by ethnicity, since many anticipate experiencing less discrimination in Serbia. This is not to claim that ethnic identity alone defines every aspect of Serb life, but rather that it is a critical lens through which many of these decisions are filtered. I wanted to understand how the pervasiveness of ethnicity in the everyday came to be, despite numerous examples from my fieldwork that highlighted grey and complex areas of social life. As a result, this dissertation moves through topics like historical memory, language politics, minority schools, youth violence, and political education programs in order to gain a deeper understanding of the social and political framework which limits manoeuvring space.

When I arrived in Vukovar, I had only one phone number in hand: the sister of a friend of a friend of my partner. Thus, my recruitment process was a quintessential and very slow snowball method. Due to the fraught nature of the ethnographic terrain, it was difficult to initially find participants who would be willing to trust me to protect their identities or to faithfully tell their stories. Most ordinary people were afraid of getting into trouble at work—particularly those who worked for or with Croats, as well as those who worked for Serb institutions. My interviews typically came about when interlocutors shared my contact information with others who might be interested in speaking with me. Once I became more established in the community, this process grew easier. With these

concerns in mind, I approached my fieldwork from a few different directions: through Serb institutions, political organisations, the church, NGOs, as well as through the community. Due to my attempt to prioritise young and non-expert participants, I leaned most on the snowball method and the contacts I was able to make within the community.

Despite these challenges, I was able to speak to a wide variety of people. Almost all of them were in the age category I was most interested in: under the age of fifty. I credit this to the fact that Vukovar, unlike any other urban centre in Croatia, has a significant Serb population. I prioritised younger participants because I assumed that older participants would have less of an incentive to carefully negotiate their stigmatised identities. Many of my interviewees wanted their story told, whether it was because they felt it would otherwise go unheard or because they wanted to put into perspective the stories others had told me. In fact, many of them were immensely critical of the local Serb political representatives and the community itself.

At times, I wondered about the ethics of conducting ethnographic research in such a tense context. More specifically, I wondered whether participants truly understood what it meant—or even wanted—to participate in my research, or whether they were weaving me into the local economy of favours by agreeing to speak to me as a way of repaying a debt to a friend or colleague. On one occasion, a person I was interviewing implied that our mutual contact had really leaned on them in order to make the interview happen (something I was not aware of), and then proceeded to evade my questions or feed me the party line. I was only able to recognize this because, after a year in the field, I had become attuned to the political spin on current issues. Despite the evasiveness, I kept the interview in my database, as it provided a rare insight into the strategic manoeuvrings that Serbs in Vukovar experience daily.

Indeed, issues of safety and ethics were at the forefront of my thoughts throughout my stay in Vukovar. All of my participants asked me to carefully anonymise their identity, stressing that they were living in a small community in a small town where everybody knew each other. As a result, not only have I changed the names of everyone who participated in my research, I have taken other measures such as changing their residence, at times their gender identity, and at times combining stories under one narrative. All of the vignettes have been reconstructed from memory or from ethnographic notes, purposely omitting turns of phrase or speech forms which could be associated with a single person. This is also the reason I encouraged my participants to choose where we would have the interview. More often than not, they chose Serb-owned cafés (*kafići*) such as *Maritimo* and *Mornar* in Vukovar or *Living* and *Display* in Borovo Naselje. On a few occasions, my interviewees chose what they deemed to be a “neutral” or “alternative” space, such as the café *Kibic Fenster*, hotel *Lav*, or a café in the mall of *Golubica*.

My ethnographic research is inextricably shaped by my own positionality as a child born during the War of Croatian Independence, and as a diasporic, Canadian-trained scholar. I was born in

Sombor, Serbia, in 1993, at a time when my family resided in Beli Manastir—a small town in north-eastern Croatia, which was then part of the RSK. Due to the frontlines cutting off access to Osijek’s maternity hospital, many women from Beli Manastir, including my mother, were taken across the border to give birth in Sombor. Due to the poor condition of the roads, and the carelessness of the ambulance driver, my mother nearly gave birth to me on the border between Croatia and Serbia, which, I believe, would have been a much more symbolic representation of my complicated ethnic and religious background.

My father was a Catholic, the son of a mixed (*mješan/mešan*)²⁴ Serb-Croat marriage, and my mother is an Orthodox Serb. Both of my grandfathers were communists who migrated from Serbia, while both of my grandmothers—one Serb, one Croat—are autochthonous to Croatia. My maternal grandmother’s family joined the communist resistance during World War II and fled into the forests of Lika, finally settling in an ethnically cleansed German village in Vojvodina in 1946. Meanwhile, my paternal grandmother’s family fed the German and Ustaša soldiers—a history that contributed to her lifelong obsession with Germany and led her to adopt the word *Oma* (affectionately *Omama*) as her preferred title of grandmother. During my fieldwork, my paternal grandfather passed away, and it was not until his burial—in the Catholic cemetery of Beli Manastir—that I discovered that he had converted to Catholicism in the 1950s. In short, a generational tangle so Balkan it could serve as a case study in Yugoslav complexity... and comedy!

My parents decided to apply for asylum in Canada shortly after the end of the Peaceful Reintegration, when my father—and every other “Serb” employee at his firm—was fired.²⁵ While my name, surname, and speech make me immediately “read” as Serb, it is my father’s decision to fight for the Serb side during the war that cements into place my ethnicity as well as my perceived immorality in Croatia. As Drakulić (1993: 52) once said about nationhood, “there is no escape; there is nothing else to wear.”

I have often wondered what my life would have been like if my family had never left Croatia. In a roundabout way, this dissertation is an attempt to answer this enduring personal question.

OUTLINE OF THE CHAPTERS

Enemy Minority consists of five chapters. The first chapter of the dissertation, “‘A Victim is a Victim But...’ The Politics of Memory and (Un)Grievability” examines the commemorative

²⁴ As Hromadžić (2015: 90) has argued, the trouble with the discourse of mixing is the implication that “real” and “substantial identities” must be mixing, thus reifying categories which are the product of the violent ethno-nationalist imaginary. More than that, the discourse of mixing in academia participates in the romanticization of the multicultural Balkan landscape, instead of adopting an approach which properly accounts for the complexities on the ground.

²⁵ As Bell-Fialkoff (1993) reminds us, the line which separates “voluntary” refugees from those who have been ethnically cleansed has become increasingly thin. This is perhaps because ethnic cleansing is increasingly being reconceptualized as a process rather than as singular events (Jenne 2016).

practises of Vukovarian Serbs, focusing on how they navigate the politics of memory in post-war Vukovar. It analyses the November 17th commemoration, organized by Serbs as a counter-memorial to the state-sanctioned November 18th event, as an effort to assert their victimhood and secure ontological security in the context of their minoritization. These commemorations are framed as apolitical, strategically avoiding overt political claims to mitigate further tension. The chapter also explores the newly erected monument in the courtyard of the Serbian Orthodox Church, highlighting its role in asserting Serb memory in a town where their narrative has been obscured. Further, it examines the antifascist commemoration at Dudik Memorial Park, where local Serb elites craft antifascist self-narratives to challenge their portrayal as an enemy minority. Through ethnographic accounts, the chapter shows how both Serb elites and ordinary individuals engage in diverse—at times subtle and measured—acts of remembrance. Ultimately, the chapter argues that these counter-memorials and mnemonic practises serve as a means to challenge the dominant Croatian national memory and redefine Serb identity, reinforcing their ontological security within the fractured political and social landscape of post-war Vukovar.

Chapter 2, “‘It’s Not Scary At All, You Just Have to Learn the Rules:’ *Čisti Hrvatski* as a Language Ideology” provides a perspective on local linguistic practises. It examines how minority subjectivities are shaped through linguistic performances, challenging the notion of a stable minority identity and the nation-language nexus. It argues that racio-linguistic ideologies (Rosa & Flores 2017) assign meaning to linguistic forms, making “pure Croatian” (*čisti hrvatski*) a violent language ideology that links linguistic purity to morality. I examine how minoritised individuals navigate complex ethnic and social boundaries through language, shaping their identities in the process. I show how local Serbs embody exemplary, shifty, and unruly minority subjectivities by performing hegemonic language forms in public, manipulating language to remain ethnically ambiguous, or refusing to “speak like a Croat” altogether. At the same time, their linguistic practices often reinforce nationalist ideals about language. Ultimately, I demonstrate that linguistic practices are deeply embedded in local power dynamics and identity formation processes, offering a new perspective on language as a tool for negotiation in post-conflict spaces.

The chapter on language provides the necessary conceptual framework to understand the political relevance of the minority language schools in Vukovar. The third chapter, “‘It’s Not About Cyrillic, This Is About Dignity:’ The Politics of Minority Education,” explores the “divided” educational system in Vukovar, specifically focusing on the “Serbian” language Model A programs. These programs are a direct result of the ethnic divisions in the post-conflict context, where schools are structured to separate students along ethnic lines. The chapter discusses how the educational system in Vukovar actively reproduces ethnic nationalism and divisions, institutionalizing segregation through policies and spatial arrangements. It highlights the role of Serb elites in maintaining these divisions, using minority language education as a means of preserving cultural identity while simultaneously exercising political control. Teachers in the Model A programs navigate the tension between state-imposed nationalist narratives and the need

to protect their students' identities, employing subversive pedagogical methods to counteract Croatian nationalist messages in the curriculum. The chapter also examines how students experience these divisions, with many feeling the weight of ethnic segregation in their daily lives. It argues that the divided schools emerge as arenas of tension, acting as both shields of minority identities but also as mechanisms of socialization that reinforce ethnic boundaries. Ultimately, the chapter shows how these schools perpetuate inter-ethnic division while fostering resistance within the Serb community, shaping students' subjectivities and their understanding of national belonging.

The fourth chapter, “‘The Violent State of Croatia’: Gendered Life in a Divided City”, analyses the enduring legacy of violence in Vukovar, following the Croatian War of Independence. It examines how a “continuum of violence” (Cockburn 2004) persists in everyday life, manifested through inter-ethnic street clashes, nationalist rhetoric, and gendered aggression, despite the official end of the war. By employing a feminist lens, the chapter argues that violence is not only physical but is deeply embedded in the social, political, and economic structures, leading to a crisis of masculinity and the marginalization of ethnic minorities—particularly Serbs. The chapter highlights the experience of young Serb men, who navigate ethnic identity, masculinity, and the constant threat of violence. It also looks at the role of fan groups, like the Bad Blue Boys (BBB), in perpetuating nationalist violence and shaping identities. Additionally, it explores the often-overlooked experiences of Serb women, who face the dual challenge of balancing ethnic loyalty with gender expectations in a post-conflict society. Challenging the idea of “peace” as merely the absence of war, the study reveals that Vukovar’s tensions continue to shape its community dynamics. The chapter critiques local peacebuilding efforts, arguing that the cessation of armed conflict does not address the ongoing cycles of violence, trauma, and power imbalances in the community.

The last chapter, “‘Like Horns in a Bag’: The Politička Akademija and the Struggle for a Future,” looks at the Serbian National Council’s Political Academy (hereafter Politička Akademija), a program for young Serbs in Croatia that aims to shape their political and cultural identities in the post-conflict and post-socialist context. It examines the ideological divisions within the Croatian Serb community, highlighting the tension between liberal and nationalist factions. While the Akademija aims to foster a “good Serb” identity aligned with liberal democratic values and European integration, it often clashes with participants’ diverse backgrounds and personal ambitions. For the program’s elite organizers, the fear of losing national identity in Croatian society drives efforts for integration without assimilation. However, the greater fear for young Serbs is futurelessness—the uncertainty of a secure future. The chapter argues that the Akademija functions as a technology of subject formation, creating a liberal minority subject, but often falling short due to the mismatch with participants’ aspirations and values. In a broader context, the chapter critiques the assumption that European integration will automatically improve minority rights, arguing that it offers no guarantee of social integration or equal opportunity. Ultimately,

the Akademija becomes a space for negotiating identities and grappling with the realities of marginalization and uncertainty for young Serbs.

The dissertation closes with a reflection on the intricate political and social terrain in Vukovar, shaped by enduring ethnic tensions in the aftermath of conflict, and ongoing struggles for identity and inclusion. By exploring the 2024 anti-violence protest, the rhetoric of its organizers, and the heartfelt accounts from the family of the victims, I argue that, while nationalist legacies continue to heavily influence the region's dynamics, unexpected moments of solidarity and collective action highlight the possibility for change in a deeply divided community.

CHAPTER 1:
“A VICTIM IS A VICTIM BUT...”
THE POLITICS OF MEMORY AND (UN)GRIEVABILITY

“In the name of the present, a war was waged for the past; in
the name of the future, a war against the present.”
—Dubravka Ugrešić

When November 18th²⁶ comes around, this small, quiet town comes alive with the arrival of thousands of mourners from across the country. Chaos ensues as the newcomers park haphazardly, creating traffic jams that bring the town to a standstill. The patriots (*domoljubi*) gather at the Vukovar Memorial Hospital, where they are joined by the heads of state and local politicians, forming a large commemorative procession (*kolona sjećanja*) that overflows onto the road, making its way through the town to the Vukovar Memorial Cemetery. This 5.5 km journey, known as “the Way of the Cross” (*križni put*),²⁷ mimics the route taken by civilian Croats who were evacuated by the JNA and Serbian paramilitaries after months of hiding in their basements. At the cemetery, a state-sponsored Catholic mass is held, and the entire event is televised live. As Banjeglav (2012) notes, it is assumed that all the victims of the siege and their families are Catholic.

Due to its tragic history, Vukovar has been transformed from a geographical site into a symbol of the creation of the Croatian nation. It no longer belongs solely to the people who inhabit it but holds immense significance for all Croats across the country (Kardov 2006b).²⁸ The veneration of Vukovar has become so integral to the Croatian national narrative that it is nearly impossible to speak of the town without a sense of, “innate reverence” (Schellenberg 2015: 19). Recently, Vukovar was officially designated a “place of special patriotic piety” (*mjesto posebne domovinskog pijeteta*),²⁹ cementing its status as a national moral location. Kardov (2006b: 65) highlights that Croatian national discourse has been embedded with concepts such as, “the

²⁶ In Croatia, this date is better known as the Day of Remembrance for the Victims of the Homeland War and the Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Vukovar and Škabrnja (*Dan sjećanja na žrtve Domovinskog rata i Dan sjećanja na žrtvu Vukovara i Škabrnje*). It marks the end of the siege of Vukovar in 1991 and has become the single most important national commemorative holiday across Croatia.

²⁷ This is a direct reference to the *Via Dolorosa* and an attempt to convey biblical symbolism and Christ-like victimhood to the Croatian nation (Žanić 2007). It should also be noted that the same symbolic language is used by the far-right in Croatia to denote the death march and mass killing of Croat fascists by the communist resistance at the end of WWII near the town of Bleiburg. The yearly commemoration—an orgy of fascist symbols—produced the “biggest gathering of fascists in Europe” until the Austrian government banned the event in 2021 (Pavlaković et al. 2018: 29).

²⁸ After the siege, Croats from across the state weighed in on the future fate of the crumbling town, some even suggesting that it should not be rebuilt but rather turned into a monument, as a symbol of Croatian suffering. At the same time, a roundtable on Serbian television advocated for the reconstruction of Vukovar in the “Byzantine style” to indicate its “Serbian identity” (Povržanović 1993 cited in Baillie 2013a). To the relief of all Vukovarians, the government chose to invest heavily into the reconstruction of the town as it was before the siege. Despite this being an inequitable process for local Serbs (Kardov 2006a) the town is, at this point, almost completely reconstructed.

²⁹ In his article “*Jebo Vas Vukovar*” (Fuck You and [Your] Vukovar), the antifascist Croat journalist Boris Dežulović criticized the growing instrumentalization of the destruction of Vukovar for nationalist purposes at the cost of the quality of life of its citizens. He was (unsuccessfully) sued by various citizens for inciting hatred.

principle of Vukovar,” “spirituality of Vukovar,” and “Vukovar ethics”. Research by Kardov (2006a; 2006b), Baillie (2012; 2013a; 2013b), Clark (2012) and Banjeglav (2019) shows a town divided by conflicting memories, where memorials and commemorative events serve as both physical and symbolic boundary markers. The academic community has also closely examined the commemorative practices and monuments of Vukovar (Kardov 2006a; 2006b; Baillie 2013a; 2013b; 2019; Naef 2013; Clark 2012; Schellenberg 2015; Zorko 2020; Banjeglav 2021). However, much of the literature overlooks the presence of fascist symbols at the commemorative events and the involvement of far-right Croatian figures (Figure 9). My own experience attending in 2021 was especially uncomfortable due to sightings of World War II-era fascist Croatian flags and symbols in the crowd, carried by civilians, as well as my close encounter with Velimir Bujanec, a far-right figure known for historical revisionism and genocide denial (Figure 8).



Figure 8: Velimir Bujanec stands in the *kolona sjećanja*, his hands clasped in front of him. Behind him, someone is holding a fascist WWII-era NDH flag.

Most Vukovarian Serbs do not participate in these commemorations. Many view the memorial sites and associated rituals as part of a “patriotic landscape” where only Croatian narratives are expressed and honoured (Daniels 1993: 5, cited in Baillie 2012). As a result, Vukovarian Serbs “have fallen into a black hole,” and have no state-sanctioned way to grieve their own dead from the siege (Kaiser 1994, cited in Baillie 2013b: 121). Ostracized from official memory and, consequently, the national imaginary, Vukovarian Serbs choose to either stay at home or leave town altogether during these events. For many, the stigma of being a Serb is too much to bear during this period. As one of my interlocutors put it, “there is another Serb colleague at my school

who jokes about how, whenever November comes around, she sees a beard on her face and a knife between her teeth every time that she looks into the mirror!”³⁰



Figure 9: A WWII-era fascist NDH flag is visible in the *kolona sjećanja* (commemorative procession) that stretches all the way down the street.

While the absence of Serbs from commemorations has been well-documented (Kardov 2006b; Clark 2012; Schellenberg 2015), the question of whether Serb presence is wanted or unwanted remains a controversial topic among Croat organizers and participants.³¹ I could not help but wonder how Serbs feel during this time, and what was actually going on behind that “occasional curtain twitch” (Clark 2012: 132) as their Croat neighbours solemnly march through the streets carrying candles. What is it like to be a Serb in Vukovar on, and in the days leading up, to November 18th? How do Serbs engage in counter-remembrance and commemorate “their” victims? And, perhaps most importantly, what meaning do they attach to these practises, and what purpose do they serve?

Memory studies, known for its interdisciplinary nature, has traditionally focused on collective memory within the context of the nation-state, analysing it as a tool for reifying imagined communities (Halbwachs 1980; Smith 1995). While these studies often focus on a single nation-

³⁰ The description of the beard and the knife is a reference to the appearance of Chetniks, whose physical appearance was often characterized by a rugged, militaristic demeanour, with many members sporting shaggy facial hair and moustaches.

³¹ In the words of Domagoj Zovak, an antifascist Croat journalist, it seems that we have a case of “Schrödinger’s Serbs,” simultaneously wanted and unwanted at Croatian commemorations. See: https://youtu.be/YM--H017xc?si=Mrdmainzzucydc_n.

state's efforts to forge national memory, there has recently been an emerging trend to analyse the impact of globalization on collective memory (Assmann and Conrad 2010). These studies analyse transnational networks, NGOs, and the international community, emphasising “cosmopolitan memory” which transcends the nation-state (Levy and Sznajder 2002). While my study focuses on national-level commemorative practises, it centres on the subversion of hegemonic national memory by national minorities. It joins other studies of counter-memory practices of communities who, despite remaining in the framework of the nation-state, are making demands for representation (Khalili 2007; Doss 2010; Alderman 2010; Rose-Redwood et al. 2018).

During my time in Vukovar, I observed both collective, organized efforts to reclaim suppressed histories and personal, individual acts of commemoration. I argue that these diverse mnemonic practises and narratives reveal how Vukovarian Serbs seek to cultivate ontological security at both the collective and individual levels (Giddens 1991). Nation-states themselves pursue ontological security by stabilizing national narratives (see Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi 2020), but enemy minorities unsettle this process because their counter-memories challenge the nation-state's story of the self. The concept of the enemy minority thus offers a way of understanding not only how the Croatian state experiences Croatian Serbs as a threat, but also how Vukovarian Serbs negotiate their own precarious subjectivities within this hostile symbolic order. In the context of Vukovar and its “moral economy” (Golubović 2019), local Serbs work to reconstitute their collective and individual narratives by rejecting imposed labels of “aggressors” and “bearers of collective guilt.” Instead, they position themselves as antifascists, patriots, and victims in their own right—efforts that address their own ontological anxieties but do so without breaking from the nation as the dominant frame of recognition.

In this chapter, I begin by giving an ethnographic account of November 17th, one of the most controversial commemorative events organized by the Croatian Serbs. I follow with an analysis of November 17th as a mnemonic practice by discussing its function as a counter-commemoration, the narrative it seeks to convey, and the intricacies of the site itself. Then, I explore the concept of “ungrievability” (Butler 2004; 2020), examining how Serbs, as complex political victims, are not grievable subjects in the context of the local moral economy of victimhood. By analysing the newly erected monument in the courtyard of the Serbian Orthodox church, I demonstrate the rigidity of the nation-state framework in local Serbs' mnemonic practices. This is followed by a discussion of the concept of “resistance” as it relates to the practises of Serb elites, who use an apolitical framing to navigate marginalization and assert victimhood, and an exploration of the practises of ordinary Vukovarian Serbs, who engage in diverse and subtle mnemonic practices. I conclude the chapter by giving an ethnographic account of the antifascist commemoration at the Dudik Memorial Park in order to analyse the antifascist self-narratives being constructed by local Serb elites.

17. NOVEMBAR/18. STUDENI³²:

On November 17th, 2022, I hurried down Ukrajinska street, passing the old Serbian Orthodox cemetery and making my way toward some unkempt hedges on the left side of the road. Just then, Slaviša emerged from the shrubbery, greeting me nervously, giving the impression that he had better things to attend to on a Thursday morning. We were joined by a solemn Svetozar, and together the three of us entered the Aleja cemetery through a narrow gap in the overgrown hedge.

The controversial cemetery, derogatorily referred to as the cemetery of *šajkača*³³, consisted of two parallel rows of stark white marble tombstones, each inscribed with the names of Serb soldiers buried there. Originally ornamented with *šajkača* hats, the tombstones had been remodelled after the return of Croat refugees. A circular cement pathway connected the two rows, with a large white marble cross at its centre. The cross stood without any inscription, making its commemorative meaning unclear to any outsider. The only hint came from a red, blue and white ribbon on a flower wreath leaning against it, with the words “in memory of the war victims” written in Cyrillic. Purposely ambiguous, I thought to myself. The grass had freshly been mowed, and an elderly lady was fussing over one of the graves, cursing to herself about how she had just cleaned it, only for it to be dirtied once again.

We were joined at the centre of the cemetery by Dušan, another party member, and a middle aged woman I had not seen before. They greeted us stiffly and distributed the beeswax candles among us.

Dragana: “Will the politicians from Zagreb be joining us here?”

Svetozar: “No. The Zagrebians never come here. Pupovac will go to the Danube today, then to Ovčara, then we will all meet at the Church of St. Nicholas.”

Dušan: “A victim is a victim but... (*žrtva je žrtva ali*) they never come here.”

The phrase “a victim is a victim, but...” (*žrtva je žrtva, ali...*), was repeatedly echoed to me throughout my time in Vukovar and appears several times in this chapter. On the surface, it seemed like a mindless refrain, meant to emphasize that all victims of the siege should be respected and mourned, regardless of their ethnic background—as if it were the moral thing to say. However, it became clear, time and again, that ethnicity played a significant role in how victimhood and recognition are perceived. In Vukovar, the symbolic heart of Croatia, even the dead cannot escape ethnic ethnicization.

³² In “Croatian,” the month of November is called *studen*, while in “Serbian” it is called *novembar*. In order to illustrate the division of local memory, I have also highlighted the linguistic difference in naming the commemorative month of November. For more on local linguistic practices and divisions, see Chapter 2.

³³ The *šajkača*, a hat which was historically part of the Serbian military uniform, has since WWI been worn by many elderly Serbs, particularly in rural Serbia. In Croatia, and particularly since the 1990s, the hat is exclusively associated with *Četniks* since many Serbian paramilitaries who committed atrocities in the 1990s proudly wore the same hat.



Figure 10: The November 17 commemoration at the Aleja Cemetery.

After some casual chit-chat, they began the ceremonial walk around the cemetery, circling it three times while quietly whispering among themselves. As they walked, I noticed a man busying himself with work in his backyard, which was adjacent to the cemetery. In fact, the cemetery, illegally built in the 1990s, sits on private property belonging to the surrounding homes. The neighbour, however, went about his business, completely ignoring the commemoration taking place just meters away. As the five Serbs stood before the cross, their heads bowed in silence, life carried on all around them as if nothing was happening: cars drove by, people walked their dogs, and neighbours tended to their yards (Figure 10). I also spotted a police car parked by the entrance of the cemetery, quietly waiting in the shade for the ceremony to end. Just in case, I thought. Yet, it remained unclear whether its presence was meant to be reassuring or threatening.

During my sixteen months of fieldwork in Vukovar, I discovered several commemorative events organized by the Serb community, far more than I had ever anticipated to uncover, or gain access to.³⁴ Given their controversial nature within Croatian society, these events are often tense, secretive, and hurried. Today's November 17th commemoration has its roots in the RSK period, when it was celebrated on November 18th. While Vukovar was still under Krajina control, and throughout the Peaceful Reintegration period, November 18th was *celebrated* as a day of liberation (*oslobođenje*). The commemoration for those killed in the siege was just one part of this celebratory day and was widely attended by the predominantly Serb local population (Žanić 2007).

³⁴ The most important Serb-led commemorative events in Vukovar are St. Vitus' Day (*Vidovdan*) on June 28th, the Serbian Orthodox ceremony of the dead (*parastos*) on the second Saturday of September, and the commemoration on November 17th.

However, starting in 1997, as Croat refugees began returning and the demographic landscape shifted, the Serb-led November 18th commemoration gradually lost prominence, becoming eclipsed by the Croat-led events on the same day. As local Serbs became increasingly politically disempowered, continuing to mark November 18th in the same way became logistically challenging, socially unacceptable, and even dangerous. Consequently, the Serb-led commemoration was moved to November 17th, maintaining the same rituals at the same location, but shifting in tone from celebratory to mournful.

Political representatives of the Serb community have traditionally been expected to join their Croat neighbours in the state-sanctioned November 18th commemorations. As Banjeglav (2012) notes, there have been several instances of Croatian Serb politicians, Serbian politicians, and prominent Serbian civil society figures participating, often with the goal of fostering rapprochement. However, in recent years, Milorad Pupovac has boycotted the November 18th commemoration due to the increasingly intolerant political climate in Croatia.³⁵ Instead, Pupovac—along with other high profile Serb elites from Zagreb—now comes to Vukovar on November 17th. They lay wreaths for both Serb and Croat civilian victims at the Danube and, for Croat victims, at Ovčara Farm, before lighting candles at the St. Nicholas Orthodox Church for all victims of the war and the siege of Vukovar.³⁶

However, local Vukovarian Serb political representatives refuse to join the Zagrebian Serbs during these commemorations. Instead, they quietly make their way to the Aleja cemetery, and later join the Zagreb delegation for the candle lighting at St. Nicholas and the subsequent press conference. This parallel commemoration on November 17th, along with others like it, highlights the deep ideological divide between the Zagreb and the Vukovar factions of the SDSS. While the Zagreb-based members are willing to commemorate Croat victims of the siege, the Vukovarian locals, like the elderly woman in the vignette, consider attending the Ovčara memorial in this political climate to be offensive and completely out of the question.³⁷ Some party members have, on several occasions, expressed frustration with their Zagrebian counterparts, arguing that life as minorities in a large, multicultural city is far easier than it is for Serbs living in Vukovar.

THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

According to Ashplant et al. (2000), “sectional memories,” like those commemorated on November 17th, are not acknowledged by the hegemonic national narrative but still gain

³⁵ While I was in the field, Milorad Pupovac was the president of both SNV and SDSS.

³⁶ The Danube has been symbolically incorporated into many of the Serb-led commemorations. Given that most of the bodies of the Serb victims of the violence preceding the siege were never found, it is presumed that they have been dumped into the river. However, there are also many Croat victims of the siege whose remains were never located, making the issue of missing persons a continuously painful aspect of the Vukovar tragedy.

³⁷ For some Vukovarian Serbs, the commemoration of Croat soldiers—even if they were executed prisoners of war—is deemed offensive due to their responsibility for the death of local Serbs, soldiers and civilians alike. Others find it acceptable, but not in the current political climate. For the local Serb political elites, however, attendance at Ovčara appears to be a bargaining chip that is carefully negotiated.

significance as they undergo similar processes of remembering and forgetting. These memories take on cultural and political forms, becoming counter-narratives in their own right. Social science research on these fascinating formulations of “counter-memory” has been abundant, particularly in marginalized and minoritized groups (see Ashplant et al. 2000; Legg 2005; Sindbæk Anderson & Törnquist-Plewa 2016). A concept introduced by Foucault (1977: 160), “counter-memory,” challenges the traditional notion of history as knowledge and emphasizes the need to question the power relations underlying the production of any “memory” (Davis & Starn 1989: 2). As such, counter-memory is often *counter to* (often national) memory. It is conceptualized as a radical act, involving “the collective practice of relearning, which in turn becomes an act of political subjectification” (Demos 2012: n.p.). In this way, counter-memory serves to recover the historiography of the forgotten and the vanquished.

It is problematic to assume that counter-memory is always radical or inherently opposed to national memory. It is often mistakenly seen as authentic and separate from hegemonic forms (Olick and Robbins 1998). To challenge this, scholars have introduced concepts such as “popular memory,” defining it as a process of “ongoing contestation and resistance” (Johnson et al. 1982, Lipsitz 1990, and Wallace 1996 cited in Olick and Robbins 1998). To account for the complexity of memory in the global context, Tello (2022: 391) suggests reconceptualizing counter-memory from an us/them to an and/and formula, embracing the “irreducible too-muchness” of modernity. However, in Vukovar, commemorations remain deeply divided along us/them lines, where individuals are expected to align with one national narrative or another. And it is doubtful whether the commemorations performed by the Serb elites on November 17th ought to be understood as ideologically different from the hegemonic narrative they challenge, and if they can then be perceived as “counter-memory.” Therefore, it is more important to examine the claims and demands that the organizers are making through these commemorations. What are they actually counter to and what narrative do they privilege?

There is a clear connection between identity construction, social memory, and mnemonic practices. Hall (quoted in Huyssen 1995: 1) explains that, “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves in, the narratives of the past.” To understand the social aspect of identity construction through memory, Halbwachs (1980) introduced the concept of “collective memory,” arguing that individuals cannot properly remember outside of a group context. Building on this, Zerubavel (1996: 286) argued that “mnemonic socialization” is a process governed by, “social rules of remembrance that tell us quite specifically what we should remember and what we can or must forget.” Given the epistemological dominance of nation-states, it is no surprise that individuals often feel deep pride or shame tied to the nation, even regarding events that predate their own involvement.

The November 17th commemoration organized by Vukovarian Serbs, which seeks to elevate Serb victims of the conflict alongside Croat victims, does not challenge the hegemony of the nation-

state or the mnemonic frameworks it creates. Instead, it reifies both the Serb nation and the Croatian nation-state, within which Serbs exist as a minority. Instead of *dismantling* the dominant narrative, the commemoration seeks to *alter* it. In other words, the Serb-led commemorations serve the same nation-building purpose as their Croat counterpart; they are also building a narrative about the community by mobilizing collective memory of victimhood. As Schäuble (2014: 11) notes, “local narratives of (self-)victimization are strategies of empowerment and expressions of the attempt to have a say in the determination of official historiography.” Therefore, it is important to recognize that (re)building narratives serve not only as a means of seeking collective ontological security, but also as a means for empowerment and survival. However, since the process of rewriting these narratives is dynamic and contested—evidenced by the dispute between the Zagrebian and Vukovarian SDSSers—it is not surprising that some narratives can be frequently mobilized for nationalist propaganda.

This chapter focuses on mnemonic narratives, but it also aims to analyse the mnemonic practices associated with them. The sites selected for these practices, or *lieux de mémoire* (Nora 1984), are never arbitrary or devoid of meaning. According to Nora (1984), these sites are able to elicit emotional and embodied responses, themselves becoming emblemized with memories of the nation. Vukovarian Serbs are organising commemorations at various locations—some religious, others more symbolic—but the Aleja cemetery remains a constant, despite its controversial nature. The Aleja cemetery holds different mnemonic associations for Croats and for Serbs. For Croats, it is primarily associated with the razed Croat-owned houses that once stood on the site, serving as a constant reminder of the ethnic cleansing of non-Serbs during the time of RSK (Kardov 2006b: 87). The fact that the white marble tombstones were once adorned with *šajkače* further evokes memories of Serb historical hegemony and violence. For Vukovarian Serbs, however, the Aleja cemetery is the only site in town where the memory of Serb victims is still acknowledged (Banjeglav 2019: 197). After the Peaceful Reintegration and the return of Croat refugees, many offending RSK-era monuments around town, deemed too controversial, were relegated to a corner of the Orthodox cemetery in Borovo Selo, a neighbouring Serb village, creating what has been called a “graveyard of memorials” (Baillie 2013b: 120).

The fact that the most important Serb-led commemorations of war victims take place in a cemetery is not surprising, given the “necrophilic” (Verdery 1999) obsession with and competition over the numbers of the dead that has shaped both socialist and post-socialist Yugoslavia (see Denich 1994; Hayden 1994; Schäuble 2014). Verdery (1999: 20) argues that politicized dead bodies can reposition entire social categories and become tied to specific sets of values. The ongoing process of grieving serves a political function: mourners instil affective meaning into sites, thereby lending legitimacy to the ontological narratives being constructed.³⁸ Elites who seek to mobilize affect in

³⁸ The fact that the other major Serb-led commemoration is held on June 28th, St. Vitus Day (*Vidovdan*), the single most important national holiday for the Serb national identity, is telling of the political narrative being actively constructed. The elites are connecting the suffering of the Serb victims of the siege of 1991 to the nationalist narrative

order to reshape historical narratives understand the symbolic power of dead bodies, due to their traditional association with the sacred and the cosmic (Verdery 1999: 32). And while the fact that Serb civilians were also killed during the siege is a narrative intentionally obscured by right-wing politicians in Croatia, Serb politicians in Vukovar argue that their mnemonic practices are apolitical, in contrast to what they perceive as the political appropriation of the dead by their Croat neighbours. This apolitical framing is analysed further in this chapter, since there is deliberate political significance and purpose in these commemorations.

THE UNGRIEVABILITY OF SERB-NESS

The few Serb-commissioned monuments in Vukovar reflect not only a sense of tension, but they also embody a deliberate ambiguity and strategic caution which can be interpreted as an attempt to navigate complex political and historical sensitivities. Consider, for instance, the unengraved marble cross at the centre of the Aleja cemetery. There is no indication, either etched in stone or otherwise, of who the monument is meant to honour, nor is this clarified during the November 17th commemoration. The only clues are the Cyrillic lettering on the tombstones³⁹ and the dates of death, ranging from 1991 to 1995. The fact that all the buried are men suggests that these were Serb soldiers who died defending the RSK, a Serb national project, marking them as military victims—victims who are, in contemporary Croatia, deemed ungrievable. The ambiguity persisted even in private conversations and interviews with organizers of the event. For instance, I struggled to get Svetozar to directly tell me who was being commemorated on November 17th. Consider the following exchange:

Dragana: “But you already have moved what you were doing on [November] 18th to [the parastos in] September. So why still maintain November 17th? Is it because...”

Svetozar: “No. This is not maintained. It isn’t organized. They come without... so, there is no announcement, people simply gather. This is a tradition that has remained and this is something that, in the end, shouldn’t be lost. Families of the victims are the ones who lay a wreath with us and remember their victims.”

Dragana: “Is this still for the Serb civilian victims who are invisible [in the Croatian national narrative]?”

Svetozar: “This is for all the victims who...”

Dragana: “*All?*”

Svetozar, barely above a whisper: “Yes, all the victims.”

of Serb victimhood since 1389 at the hands of the Ottomans. The Vidovdan commemoration is clearly designated for *civilian* Serb victims.

³⁹ The Cyrillic alphabet is an indication of irrefutable Serb-ness in the Croatian context, an issue I will explore further in Chapter 2.

Svetozar's explanation suggests that the scope of the commemorations *expanded* rather than shifted. On November 17th, both civilians and soldiers killed during the war were portrayed as equal victims and commemorated together.

At first, I interpreted the reluctance to publicly acknowledge that RSK soldiers were being mourned as a sign of Vukovarian Serb elites being cautious, hesitant to attract attention to themselves out of fear of renewed reprisal. Commemorating both combatants and non-combatants together—expanding the scope of victimhood so broadly—is highly controversial. Since medieval times, soldiers have been excluded from the conceptualization of the ideal victim, as European norms surrounding “just war” and “legitimate targets” were first developed (Bouris 2007). However, distinguishing between combatants and non-combatants has often been complicated in practice. “Women and children” (Enloe 2014) are traditionally grouped together and treated as civilians, while all men considered capable of military service are seen as combatants, regardless of their actual status—a trend that has had historically disastrous consequences (Carpenter 2005). Having served in the army, particularly in the Serb rebel forces, negates the innocence required for victim status. Therefore, the Vukovarian Serbs' decision to commemorate both civilians and soldiers on November 17th understandably raises eyebrows, partially explaining the secretive nature of the commemoration and why the Zagrebian Serbs will not attend.

On November 18th, during the state-sanctioned commemorations in Vukovar, Croat soldiers are readily mourned alongside civilian victims, with veteran associations holding a place of honour in the mnemonic rituals. This is less surprising when considering the centrality of the nation for both Serbs and Croats in the region. In ethnic democracies (Smootha 2002; Štiks 2010) like Croatia, where the majority population enjoys favoured status, Croatian Serb rebel soldiers are effectively *ungrievable*—their role as combatants against the Croatian nation renders them excluded from the realm of acceptable victimhood.

In the Croatian hegemonic narrative of the war, it is not only Serb soldiers who are considered ungrievable victims. *All* Serb deaths are rendered so, due to their inherent incompatibility with the national historical narrative, which frames the so-called Homeland War as a moral and righteous cause.⁴⁰ Serbs, as an enemy minority, are perceived as embodying a negation of the “desirable” subject, particularly in terms of loyalty—a loyalty that, through enduring discursive processes, has become linked to ethnicity. Drawing on Butler's (2004; 2020) concept of grievability, which posits that equality entails the principle of equal grievability as a foundation for organizing social life, and Mendes's (2020: 57) work on the ungrievability of marginalized subjects in white-supremacist contexts, we can better understand the perception of Croatian Serb deaths during the 1991 siege:

⁴⁰ The second article of the Declaration on the Homeland War (*Deklaracija o Domovinskom Ratu*), issued in 2000 and in direct contradiction with the judgments of the ICTY, states that, “the Republic of Croatia waged a just and legitimate defensive and liberation war, and not an aggressive war of conquest towards anyone, in which war it defended its territory from the Greater Serbian aggression within its internationally recognised borders.” Available online at: <https://narodne-novine.nn.hr>.

these deaths are “at once expected, unremarkable, and ultimately, dismissible.” While Mendes (2020) and Butler (2004; 2020) focus on marginalized groups—specifically racial and sexual minorities—within specific historical and social contexts, their frameworks provide valuable analytical tools for understanding the ungrievability of Croatian Serbs. Croatian Serbs were the largest and most politically and militarily dominant group in the former Yugoslavia, and their experience of marginality is a contemporary reality, a consequence of the military defeat and ethnic cleansing of the 1990s. As a result, Serb-ness is today associated with disloyalty to the state, and thus, the deaths of Croatian Serbs during the War of Croatian Independence, are perceived as unworthy of grief.

The dominant historical narrative of the war in Croatia, along with the personal traumas experienced by individuals, have created a social environment in which the social norms of intelligibility do not recognize certain lives as lives (Butler 2004). These lives cannot be grieved because they are conceptualized as “socially dead” (Butler 2020: 59). Golubović (2019) argues, in the case of Sarajevo Serbs, that moral economies of victimhood determine which lives are grievable, often erasing certain kinds of violence altogether. A notable critique of this erasure and ungrievability comes from playwright Oliver Frlić, who, in one of the plays from his *Trilogy of Croatian Fascism*, had performers throw raw meat onto the stage to force the audience to confront the symbolic bodies of non-Croat victims of war crimes that the Croatian state continues to deny (Blanuša 2017). Frlić’s plays faced significant censorship, boycotts, and organized protests.

The “amplified silence” concerning certain deaths is common in post-conflict societies, where deaths that fall outside of the dominant narrative of victimhood become ungrievable in public spaces (Burnet 2012: 11; Ballinger 2012; Douglas 2012). In the Croatian nationalist narrative, all Croatian Serbs are collectively blamed for the crimes committed against ethnic Croats and the Croatian nation throughout history, particularly given that so few individuals have been held accountable for war crimes (Sokolić 2019). The “organized innocence” (Jalušić 2007: 1182) of the Croatian state and nation, which provides an “ideological shield against responsibility,” cannot accept the absence of wrongdoing as a claim to victimhood by Serb civilians. As Bouris (2007: 41) notes, “a moral and subjective criteria of purity must also be met in order to see harmed individuals as victims,” and Serb-ness is perceived as incompatible with this moral standard.

When we apply the concept of “collective responsibility” (Arendt 2003) to Serbs living in the RSK, who stood as silent bystanders during the ethnic cleansing of their Croat neighbours, it becomes clear that these individuals are at least “complex political victims,”—or “victims who knowingly and purposefully support certain discourses that contribute to the space of their political victimization” (Bouris 2007: 84; Baines 2016; Moffett 2016; Golubović 2019). Bouris (2007) argues that engagement with such problematic discourses (in this case, nationalism) is actively undertaken because it plays a key role in constructing their identity beyond that of a mere victim. While the status of victimhood for complex political victims is not inherently challenged, these

are lost lives that the Croatian national narrative refuses to mourn as long as they remain tied with Serb-ness.

Despite the “hierarchy of innocence” (Moeller 2002) which places children at its top, Serb children killed during the conflict must be disassociated from their ethnicity in order to be recognized as grievable. In 2021, a mural was unveiled in Vukovar to honour all 34 children killed during the war, including several Serb victims (Figure 11). However, the accompanying plaque does not emphasize the multi-ethnic composition of the victims, instead reinforcing the broader war tourism narrative that casts Serbs solely as aggressors. This framing may lead outsiders to assume all 34 victims were ethnic Croats. The same disassociation is required for Serb soldiers who fought on the Croatian side during the war. As Clark (2012: 128) notes, these soldiers are referred to as defenders (*branitelji*), deliberately obscuring their ethnic difference. This narrative of ethnically selective victimhood is exemplified by a statement from mayor Ivan Penava, who accused Milorad Pupovac of commemorating “imaginary Serb victims” on November 17th. In this view, “Serbs” and “victims” are positioned as morally opposites, with no room for overlap.⁴¹



Figure 11: The mural dedicated to the children killed during the 1991 siege.

The covert nature of the Vukovarian Serbs’ November 17th commemoration should be analysed beyond mere fear of the judgment from the majority population. If the commemoration is understood as a mechanism through which Serb elites regain control over their collective socio-historical narrative—the story they tell to themselves about themselves—then the non-Serb

⁴¹ See the following article for coverage of Ivan Penava and “imaginary Serbs”: <https://www.telegram.hr/politika-kriminal/penava-o-dolasku-pupovca-u-vukovar-ne-moze-doci-dan-ranije-i-baciti-vijence-za-nekakve-imaginarne-srpske-zrtve/>.

audience becomes irrelevant. This is somewhat unusual, as commemorations are traditionally perceived as performances intended for external audiences (Turner 2006). In this case, however, the majority population, along with anyone outside the Serb community, is actively excluded. The performance is internal, with the audience being Vukovarian Serbs themselves. This is exemplified by the fact that the commemorations are consistently reported in *Izvor*, a newspaper run by the ZVO. The reluctance to share information about the commemorations with the rest of the Serb community in Vukovar, including journalists not affiliated with the ZVO, may suggest that the construction of this ontological narrative is an elite-driven process, rather than one open to democratic inter-community debate.

“FOR ALL INNOCENT VICTIMS”: A NEW MONUMENT

While I was living in Vukovar, I often found myself wondering whether a joint commemorative event—organized by both Croats and Serbs to honour all the civilian victims of the siege—could ever be possible in this divided post-war town. Even as I write this chapter, I find myself fantasizing about what a truly counter-hegemonic narrative and commemoration might look like, concluding that one that divorces the victims from their respective nations would be the most acceptable. Yet, my anti-nationalist fantasies repeatedly proved to be just that: fantasies. Whenever I asked my interlocutors if such a joint commemoration would be possible, they would laugh or roll their eyes, signalling their scepticism. During my interview with Svetozar, however, he shared that, as a political representative of Vukovar Serbs, he had attempted to unite the commemorations. He told me:

“While I was [political position, censored], I made an offer to the then mayor, to make one monument there on the Danube. It would have also been a cross, for the Serb civilian victims of the war. I suggested that we could go together and lay a wreath for them and for the [Croats]. And we were speaking exclusively about civilian victims. I offered this and he, of course, did not accept [...] He said that there are enough monuments in Vukovar and that the Serb community should adapt itself.”

Svetozar’s suggestion to the mayor was not anti-nationalist, as it reinforced ethnic categories of victims rather than challenging them. According to Svetozar, his suggestion was rejected because acknowledging the existence and validity of Serb victims would undermine the entire Croatian narrative of the war. Moreover, the ability of memorial landscapes and monuments to change is unlikely and often seen as undesirable, since these monuments are typically designed to be permanent, ensuring the stability of both memory and, usually, ideology (Young 1993). This immutability is unsurprising, as these stone structures are intended to embody nationalist interpretations of history. In contested cities such as Vukovar, each side will challenge any attempt to alter the dominant memory, particularly if it challenges their own personal experiences (Ryan 2010 in Baillie 2012).



Figure 12: On the left, the newly erected monument to all the victims of the Croatian War of Independence located in the courtyard of the St. Nicholas Orthodox Church in Vukovar.

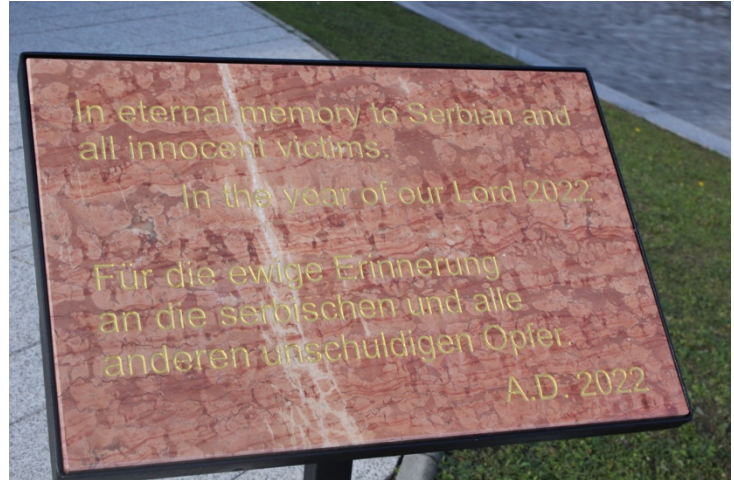


Figure 13: On the right, the plaque located near the monument.

Given this uncompromising political climate, I was surprised to discover that a new monument had just been erected by the Serb community in Vukovar, one that presents itself as tolerant and inclusive (Figure 12 and Figure 13). Importantly, the new monument is not framed as anti-nationalist, but rather as multinational. Located in the courtyard of the Serbian Orthodox Church of St. Nicholas, the monument is in the shape of an Orthodox cross and is inscribed in Cyrillic with the following message: “in eternal memory of Serb and all innocent victims” (*za večno sećanje na srpske i sve nevino stradale žrtve*). The awkward phrasing, even in *našem*⁴², becomes even more apparent when the text is translated into German on a plaque near the monument.⁴³ Translated, it reads as: “In eternal memory of Serb and all *other* innocent victims” (*für die ewige Erinnerung an die serbischen und alle anderen unschuldigen Opfer*).⁴⁴ The wording seems to imply that the monument honours the memory of all Serb victims, whose innocence is assumed or

⁴² Given the intense nationalization and politicization of local linguistic practices, I have decided to opt out of the naming game entirely by branding the mutually intelligible language as *naš*, which means “ours”. I will be using this term throughout my work, with the relevant grammatical cases. I expand on this stance in Chapter 2.

⁴³ Nobody seemed to find an explanation necessary for the fact that a German translation was included at all. I assume that this might be due to the predominance of German tourists who make their way to Vukovar as part of tourist cruises on the Danube. It is also possible that, since Vukovar was once part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, the German language, more than any other, continues to be popularly associated with European-ness.

⁴⁴ Emphasis added.

deemed irrelevant, alongside other victims, whose innocence is a mandatory prerequisite. While the clumsy phrasing might be dismissed as an oversight, the location of the monument makes it an unlikely destination for non-Serb mourners. The argument that this could become a new shared site of memory for all Vukovarians is unconvincing. However, according to Svetozar, the Serb community was unable to obtain a license from the city of Vukovar to build the monument anywhere else, so they were forced to place it on Serb-owned land.

When asked what an ideal commemorative scenario would look like, Svetozar claimed that finding a site acceptable to both Serbs and Croats could lay the groundwork for a joint commemoration for all victims, though he was not sure what such a site might be. He conceded that neither Aleja nor Ovčara would work, given their association with soldiers.⁴⁵ It seems that most Vukovarians view monuments as fixed objects rather than as mutable cultural artifacts. As a result, the instinct is to add more monuments to reflect social change, rather than alter or challenge existing ones. Furthermore, although this new monument attempts to challenge the dominant national memory, it does not question the fascist tendencies of monuments that reduce viewers to passive spectators (Young 1993: 28). The new monument, like others, seems to discourage “memory-work” (Kuhn 2020)—the active practice of remembering, where what is remembered is interrogated and open to reinterpretation—in favour of passive consumption by the viewer.

This traditional approach to memory reflected in the new monument is not surprising, given that it was never intended to challenge the core aspects of national memory and the role monuments play within it. Nor was it conceived as a critique of the nation-state itself; instead, it seeks to negotiate the position of the Serb minority within the national project, presenting their inclusion through an alternative narrative. The new monument mirrors the same ethnic divisions present in other monuments in Vukovar, only adding the Serbs’ victimhood into the existing narrative. This is evident in the conversation that Svetozar had with the mayor, where he suggested that a cross be erected for Serb civilian victims. He revealed that it was essential to highlight the ethnicity and religious affiliation of the victims. No one has proposed removing ethnicity or religion from the historical narrative or from the monuments, thus reinforcing the “ethno-totalitarianism of the everyday” (Jović 2017).

AN APOLITICAL RESISTANCE?

Are the commemorative practices of Vukovarian Serbs acts of resistance? According to Baillie (2012), the tendency of local Serbs to interpret the state-sanctioned monuments and their dominant message in antagonistic ways positions them as, “semiological guerrillas.” She argues that acts such as the vandalism of these monuments by Serb youths, as well as the construction of new memorials, are forms of resistance and contestation against the hegemonic historical narrative

⁴⁵ Equating all RSK soldiers with the prisoners of war who were executed at Ovčara is immensely problematic, given that the former died in battle and the latter were liquidated after they had surrendered their arms to Serb forces who had gained military control of the town.

upheld by the state. For instance, a memorial dedicated to Serb victims of the war was built in Borovo Selo in 2011, but the names of the victims were not added until 2013 to protect their families from potential retribution. Baillie (2013b: 126) argues that the construction of this memorial represents, “Serbs staking claim to an alternative history,” implying a clear sense of intentionality and direct action. However, beyond resistance, these practises may also reflect deeper, more complex processes at work in the construction of memory and identity within the Serb community.

According to Hollander and Einwohner (2004) there is no consensus among social scientists regarding the concept of resistance. While most scholars agree that resistance involves action and opposition, debates often focus on issues of recognition and intent. From Rubin’s (1996) perspective, the actions of Vukovarian Serbs would not qualify as resistance due to their lack of visibility and recognition by the majority population. In an interview with Svetozar, I directly asked if he believed the alternative commemorations were organized as a form of resistance. He hesitated, clearly surprised by the question, and responded, “it isn’t resistance but rather a simple message that Serb victims are not recognized and until there is some kind of reciprocity concerning recognition of victims, the conversation is over.” Leblanc’s (1999) emphasis on intent as a defining feature of resistance would also complicate the classification of these actions. The reluctance of Vukovarian Serb elites to label their actions as resistance may cast doubt on their oppositional intent. However, scholars focusing on grassroots resistance in everyday actions adopt a broader understanding of what constitutes resistance (Scott 1985; Abu Lughod 1990; Richter-Devroe 2011; Hynes 2013).

Social scientists have examined the ways in which structurally empowered groups can act as agents of resistance, suggesting that resistance does not necessarily arise from the Left, nor must it aim at societal betterment (Hirsch 1995; Miller 1997; Starn 1995; Merry 1995; Kellett 1995). In fact, Hollander and Einwohner (2004: 549) argue that “while resisting power, individuals or groups may simultaneously support the structures of dominance that necessitate resistance in the first place.” In other words, resistance is inherently complex, accommodating both opposition to and support for the mechanisms of subjectification. For Vukovarian Serb elites, nationalism and ethnicity are fundamental to their identity, and they respect the very structures that delineate the boundaries of victimhood. Svetozar, for example, shared that during November 18th commemorations, he would often direct tourists in Vukovar because he respects their desire to honour *their* dead, believing that “a victim is a victim,” regardless of ethnicity. This respect for the nation-state is also evident in his suggestion to build a monument for Serb civilian victims and have it included in state-sanctioned commemorations. For these elites, the goal is not to challenge the nationalist categories through which Serbs are marginalized and disempowered, but rather to be (re)included in the national imaginary and, by extension, participate in the exclusion of Others.

However, this does not preclude their actions from being understood as forms of resistance. As MacLeod (1992) points out, “ambiguous agency” is an important concept for understanding resistance. He argues that resistance should be seen beyond a simple dichotomy of resistance versus conformity, in order to capture the complexities of social behaviour. Making space for seemingly contradictory behaviour is a crucial aspect of ethnographic research, particularly when examining the everyday lives of disenfranchised groups with little space for political manoeuvring (Abu Lughod 1990; Ortner 1995). Furthermore, Svetozar’s hesitation to label the commemorations as acts of resistance, as well as his reluctance to acknowledge the political nature of the Vukovarian Serbs’ mnemonic practises—downplaying their organized nature—does not disqualify them from being analysed as forms of resistance. Scott (1990: 199) argues that “so long as we confine our conception of the political to activity that is openly declared we are driven to conclude that subordinate groups essentially lack a political life.” Svetozar’s insistence on the apolitical nature of the commemoration should be understood as a rhetorical technique and ethical strategy in a region where politics are considered dirty, corrupt, and immoral (Greenberg 2014; Kurtović 2012; Grandits 2007; Helms 2007; Kolind 2007). By emphasising the spontaneous and apolitical character of the November 17th commemoration, he seeks to reframe the Serb community as morally superior to the majority population.

Following Abu Lughod’s (1990) call to treat resistance as a diagnostic of power, what can the apolitical framing of the Vukovarian Serb elites and their mnemonic practices themselves reveal about the local dynamics of subjectification? The Serb-led commemorations I observed in Vukovar are characterized by their covert, rushed, and tense nature. Svetozar ensured that independent Serb journalists were not informed about the commemorations ahead of time. While he never directly stated that he deliberately kept information from journalists, he did tell me that there was unease due to fear of reprisal by the majority population, implying that he intentionally kept the commemorations secretive to protect the mourners.⁴⁶ The dominant narrative about Vukovar and the so-called Homeland War creates a moral economy of victimhood (Golubović 2019), where the categories of victim and perpetrator are essentialized and ethnicized. In this context, ethnic Croats (and *branitelji* in particular) have been positioned as morally superior subjects, giving them access to certain immunities, rights, and privileges (Koska and Matan 2017) while also empowering them to police the mnemonic practices of minority communities. This moral economy of victimhood has, in turn, facilitated the positioning of Croatian Serbs as bearers of collective guilt and, by extension, morally deficient and disloyal subjects. In this context, Serbness serves to contrast and define the superior morality and the pure victimhood of Croats.

Beyond a regional scepticism towards the political, the hesitation of Vukovarian Serb elites to frame their mnemonic practises as resistance or as political actions further highlights the power

⁴⁶ Svetozar and other organizers of alternative commemorations did not hesitate to tell me that commemorators had experienced harassment from the majority population. Many recalled one particular occasion during a commemoration at Dudik, when a man disrupted the event by driving around the site while blasting a song (Yugoslav-era rock band *Azra*’s “Sons of Whores” (*Kurvini Sinovi*) whose lyrics were meant to insult the attendees and discredit their actions.

dynamics they must navigate. When Vukovarian Serbs attempt to assert their linguistic minority rights by requesting the installation of “bilingual” plaques in the town, their demand was blocked by the morally superior subjects (*branitelji*), sparking unrest across Croatia. Articulating minority rights demands in an overtly political tone is often discredited, branded as aggressive or ethno-nationalist.⁴⁷ The “bilingual” plaques, installed overnight, triggered anti-Cyrillic—i.e. anti-Serb—riots and were quickly destroyed. It became evident that making demands of the state could lead to violence, regardless of its legal commitment to the protection of minority rights. The moral economy of victimhood, supported by the state, empowered certain categories of citizens while disempowering others, thus preventing the state from fulfilling its obligations. In this context, reframing subversive mnemonic practices as “just tradition” (*samo tradicija*)—as something passive and unorganized rather than overtly political—should be seen as a strategic move. This framing allows the Serb community to “silently, patiently, protractedly and pervasively” (Bayat 1997: 7) rebuild its self-narrative as moral subjects, deserving of recognition as victims in their own right.

While scholars of marginalized groups might argue that the mnemonic practises described here should be considered as resistance, I contend that this is not the most pertinent question. The apolitical framing and the tense nature of the mnemonic practises reveal the local power dynamics at play, in which Serbs are positioned as immoral and disloyal subjects, contrasted with the highly moral and loyal *branitelji* and other Croat subjects. As a result, local Serb elites experience significant anxiety and ambiguity in their mnemonic practises, not only about their physical safety—evidenced in the tense, rushed, and secretive nature of the commemorations—but also about their ontological security. In this context, apoliticality becomes a strategy for constructing a moral high ground, necessary for the framing of victimhood, which the stigmatised and marginalised minoritized subjects desperately need.

TRAITORS OR PATRIOTS: EVERYDAY PRACTISES OF MEMORY

While this chapter has privileged the discourse of political elites, it would be incomplete without examining the mnemonic practices of ordinary Vukovarian Serbs. Previous ethnographic studies of Vukovar have noted that local Serbs collectively boycott the state-sanctioned commemorations (Kardov 2006b; Clark 2012; Baillie 2012, 2013b). While this observation holds true, my research adds nuance to the existing literature. Both Croat and Serb political elites in Vukovar are working to define the mnemonic norms of the community through the discourses of morality and patriotism. Despite this, some ordinary Serbs have managed to create their own mnemonic practices, using them as tools for constructing their own self-reflective narratives as members of the Serb community.

⁴⁷ In 2019, in an attempt to demand that the “bilingual” plaques be reinstated and that minority rights be respected, Penava was given a copy of the statute of the town of Vukovar in the Cyrillic alphabet by SDSS members. Penava demonstratively threw the statute on the floor and called the attempt to reinstate the plaques, “the continuation of the creeping Greater Serbian Aggression.” See the following article: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/vukovar-dvojezi%C4%8Dne-plo%C4%8De/30223895.html>.

It is certainly true that most Vukovarian Serbs are absent from the state-sanctioned commemorations on November 18th. Some individuals, with evident awkwardness, have explained their absence by stating that they did not lose anyone during the siege or the conflict, attempting to rationalize their decision not to attend. However, the majority of Vukovarian Serbs I spoke to expressed clear distaste for the event, citing the invisibility of Serb victims as the primary reason for their absence. It should be noted that, had they wanted to attend, they would have faced immense social pressure from their own community not to do so. Vukovar is a small town where everyone knows each other, and attending such an ethnically charged event would certainly raise eyebrows. As a result, many choose to stay home or leave town altogether to avoid being labelled a traitor (*izdajica*) by their fellow Serbs. When asked why they did not attend any of the commemorations organized by the Serb community, most claimed they were unaware of them. Others said they had no emotional need to do so or feared being seen by a member of the majority population. Most people I spoke to did not view their absence as a political act, much less as a form of resistance. However, framing their actions as such could offer valuable insight into the power dynamics at play.

Some individuals who experienced the trauma of the siege refuse to label themselves as victims and, through this refusal of victimhood, find empowerment in boycotting all the commemorative events. Such is the case of Stevan and Ana, a mixed-marriage couple who remained in Vukovar during the siege with their three underage children and whose experience was detailed in the Introduction. Throughout the siege and the war, their mixed-marriage family was targeted by both Serbs and Croats. As a result, the couple refuses to participate in any commemorative events, seeing both sides as overly nationalistic. Acts of refusal like this can be understood within the framework of resistance, particularly if we view them as “negating that which negates us” (Garland 2013), an “affirmative investment in another possibility” (Weiss 2016: 352) or “a disinvestment from rules of engagement” (Bhungaliala 2020: 390). While most Serbs in Vukovar refuse to participate in any commemorations, the case of Stevan and Ana particularly captures the frustration that ordinary Vukovarians may feel with the ethnicization of victimhood and their motivation to seek alternative forms of self-identification. According to Bouris (2007), political victims who resist the discourse of victimization are mobilizing what Foucault (1994) calls “technologies of the self,” the practice of self-care through self-reflection with the purpose of producing free and ethical individuals. They become self-aware and active agents in peacebuilding processes in post-conflict areas. In this sense, the Vukovarian Serbs who decide not to participate in any commemorations in a town defined by its past victimization are perhaps doing the most difficult resistance work against both the state and their ethnic community: they are *independently* creating their sense of self.

Bojana, a lively Serb woman in her mid-forties, was one of my first interviewees. In her own words, she described herself as, “always a patriot but never a nationalist.” I was sitting in her living

room, whose walls were adorned with Orthodox icons and other religious tchotchkes, when she first complained about the erasure of Serb victims from the official Croatian narrative of the siege. Despite this, she shared that while she lived in an ethnically mixed apartment building, she would always light a candle on November 18th and leave it on her windowsill out of respect for her Croat neighbours because “a victim is a victim.”⁴⁸ Given that this occurred when Croats first began returning to Vukovar, at a time when Serbs were still the demographic majority, I believe that Bojana’s commemorative practices were not motivated solely by fear. Perhaps this is an example of carefully managing one’s difference, of redefining one’s self-narrative in the imposed context. By placing that candle in her windowsill, she broke one of the mnemonic norms of the Serb community and identified her household as (at least) tolerant of the state-sanctioned commemorations and the national narrative. Throughout our conversations, Bojana made it clear to me how important it was for her to maintain good relations with her Croat neighbours, even now that she has returned to her old neighbourhood. She proudly mentioned that one of her Croat neighbours had even given her a key to their front gate. However, she has since stopped placing the candle on her windowsill and now keeps her window shutters tightly closed on November 18th. Bojana’s evolving mnemonic practices appear to be an attempt to negotiate her identity in a context where there is little space for ambivalence. She seeks to retain her self-declared title of a Serb patriot while also demonstrating a measure of respect for Croat victims.

Aleksandar, a young Serb in his early twenties, not only participated in the November 18th procession but also proudly shared his involvement on social media. Aleksandar used his participation in the state-sanctioned commemoration as moral capital, leveraging it to criticize the right-wing politics of the municipal government. In light of Ivan Penava’s announcement that Serbs had lost the right to bilingual plaques as a result of the demographic change in Vukovar, Aleksandar posted the following statement on social media:

“Peace was restored by reducing minority rights. THIS IS NATIONALISM AND FASCISM. I feel sorry for my city. I feel sorry for this man who does not understand the power of an intercultural community, who does not see the beauty in multi-ethnic societies. Many have left because of him, but I want this man to know that one Aleksandar, a native Vukovarian, a Serb and a citizen of the Republic of Croatia, is still here and that he will not be quiet and that he will not accept this quasi-peace. I am proud of all my fellow citizens and wonderful friends of all

⁴⁸ The practice of placing a red lantern (*lampion*) with a candle inside on the windowsill of houses and apartment buildings has become a norm for Croats in Vukovar which begins, for some, as early as the first day of November. Given that this is a social norm practiced by those who participate in the state-sanctioned commemoration and support the dominant narrative of the war, it has also become a marker of Croatian ethnicity in Vukovar. Thus, by taking a walk in Vukovar on a November evening, one can, in theory, identify Croatian households by the glowing red light on their windowsills.

nationalities who came to my *Slava*⁴⁹, for Christmas on January 7th, to whom I taught the Cyrillic [alphabet]. I am proud of myself for having come in first place in the county Croatian language competition, for having paid my respects to all the civilian victims of the war and to my wounded city on November 18th and August 4th. You should be ashamed of your title, mayor of only one [ethnic] part of Vukovar.”

Not fearing for (or perhaps not caring about) potential reprisals from the Serb community, Aleksandar mobilizes the moral capital generated by attending the state-sanctioned commemoration to make political demands as both a Croatian citizen and a member of the Serb national minority. By highlighting his fluency and usage of the Croatian language and his participation on November 18th, he positions himself as a “model minority,” a concept initially applied to Asian Americans to suggest their willingness to assimilate and remain politically non-disruptive (Lee 1999; Reyes 2009). In the Croatian context, a model minority is one who respects the national narrative of the war and accepts one’s minoritization, thereby claiming the right to demand recognition of one’s minority rights. Aleksandar’s references to his cross-ethnic friendships and his emphasis on multiculturalism are particularly interesting, given Croatia’s ongoing efforts to position itself within the European imaginary, which culminated in its 2013 accession to the EU (Bellamy 2003). By invoking what is traditionally considered to be European values, Aleksandar appeals to Europe as a “civilisational space,” placing particular emphasis on its “regimes of inclusion” rather than exclusion (Dzenovska 2018: 3). Through his participation in these mnemonic practices, Aleksandar is also challenging the mnemonic norms of Serb elites, who expect all Vukovarian Serbs to boycott the event. It should be noted that Aleksandar also participates in some Serb-led commemorations and is active in many Serb cultural clubs. By positioning himself as a model minority and a moral subject to make political demands of the state, Aleksandar resists the label of “aggressor” and “disloyal citizen” imposed on Croatian Serbs by the hegemonic historical narrative, while reaffirming his commitment to the Vukovar Serb community. The ways in which Stevan, Ana, Bojana, and Aleksandar engage in mnemonic rituals suggests that commemorative practices are not only dynamic, but also serve as tools of self-construction, helping to manage anxiety and establish ontological security in a tense post-war context.

“WE ARE BROTHERS”: SERBS AS KEEPERS OF JEWISH AND ANTI-FASCIST MEMORY

The township of Vukovar has a long history of atrocities, population cleansing, and genocide, predating the violence of the 1991 siege. However, this history is obscured by the informational plaques on historical buildings and the narratives displayed at local museums, which “essentialize the war [of Croatian Independence] as an age of moral certainty, a time innocent of complexity,

⁴⁹ *Slava* is an annual religious ritual in which Serbian Orthodox families celebrate their patron saint. The day is marked by a feast and celebrated with family and close friends. The tradition is passed on from father to son. Traditionally, women are expected to take on the patron saint of their husband’s family upon marriage.

irony or ambiguity” (Baillie 2013b: 125). In fact, right-wing scholars in Croatia have actively worked to portray the events in Vukovar as incomprehensible and unprecedented (Schellenberg 2015: 20). As Baillie (2013b) notes, the crimes committed in Vukovar are depicted as entirely exceptional, “disassociating them from the Croat ethnic cleansing of Serbs and Jews which took place in the city and across Croatia and Bosnia during the Second World War.” In fact, prior to World War II, Vukovar was the seat of the Upper Rabbinate of Syrmia, home to about six hundred Jews, the majority of whom were killed in Ustaša death camps (Dobrovšak 2017). After the end of World War II, the local German population was ethnically cleansed by the new socialist government, and while some returned, the town never regained its pre-war demographics (Barišić-Bogišić 2011). For the current right-wing municipal government, which aims to make Vukovar a symbol of Croatian suffering, memory begins in 1991.

On a bright and warm spring day, my partner and I made our way to the Dudik Memorial Park, where the socialist government had commissioned the renowned architect Bogdan Bogdanović to design a memorial for the site of a World War II mass execution and burial site. Once an isolated field of mulberry (*dudik*) trees, this location was where Ustaša officials executed hundreds of ethnic Serbs, Jews, Roma, and Croats, the latter specifically targeted for their participation in the resistance movement (Buljan 1984; Gojko and Majski 1977). The Dudik Memorial was built to honour the “victims of fascism,” following the Yugoslav ideology of brotherhood and unity, deliberately omitting the ethnic identities of the victims (Subotić 2019). The park features five 18-meter-tall concrete cones, wrapped in diorite and topped with wooden structures covered in copper sheeting (Figure 15). One would not know it today, but the unkempt memorial park includes a flat stage which can accommodate an audience of up to 3000 people (Achleitner 2013). Despite the massive size of its monument, we struggled to find Dudik, as it is not listed on any local map nor are there street signs directing visitors. As I approached the conical structures, now in decrepit condition, I stepped on a blue condom wrapper. Beneath the shade of the ancient mulberry trees, we found empty liquor bottles and trash scattered across the site. The memorial had seemingly transformed from a solemn place of remembrance to an “enigmatic question mark in contemporary space,” a site where clueless teenagers come to party (Osborne 2001 quoted in Baillie 2019: 184). Worst of all, a large blue graffiti was scrawled across one of the structures, depicting a tree with hanging bodies, alongside the words: “Serbian family tree”⁵⁰ (Figure 14). We looked at each other, then the monument, in horror.

⁵⁰ The fascist graffiti is a modern-day call for genocide, referring to the WWII-era practise of the Ustaša to torture and hang Serbs on trees. The slogan *Srbe na Vrbe* (Hang the Serbs from the Willow Trees) gained popularity during the Ustaša genocide against Serbs. Unfortunately, such fascist vandalism of socialist-era anti-fascist monuments is common across the post-Yugoslav region. Note, for instance, the 2022 devastation by neo-Ustaša youths of the Partisan Memorial Cemetery in Mostar, a memorial complex which was also designed by Bogdan Bogdanović.



Figure 14: On the left, the “Serbian family tree” graffiti on the monument.

Figure 15: On the right, the Dudik Memorial Park.

When I returned to the site two months later for the annual Dudik commemoration organized by the Vukovar-Srijem County Association of Anti-Fascists, I noticed that the grass had been cut, the site was somewhat cleaned up, and the graffiti had been erased. The attendees were mostly multi-ethnic members of antifascist organizations from Serbia and Bosnia, as well as delegations from Serb villages in Croatia.⁵¹ The scorched grass was covered in numerous wreaths, and the brouhaha of the chit-chatting attendants catching up since their last event was intermittently interrupted by the furious flapping of flags (Figure 16). Aside from children reciting poetry and playing *tamburice*, the event was attended by mostly senior citizens. Nikola, a Serb journalist I had met for coffee and one of the few young people in attendance, spotted me and came over to say hello. “I had to cover the event for work *again*,” he said, rolling his eyes in annoyance. He claimed that he had forgotten the location of Dudik and had to ask his co-workers for directions again. As I spoke to him, I became painfully aware that wearing my Antifa Zagreb T-shirt might not have been the wisest idea. I had been under the naive impression that the event would only attract antifascists. However, I soon realized that the antifascist legacy was being instrumentalized by various groups for a wide range of contradictory political purposes.

⁵¹ This included antifascist delegations from Vojvodina (RS), Sremska Mitrovica (RS), Sarajevo Canton (BA), Savski Venac (RS), Brčko District (BA), Novi Sad (RS), Šid (RS), Srebrenik (BA), Apatin/Rastina (RS), Indija (RS), Vrbas (RS), Osijek/Beli Manastir (HR), Pakrac/Lipik (HR), Slatina (HR), Županja (HR), Trpinja (HR), Borovo (HR). It also included delegations from towns such as Sombor (RS), Trpinja (HR), Borovo (HR), Negoslavci (HR), Markušica (HR), as well as delegations from countless Serb minority councils, and political parties such as SDSS, DSS, and SDP.



Figure 16: The commemoration at the Dudik Memorial Park.

Both Franjo Habulin, president of the Union of Anti-Fascist Fighters and Anti-Fascists of the Republic of Croatia (SABAH), and Lazo Djokić, president of the Vukovar-Srijem County Association of Anti-Fascists, delivered notable opening speeches, emphasizing the rise of fascist trends in Croatia and calling for action. The most affectively charged moment of the commemoration came when a young girl, her voice trembling with emotion, began reciting one of Branko Ćopić's most famous poems about the suffering of civilians at the hands of the Germans during World War II.

*Radovala se djevojčica
i vatri, i gradu neviđenom,
a sada leži, sićušna kao ptica,
na cesti Petrovačkoj,
na cesti okrvavljenoj.*

The little girl rejoiced
at the fire and the unseen city,
but now she lies, tiny as a bird,
on the Petrovačka road
on the blood-stained road.

Perhaps the young girl reciting the poem was moved by the plight of the girl in the verses, or perhaps she was reacting to the elderly women in the audience, who, in accordance with the cultural tradition where the labour of mourning is assigned to women (Bennett 2002), began to weep silently and wipe their eyes. In contrast, the men in the background continued to chat indifferently and catch up. It was at this time that I overheard an intriguing exchange between two men standing near me:

M1: I am surprised to see that SDP⁵² sent a delegation and a wreath.

M2: Me too. But, you know, three out of their five delegates are Serbs.

M1: Oh, I see.

The implication was clear and seemed to be a belief shared by much of the local Serb population: only local Serbs would attend an antifascist commemoration, while Croats either did not care or opposed it. As the event was wrapping up, I was approached by a glum Svetozar who offered to give me a ride to the reception. Before we got into the car, he pointed to a nearby football field, which had been illegally built on the land of the Dudik Memorial (see Baillie 2019) (Figure 17).⁵³ Outraged, he remarked, “Croats don’t care about Dudik and they never participate in antifascist commemorations because they would rather forget historical events where they are not the victims.”

Curious about these claims, I set out to learn more about the antifascist commemorations and their attendees. I arranged an interview with Lazo Djokić and asked him quite directly about the ethnic composition of the attendees. Djokić confirmed that local Croats tend to avoid the commemorations and that municipal officials do not send delegates. However, instead of attributing this to an essentialist fascistic tendency among Croats, Djokić argued that many Croats are sympathetic to antifascist values but are too afraid to attend, succumbing to immense social pressure to distance themselves from Yugoslav-era memorials and anything associated with Serbness.⁵⁴ As a result, antifascist organizers only approach teachers and students from the Serbian language high school programs to organize the recitations. It is anxiety rather than ideology, that governs the decision-making processes concerning antifascist commemorations, even among the majority population. And it is precisely this pervasive state of anxiety, forged out of the “generative force” (Bergholz 2016) of local memory of violence, which warrants further exploration.

⁵² The SDP, *Socijaldemokratska Partija Hrvatske* (*Social Democratic Party of Croatia*), is a centre-left political party and one of the most popular political options in contemporary Croatia. As the successor of the League of Communists in Croatia, it is considered to be the most popular political option for Croatian Serbs who do not want to stand out as Serbs.

⁵³ During my last visit to Dudik, I noticed that a portion of the park had been ploughed. It is believed that the action was carried out privately, without official permission or prior notification. For more detail on the incident, see: <https://srbi.hr/ko-ore-po-dudiku/>.

⁵⁴ According to Cipek (2017) the Croatian Right and the Catholic Church use the discursive portrayal of Croatia’s enemies as “commies, Serbs, and Yugoslavs” to rally supporters and consolidate a unified identity.



Figure 17: The illegal football field constructed on the grounds of the Dudik Memorial Park.

The belief that local Serbs are the only antifascists in town, however, is a claim I repeatedly encountered during my fieldwork. While having coffee with Slaviša, a member of the local political elite, I asked him if he knew where the old Jewish synagogue had been located before its devastation in 1941. Since no plaque had been placed by the Vukovar Tourism Board, the empty, overgrown lot would not reveal to a passer-by the magnitude—in symbolic significance and sheer size—of what used to stand there. Without hesitation, Slaviša correctly answered that it had been located across the street from what is now the headquarters of the Europe House Vukovar NGO.

Slaviša: “We know this.”

Dragana: “We? We, Serbs?”

Slaviša: “Yes.”

Dragana: “Because of what happened here in the 1940s?”

Slaviša, nodding gravely: “We are brothers.”

This expression of solidarity took me by surprise, especially given the numerous instances of offhand anti-Semitic comments I had encountered during my time in the post-Yugoslav region.⁵⁵ It is important to note that this philo-Semitic articulation of kinship cannot be analysed without

⁵⁵ I will never forget sitting in a popular Serb-owned café in downtown Vukovar when I overheard a loud conversation at the table behind me. A well-known local Serb politician (not from the SDSS) was speaking with a friend, and I could not help but overhear his friend say, “it’s weird to say it, but Hitler was right, wasn’t he?” While such overt expressions of anti-Semitism are admittedly rare, they are accompanied by far more subtle and commonplace instances of essentialist or paranoid remarks about Jews that I have heard over the years.

taking into account the appropriation of the Jewish trope by national intelligentsia across the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. As Živković (2000) argues, the “wish to be a Jew” became a profitable strategy for statesmen, academics, and poets to garner sympathy for the Serbian national project from both domestic and foreign audiences. This is due to the fact that, in Western thought, Jews are seen as the embodiment of goodness the archetypical victims of history, making their identity highly valued in moral terms (MacDonald 2002). Thus, referring to them as “brothers,” or blood relatives, is as close as one can get to being a Jew. However, Slaviša’s words must also be analysed through the specific lens of the Croatian Serb experience, a perspective that has not traditionally been explored by academic discussions on this subject (cf. Živković 2000; MacDonald 2002; Subotić 2019). As the grandchildren of genocide survivors, many Vukovarian Serbs, like Svetozar and Slaviša, appear to position themselves as keepers of Jewish memory in Vukovar—a fascinating claim that warrants further analytical exploration.

Various thinkers have criticized the growing trend of universalizing the Holocaust, fearing it would lead to the trivialization and denial of its horrors (Finkelkraut 1982; Langer 1998; Landau 1998). Others, however, argue for comparative approaches to Holocaust studies. Žižek (2005: 79) goes as far as to claim that, in the postmodern context, “we are dealing with universalized anti-Semitism—that is, every ethnic ‘otherness’ is conceived as an *unheimliches* double that threatens our enjoyment.” Even more broadly, Appadurai (2006) argues that, due to their desire for national purity, all majoritarian ideologies carry the seeds of genocide under the right political and historical circumstances. Recent scholarship on World War II violence in the NDH has highlighted the concept of “entwined genocides,” emphasizing the interconnectedness of the genocides that took place there. The Ustaša systematically and often simultaneously murdered ethnic Serbs and Jews (and Roma) under different aspects of the Ustaša ideological framework (Matijević 2024; Kralj 2023; Korb 2025). Given the shared and often overlapping persecution, the suffering of Serb and Jewish, as well as their survival strategies, were often deeply entwined. The story of Jelena Malević exemplifies this interconnectedness. Malević, a Jewish woman from Slavonski Brod, fled to Vukovar when her husband, a Serb, was executed by the Ustaša regime in 1941. She survived most of the Holocaust in Croatia by passing as an Orthodox Montenegrin. When Italy capitulated and her Montenegrin citizenship no longer protected her against the anti-Serb policies of the Ustaša, she was arrested and placed in a concentration camp. It is important to note that, “after successfully surviving as a Jew passing as a Christian and evading the Holocaust, she was almost killed as part of another genocide—the genocide against Serbs” (Matijević 2024: 166). If we consider this important historical interconnectedness, what are the functions of Slaviša’s claims?

While Slaviša’s claims may be strategically positioned within contemporary political debates, where invoking Jewish suffering provides symbolic legitimacy, I argue that their historical grounding allows them to serve a deeper purpose beyond appropriation. These claims anchor his identity in a shared history of suffering, helping to secure his own existential position as a moral subject in a context of marginalization. In other words, his statement is as much a performance for

external audiences as it is a means of reinforcing his own sense of belonging and identity. Positioning themselves as keepers of Jewish and antifascist memory may be an effort to secure the ontological security of the group by reconstructing its collective narrative. By preserving these histories and associating themselves with them, Serbs may seek to alleviate the existential anxiety of living as a stigmatized minority on the brink of disappearance, clinging to the ubiquity of the nation.

Daliborka, another SDSS party member, assured me with exasperation, “there absolutely is a connection between Serbs and antifascism! We Serbs are constantly carrying wreaths, but we are considered such aggressors! I don’t know how such a thing is possible!” Daliborka and other Serb elites in Vukovar argue that Serbs are the only ones who attend antifascist commemorations and care about the memory of Vukovarian Jews, while claiming that Croats ignore or actively erase anti-fascist history. These sweeping claims not only overlook the social reality described by Djokić, but they are also ahistorical. Baillie (2019: 203) notes that during the time of the RSK, there was no effort to reconstruct Dudik because the regime was as anti-communist as Penava’s government is today. These essentialist claims may be seen as a form of “strategic essentialism” (Spivak 1988) which seeks to, “mobilize a collective consciousness for achieving a set of chosen political ends” (Pande 2017: 1). The everyday lives of Croatian Serbs are marked by unpredictability, including brain drain, financial precarity, and policies of marginalization by the municipal government. In this context, these essentialist views on identity could be understood as attempts to draw distinct boundaries between the Serbs and the majority population, in order to mobilize a collective political will. Emphasising historical events which precede 1991, where Serbs were the victims of Croatian fascism, and asserting that the entire Serb national collective identifies with antifascism, provides an important dose of moral value. It allows the Serb collective to regain some control over their national narrative and strengthen their ontological security. In the words of Jock Young (cited in Bauman 2000: 172), “the desire to demonize others is based on the ontological uncertainties of those inside.” If all Serbs subscribe to the narrative that Serbs are anti-fascists and Croats are fascists, they are more likely to unite and resist erasure. In other words, participation in antifascist commemorations is not just a matter of ideological commitment, but often a strategy to protect the concept of the nation and its national narrative.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I met Goran, a young Vukovarian Serb, for coffee after he returned from the annual commemoration in Jasenovac, where he attended as part of the Vukovar delegation. He seemed in ill-spirits and quickly revealed his bitterness.

“I don’t know why Serbs are even wasting their time fighting revisionism and aligning with anti-fascists in Croatia. If the state wants revisionism, they should get it! It’s a reflection of their nature. And the EU is fine with this, there’s no use fighting it. Things have only gotten worse for us since we joined the EU, so what

does that tell you? The EU doesn't care about a small fish like Croatia, they won't hold anyone accountable. So, what is the point?"

Goran's deep disillusionment with both Croatian state politics and the European Union reflects his scepticism about the effectiveness of counter-memory practises as resistance to revisionist politics. His bitterness reveals a sense of helplessness, as well as a feeling of betrayal. His condemnation of the Croatian state as inherently fascistic—"a reflection of their nature"—underscores how entrenched nationalist and essentialist narratives shape his perceptions, even in moments of apparent resistance. Ironically, in rejecting the very revisionism he sees as rampant in Croatia, Goran's rhetoric inadvertently reinforces the essentialist narratives of division and animosity that he claims to oppose. This contradiction highlights a central theme of my dissertation: the difficulty of transcending entrenched social categories, even when one is actively engaged in resistance against dominant ideological narratives.

The town of Vukovar has been a focal point for numerous studies on collective memory and commemoration. In an attempt to diversify the literature, I shift focus to the covert mnemonic practices of an enemy minority community that seemingly resists the dominant narrative and thus disrupts the ontological security of the nation-state. Goran's words highlight the fundamental challenge to such resistance: the difficulty of operating within a space that is so thoroughly shaped by nationalism. As a result, this ethnography has been a deep-dive exploration of the crevasses of nationalism, witnessing how this ideology reinforces itself thirty years after the end of the conflict. The calcification of nationalism and ethnic division occurs not only through the creation of a moral economy of victimhood in which some subjects are more grievable than others, but also by the inability to imagine remembering outside of the parameters of the nation. In this chapter, I have described how even in non-hegemonic commemorations, the concept of the nation is solidified, and other ideologies are appropriated for its reification. The only alternative manifests at the grassroots level—through ordinary people who, in their own ways, affirm that "a victim is a victim," regardless of ethnic belonging.

Having examined how mnemonic practises in Vukovar are mobilized to create ontological narratives about the group, the next chapter shifts focus to language as a tool of identification and exclusion. In this chapter, I will explore how language marks ethnic boundaries but also functions as a moral indicator, where linguistic practices are entangled with notions of immorality, legitimacy, and belonging. Just as mnemonic practices are instrumental in defining who is grievable and who is not, so too is language used to assign moral value, further entrenching divisions within this post-conflict society.

CHAPTER 2:
“IT’S NOT SCARY AT ALL, YOU JUST HAVE TO LEARN THE RULES!”
ČISTI HRVATSKI AS A LANGUAGE IDEOLOGY

“It was a time defined by linguistic divorce, filled with noise
and fury. Language became a weapon. Language betrayed,
marked, divided, and united.”
—Dubravka Ugrešić

I was introduced to Sofija, an outgoing young Serb woman, by her father, who had nervously declined to participate in my research. His daughter, however, enthusiastically agreed to meet with me on several occasions. During our first interview, I was struck by how closely linguistic practices are affiliated with ethnicity, and how much attention is given to these practises. Sofija shared that she usually speaks in *ekavica*⁵⁶, but that decision is not without consequences. She recalled a particularly uncomfortable exchange with a Croat man:

“I was walking my puppy in front of my apartment building and a construction worker stopped me to ask me how old he was. I answered in *ekavica*, I said he was eight months old (*osam meseci*). The man was shocked, asking me, ‘Months? Are you a Serb?’ (*Meseci? ‘Si ti srpkinja?’*) I felt like he had asked me if I was dirty, not if I was a Serb! I confirmed that I was indeed a Serb and nothing bad happened, but it was so uncomfortable.”⁵⁷

Sofija’s story captures the emotional complexity of navigating the intricate Croatian linguistic terrain as an enemy minority, and how stigmatized social actors manage to cope with the unpredictability of their social world. The construction worker, whom Sofija assumed was a member of the majority population, feigned shock at hearing someone employing a Serbian linguistic register in Vukovar instead of *čisti hrvatski* (pure/clean Croatian), a term that has, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, come to encompass a particular language ideology. The words of the construction worker not only demonstrate the extent to which linguistic practices are instinctually policed and ethnicized, but also the immediate emotional impact of being confronted and provoked with one’s difference. Sofija’s indignance at being treated as if she were dirty is relevant and revelatory, given the discourse of purity and cleanliness which has continued to dominate linguistic issues in Croatia since the 1990s. In an attempt to establish ethnonational social boundaries, Croatian linguistic authenticity became synonymous with purification from Serbisms,

⁵⁶ The *ijekavica/ekavica/ikvica* variants are themselves variations in the reflex of the Old Slavic *ě* sound, which is characteristic of the dialectic continuum on which the regional contemporary languages are being built. In Croatia, the *ekavica/ijekavica* variants have become the single most important symbols of linguistic (and ethnic) difference between the Serbian and Croatian “languages.” *Ekavica* is associated with Serb-ness and *ijekavica* is associated with Croat-ness. I expand on these “differences” further in the chapter.

⁵⁷ In this case, the use of the ekavian “Serbian” variant *mesec* for ‘month’ instead of the “Croatian” variant *mjesec* is immediately apparent to fluent speakers.

which were regarded as dirty or unclean linguistic forms. Furthermore, due to the employment of the discourse of purity and cleanliness throughout history as a way to ostracize marginalised people, being made to feel dirty or unclean comes with affective baggage (Berthold 2010; see also Douglas 1966). Sofija's indignance illustrates just how distressing it can be to not only be rejected from the nation and recognized as an ethnic Other, but also to have one's morality or loyalty to the state indexed through pronunciation or grammatical choices.

Sociolinguists argue that the relationship between identity and language is inseparable and mutually constitutive, making language a social practise (Joseph 2004: 12). One might even view linguistic behaviour as "a series of acts of identity" (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller 1985: 181), through which individuals establish their connection to social groups. Similarly, Bucholtz and Hall (2010: 19) suggest that identity is "discursively produced", "constructed through indexical processes and in relation with other actors and positions." While the connection between language and national identity has been extensively explored by social scientists, the prevailing view is that nationalism creates national languages and attaches to them a false sense of permanence (Hobsbawm 1991; Anderson 1991; Billig 1995; Smith 1998). According to Billig (1995: 19), "speaking patriotically," or talking about the nation, reifies it. However, as this chapter demonstrates, the linguistic form and the content of this discourse are relevant to the construction of the nation and its reification. In other words, phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexical choices are just as significant as the message being conveyed. This chapter will explore not only how the linguistic practises of Croatian Serbs allow them to construct their individual and group identities as a marginalized community (Joseph 2010), but also how Croatian Serbs are *being made* by the state, the local government, and the majority population they encounter on the streets of Vukovar.

Furthermore, the literature on the construction of identity through language in borderlands has revealed how diverse the processes of construction and negotiation of identity can be in such regions (Watt and Ingham 2000; Llamas and Watt 2010). Given that Vukovar is located on the Danube, the river marking the border between Croatia and Serbia, it is unsurprising that the remarkably diverse linguistic patterns observed there reflect its liminality. This chapter contributes to the literature on language as a marker of difference in the construction of identities in border regions. More traditionally, language was viewed by the Genevan structuralist stream as, "a bounded, homogeneous, structural system, a unity made primarily for denotation (i.e. reference, labelling the world), with centrally defined norms of grammatical and orthographic correctness to which all speakers are expected to orient" (Gal 2018: 226). However, a different theoretical approach to language has emerged (Silverstein 1979; Bakhtin 1981; Lucy 1993; Kroskrity 2004), one which rejects standard language ideology and views language as, "social practice, focused as much on non-denotational signalling (social indexicality) and the importance of socially meaningful variation as on denotation" (Gal 2018: 227). In fact, standardisation and the policing of linguistic deviations serve as nation-building disciplinary mechanisms used by both majority

and minority groups (Woolard 1998; Joseph 2004; Gal 2006). This chapter explores how marginalized groups use linguistic practises, tied to nationalism, to construct and negotiate their identities.

For decades, sociologists and anthropologists have studied the linguistic practises of racialized and minoritized communities, shifting from viewing them as linguistically deficient to challenging these racist discourses (Lewis 1959; Bereiter & Engelmann 1966; Poplack 1980; Fishman 1991; Delpit 2006). Traditional sociolinguistics often follows the distinctiveness paradigm which, “hinges on the ideology that group x speaks language x, a distinguishable speech variety from language y, spoken by group y” (Lo and Reyes 2009: 6). As a result, the language practices that challenge these norms are often erased in academic literature (Gal and Irvine 1995). New generations of postcolonial and decolonial scholars have problematized these assumptions, focusing on how language is co-naturalized with race and ethnicity (Silverstein 2003; Agha 2005; Lo & Reyes 2009; Rosa & Flores 2017). Rosa (2019: 2) argues that the “co-naturalization of language and race is a key feature of modern governance, leading to the belief that languages are racially embodied and that race is linguistically intelligible.” This chapter contributes to the growing body of literature that challenges the connection between linguistic forms and racial and ethnic categories.

I reject the reification of social categories by assigning arbitrary linguistic labels to ethnic groups. In line with over 200 social scientists, writers, journalists, activists, and public figures who signed the 2017 Declaration on the Common Language, I argue that the languages spoken in Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro are all variants of a single language (see Kordić 2010). I refer to our shared language as *naš jezik* (our language), a label that other ethnographers have also noticed being used on the streets of former Yugoslavia (Kapović in Hodges 2016). Not only does it make the notion of shared intelligibility clear, but it also implies a sense of shared belonging which, as a child of the diaspora, I have always felt whenever I heard someone speaking *naš jezik* abroad. Not only do we understand one another, we *understand* one another. Thus, the issue of what Ugredić derisively (1998: 88) calls the “Holy Blood Group,” the “system of generally induced paranoia [in which] one’s national origin is the essential fact” is avoided entirely. Any reference to a “Croatian” and/or “Serbian” language ought to be understood as ironic, having an invisible “so-called” prefix attached to it. Instead of taking these “languages” for granted, I am referring to forms and signals that have been socially assigned to them.

This chapter argues that minority subjectivities can be constructed through linguistic performances, challenging both the concept of a stable minority identity and the nation-language nexus. As I argue throughout this dissertation, the figure of the enemy minority destabilizes the ontological security of the nation-state. In Vukovar, this destabilization is often made tangible in language, where the smallest phonological choice exposes an intolerable difference and can lead to suspicion, humiliation, or violence. The chapter argues that racio-linguistic ideologies (Rosa &

Flores 2017) assign meaning to linguistic forms through enregisterment, rendering *čisti hrvatski* a language ideology (Irvine & Gal 2000) by linking its linguistic forms to morality in which Serbness is associated with immorality. This chapter asserts that minoritised and stigmatised individuals actively employ linguistic performances and management strategies to navigate a complex linguistic landscape. It emphasizes that language plays a central role in identity formation. Furthermore, by analysing how enemy minorities conform to, play with, or reject hegemonic language forms, the chapter argues that linguistic practices are deeply intertwined with local power dynamics and the construction of social identity.

The chapter is divided into six sub-sections. The first subsection traces the evolution of *čisti hrvatski* as a language ideology, highlighting its roots in nationalist and purist movements from the 19th century to the 1990s, and its role in shaping linguistic boundaries and ethnic identities. The second section explores how the *ekavica* and *ijekavica* variants symbolize ethnic and moral identity, linking language to nationalism and racialized hierarchies. The third section explores how Serbs in Vukovar use linguistic “passing” to navigate ethnic stigma and identity in a post-conflict society. The fourth section examines how Vukovarian Serbs create an exemplary minority subjectivity through strategic linguistic choices, balancing decency, appeasement, and formality. The next section explores how Serbs become shifty minority subjects by using strategic language practises, humour, and identity manipulations to navigate and subvert ethnic and linguistic boundaries. The final section explores how Serbs become unruly minority subjects by refusing prescribed minority behaviours and embrace retrenchment into nationalist ideologies as a form of resistance to perceived assimilation.

THE EVOLUTION OF *ČISTI HRVATSKI*:

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Bosnian, Serbian, and Croatian are the official languages, a pack of cigarettes carries the same health warning three times: *pušenje ubija*, *pušenje ubija*, *пушење убија* (smoking kills) (Figure 18).⁵⁸ On May 9th, the anniversary of the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany, local anti-fascist activists parodied this linguistic absurdity with a mural reading: *nacionalizam ubija*, *nacionalizam ubija*, *национализам убија* (nationalism kills). Despite these efforts to free language from nationalist constraints, the nation-states that emerged from the ashes of multi-ethnic socialist Yugoslavia continue to treat these languages as separate, with the international community complicit in sustaining this division.

The Herderian belief that a nation requires its own language has a long history in the Balkan region, dating to the flourishing of the Croatian and Serbian literature languages in the 19th century, and is deeply rooted in social memory (Edwards 1985). However, given that the Yugoslav state was an ideological project favoured by elites, the Herderian conviction culminated in the signing of the Vienna Literary Agreement (*Bečki Književni Dogovor*) by Serb and Croat elites in 1850, which established, for the first time, the notion of one people, South Slavs, and one single language in

⁵⁸ Note that the last phrase, written in the Cyrillic alphabet, is identical to the previous two.

the region: Serbo-Croatian (Greenberg 2004: 9). As we will see, whenever the Yugoslav national project lost favour and other national projects gained momentum, the notion of a shared language became increasingly less popular.



Figure 18: A package of cigarettes borrowed from someone visiting from Bosnia.

When the Ustaša, a Croatian fascist movement, came to power in 1941 and formed the NDH, the notion of a Croatian language—which, along with the notion of the Serbian language, emerged in the mid-1800s—took a fascistic turn and, consequently, linguistic purism reached its violent culmination through the enactment of a series of laws and the establishment of a state service for the Croatian language. Kordić (2010: 16) notes that “the departure from Serbian and the cleansing of Croatian from ‘Serbianism’ were the basic themes of the Ustaša language policy.” After all, an important element of the Ustaša ideology was the negation of Serb-ness as a social category and identity altogether, which resulted, in addition to the mass murders and expulsions, in a state campaign of forced assimilation through conversions to Catholicism (Matijević 2024). According to Yeomans (2013: 263), “language purification was part of a wider mechanism of cultural politics aimed at the eradication of all traces of a Serb presence—and, from the point of view of the Ustasha movement, Serb contamination—in the state.” Thus, due to policies of linguistic purism as well as the genocidal violence perpetrated by the Ustaša during World War II, the lines of demarcation between the various peoples of the region became more pronounced (Bergholz 2016), which also manifested and reproduced itself on a linguistic level.

After World War II, the socialist government of Yugoslavia restored the idea of a unified language, solidifying this goal with the Novi Sad Agreement (*Novosadski Dogovor*) of 1954. Greenberg

(2004: 23) remarks “that this unity was achieved through compromise and tolerance of local language varieties, which enjoyed the same level of prestige throughout the country.” The state was divided between two linguistic centres, Belgrade and Zagreb, making “Serbo-Croatian” a pluri-centric language, characterised by competing standard norms. To solidify this linguistic project, the socialist government supported the production of a standardised orthography and a unified dictionary (Pupavac 2003). However, Bugarski (1997) argues that this unified language had a “weak internal identity,” and debates over the distinctiveness of local varieties grew increasingly contentious. In the mid-1960s, disputes between Serb and Croat academics over the dictionary project led to the Croatian Spring, a nationalist movement which extended well beyond linguistics. In fact, “protestors were demanding the recognition of the Croatian language as distinct, greater civil rights and the right to remember national histories” (McConnell 2021: 58). Tito’s government cracked down on the protests and many academics, including future Croatian president Franjo Tudjman, were imprisoned.

By the 1990s, when the Yugoslav state was collapsing, linguistic purism re-emerged as a manifestation of Croatian nationalism. In what Ugrešić (1998: 61) dubbed “the spirit of Mr Clean Croatian Air,” the newly independent state was, once again, actively cleansing itself of symbolic representations of the Serbs: inanimate representations such as monuments, curriculum, books, speech, and eventually Serbs themselves. As a result, the concept of *čisti hrvatski* as a linguistic form regained popularity. According to Greenberg (2004: 49) prescriptive manuals and books emerged in the 1990s, with the aim of coaching Croats how to speak Croatian properly. In what Bugarski (2001: 84) has called “artificial administrative Newspeak,” the cleansed Croatian language reintroduced archaic words as well as newly coined words in order to produce authenticity. The pressure to forget how one used to speak and adopt the newly cleansed Croatian vocabulary was immense and remains so today. Even Franjo Tudjman, the first president of Croatia and a key figure in coining new Croatian terms, struggled with consistency. In 1996, during a visit by US President Bill Clinton to Zagreb, Tudjman accidentally used the Serbian variant of the word for ‘happy’ (*srećan*) instead of the Croatian form (*sretan*). The minor slip was deemed so scandalous that it was edited out of all subsequent news reports in state-run media. In sociolinguistic terms, *čisti hrvatski* emerges as a language ideology of linguistic purism, defined as a, “set of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalisation or justification of perceived language structure and use” (Silverstein 1979: 193). However, Kordić (2010: 10) has criticised this linguistic purism used to set social boundaries, citing that, “linguistic purism is a tool which serves racist and nationalistic ideology.” In this context, *čisti hrvatski* emerges as a violent language ideology and a product of Croatian nationalism. It drives not only the “pest-controlling action” (Ugrešić 1998: 64) of the linguistic field, but also cleanses the national space of imagined Serb-ness and, by extension, real people.

HEARING ETHNICITY (AND MORALITY)?

In the field, I observed that the notion of a shared language between Croats and Serbs has been mostly erased from social memory, much like other unwanted histories that have been forgotten in post-conflict Vukovar (see Clark 2013). In my experience, those who do believe in a shared language are usually older people, born before the Croatian War of Independence. However, even they rarely express this belief publicly, often distinguishing between official views (*službeno mišljenje*) and personal opinions (*lično mišljenje*). These more nuanced beliefs were not transferred to members of the next generation—born after the war and educated in linguistically divided schools (see Chapter 3)—who deeply believe in the existence of two distinct languages. Most of my interlocutors seem to have forgotten how Vukovarian Serbs and Croats spoke during (and before) the socialist period—a particular Vukovarian dialect dominated by the *ekavica* variant and peppered with a blend of Croatian and Serbian vocabulary—before the bloodshed drew such sharp social cleavages. More importantly, nobody seems to understand that “languages spill over beyond the borders of peoples, nations, and states, regardless of how neatly its edges try to align and fold within them” (Čolović 2023: 174). Both Serb and Croat nationalists argue that both groups spoke distinct languages and that inauthentic homogenisation of the languages was imposed by the Yugoslav state. Kardov (2002) argues that, while some distinctions existed between Serb and Croat speech patterns before the war, these were never convincingly confirmed by scholars and certainly exaggerated by the destructive experiences of the 1990s. Some Croats adopted Zagrebian speech forms during their time in exile, while some Serbs in RSK mimicked the Belgradian speech forms to amplify their loyalty to the Serbian nation. However, Greenberg (1998: 714) notes that the complex processes of migration and population mixing in this region have led to linguistic assimilation between Serbs and Croats, thus undermining the notion of ethnic dialects altogether.

In the absence of clear phenotypical distinctions between ethnic groups, markers like religious symbols, tattoos (such as those worn by Croatian women in Herzegovina), circumcision (common among Muslim men), names, and linguistic cues become primary ways of signalling ethnic difference. However, neither names nor language can be fully relied upon as definitive markers of identity, as this chapter demonstrates. Language is highly malleable and can be strategically deployed, making it an unreliable indicator of ethnicity. While language may reveal regional affiliations or the social context of a speaker, it does not necessarily reflect their ethnic identity, as individuals from different ethnic groups may share the same linguistic practises or switch between languages based on context.

But how do linguistic forms become imbued with ethnic meaning and moral weight? Based on Agha’s (2005) concept of “linguistic enregisterment,” a process through which forms of language are granted cultural value, Rosa and Flores (2017: 631) theorise a racio-linguistic perspective in which “linguistic and racial forms are jointly constructed as sets and rendered mutually recognizable as named language/varieties and racial categories.” The processes through which forms of language become affiliated with models of personhood are embedded in the ideologies

of the speaking subjects. In the Croatian context, the language ideology of *čisti hrvatski* governs the linguistic register formation process through which—over time, through repetition, and institutional support—small features of language become emblematic of Serb-ness or Croat-ness.

Studies on the experiences of people in South-Eastern Europe primarily focus on ethnicity and nationhood, largely overlooking the concept of race, despite recent pushes to “think between the posts” (Verdery and Chari 2009). As Baker (2018: 1) notes, the Yugoslav region has been “entangled in global ‘raciality,’” leading to “shifting, ambiguous identifications with symbolic histories and geographies of race.” One such association is the perception of Europe as a space of modernity, civilisation, and whiteness (Mills 1997; Mignolo 2000), contrasted with the Balkans, which were imagined as spaces of “cruelty, boorishness, instability, and unpredictability” (Todorova 2009: 119). These hierarchical symbolic constructions are what critical race theorists have identified as racialised logic. While Serbs in Croatia are *not* racialised subjects in the same way as the Roma or recent immigrants, the interaction between the concepts of ethnicity and race in the construction of their subjectivity and their linguistic patterns is still framed by the global racial order and imperial knowledges. Mignolo and Tlostanova (2006: 210-211) highlight that this region is characterized more by imperial differences than by colonial ones, noting that the distinctions between this area and the West are more complex and fluid. This makes it challenging to understand such regions and their configurations from either Western or radical non-Western perspectives. However, imperial epistemic and political projects have nonetheless infiltrated the South-East European region, fixing ethnicized boundaries through racialized dimensions in a phenomenon Bakić-Hayden (1995) refers to as “nesting Orientalisms.” Race, as a “global structure of power, thought, and feeling” (Baker 2018: 16), is the mechanism through which different groups in the former Yugoslavia could be “qualified” as European based on their position on the “hegemonic Western scale” (Bakić-Hayden 1995: 924). As such, Croatian narratives which frame Croats as ‘European’ and Serbs not only as culturally, historically, and geographically different, but also as belonging to an inferior civilisation (Bellamy 2003: 68) are deeply embedded in global racial formations. Croats and the “Croatian” language are framed by Croatian nationalists as properly European and superior to the Byzantine Serbs, thus perpetuating Eurocentric understandings of language which have historically discredited and oppressed racialized speakers and their languages. The irredentism of local Serbs and the anti-Croat violence unleashed within the borders of Krajina only cemented the otherness of Serbs in Croatian society, imbuing speech forms not only with ethnic indexicality but also with notions of (im)morality.

According to Rosa and Flores (2017), the “racio-linguistic ideologies” which produce a distinction between pure and impure languages are also the ones which produce the racial and linguistic hierarchies of legitimacy which are central to modern subject formation and governance. In the Croatian context, it is more useful to think about “ethno-linguistic ideologies” since Croatian Serbs are ethnically rather than racially defined subjects, even if they are caught up in the global racial order. Research on this phenomenon has mostly focused on post-colonial contexts, but the same

processes are at work in nation-states which seek to define certain ethnicized forms of speech as more civilised or moral than others.

In Croatia, the *ekavica* variant of the language has become the most common socially recognized register of linguistic forms associated with Serbs and immorality while the *ijekavica* variant is associated with Croats and morality, despite the historical complexities and geographical diversities of these forms of speech. It is important to note that official orthographic rules for standard Serbian recognizes both the *ijekavica* and *ekavica* variants as correct forms of the language. In Croatia, however, only the *ijekavica* variant is considered correct.

“Serbian” *ekavica*: *Ona nosi belu haljinu* / She is wearing a white dress.

“Croatian” *ijekavica*: *Ona nosi bijelu haljinu* / She is wearing a white dress.

The nationalist fervour of the 1990s attempted to stamp out this linguistic diversity by drawing clear (ethnic) borders across the diverse linguistic landscape. In fact, Škiljan (2014) points out that, during the 1990s, *ekavica* was imposed on Serbs from regions where *ijekavica* was the most dominant form of speech by Serb nationalists who sought to enforce the Belgradian variant.⁵⁹ Croatian nationalists, on the other hand, pressured native *ekavica* speakers of Croatian ethnicity to become true patriots by switching to the *ijekavica* variant (Greenberg 2004: 166). Such is the pressure to demonstrate linguistic patriotism that scholars have noted some cases of hypercorrection in Croats who emigrated in the 1990s from the ekavian region of Kosovo to the ijekavian region of Slavonia; the letters *ij* were being added to words that do not require it (*zijec* for ‘rabbit’ instead of *zec*, for instance) (Jurlina 2019: 18). While the *ekavica/ijekavica* variants might have become the quickest way to *hear* ethnicity, other ethnicized variations in speech are more subtle and require a more attuned ear to identify. In an attempt to simplify matters which have been complexified beyond measure, I have selected some relevant “similarities” and “differences” between Croatian and Serbian highlighted in Langston and Peti-Stantić’s (2014) book and compiled them into the following table:

	Croatian	Serbian	English
Orthography			
	kuća	kyĥa/kuća	house
	Shakespeare	Šekspir	Shakespeare

⁵⁹ There is much debate about the “authentic” linguistic variants of Serbs from across Croatia, since these practices have evolved throughout history as a result of migrations and, more recently, state linguistic policies of purism. While Serbs from the regions of Kordun, Banovina/Banija, and Lika were traditionally speakers of *ijekavica* (the same as their Croat neighbours), the Serbs from regions such as Baranja, Eastern Syrmia and most of Eastern Slavonia were commonly speakers of *ekavica*.

Phonology			
	mlijeko	mleko	milk
	kuhati	kuvati	to cook
	stol	sto	table
	s prijateljem	sa prijateljem	with a friend
	pomoći ⁶⁰	pomoći	to help
	labirint	lavirint	labyrinth
Morphology			
	suvremen	savremen	contemporary
	profesorica	profesorka	professor (fem.)
	anarhist	anarhista	anarchist
	jezični	jezički	linguistic
	informirati	informisati	to inform
Syntax			
	Oni ne žele doći.	Oni ne žele da dodju.	They don't want to come.
Lexicon ⁶¹			
	kruh	hleb	bread

The above table was also included in order to illustrate how tricky it could be to navigate between Serbian and Croatian, given that some of the noted differences are so minuscule as to be only audible to the learned ear of locals. Along with the *ekavica* variant, the use of the Cyrillic alphabet has become a leading symbol of Serb-ness and stigma across Croatia, but with particular significance in Vukovar. Despite the fact that both the Latin and Cyrillic alphabets have been used

⁶⁰ I wanted to highlight this particularly minute difference, since it is only a question of accentuation.

⁶¹ This chapter focuses on the linguistic markers of Serb-ness in Eastern Slavonia. However, linguistic indicators of ethnic identity can vary across different geographical regions of Croatia due to the country's incredibly diverse linguistic landscape. For example, in Dalmatia, vocabulary considered "Serbian" in Eastern Slavonia is commonly used by the majority population and is not considered a marker of Serb-ness. In contrast, *ekavica* and the use of the Cyrillic script are more consistent and dominant markers of Serb-ness across Croatia, though the social consequences of using these markers can vary depending on the local and regional context.

in Croatia and Serbia throughout history, the Cyrillic alphabet has become emblematic of Serbian language and nationalism since the 1990s (Šarić and Radanović Felberg 2017).



Figure 19: An anti-nationalist and inclusive graffiti near downtown Vukovar that reads “Vukovar for everyone” (*Vukovar za sve*) with the last word (everyone) written in Cyrillic. The Cyrillic part had been crossed out by someone, implying disagreement with the message and the rejection of Cyrillic.

TO PASS OR NOT TO PASS:

Mila, a shy young woman in her early twenties, told me of the countless instances of bullying she was subjected to as a young child due to her ethnic identity.

“One of the worst experiences in my life occurred when I was in the fifth grade. I had won a competition at my school and was sent to the county competition, where I befriended a Croat girl from another school. We both advanced to the state-level competition but, by that time, things had changed dramatically between us. In the meantime, she had somehow figured out that I was a Serb. She refused to sit on the bus with me and didn’t want to tell me why she suddenly hated me. Then, she suddenly exclaimed, ‘people, there’s a Serb on the bus!’ (*ljudi, imamo srpkinju u autobusu*) to which none of the adults reacted. I was so ashamed.”

Mila’s experience of ethnic bullying was but one of many such stories I heard during my fieldwork. What I found especially interesting was the fact that so many Serbs were confronted with shame of their ethnic identity very early on in life. The need to develop a set of skills to manoeuvre their stigma so early is also reinforced by the indifference—or helplessness—of the adults around them, which implies that the discrimination is perceived as somehow justifiable, tolerable, or inevitable.

According to Goffman (1963: 5), some stigmatised individuals attempt to negotiate their “spoiled identities” or “undesired differentness” by adopting the management technique of ‘passing’ in order to minimise social tension. Given that these performances are, “socialised, moulded, and modified to fit into the understanding and expectations of the society in which it is presented,” they are often idealised cultural performances (Goffman 1959: 35). They entail trespassing social—even legal—boundaries of identities which are traditionally conceptualised as natural and essentialist, thus engendering political anxieties of their own. However, it has been suggested that passing is not only motivated by the desire to rid oneself of an identity of an oppressed group for social or economic gain; the motive for passing is often complex and ambiguous, pursuing many different kinds of advantages (Ginsberg 1996). It must be emphasised that the “management of undisclosed discrediting information about the self” (Goffman 1963: 42) is motivated by a desire to evade the effects of ideologies which rationalise one’s inferiority, making passing an attempt to “be more truly themselves” (Kroeger 2003: 2) or “a strategy to be a person” (Cutter 1996: 75).

The ability of passers to disrupt the violence they are subjected to is disputed. According to Bhabha (1984: 122), passing (or ‘mimicry,’ in his words) is an “ironic compromise” or a “double articulation” because it both reinforces colonial discourse and challenges it. In fact, “its threat comes from the prodigious and strategic production of conflictual, fantastic, discriminatory ‘identity effects’ in the play of a power that is elusive because it hides no essence, no itself” (Bhabha 1984: 129). In other words, passing can be perceived as a dangerous transgression because it disrupts the ontology of identity categories, destabilises the assumption that what is visible is an “epistemological guarantee,” and exposes the fragility of status and hierarchy (Ginsberg 1996: 4). If differences can be masked or made invisible, then this endangers the legitimacy of the “hegemonic cultural imaginary” of the empowered group (Garber 1992).

In the tradition of Goffman (1963), literature on passing has focused on the negotiation of highly stigmatised identities and has become broad. It has included studies on the performances of urban African-Americans (Drake and Clayton 1945), the homeless (Anderson, Snow and Cress 1994), on individuals with HIV/AIDS (Weitz 1990), on individuals with learning disabilities (Rueda and Mehan 1986), on lesbians crossing ethnic lines (Moraga 1983), on the practises of bisexual women (Lingel 2009), on Holocaust survivors (Stein 2009), to name just a few. More recently, studies on passing have emphasised the importance of adopting a wider understanding of the concept, which would encompass negotiations of less controversial identities in everyday life in order to better reflect the complexities of modern life and the fluidity of identities (Renfrow 2004).

My study of the techniques utilised by the Serb community in Vukovar to negotiate their identity is more in line with the traditional approach of passing as a method of managing stigma. Given that Serbs’ difference is not defined by an “epidermal schema” (Fanon 1986: 112), passing has become a linguistic performance embedded in ethno-linguistic ideologies which produce the

positivist belief that language is—here, ethnically—embodied (Rosa 2019).⁶² In other words, if Goffman (1963: 48) speaks about the visibility of the stigma of others being an important factor, then the case of Croatian Serbs reveals the importance of a particular kind of visible stigma: one that is *audible*. Passing then becomes a matter of shifting from one register to another, much like the linguistic practices of women, or “women’s language,” described by Lakoff (1975: 7), which “requires special awareness to the nuances of social situations, special alertness to possible disapproval.” It is no wonder then that processes of passing which require so much hypervigilance have been described as “emotionally charged” (Renfrow 2004: 502) or “very stressful if not traumatic” (Matsunaga 2007: 231).

It must be noted that my interlocutors’ decisions concerning passing (or not) were always anchored in strategic decision-making concerning particular situations and people, or everyday life circumstances. “Speaking like a Croat” was at times performed in order to demonstrate one’s willingness to respectfully perform minority subjectivity. Other times, slipping in and out of ethnicized registers is strategically employed as a survival mechanism or even as a method of criticising the social world around them. Or, adopting an unapologetic approach to linguistic performance, in this case “speaking like a Serb,” speaks to the countless processes of identity formation at work. All in all, the decision to pass or not to pass, or to adopt some kind of middle-ground approach, reveals much about the power dynamics at play in Vukovar and the process of minority subject formation.

EXEMPLARY MINORITY SUBJECTS: ON DECENCY, INCONSPICUOUSNESS AND FORMALITY

On New Year's Eve, I had decided to accompany Ksenija, a forty-something Serb woman and her group of close friends to *Mornar*, a well-known Serb-owned restaurant located on the picturesque bank of the Danube River. The restaurant was booked solid, indicating the readiness of the Vukovarian Serb community to get back to normal after months of strict COVID regulations that prevented such gatherings. Between numerous courses of local delicacies, my party pulled me into endless spirited *kolo* dances and sang along to popular folk music whose lyrics everyone, apart from me, seemed to know by heart. It was on this joyous occasion that I made the acquaintance of Slobodan, a middle-aged Serb, and the husband of one of Ksenija’s closest friends. At the time, he was working for a successful foreign firm, and one of the few people I had spoken with who were immensely satisfied with their income and career prospects in Vukovar. After hearing about my research, he proudly told me the following:

⁶² The avoidance of certain gestures and body language associated with Serb-ness can also function as a form of passing, though this was largely absent in my interlocutors’ accounts, who emphasized language instead. Ethnographic studies in Vukovar (Kardov 2002) and Sarajevo (Golubović 2020) show that Serbs may avoid using the thumb, index, and middle fingers to indicate the number three, as well as the traditional practice of kissing three times on the cheeks in greetings. My interlocutors likely engage in strategic avoidance or negotiations of body language as well, but the local emphasis on language may reflect its heightened political significance in Vukovar following the 2013 anti-Cyrillic riots.

“I never had any problems at work as a Serb. I choose not to stand out (*ne ističem se*), but if someone were to directly ask me, I would tell them. Everyone wished me a Merry Christmas on December 25th and I thanked them but reminded them that I celebrate Christmas a little later. [...] I speak pure Croatian (*čisti hrvatski*) at work, I never slip [into *ekavica*]. In high school, I was always the best in my class in Croatian language. Sometimes when I hang out with my Serb friends, I have to be careful not to slip into *ijekavica* because I am so accustomed to speaking it at work.”

In Vukovar, as well as the rest of Croatia, the belief that ethnicity is audible is widespread, making most people highly attuned to listening for linguistic differences. Due to the enormous social pressure to speak the official language of the Croatian state and the stigma associated with symbols related to Serb-ness, some Vukovarian have opted to alter the way that they speak to accommodate their new life in an independent Croatian state. During my fieldwork, and much like other social scientists researching the concept of ‘passing,’ I found that many of my interlocutors chose to speak *čisti hrvatski* in order to gain some kind of social or economic advantage, while others did so to avoid a potentially uncomfortable or even dangerous situation with a member of the majority population. Interestingly, however, some individuals have told me that they opted for this linguistic performance because they think it is the right thing to do (*iz pristojnosti*).

The pride that Slobodan feels in his grasp of *čisti hrvatski* and his ability to seamlessly switch registers is evident in the vignette, even more so when he seemingly downplays his linguistic proficiency in Serbian. It is clear that, for Slobodan, discursive dexterity is a sign of competence, intelligence, and ability; it is a way to claim a certain kind of superiority in a context that seeks to constantly devalue him and people like him. At the same time, Slobodan’s claim that he is prone to accidentally slipping into *ijekavica* in the presence of Serbs is an example of what Bauman (1991, 184) calls “disclaimers of performance,” which are “instances where speakers may not wish to take full responsibility to their audiences for a display of communicative competence”. This is particularly interesting for social scientists seeking to understand the dynamics of performance. It is entirely plausible that Slobodan, who switches registers on a daily basis, makes such errors from time to time. However, instead of highlighting how embarrassing it can be to slip into *ijekavica* when surrounded by Serbs, he is seemingly proud of the fact that he is more likely to slip into *ijekavica* and make errors when speaking Serbian than to slip into *ekavica* at work and compromise his perceived fluency in Croatian. It is evident that Slobodan is aware of the social capital associated with proficiency in Croatian in Vukovar, which is also necessary to access more prestigious job opportunities. Through this kind of metacommentary on his register-switching abilities, Slobodan is formulating not only a statement on his competence but also on his belonging to the Croatian state; he is actively forging an emblematic link between his discursive practices and his allegiance to an associated national belonging. He is indexing himself as belonging to both

the Serb ethnic category and the Croatian citizen category, a dichotomy many Vukovarian Serbs have trouble navigating.

Furthermore, it should be highlighted that Slobodan and many other Serbs who share his discursive ability and tendency do not believe that they are engaging in passing, because their ethnicity is only passively or temporarily being concealed or downplayed. This could be better described as a practice of “covering” (Goffman 1963). In fact, in certain situations, engaging in this skilled linguistic performance is considered an acceptable and even *moral* practice by many in the Serb community of Vukovar. This is particularly the case for Serbs, like Slobodan, who are employed by Croats in the private sector. On numerous occasions, the decision to speak *čisti hrvatski* has been formulated to me as a matter of decency (*pristojnost*). Many Vukovarian Serbs argued that, since they are a national minority in Croatia and that the official language is Croatian, they must abide by these “rules” because it is the decent thing to do. Slava, another friend of Ksenija, stressed that speaking *čisti hrvatski* in some contexts was what made her an exemplary citizen.

“I pay all my taxes and I respect the rules of my native country (*matična zemlja*). When I walk into a hospital or a police station, I speak in *ijekavica*. When I’m home, I only speak in *ekavica*. [...] It was about fifteen years ago, in a hair salon, when someone corrected me for the last time. They told me it was *škare* (scissors) and not *makaze* (scissors).⁶³ I immediately put them in their place, they had no business correcting me!”

These experiences shed light on one of the disciplinary technologies of the nationalist state which defines the everyday order-of-things in Vukovar. To abide by these unwritten linguistic rules of (what has become a matter of) morality is, according to Slava, what makes her a “good” citizen. The nation-state has become so efficient in disciplining its subjects that it could, through subtle coercion, get away with what Foucault (1975) calls “an infinitesimal power over the active body” by controlling the subject’s movements, gestures and even attitudes. Both Slobodan and Slava’s stories demonstrate how these nationalist disciplinary mechanisms have created new normative notions of personhood which orbit around the concepts of the nation. In fact, these mechanisms are so effective that they are no longer required: the citizens discipline themselves and each other. A national minority is expected to *act*—here, speak—in a particular way when it is confronted with the nation-state.

⁶³ The person Slava was interacting with considers *škare* to be the authentic Croatian variant while *makaze* is considered the Serbian variant. My mother had an almost identical experience in Beli Manastir in the late 1990s. She responded by telling her interlocutor that the authentic Croatian variant is *nožice*, an archaic term used by her grandmother who was born in a predominantly Croatian village in the region of Lika. Her interlocutor had nothing to say, since proximity to Zagreb was considered the trump card of Croatian linguistic authenticity at the time. These examples demonstrate just how subjective and contingent processes of linguistic authentication can be.

Traditionally, the term “*matična zemlja*” (native country, homeland/motherland) is a discursive construction that representatives of national minorities use to refer to the historical homeland. So, in the case of Croatian Serbs, *matična zemlja* would be used to refer to Serbia. This “triangular configuration” (Brubaker 1995) between the national minority, the newly nationalizing state in which it lives, and the external nation-state to which it is ethnoculturally related, creates a highly interdependent relational nexus. The concept of *matična zemlja* is a political category, one that is constructed and not a given. It is problematic, since it shifts the responsibility for the minority community from the state they live in to some imagined relation to a kin state. In this ethnographic excerpt, it is interesting to see that Slava is actively resisting this association with Serbia and refers to Croatia as her *matična zemlja*.⁶⁴ Furthermore, Slava’s story about the incident at the hair salon exemplifies an attempt to regain a certain amount of control over the boundaries of her social categorization and the reach of the power of the state. Slava’s indignance at being policed at a hair salon is contrasted by her readiness to police herself in what she considers state institutions. By asserting that a member of the majority population cannot correct her speech in a hair salon, a commercial locale and not, in her mind, within the bounds of state institutions, she is pushing back against the limited space offered to minorities by the nation-state.

I was told that speaking Serbian in state institutions could be considered an attempt to deliberately stand out (*isticati se*) and provoke others, a perception many of my interlocutors who preferred to speak *čisti hrvatski* wanted to avoid. In fact, Ahmed (2012: 157) argues that, in the case of racialized minority staff at a university in the UK, “the need to legitimise your existence can require that you actively reduce rather than increase your visibility.” In the Vukovarian context, the desire to be inconspicuous in certain situations is amplified by the particular kind of collective stigma carried by local Serbs. Brubaker et al. (2006) observe a similar phenomenon of self-policing among the Hungarian minority in Romania, arguing, however, that the overemphasis on relatively infrequent instances of policing of minorities’ linguistic practices by the majority population leads to anticipatory self-policing. Indeed, the desire not to provoke and to downplay one’s difference was communicated to me countless times by my interlocutors, regardless of age or gender. Rather than being the result of the circulation of over-embellished stories, I argue that there exists a deep awareness of how Croatian political elites have historically associated Serb-ness with stereotypes of being “uncivilised, non-Western and savage” (Zambelli 2010: 1664), as well as with Croatian suffering. In fact, Sokolić (2017: 796) notes that the Serb community is often seen as “taking advantage of their unique status in Croatia, granted to them by an open multi-ethnic state.” For many, the decision to police one’s speech is about minimising one’s difference and avoiding uncomfortable situations, particularly in interactions with members of the majority who may have lost loved ones during the War of Croatian Independence.

Through the semiotic process of “iconization,” defined as “the attribution of cause and immediate necessity to a connection that may only be historical, contingent, or conventional” (Irvine and Gal

⁶⁴ I owe this important point to my colleague Nina Čolović.

2000: 37), *čisti hrvatski* has become, as a linguistic form, a social signifier of formality through the recognition and repetition of its use in particular contexts. According to Abercrombie (2018: 755), “the standard is understood as prestigious, not merely uniform, and thus appears neutral and common-sensical.” Thus, not only is it considered inappropriate to employ any minoritized language in formal situations or settings, but minoritized people are considered less capable if they are not able to adequately reproduce this formal speech form. This is, for instance, the case for Romani students in Croatia who have been treated as linguistically impaired compared to their Croat peers and segregated into separate classrooms (Kunac et al. 2023). The use of Serbian, however, could be interpreted as not only inappropriate but also offensive, given the association of the language (and Cyrillic script) with Serb violence in the context of Vukovar (Sokolić 2017; Šarić & Radanović Felberg 2017). Anxiety over language proficiency and legitimacy was exemplified by Lazar, a twenty-something young Serb from Borovo, who continuously used *čisti hrvatski* during our meetings, despite my own inconsistent linguistic patterns.⁶⁵ He explained that he considered my research a formal matter, which required him to speak in a formal manner. In the Croatian context, which is defined by its preconceptions about the nexus of language and nation, as well as the production of *čisti hrvatski* as a particular language ideology, to speak the pure national language is to speak both formally and morally.

It became evident to me that the reasons for speaking *čisti hrvatski*—whether out of decency, appeasement, or formality—were still rooted in concerns about “discreditation” (Goffman 1963), given that Serbs’ difference is not immediately apparent. Fear, however, was not readily acknowledged by my interlocutors. For instance, Milica, a thirty-something Serb woman from Borovo, told me that she does not even switch registers (*prešaltati se*) to Serbian with her Serb colleagues at work, even if they are alone or on break, worrying that she might confuse herself and end up in an embarrassing situation. Similarly, Ksenija, whom we met earlier, confessed that she had a “cheat sheet” with common Croatian words hidden at work, worried about being rebuked by a customer for making a mistake. Both Milica and Ksenija framed their precautions not as expressions of fear, but as habits they had simply adapted to over time. While I take their claims of not being afraid seriously, I also recognize that the care they invest in these strategies reflects a form of careful management, not complete indifference. Their actions suggest a deliberate and practical navigation of their tense environment, rather than an absence of stress. This indicates that their actions—though not driven by an overt sense of fear—are shaped by an awareness of the risks of social missteps and the need to safeguard their position. In other words, their language

⁶⁵ My own linguistic repertoire escapes nationalist linguistic categorization, reflecting my borderland identity and refugee life trajectory. While I have always consistently used *ekavica* and favoured Serbian syntactic structures, I switch back and forth between Croatian and Serbian lexical choices. This is partly a reflection of the speech patterns in my home region of Baranja, which straddles Serbia and Hungary and has always been ethnically and linguistically diverse (see Greenberg 1998). Having completed my primary, secondary, and university education in Canada, I cannot convincingly switch registers. More often than not, my speech has been labelled as Croatian when I am in Serbia and Serbian when I am in Croatia.

strategies reflect a calculated and pragmatic effort to maintain smooth, unchallenged interactions in a context that has historically been marked by ethnic tension.

Whatever the motivation for speaking *čisti hrvatski*, the decision to do so also signals a degree of acquiescence to one's minoritised position in Croatian society. Being an exemplary minority subject means consistently speaking the purified Croatian language in public spaces while relegating the minoritised Serbian language to the private sphere, behind closed doors. Like Dzenovska (2018: 76), whose research focused in part on Russian-speakers in Latvia, I was repeatedly unsettled by scenes of minoritized people being made into, "submissive, anxious, and eager subjects." This kind of attitude is encouraged in the Croatian context, where the discourse of multicultural tolerance, perceived as a marker of desirable European-ness, has been embraced by the Brussels-oriented government. However, critiques of the discourse of tolerance as a "form of symbolic violence" (Hage 2000: 87), an "ideology and practice of governance" (Povinelli 2002: 6), as "stranger fetishism" (Ahmed 2000: 97), or as "civilisational discourse" (Brown 2006: 6) are abundant. In other words, the mantra of tolerance cements supremacist structures into place, locking the empowerment of the "tolerant" and the subjectification of the "tolerated" into place. In an attempt to make everyday life liveable, Vukovarian Serbs are making themselves into exemplary and tolerable subjects, confirming their position as subordinate to the dominant "managers of national space" (Hage 2000: 91). The depth of the state's disciplinary power is particularly evident when it is entirely absent in the aforementioned ethnographic excerpts; some Vukovarian Serbs are able to police themselves into behaving like desirable minorities.

By acknowledging the existence of a pure Croatian language, the concept of a pure Serbian language is also implied—a notion my interlocutors fully accept and employ. In fact, similar patterns of nationalist linguistic purifications are currently at work in Serbia and have been documented (see Greenberg 2004; Jovanović 2018). Thus, while these linguistic performances position Vukovarian Serbs as disempowered minority subjects, they also demonstrate their agency in reinforcing the nationalist ideology shaping their identities. While they have acquiesced to their minority status in Croatia, they rarely question the theoretical basis of this disempowerment. In this context, the decision to strategically "come out" as a Serb in certain situations can be seen as both an affirmation of the social categories that structure their world and a form of empowerment. Goffman (1963: 100) argues that voluntary disclosure allows individuals to shift from being "a discreditable person" to "a discredited one," opening up the possibility of adaptive strategies for the stigmatized. The decision to "come out" (*autovati se*) before one is "outed," thus be a strategy of empowerment in a disadvantaged position. For example, Dajana, a twenty-something Serb woman, told me she passed as a Croat while studying in Osijek until an acquaintance told her she could never be friends with a Serb. Outraged, Dajana revealed her ethnicity, and they never spoke again. However, not all "coming out" moments are so dramatic; often, others catch on through slips or intentional decisions to be less careful—what Goffman (1963: 101) calls "disclosure etiquette."

While in the field, I have encountered individuals who have permanently renounced any identification with Serb-ness and have adopted an alternative group identity. Some of these individuals chose to identify as members of the majority population, while others have opted to identify as members of another minority group. Hofman (2005) has noted such an encounter with a Zagrebian woman who, after the end of the war, renounced her identification with Serb-ness and opted to identify herself as a Jew. Similarly, Henkel and Šakaja (2009) have demonstrated that many Serbs from the Banovina/Banija region have identified the Baptist Church as an ethnic “niche of neutrality.” However, given the amount of prejudice these individuals face from the Serb community, the precarious position they inhabit with the majority Croat population, and the danger of reifying ethnic groups by analysing “permanent” transitions from one group to another, I have opted not to take on these cases in my dissertation.

SHIFTY MINORITY SUBJECTS: ON FINDING A MIDDLE GROUND

Sofija, whom we met in the introduction of this chapter, happily exclaimed that she had no problem working in Croat-owned businesses and had countless Croat friends. However, as we began our conversation at *Kibic Fenster*, a café-bar located on the outskirts of Vukovar and frequented by an ethnically mixed “alternative”⁶⁶ crowd, she expressed discomfort about my choice of locale, preferring to meet at a Serb-owned café. The next time we met, at a café of her choosing, she was visibly more relaxed. When asked whether she switched registers at work, she proudly told me that she adopted some clever strategies to dissimulate her ethnic identity while also avoiding speaking *čisti hrvatski*.

“It’s the same language, really. But using *ijekavica* feels like a theft of my identity, like an act of betrayal to myself [...] At my old job, my boss, my co-workers, and almost all the customers were Croats, so I was careful with my words. I just avoided words that are different in Croatian. I tried to find a middle-ground... some neutral words. If someone ordered a coffee, I’d ask them, ‘with warm or cold?’ (*sa toplim ili hladnim*)”

In order to avoid using the word ‘milk’ (*mlijeko/mleko*) which differs between the two ethnicized registers, Sofija found a way out of the linguistic bind imposed on her. With her intimate familiarity with the intricacies of both “languages,” she has managed to “fashion linguistic escape routes from modes of discrimination” (Rosa 2019: 28). In his ethnographic exploration of the linguistic practices of American-Latino youths, Rosa (2019) revealed the subversive nature of their use of ‘inverted Spanglish’ and the ways in which they called into question the notions of

⁶⁶ *Kibic Fenster* was the only café-bar in town which played rock music instead of what musician Rambo Amadeus pejoratively called “turbo-folk,” also known as pop-folk, *narodnjaci*, or *cajke*, a type of folk music characterised by heavy accordion and considered by urban dwellers as “mass-produced, low-quality and representative of a village mentality which has polluted cities/society” (Grujić 2006, quoted in Baker 2016: 138). This locale attracts a more open-minded crowd and becomes one of the rare Vukovar spaces claimed by both Serbs and Croats.

monolingualism and bilingualism. Similarly, by strategically leaving out symbols of stigma, i.e. words which index Serb-ness, Sofija is not only perforating linguistic and ethnic boundaries but calling their existence into question altogether. In this context, Sofija's self-protective actions reveal the fragility of the sociolinguistic scaffolding which annex phonologies and lexicons with social identities. Her subtle practices reveal that the emperor wears no clothes, so to speak.

The strategic uses of register-switching continued to surprise me during my time in Vukovar. One afternoon, while having coffee with Ksenija, whom we met earlier, at *Maritimo*, a popular local Serb-owned café in the heart of Vukovar, she received a call from a close friend who was returning from Zagreb by train. Ksenija excused herself, explaining that her friend had had an important doctor's appointment and she wanted to hear how it had gone. After the call, Ksenija returned to her seat, looking amused.

Ksenija: "She said that it went well. But she was clearly not alone in the wagon, so she couldn't talk."

Dragana: "Oh. How do you know that she wasn't alone?"

Ksenija, laughing: "She spoke to me in *ijekavica*, of course!"

Ksenija and her friend use *čisti hrvatski* to signal that members of the majority population are within earshot and that they must censor themselves. This is another way in which this stigmatised group attempts to, "contest, reimagine, and redefine ethno-racial, geopolitical, and linguistic borders" (Rosa 2019: 8). Their ability to navigate and manipulate the linguistic landscape becomes second nature—almost an inside joke. Through their playful engagement with linguistic categories, Ksenija and her friend reveal that national categories are not fixed, but rather fluid, "interactional resources to display, align with, or contest particular social positionings" (Suzuki 2009: 149). In this case, they mock the hierarchal imposition of national categories while still aligning themselves with Serb-ness. Like the Laotian American girls observed by Bucholtz (2009), Ksenija and her friend participate in and resist the terms imposed on them by language ideology. In a context where ethnic stereotypes shape access and opportunity, these moments of agency are significant.

During my fieldwork, I noticed that humour plays an important role in identity construction for the minoritized Serb community in Vukovar. Anthropological literature demonstrates how humour can serve the purpose of cementing social categories (Apte 1985; Dundes 1987; Duara 1996), while other scholars have shown that humour can unsettle dominant narratives and hierarchies (Flint 2001; Kuus 2008; Macpherson 2008; Dodds and Kirby 2013; Wedeen 2013; Ridanpää 2014; Petrović 2018; Bhungalia 2020). One afternoon, while having coffee with Draga, a middle-aged Serb woman, in the popular Serb-owned café *Living* in Borovo, the topic of humour as a "socially acceptable painkiller" (Oushakine 2011: 655) came up. She shared how her husband, known for

his good humour, handles prejudice about his Serb-ness. His work requires him to make house calls across the county, which can be tricky given his stigmatised identity.

“He was working in the home of an elderly Croat woman in [censored, village] who started ranting about how much she hates Serbs. My husband, being the jokester that he is, joined her and ruthlessly raved against Serbs too! When the woman asked him where he was from, he told her he was from [censored, Serb village]. She was speechless!”

He exploited the perceived “authenticity” of his *ijekavica*, which happens to be the linguistic variant commonly spoken by Serbs from his village, allowing the woman to assume that he was a Croat. She immediately realised her mistake when he revealed which village he was from. For comedic performances to resonate with their audience, they must draw on shared ideologies—here, those of language practice and community membership (Chun 2009). The humour arises from the husband’s clever exploitation of the social significance attached to speech forms to trick the prejudiced woman, combined with the ironic reversal of expectations about who is insulting whom. The sudden revelation of his ethnicity undercuts her assumptions and forces her to confront her own prejudice. As Wedeen (2013: 864) notes, humour can be emancipatory because it creates, “potential for world-creating openings by pointing out everyday life’s absurdities.” In the prank narrated above, the woman’s realization is both comical and uncomfortable, as it highlights the absurdity of ethnic stereotypes based on something as arbitrary as language. As Bhungalia (2020: 391) reminds us, “humour must be understood within a broader economy of power and violence.” In this interaction, Draga’s husband shifts the power dynamics by using the prejudiced woman’s biases against her, not only deflecting conflict but also undermining the power structures that give her authority as a member of the majority population.

However, Draga’s husband did not spare local Serb nationalists from his pranks and mocked them as well. She shared the following story:

“Once, he rang the doorbell of a Serb house. Nobody answered, but he could see through the window an elderly woman frantically running around the living room, trying to take down a Serbian flag hanging on the wall. Before she managed to take it down, he opened the front door. He gasped and shouted, ‘What are you doing with that *četnik* flag?!’ The old woman just stood there sheepishly until he told her he was a Serb too!”

The woman’s frantic attempt to hide the flag suggests an over-the-top form of nationalism, fuelled by fear and insecurity tied to her ethnic identity—something Draga’s husband both mocks and exploits. He mocks both the nationalism and the paranoia that can accompany nationalist symbols in post-conflict societies where they carry heavy political and emotional baggage. He uses his

flawless *ijekavica* to pass for a Croat who catches her behaving like a disloyal subject. While scholars have conceptualised minority nationalism as a tool for minorities to resist disempowerment at the hands of the majority (Kymlicka and Straehle 1999; Keating and McGarry 2001; Roach 2005; May 2008; Oakes and Warren 2007; Jamal 2011), Kiš (1974) offers a different lens, viewing nationalism as “collective and individual paranoia” driven by “envy and fear.” From this perspective, the elderly woman’s quiet, everyday nationalism is particularly jarring. Despite being in a marginalized position, she participates in the same ethnic exclusivity and nationalism that helped fuel the very conflict she has suffered from in the first place. Most importantly, it is his familiarity with ethnic symbols—whether flags, language, or historical allegiances—that allow him to navigate the terrain and perform identity play. By accusing the woman of displaying a *Četnik* flag, Draga’s husband is using language to strategically manipulate its symbolic value. The term *Četnik* itself, when used in this context, is charged with power. Draga’s husband strategically reclaims this power through language to make the woman feel uncomfortable and to expose the fluidity of ethnic categories and the ambiguous nature of identity in post-conflict settings.

In the end, he brings her in on the joke and she is also able to laugh with him. As members of a disempowered group, they are both able to use humour as, “a way to process the pain of displacement, dehumanisation, and [ethnic] violence” (Bhungalia 2020: 394). However, as Hill (1998, cited in Chun 2009: 278) noted, “practices that invoke laughter, and that are thus defined as humorous, can still reproduce hierarchies of race and other social axes.” I argue that these pranks, made possible through intricate linguistic performance, while they subvert and question ethnic identities and national symbols, also have the potential to reinforce ethnic categories. Sofija’s strategic navigation of the linguistic landscape, Ksenija and her friend’s bending of coercive linguistic ideologies to their personal advantage, and the pranks played by Draga’s husband all reveal the ways in which subjugated groups are able to maintain social categories in place, but also manipulate the linguistic “rules” imposed on them in order to, “smiling and laughing,” not only “turn away from power” (Coulthard 2014, cited in Bhungalia 2020: 390) but also regain control of their self-narrative.

UNRULY MINORITY SUBJECTS: ON THE REFUSAL OF ČISTI HRVATSKI

Early in my fieldwork, I met Marko, a young man from an ethnically mixed background. His initial nervousness about participating in my study was made apparent through his constant fidgeting. To my surprise, a few minutes into our conversation, he leaned over to glance at my notes and asked me if I was writing in Cyrillic, testing my loyalty, and belonging to the Serbian nation. “I only use Cyrillic,” he proudly told me, and he proved this by using it in all our future communications. I explained that while Cyrillic was the first alphabet I had learned, I was no longer proficient enough and was writing my notes in English. Reassured by my answer, he relaxed and eventually opened up, revealing just how much he lived his life separately from the majority population.

“I don’t associate with Croats. I have no Croat friends and I don’t make an effort to come into contact with them. My mechanic is a Serb. My hairdresser is a Serb. Everyone in my life that I have any kind of contact with, they’re all Serbs. I’m not saying there aren’t normal Croats... but they’re rare. I say hello to some acquaintances when I bump into them on the street, but that’s it. I don’t live with them, I live next to them (*živim pored njih*).”

After our conversation, Marko offered to give me a tour of the city, pointing out historical remnants of Cyrillic in Franje Tuđmana street in the old town (Figure 20). To him, these symbols were proof that Serbs had continuously inhabited Vukovar and that Cyrillic was not an import from Serbia, as Croat far-right politicians would have tourists believe. I found it striking that the most extreme declaration of “separation” (Berry 2005) from the majority population I had encountered came from someone with a “mixed” background. He refuses to “integrate” by speaking *čisti hrvatski* in public spaces or conforming to the expectations placed on minorities. Instead, he prefers to live a parallel life, next to the majority population. In doing so, he enacts an unruly subjectivity—one that threatens to unsettle the ‘multicultural’ veneer of the Croatian state.



Figure 20: One of several Austro-Hungarian era buildings in downtown Vukovar bearing the name of Aleksa Paunović in the Cyrillic script, honouring the prominent 19th-century Vukovarian Serb landowner

and entrepreneur who financed the construction of the oldest part of the town. Due to regulations concerning the preservation of historical heritage, these Cyrillic plaques cannot be removed.

One summer afternoon during my fieldwork in Vukovar, I was walking down Josipa Jurja Strossmayera street in deep conversation with a friend when we were suddenly interrupted by a dramatic scene unfolding in front of us. An angry man stormed out of a shop, his teenage son in tow, shouting, “As far as I’m aware, in Croatia, everyone should be speaking Croatian!” It was unclear whether his anger was directed at a member of the Serb national minority, another minority, or even a Croat who had misspoken. However, what was unmistakable was the underlying expectation, shared by many nationalists, that *čisti hrvatski* should be the only language heard on the streets of Croatia. This incident highlights a broader social pressure that transcends formal state mechanisms. While Croatia does not have a law like Latvia’s State Language Law—which enforces official state language proficiency in certain professions through coercive measures such as surveillance and punishment (Dzenovska 2018)—the pressure to conform to linguistic norms is nonetheless powerful.⁶⁷ In fact, intense social coercion often renders state-enforced disciplinary measures unnecessary.⁶⁸ Members of the majority population are not exempt from this collective pressure. In fact, I have often heard from my interlocutors that their Croat acquaintances had confessed to them, after a few drinks, about the pressure to speak *čisti hrvatski* and to abandon all association with Serbs. Thus, the decision of members of a stigmatised minority group to resist this intense social pressure can be understood as a refusal to bend to the expectations of the nation in the nation-state, making it an interesting socially and politically productive act.

Most studies on “passing” assume that stigmatised individuals try to manage their problematic identity through concealment (Goffman 1963; Renfrow 2004). However, recent literature suggests that decisions about “passing,” “becoming ethnic,” and navigating identity categories are far more complex (Waters 1990; Portes and Hao 2002; Song 2003; Matsunaga 2007; Khanna and Johnson 2010). For example, Grosswirth Kachtan (2017: 721) shows that in some contexts, it can be preferable for stigmatised identity to be “displayed extremely and be exaggerated.” By emphasising their stigmatised identity, groups not only legitimize their ethnicity but also reconstruct other aspects of their social identity. Moss and Faux (2006, cited in Matsunaga 2007), argue that such a strategy can confer credibility and turn stigma into an empowering resource to confront oppression. However, this decision is strategically calculated—it only works when

⁶⁷ This could change soon. The Croatian Language Act, introduced by the Matica Hrvatska, aims to establish stricter regulations on the use of the Croatian language, including a proposed Council for the Croatian Language to oversee linguistic norms and standards. Its critics fear that the Act could undermine linguistic diversity by creating pressure to conform to a stricter and standardized version of Croatian language. Minorities fear that the law could create a framework that might lead to more strict oversight of language use in educational settings, potentially increased inspections, and pressures on teachers. In January 2024, the Croatian Parliament passed the Croatian Language Act. I want to thank Nina Čolović for pointing this out.

⁶⁸ Ugrešić (1998: 60) notes that, in 1992, “Croatian citizens themselves have begun frantically digging through their own and other people’s biographies in search of an undesirable blot.” This illustrates the enthusiastic participation of ordinary citizens in (re)producing the nationalist norms which emerged in the 1990s.

individuals feel capable of handling the potential social consequences (Afifi and Weiner 2004, cited in Matsunaga 233).

In the case of Marko, he must feel a certain level of empowerment to wear his stigma without fear or shame. The historical continuity of Serb communities in Vukovar and surrounding areas provide Marko with a sense of strength and belonging that might not be available to Serbs in other parts of Croatia, where the population has been significantly reduced. In fact, I have not witnessed or heard about such bold, and at times antagonistic, displays of identity from Serbs outside the Vukovar region. Additionally, Vukovar's linguistic, cultural, and social separation of Serbs and Croats (Kardov 2002) makes this form of identity performance more feasible than in other areas where the two groups are more interconnected.

While Marko's decision to live parallel to the Croat community might be a dramatic example of embodying an unruly minority subjectivity, it is not the only way such an attitude can manifest. The ability to pass through the porous boundaries of ethnic identity through linguistic performance is often only possible for Serbs whose difference is not immediately apparent to the majority population. However, a growing trend in the Vukovarian Serb community is to eliminate the possibility of "passing" altogether by giving children highly ethnicized names, often drawn from the history of Serbian medieval figures. In this way, the child's name becomes a powerful symbol that publicly signals the family's political stance—whether conservative or liberal—to the wider society.

I was having coffee with Jovana and Bojan, a married couple in their forties from Borovo Selo, when the conversation shifted to the naming practices of local Serbs.

Dragana: "Did you ever consider neutral names for your children?"

Bojan: "Neutral names were out of the question. Children with neutral names do not have firm foundations and are then easily manipulated because they lack self-confidence."

Jovana, nodding: "They do not know who they are."

Bojan and Jovana are particularly concerned about political manipulation, fearing that without clear markers of Serb identity, Serb children might be more easily encouraged by the majority to identify as Croats on national censuses. Conservative naming practices like these are common in minority communities (Fryer and Levitt 2004; Wallach 2017). However, recent studies in North America show a decline in traditional naming due to individualisation (Main 1996; Lieberman 2000). People today, more focused on self-fulfilment, are less likely to follow traditional paths or hierarchical authority, favouring "families of choice" over "families of fate" (Edwards and Caballero 2008: 42). In contrast, my fieldwork in Vukovar reveals that some Serbs are doing the opposite—choosing to solidify their identities within "families of fate," where the nation and

ethnic group serve as key anchors in their lives. This reflects a response to what Jović (2017) calls the “ethno-totalitarianism of the everyday.” Many of my interlocutors, particularly those with ethnicized names, resist Croatian linguistic purism, associating it with the fascist Ustaša regime policies. For these Serbs, having a clearly ethnicized name offers a sense of ontological security in a society where their identity is often marginalized. Jovana, for example, takes comfort in the immediate clarity her name provides, saying, “I immediately know where I stand with Croats.” The ethnicized name becomes a clear symbol of stigma, signalling whether the majority will accept or reject her.

However, while these behaviours and practices can be seen as strategies of empowerment for marginalized communities with limited options, they also contribute to the normalisation of a violent ideology that reinforces ethnic hierarchies. As Goffman (1963: 114) notes, adopting minority nationalism makes the stigmatised individual complicit in the creation of “a public image of his differentness” and solidifies the stigmatised group as a distinct entity. In this sense, choosing to live separately from the majority and emphasizing one’s ethnic difference can be seen as using the “language and style of his enemies” (Goffman 1963: 114). The need to reinforce these ethnic boundaries is evident in the readiness of many Vukovarian Serbs to mock or condemn others who attempt to “pass” as Croats by speaking *čisti hrvatski*. Ksenija, whom we met earlier, recalled an incident at the local bakery, illustrating the social consequences of being discredited (Goffman 1963).

“My husband rarely finds anything funny, but one day he came home from work howling with laughter. He told me that an elderly woman, who was visibly stressed out, had confusedly tried to order a *viršla u hrenovci* (a sausage in a sausage).⁶⁹ She immediately corrected herself, but it was too late!”

In the scenario described above, the woman passing as a Croat was caught in the act and discredited by another Serb, an incident that can be very embarrassing. However, it can also be dangerous or ruinous. The decision to use *čisti hrvatski* can be perceived as a deep betrayal by the local Serb community, particularly by those who refuse to “pass.” On another occasion, while having coffee with Ksenija and Sergej, a young Serb man in his twenties, we discussed the issue of Serbs “passing” as Croats. Sergej, who had adopted several distinct Belgradian lexical tendencies, was visibly frustrated.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ *Viršla* is the Serbian variant for sausage and *hrenovka* is the Croatian variant for sausage. The woman in question had presumably wanted to order *hrenovka u lisnatom* [sausage in puff pastry], a popular baked good in the region.

⁷⁰ For instance, Svetozar’s continuous punctuation of his sentences with *bre*, a Belgradian interjection used to add emphasis or to convey mood, was impossible to overlook. The interjection is not native to the Vukovar region, but has become increasingly popular among Serbs who are attempting to signal their belonging to the Serbian nation.

“A Serb woman I know works at a grocery store in [village, censored] and she was greeted by a Croat customer with *bok*⁷¹, to which she replied *bok!* Can you believe it? I thought to myself, now you belong to no one because you did that (*sad si ničija zato što si to napravila*).”

Ksenija nodded gravely in agreement, condemning the woman for performing Croat-ness at her workplace. It was fascinating to observe how Ksenija, who herself used *čisti hrvatski* with Croat customers and kept a “cheat sheet” at work to avoid slipping into *ekavica*, readily judged another Serb in a similar situation. What seemed like a contradiction intrigued me. Bourdieu’s (1994) concept of “habitus,” a set of gradually constructed social dispositions that guide behaviour, offers a useful lens for understanding this. If, as Bourdieu (1980: 64) suggests, “the relation to what is possible is a relation to power,” then Ksenija’s actions reflect an embodied sense of how one is expected to behave, shaped by the power dynamics of her social environment. From her perspective, there is no contradiction—she is simply following the practical schemes and social expectations dictated by the group, in order to navigate the “ethno-totalitarianism of the everyday” in Vukovar (Jović 2017).

Sergej’s harsh denunciation of the Serb woman saying *bok*, which he regarded as a betrayal of the group, while allowing himself to use *bre*—a Belgradian linguistic pattern—reveals an interesting contradiction. His use of *bre* is seen as acceptable and even authentic, while *bok* is condemned as inauthentic and a betrayal. This suggests that what is considered “authentic” or “inauthentic” is not fixed but historical, contingent, and socially constructed, rather than rooted in any objective truth. Coupland (2003) notes that, while sociolinguistics remains sceptical of the concept of authenticity, its strong affective impact makes it a significant social phenomenon that requires attention. This raises the question: how do people authenticate speech for themselves and others? According to Hutanu (2021: 235), Sergej’s exaggerated use of *bre* can be seen as “metapragmatic activity,” where the speaker consciously reinforces a particular stereotype. Heller (2003) suggests that the value of authenticity is tied to an ideology of essentialized ethnonationalism. In Sergej’s case, he is actively constructing authenticity by reinforcing linguistic stereotypes rooted in dominant ethnonationalist ideologies of division. Despite the apparent intentionality of his actions, Sergej’s behaviour reflects the deep internalization of language and nationalist ideologies that shape everyday life. The assumption that Serbs should speak one way and Croats another is so ingrained that it is viewed as an inherent truth.

This ethnographic moment reveals not only the complexities and contradictions of shared habitus but also the deepest fear of this minoritised community. For Ksenija and Sergej, to be ostracised from one’s ethnic group, to “belong to no one,” is the most dangerous outcome for a Vukovarian Serb. Living in an ethnic “no man’s land” means the complete breakdown of ontological security, where no other form of self-identification is credible or imaginable. The seemingly antagonistic or

⁷¹ *Bok* is currently the most common Croatian informal greeting, which Serbs in Vukovar do not traditionally use.

confrontational attitudes of Marko, Bojan, Jovana, Ksenija, and Sergej toward language and linguistic practises reflect their struggle to navigate everyday life under the weight of nationalist ideologies, in which they feel inherently disempowered as stigmatized minorities.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I was invited to a comedy show in Borovo Selo, a predominantly Serb village near Vukovar, where Goran Vinčić, a successful Croatian Serb comedian, was performing. Despite the event being free, the organisers expressed frustration at their inability to fill the small theatre. Vinčić delighted the crowd with a broad spectrum of jokes that resonated with the predominantly Serb audience, most of which focused on life in an underdeveloped region and his experience as a Serb attending high school in Zagreb. He ended his performance with a thought-provoking joke about language and assimilation, illustrating how humour can be used to navigate complex cultural and linguistic dynamics. He asked,

“What is the hardest for Serbs in Croatia? They say [*dramatically lowers voice, feigning paranoia*] assimilation! Have you heard about that word? Assimilation, they say, that’s it! It’s happening! Holy shit, we’re all going to disappear! [...] To me, assimilation does not sound scary... nah. Assimilation sounds like [linguistic] alternation. Think about it, you have palatalization, assibilation, and assimilation! What is assibilation? K, G, H turns into C, Z, S. What is assimilation? S, R, B in front of a U turns into H, R, V! It’s not scary at all, you just have to learn the rules!”

The comedy in Vinčić’s performance lies in his ability to take the loaded term—assimilation—and transform it into a light-hearted linguistic lesson through clever wordplay. The letters S, R, and B represent the word *Srbi* (Serbs), the letter U stands for Ustašism, and H, R, and V abbreviate *Hrvati* (Croats). Vinčić humorously suggests that assimilation is the transformation of Serbs into Croats when confronted with Ustašism, much like assibilation, where a consonant sound changes shifts into a sibilant one. The audience laughs at the absurdity of downplaying the frightening idea of Serbs becoming Croats under the influence of a fascist ideology. His assertion that assimilation is not scary *if one knows the rules* reflects the complexities and nuances of the linguistic performances employed by the Vukovarian Serb community for various purposes—an idea my chapter seeks to explore.

The Vukovarian Serbs I have encountered have, in a variety of ways, learned “the rules” of localised linguistic politics and how to manipulate them to their advantage, while also shaping how they wish to present their enemy minority identity. Some have acquiesced to their minoritized position, proudly showcasing their command of *čisti hrvatski*, often framing it in terms of respectability politics. Others have displayed their creativity by manipulating the ethno-linguistic ideologies that govern the Vukovarian linguistic landscape, both challenging and reinforcing the categories imposed on them. Finally, some have taken a more defiant approach, refusing to enact

a tolerable minority subjectivity and, in doing so, actively participating in the reification of groupism and nationalism.

This chapter explores the complex ways in which minority Serb subjects in Vukovar navigate ethnic and linguistic boundaries in post-conflict Croatia, at times challenging nationalist ideologies and creating alternative forms of identity, and at others reinforcing the nationalist status quo. Through ethnographic examples, the chapter demonstrates how these individuals strategically perform and resist hegemonic language forms—sometimes embracing their stigmatized identity, other times subverting linguistic norms to avoid coercion or to reclaim power. By examining the fluidity of ethnic identity through linguistic performance in a context of intense social pressure, the chapter contributes to the literature on minority subjectivity, offering insights into how language becomes a strategy for living everyday life in post-conflict context. It extends previous research on identity performance by highlighting the ways in which minoritized groups engage with, manipulate, and even internalize the very categories imposed upon them, ultimately reshaping the social fabric of a post-conflict society.

Building on the ways in which linguistic and ethnic boundaries shape individual identities, the next chapter shifts focus to the divided schools of Vukovar, examining how the division between majority and minority communities in Vukovar is mirrored in the educational system. Here, the schools function as sites where ethnic and linguistic segregation is both reinforced and contested. The chapter explores how these divisions play a crucial role in shaping the socialization and identity formation of young people in a divided society.

CHAPTER 3:
“IT’S NOT ABOUT CYRILLIC, THIS IS ABOUT DIGNITY”:
THE POLITICS OF MINORITY EDUCATION

“To start with there was mild, secret counting, then somewhat more obvious dividing, and then very clear branding. How else can one mark one’s stock, distinguish one’s own herd from someone else’s?”
—Dubravka Ugrešić

Kindergarten Vukovar I ‘Little Butterfly’ (*Dječji Vrtić Vukovar 1, ‘Leptirić’*) and Kindergarten Vukovar II ‘Borovo’ (*Дечју Врћућ Вуковар 2, ‘Борово’*) share the same building. Nestled amidst a cluster of apartment buildings in the densely populated residential area of the suburb of Borovo Naselje, the kindergartens appear, from an outsider’s perspective, quite unremarkable. The windows of the building are adorned with colourful children’s drawings—flowers, suns, and clouds—adding a splash of colour to its otherwise understated façade. On this bright and unusually warm April afternoon, Radmila and I slowly make our way to the building from the parking lot across the street, weaving between the dusty cars. The spring thaw has left the ground soft and muddy, slowing our progress as we circle the building to get a view of the playground, the purpose of our expedition. Radmila, a young Serb woman in her early twenties, is currently studying at a university in Serbia, though she regularly visits her parents, who still reside in Vukovar. At the end of our coffee meeting, she had offered to take me to the kindergarten she had attended.

The newly renovated kindergarten building features two identical entrances (Figure 21). They are architecturally designed to divide the children according to ethnic lines: Serb children use the right-hand entrance while Croat children enter through the left. This institutionalization of ethnicity imagines that on the right, Serb children draw flowers, suns, and clouds alongside other Serb children and are taught by Serb teachers, while on the left, Croat children draw flowers, suns, and clouds amidst other Croat children and are taught by Croat teachers. As we circled the building, I was unsettled by the fact that the playgrounds were divided by a cold metal fence—an element of the landscape that Radmila found entirely unremarkable. The fence between the children makes inter-ethnic “mixing” (*mešanje/miješanje*) not only physically impossible but also unimaginable. In this context, “fixed space becomes a dependable marker of identity in ways that highlight the co-constituted relationship between space and identity” (Laketa 2018: 186). This seemingly ordinary kindergarten—like countless other divided kindergartens, grade schools, and high schools in Vukovar—plays a key role in reinforcing the spatial governmentality of ethnic division (Hromadžić 2015a), an enduring feature of the region’s particular path to inter-ethnic peace. For Radmila, who attended these schools from an early age, such divisions were simply part of the fabric of daily life.



Figure 21: The two entrances to the kindergartens in Borovo Naselje.

In this chapter, I incorporate both an institutional perspective, which examines the structures and policies of divided schools in Vukovar, and a focus on the daily enactments of the nation, analysing the lived, everyday experiences of its students, teachers, and staff. My research aligns with literature viewing schools as cultural arenas and “discursive spaces” where identities and questions of difference are negotiated (Dwyer 1999; Thomas 2005; Hopkins 2011). It follows a Foucauldian perspective on the role of schools as state mechanisms producing docile subjects (Ploszajska 1996; Müller 2011; Pykett 2012; Laketa 2016). While the primary function of all state-regulated education systems is social control and state formation, in post-conflict contexts, education also plays a crucial role in managing—more or less successfully—inter-ethnic conflict. In some societies, the division of schools is well incorporated into the broader social narrative, where separate educational systems for different groups are normalized as part of the social fabric. In contrast, in Vukovar, the inability to reconcile competing national narratives has led to these divisions becoming a point of contestation, rather than a seamless part of everyday life. In the post-Yugoslav region, where ethnic ontologies have become dominant, ethno-nationalist ideologies are imprinted into the minds and the bodies of schoolchildren, informing their behaviours and understanding of the world around them. The Serbian language programs, as minority education, operate under Croatian state control and its measures to domesticate difference. However, because they retain some autonomy, they cannot be fully conceptualized as agents of the state. Given the measured ability of teachers to interpret the Croatian curriculum, these schools can also be understood as sites of political subversion.

This chapter draws on extensive local research (Čorkalo Biruški et al. 2004; Čorkalo Biruški & Ajduković 2003; 2007; 2008; 2009; Paravina 2022), showing that Vukovar's divided schools foster nationalistic and xenophobic attitudes among youth. Building on this body of work, my research further explores how these divided schools, as pedagogical spaces, play an essential role in institutionalising and (re)producing ethnic nationalism, thereby privileging such ideologies over interconnected life on an everyday basis. In fact, studies indicate that student attitudes are more negative than those of teachers or parents, suggesting that segregation reinforces ethnic division (Čorkalo-Biruški & Ajduković 2007). This aligns with findings in post-conflict communities, where social scientists have found that the segregation of curricula and students (re)produces the sociocultural ideologies and bureaucratic regimes of ethnonational purity and social division (Gallagher 2004; Pinson 2007; Hromadžić 2015a; Cohen 2019; Goren et al. 2019; Worden 2022). However, similar to McGlynn et al. (2013: xv), who caution that integrated education cannot be considered “an easy recipe” for the complex problems of post-conflict societies, my research also suggests that the solutions to these issues are far from straightforward.

The political leadership of the Serb community in Vukovar is not amenable to the results of the aforementioned Čorkalo Biruški and Ajduković's research, arguing that it did not accurately interpret the situation on the ground and that it is scapegoating all the social problems in Vukovar on the minority language education program. Protective of their minority rights and the unique employment opportunities offered to the marginalised Serb community through the minority education system, both SDSS members and teachers I interviewed consistently downplayed the social divisions of the schools, arguing that students managed to form significant friendships and—”even!” (*čak*), they enthusiastically emphasised—romantic relationships. Fears of unemployment are rooted in the experiences of discrimination and stigmatisation that members of the Croatian Serb community face on the Croatian job market (Koska 2009). Due to these high stakes, the social pressure within the Serb community to enrol one's children into the Serbian minority language education program is enormous. The positioning of Serb parents on the issue, however, is varied: some strongly align with the political narrative of the Serb elites, while others conform out of fear of the social consequences of dissent, even if they do not fully endorse it. Sanja, a middle-aged Serb teacher married to a Croat man, faced immense difficulty finding employment after enrolling her children in a Croatian language school, as the Serb community viewed her decision as a betrayal, while Croatian schools would not hire her because of her ethnicity. Others confirmed that members of the Serb community who chose Croatian language schooling were seen as traitors to their nation; one even went as far as calling them *poturice*.⁷² In other words, not asserting one's

⁷² This is a derogatory term used by Christians in the lands formerly colonised by the Ottoman empire to denote former Christians who had converted to Islam and become radicals. Today, this term is still commonly reserved for Muslims among South Slavs, which makes its usage here stand out. The expression “a ‘*poturica*’ is worse than a Turk” (*poturica gori od Turčina*), for example, signifies that, in an effort to gain the favour of the occupier/coloniser, a convert behaves worse towards those who did not convert than the occupier/coloniser himself in order to prove his or her loyalty. In the Vukovar context, the implication is that the Serb community considers that Serbs who enrol their children in Croatian language schools are, for all intents and purposes, converts to the Croatian nation and potentially even bigger Croat nationalists than Croats because they would be under pressure to prove themselves to the Croat community.

right to education in one's minority language and script is perceived not only as succumbing to the pressures of assimilation but also as active acts of sabotage and betrayal against one's ethnic community.

More recent research indicates that local Croats now generally support school integration (Čorkalo Biruški et al. 2021; Paravina 2022), a shift from earlier opposition in the early 2000s in Vukovar and Mostar (Freedman et al. 2004). Many of my interlocutors emphasized that, in the immediate aftermath of the Peaceful Reintegration period, their Croat neighbours did not want their children to attend school with their Serb peers. This shift is notable: while the majority population now advocates for integration, often citing the integrated schools of the socialist era as a model, they overlook the changed political and social context in which such integration would take place. Namely, integration would now occur within a newly independent Croatia, largely ethnically homogenous, where the far-right has gained political traction. This change likely reflects liberal conceptualizations of multicultural citizenship, where recognition for difference is often contingent on the performance of tolerable difference by the Other (Povinelli 2002). However, the nature of this support for integration is starkly different when it comes from a majoritarian position versus a minoritarian one. For the majority, integration is not necessarily an embrace of equality, but rather a mechanism to reshape the boundaries of belonging in a way that aligns with the dominant national identity. In contrast, for minority populations, integration can be viewed as a vital struggle for inclusion and recognition, challenging the very dynamics of exclusion and marginalization imposed by the majority. Since Croatian Serbs are perceived as an enemy minority, embodying an intolerable difference, they are perceived as "taking advantage of their unique status in Croatia, granted to them by an open multiethnic state" when they mobilize minority rights discourse (Sokolić 2019: 120). As a result, the majoritarian push for integration may also stem from a desire to curb the influence of minority nationalism in minority language schools and to produce minorities embodying apolitical cultural difference. Indeed, studies have shown that majority populations often hold negative, assimilative attitudes towards minorities (Pettigrew 1998; Sidanius & Pratto 1999; Taylor & Moghaddam 1994; Durkin 2003; Verkuyten & Masson 1995; May 2012).

This issue is illustrated by a conversation I had with two Croat educators from Vukovar Gymnasium at a peace activism workshop organised by the local NGO Europe House Vukovar (*Evropski Dom Vukovar*). Both educators claimed that the divided schools are a key factor in perpetuating students' awareness of ethnic differences, even when friendships are formed across ethnic lines. They expressed concern that separate schools for minorities do not exist anywhere else in the world and that the students are overburdened with schoolwork as a result of the additional classes. While their claim that such separate schooling is unique to the region is erroneous (see May 2012), they also suggested that the responsibility for overcoming the ethnic divide primarily rests with the minority population. This view, however, does not fully

acknowledge the power imbalance and the challenging environment for Serbs in Vukovar.⁷³ One of the women noted, with relief, that a growing number of Serb parents—whom she described as “open-minded and enlightened” (*prosvijetljeni*)—are enrolling their children in Croatian schools. However, the distinction she drew between “open-minded” Serb parents and those she considered less so reflects a broader Eurocentric discourse that continues to frame Croats as modern Europeans and Serbs as rooted in a backward Balkan identity (Bellamy 2003). This framing remains largely unchallenged in Croatia, despite the discomfort it causes for many Serbs.

Social scientists have focused regionally on the concept of divided schools, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, through various academic disciplines (Freedman et al. 2004; Torsti 2009; Hill 2011; Hromadžić 2015a; 2015b; Laketa 2016). While these studies enhance understanding of social divisions, the power dynamics in Bosnia and Herzegovina differ significantly from the ones in Croatia, an “ethnic democracy” (Štiks 2010; Smootha 1997), where Croats are the sole constituent people and minorities are demographically small and politically disempowered. Hromadžić (2015a) highlights how Croat elites in Mostar, similar to Serb elites in Croatia, use minority rights discourse to make political demands. However, unlike Croatian Serbs, Bosnian Croats are a constitutive nation with constitutional rights, making their minority rights discourse appear contradictory, at least in a legal sense. This chapter also engages with the extensive literature on minority language rights in various disciplines (Crawford 1994; Skutnabb-Kangas 2000; May 2012), as well as research on divided education and post-conflict reintegration in contexts such as Israel, Northern Ireland, and Rwanda (Feuerverger 2001; Gallagher 2004; Bekerman 2005; Bellino 2016; Russell 2019; Shepler and Williams 2017; Weldon 2010). Additionally, it contributes to studies on the impact of social inequality on failed integration and intergroup relations in post-conflict contexts (Bekerman 2004; Niens & Cairns 2005).

So, what exactly is happening on the ground that makes the “divided” schools in Vukovar such a source of political tension? How do elites shape and influence discourse on ethnic identity, minority rights, and educational systems in the aftermath of conflict? How do teachers in Serbian language educational programs navigate the tension between state-sanctioned nationalist narratives and the nationalist narratives of their minority community? And how do youth navigate and experience ethnic divisions as a result of divided educational spaces, and how do these divisions shape their subjectivity, relationships, and social interactions?

⁷³ There are countless examples of school instruction being largely or solely in the minority language due to the dominance of the majority language in most other social and institutional domains. Consider, for instance, the French language and French immersion programs in Canada, or some Spanish language education programs in the USA. In Europe, there are Welsh, Basque, and Catalan language programs as well as indigenous language programs for the Sámi people in Norway and Sweden. Other indigenous groups such as the Māori in New Zealand, the Inuit in Canada, and several groups of Native Americans across North, Central and South America also enjoy separate minority language instruction.

To answer these questions, this chapter focuses on the separated schools as a crucial fixture of the post-conflict spatial governmentality of ethnic division in Vukovar. It explores how the division of schools is not merely a passive remnant of past ethnic conflicts, but an ongoing, active force shaping the social dynamics of the region. This dynamic is also understood through the lens of the enemy minority framework: the presence of an ontologically threatening minority generates ontological insecurity for the Croatian nation-state, which seeks to secure its own social and symbolic coherence. Far-right campaigns to close or delegitimize these schools exemplify this tension, revealing the ways in which enemy minority autonomy is perceived as a threat to the nation-state's stability. However, the chapter goes beyond documenting division; it shows how institutionalized separation in the schools serves a dual purpose. On the one hand, the schools act as shields against the pressures of a nationalizing state, preserving ethnic and cultural identity within their walls. On the other hand, they simultaneously produce and reproduce nationalist identities, further entrenching divisions in a space defined by the departure of families and low birth rates. This dual role—the schools as both shield and a mechanism of nationalist socialization—lies at the heart of the tensions explored in this chapter.

In this chapter, I argue that the minority language education debate in Vukovar is driven by both cultural preservation and political control, as Serb elites use it to maintain power and prevent cultural erasure. However, this resistance fosters ethnic division, strengthens clientelist networks, and exacerbates demographic decline and marginalization within the community. I also argue that Serb teachers use subtle pedagogical strategies to shield students from nationalist narratives in the official curriculum, protecting their national identity, and reasserting Serb nationalist narratives. However, these strategies, while safeguarding students, reinforce ethnic divisions. Finally, I argue that the divided educational system shapes students' subjectivities by creating complex spaces where ethnic divisions are both contested and reinforced. While students navigate these constraints in diverse ways, they continuously engage with, resist, and adapt to the social possibilities imposed by the environment, reflecting the tension between personal agency and structural limitations.

In the next section, I will provide historical contextualization, highlighting the ways in which minority language education has been organised in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, under the Ustaša regime, during the socialist period, and after the independence of Croatia. The chapter also focuses on the discourses of minority rights, de-colonialism, and assimilation mobilised by the Serb political leadership in order to protect the divided schools. Then, it considers the ways in which teachers experience the schools and, more particularly, the subversive pedagogical methods and "hidden transcripts" (Scott 1990) they have devised to resist Croatian nationalist narratives and maintain nationalist narratives of their minority community. Finally, the chapter focuses on the students who are attending or have graduated from these schools, and the ways in which their political subjectivities have been moulded by their simultaneous consumption and rejection of the processes of socialisation at hand.

*“OVI SRBUJU, OVI HRVATUJU”*⁷⁴: THE EVOLUTION OF MINORITY EDUCATION IN VUKOVAR

Due to the ethnic diversity of the Western Balkans, minority education has been an important issue in recent history. Under the League of Nations minority protection clauses, some minorities in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia were entitled to education in their mother-tongue. According to Janjetović (2022: 38), the Serb, Croat and Slovenian elites of the Kingdom viewed some minorities as a threat, seeing them as “living reminders of the former oppression of South Slavs.” This sentiment was particularly directed toward the Germans and Hungarians, who, while not dominant, were seen as reminders of past imperial influences, as well as other minorities that held considerable political, demographic, and economic influence (see also Mezger 2020). The Kingdom was home to a wide range of minorities, including Macedonians, Bulgarians, Czechs, Slovaks, Ruthenians, Hungarians, Romanians, Italians, Albanians, Turks, Germans, Jews and Roma. In contrast, Serbs and Croats, considered constitutive peoples, were educated in the same language.

In 1941, under the fascist Ustaša regime, the conditions of some national minorities in what was the NDH worsened, while those of others improved. The German minority was granted autonomy in national affairs—including German language schools and Hitler Youth groups—and legal equality with Croats (Janjetović 2002). In contrast, the Jewish and Roma minorities, targeted for genocide, were defined in racial terms by Ustaša ideology, making conversion to Catholicism and assimilation nearly impossible. The “Serb question” was more complex, as the regime saw most Serbs as “Croats-of-old” (Matijević 2024), misled by the Serb national project. Ustaša policies toward Serbs combined deportation (primarily of elites) with mass murder, and eventually with forced assimilation. Yeomans (2017) notes that the Ministry of Education passed a law removing recognition of a separate Serb identity, forcing Serb students to adopt titles such as “Greek-Easterners” or “Vlachs.” In fact, Yeomans (2013: 21) describes this move as part of a “campaign of forced assimilation,” which also included mass conversions to Catholicism and the creation of the Croatian Orthodox Church in 1942. Thus, assimilation is a historically legible form of violence for Croatian Serbs, one which partially informs the way in which present-day pedagogical policies and political rhetoric are experienced.

It was not until the Communist Party of Yugoslavia came to power after World War II that national minority education policy was revitalized. This shift occurred within the broader context of international efforts to protect minorities in the post-war period. However, Petrović Todosijević (2023) notes that not all minorities were treated equally, with German and Italian minorities being marginalized due to World War II allegiances. Despite this, she argues, the socialist government created conditions that dramatically improved national minority education and integrated national minorities into the wider community. Socialist-era Vukovar was known for its strong industrial

⁷⁴ This phrase, carrying a strong tone of irony, is translated as “these ones are digging into their Serb-ness, these ones are digging into their Croat-ness.” It reflects a colloquial way of describing people who are embracing either Serbian or Croatian identity, implying that these identities are being adopted in a performative or exaggerated way.

sector and its multiculturalism, with as many as 29 ethnic groups (Ajduković and Čorkalo Biruški 2008). At the time, education for the constituent peoples of Yugoslavia—both Croats and Serbs—was integrated and taught in one language, Serbo-Croatian.⁷⁵

The educational system and minority education rights, like many other aspects of everyday life, changed dramatically when violence erupted locally. These changes became symbolic of the breakdown of multi-ethnic community life.⁷⁶ The siege of Vukovar, which began in August 1991, interrupted schooling of all children in the region. When the siege ended and Vukovar came under Krajina control, Serb children returned to school in January 1992.⁷⁷ However, the circumstances had completely changed. Not only were their Croat classmates gone and most of the buildings in ruins, but the education system was now controlled by the proto-state of Krajina, meaning that the ethnically homogenous schools followed the Serbian curriculum and used textbooks exclusively from Serbia.⁷⁸

The “divided,” “separated,” or “segregated” schools now common in Vukovar are a product of the post-conflict context and the transition to liberal democracy, during which Serbs were minoritized and the “Serbian” language was formally separated from the “Croatian” language.⁷⁹ The Erdut Agreement aimed at protecting human and minority rights, particularly in education and cultural autonomy (Paravina 2022). The ZVO, created as part of this agreement, became the administrative backbone of the Serbian language minority schools in the region. The Erdut Agreement, along with the ZVO, would later help regulate the Law on Education in the Language and Script of National Minorities (2000) and the Constitutional Act on the Rights of National Minorities (2002).⁸⁰ Particularly relevant for this chapter is the latter, which guarantees the right to education in the language and script of national minorities. As a result of these historical processes and a significant demographic presence, Serbs in the Vukovar-Syrmia county can enrol their children in minority language education programs. Although the Erdut Agreement was only binding for five years and meant to facilitate school reintegration, division remains the norm.

⁷⁵ According to my interlocutors, there were no operational minority language schools in Vukovar during the socialist period.

⁷⁶ With the fall of socialism and the advent of national states, major changes such as ethnic division of students, division of language of instruction, and massive curricular reorganisations took place. However, the basic structure of the educational system, in which students are divided at the high school level according to the professional orientation they want to pursue—like in other European countries—remained in place. Thus, Vukovar has four high schools: the Gymnasium (*Gimnazija*) the Nikola Tesla technical school (*Tehnička Škola Nikola Tesla*), the economics school (*Ekonomska Škola*) and the Marko Babić vocational school (*Srednja Strukovna Škola Marko Babić*).

⁷⁷ Their Croat classmates, who were ethnically cleansed at the end of the siege, did not have this opportunity, having to attend schools elsewhere in Croatia (or elsewhere in the world) as refugees and asylum-seekers.

⁷⁸ Literature on the Krajina period is not abundant. Therefore, it is difficult to say with certainty what the education policies for ethnic and linguistic minorities were at the time. However, given the intolerant political atmosphere for non-Serbs and the fact that many minorities were ethnically cleansed from Krajina territories, the small number of students left might have made the question of minority education appear irrelevant.

⁷⁹ One primary school in Vukovar offers the Model C program for Ukrainian and Ruthenian minorities.

⁸⁰ Available online at: <https://narodne-novine.nn.hr>.

Minority language education in Croatia is organised according to three models, known as the A, B, and C models. In the Model A programs, lessons are taught entirely in the language and script of the national minority with Croatian language being just another mandatory school subject. This type of schooling is dominant not only for Serbs in the Vukovar region, but also among the Italian community in Istria as well as Hungarians in Eastern Slavonia. Model B programs, however, require that school subjects related to minority cultural heritage (history and geography, for instance) are taught in separate classes in the minority language and script while the rest (science and math, for instance) are taught in the Croatian language. Finally, Model C programs require that all subjects be taught in Croatian, with *additional* classes for subjects related to minority cultural heritage taught in the minority language and script. This model is the most popular option for minorities residing in other regions in Croatia.⁸¹

In Vukovar-Syrmia county, the Model A program is the most popular option among Serb parents enrolling their children in a minority language program, arguing that the other options cannot adequately protect children from language loss and assimilation into the majority population. While this has been the dominant narrative of the local SDSS branch—whose members dominate the ZVO—most teachers, Serb parents, and students I have encountered have repeated this view. However, the decision to enroll children in these programs is increasingly fraught with complexity. All Serb parents in the Vukovar region face a complicated decision at the start of the school year: whether to enroll their child in the Model A program or in a regular Croatian school. Model C programs, available in other regions of Croatia, are not an option in Vukovar. Model B programs, which offer “bilingual” education, exist only in one county.

First, the choice is not merely an educational decision; it carries significant social implications, as the program a child attends will largely determine how their ethnicity is perceived by the wider society. Given that schools function as mechanisms for transmitting national values, language, culture, and identity (Billig 1995) as well as the local ethno-national divisions, the decision to enroll a child in a Serbian or Croatian language school becomes a fork-in-the-road in shaping the child’s social development and ethnic identity. Additionally, parents must weigh the impact of the pedagogical nationalism inherent in both systems, as well as the bullying or social ostracism from peers or even teachers. The decision is further complicated by the social consequences for parents who challenge the SDSS party’s stance on minority education, as opposing the dominant narrative can lead to social and political alienation. Finally, the survival of Model A programs is uncertain due to the continued demographic decline of the population in the region, which disproportionately

⁸¹ Throughout my time in the field, my interlocutors consistently referred to the Model A programs as “schools” (*škole*). Members of the SDSS party and teachers typically used the term “Model A schools” (*Model A škole*), while ordinary people often call them “Serb schools” (*srpske škole*). I refer to them as Model A programs rather than schools to avoid implying a fully separate institution or system. Model A programs follow the official Croatian curriculum, share a central administration, and, in most cases, students share the same school building with those enrolled the Croatian language programs. The only exceptions are primary schools in Serb-majority villages, where all students are part of the Model A program.

affects the Serb community. In neighbouring regions, this had led to the disappearance of high school Model A programs because, as Kurtović (2021) noted in the case of Jajce, “there were simply no children there to be divided anymore.” These demographic realities are used as additional reasons to pressure parents to enroll their children in the Model A program, as the classroom sizes continue to shrink every year.

Since 2006, children in Vukovar’s Model A programs are no longer physically separated from their peers in regular Croatian language schools. During the post-siege reconstruction, limited classroom space often led to students being separated into different buildings. Today, only some high schools and grade schools offering Model A have half-day shifts; most students attend classes at the same time. Unlike the “two schools under one roof” model in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where students follow different curricula but share the same building (Hromadžić 2008), Serbian, Hungarian, Ukrainian and other minority language Model A programs follow the same curriculum as Croatian language schools. The only difference is the language of instruction. Despite this, long-term research on Vukovar shows limited inter-ethnic contact among youth (Kardov 2002; Čorkalo-Biruški and Ajduković 2007; 2008; Kosić and Tauber 2010). This is explained by the limited opportunities for interaction during school time and the continued ethnicization of social space outside school. Active efforts are needed to facilitate contact during school hours, as evidenced by the rare cultural exchange programs and the extensive negotiation required for joint events like graduation trips.⁸²

The commitment of some Vukovarian Serbs in defending Model A programs should also be understood within the broader context of ongoing debates around minority language rights. As noted in Chapter 2, Mayor Ivan Penava and other members of the DP party have opposed the use of the Cyrillic script in public spaces, limiting the Serb community’s ability to access its language and script in official contexts (Banjeglav 2021; Paravina 2022). Penava has argued that Model C programs are sufficient to meet the Serb community’s educational rights and may even help reduce inter-ethnic tensions among youth in the region (explored further in Chapter 4).⁸³ This stance is part of a wider political debate, where the Croatian Right discursively frames the “spectre of communism” as a looming threat, associating it with Serb and Yugoslav identities (Cipek 2017), and uses it to justify its focus on issues of national identity (Blanuša 2017). Against this backdrop, the push to limit or eliminate Model A programs is seen by many Serb community members as a threat to cultural preservation and a step toward assimilation. However, the dynamics surrounding

⁸² Local principals and pedagogues are proud of their ability to organise a few “cultural exchange” events per year, where Serb and Croat children get to present their religious and cultural traditions to one another. The success of these exchanges is eclipsed by the amount of negotiations necessary to make them happen. For instance, the year before my arrival in Vukovar, the students at the local Gymnasium school failed to obtain the consent of all the parents to organise a joint senior graduation trip.

⁸³ See the following article: <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/teme/2021/6/27/je-li-doslo-vrijeme-za-promjenu-modela-obrazovanja-za-manjine-u-hrvatskoj>.

this debate are complex, reflecting broader tensions over how Croatia navigates its multi-ethnic past and future.

In 2017, the intercultural Danube School was proposed as an alternative to the limited schooling options in Vukovar. This project envisioned the construction of a new school in Vukovar where the Model B program would be taught. The Danube School secured funding from the governments of Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein, and met all legal requirements set by the Croatian Ministry of Science and Education. However, as Paravina (2022) notes, the project faced opposition from both Croat and Serb political elites, leading to decreased support from members of both communities. Due to what appeared as insufficient interest and support from parents and students, the project was eventually abandoned after two years of inaction, and the funding was returned. Consider the words of Laura, a middle-aged Croat woman married to a Serb man, whose child was enrolled in a Model A program at the time the Danube School project emerged.

“It was sabotaged by all the political parties here and everything they say about it is a complete lie. They’re just trying to deflect the blame for this massive failure. I was one of the parents consulted and approached by the project managers. I was so excited. I planned to enrol my son there. I figured that he would be in the fifth grade by the time the school opened, and it would be perfect. But everyone here washed their hands of it. [...] there is far too much pressure on both sides, these ones are digging into their Serb-ness, these ones are digging into their Croat-ness (*ovi srbuju, ovi hrvatuju*).”

The popularity of the proposed schooling model in Vukovar is unclear, as it was promoted by the international community rather than by local actors, whose intentions and political goals are easily questioned. But, as Laura’s frustrated words demonstrate, while the interests of the parents were considered by those who conceived the project, they were dismissed by local politicians. Serb political leaders opposed the Danube School, arguing that it was not only a downgrade in quality of education from Model A programs but that it would also undermine the existing minority language education programs. At the time, Penava, then still a member of the HDZ party, also rejected the project, arguing that it was an imposition from Zagreb. Ultimately, both Serb and Croat political elites blocked the Danube School initiative, deepening ethnic divisions and silencing the voices of parents and students who supported the project.

“LIKE THE AIR IN OUR LUNGS”: THE PARTY LINE

On a warm April afternoon, I was running late for a coffee meeting with Nemanja, a young Serb in his early twenties, at *Maritimo*. When I arrived, I found, to my surprise, that the usually reserved Nemanja was sitting and laughing with someone I immediately recognized as Ivan, a charismatic young man I had interviewed a few days ago. As it turned out, Nemanja and Ivan were childhood friends. As I sat down, I quickly realised that they were engaging in a pastime which has become

immensely popular in the Vukovar region: people-watching/ethnicity-guessing. They enthusiastically tried to convince me—the skeptical observer raised in Canada—that they could guess “who was what” based on their looks alone. Ivan claimed that a man who walked by us, “might as well have a giant U on his forehead,” implying that he must be a fascist Croat, and Nemanja took one look at a group of dolled-up women walking by and exclaimed, “they must be from Bobota” (*to je sigurno neka Bobota*), implying that they were distastefully overdressed Serb villagers from Bobota. This “game” highlights some of the ongoing dynamics of identity, social divisions, and the ways in which ethnicity, class, and gender continue to shape interactions and perceptions in post-conflict societies like Vukovar. As the conversation shifted towards minority language education, the ideological differences between the two friends became apparent.

Ivan: “Take, for instance, the Danube School. That’s a great example of how all the politicians in this town are only interested in keeping their seats. They don’t care about the betterment of our lives. But I bet that Croat parents also didn’t want their kids mingling with Serbs.”

Dragana: “What about Serb parents?”

Ivan: “They probably didn’t even care.”

Nemanja: “No, no, no. You’ve got it all wrong. Serb parents didn’t support the Danube School at all!”

Ivan: “What do you mean? Why wouldn’t they?”

Nemanja: “Why would they willingly accept a downgrade from the Model A schools, which are of much better quality, to a Model B school?”

As Ivan and Nemanja continued debating the quality of the Model A program in comparison to the other available options in Croatia, I contemplated how their disagreement reflected internal differences within the Serb community over how to navigate education in post-war contexts. On the other hand, the willingness of elites to sink the Danube School project—one that some ordinary Serbs voiced sincere interest and support for—exemplifies just how important the status quo is to the political representatives of the Vukovarian Serb community.⁸⁴ The failure of this ambitious project illustrates the efforts of local Serb political leaders to protect Model A programs.

Later in my fieldwork, I was greeted by a number of familiar faces as I entered the newly renovated *Srpski Dom* (Serb Cultural Centre) adjacent to the St. Nicholas Orthodox Church (Figure 22). The ZVO had organised a panel discussion on the Model A program in order to, as the president of the representative body claimed in his opening speech, address some “dangerous claims” against the program: namely that they are contributing to the ghettoization of the Serb community and that they worsen local inter-ethnic relations between Serbs and Croats. The state-of-the-art theatre in

⁸⁴ In one of the lessons at the Politička Akademija—discussed in detail in Chapter 5—a political representative from the Hungarian community in Croatia mentioned that his community had also been consulted about the Danube School as an alternative to Model A programs. He expressed clear opposition to the project, raising concerns that the Model B program is inadequate to prevent the assimilation of the Hungarian minority group.

which the event was taking place was only half full (in fact, I noticed that most of the attendees were either ZVO employees or SDSS members) to the chagrin of the organiser who routinely complained of poor attendance for such events. Later, the president told me that he had invited a number of Croat teachers and administrators to participate in the panel but that none had been able or willing to attend. As a result, the panel was exclusively composed of current and retired Serb teachers.



Figure 22: The newly renovated Serb Cultural Centre (*Srpski Dom*) is a source of pride for the ZVO and the priest of the St. Nicholas Orthodox church, whose tower is visible in the background.

One of these—and perhaps the most outspoken—retired teachers was Milka, an elderly woman and SDSS member whom I had already had the opportunity to meet. On that occasion, she had made it clear that the Model A programs had to be protected like the “air in our lungs,” and had articulated some of the main elements of the party narrative concerning minority language education. Like many other party members, Milka contended that the research conducted by Dinka Čorkalo Biruški and Dean Ajduković on nationalism in Vukovar’s segregated schools was inaccurate and unreliable, arguing that Serbs and Croats were able to form meaningful friendships despite their separation in Model A programs. Furthermore, Milka stressed that Model A programs are following the same curriculum as the students in Croatian language schools, only in a different language and script. The textbooks used by national minorities in Model A programs had to be approved by the Croatian Ministry of Education. She expressed frustration when I used the term “Serb schools” (*srpske škole*) during our interview, which she claimed was invented by the far-right in Vukovar. Since the Model A program uses the official Croatian curriculum, the content taught to students, she stressed, is identical.

It should be noted that Milka and other SDSS members, teachers, and parents in favour of Model A programs consistently articulated their claims using minority rights discourse. By invoking the constitutional articles that guarantee these rights and emphasizing the obligations of the Croatian state to protect its national minorities as a member of the European Union, they framed their grievances within an internationally recognized framework of human rights. This not only provided legal legitimacy to their demands but also ensured that their claims resonated within European norms of minority protection, making it harder for the Croatian state to dismiss them. They also frequently compared how unproblematic Model A programs were for the Hungarian or Italian national minorities in Croatia, wondering what exempted the Serb minority from equal treatment. The awareness of the discourse on minority rights and the disempowered position held by minorities in nation-states is exemplified by Milka's argument during the panel that, "national minorities do not receive anything, national minorities must ask for it" (*nacionalne manjine ništa ne dobijaju, nacionalne manjine traže*). In other words, the national minority is entitled to some rights, but these will not be freely given unless the minority actively demands it and solicits the state. Furthermore, the use of the linguistic minority rights discourse (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000) by members of a formerly irredentist community exemplifies a major ideological shift from the dominant position of the community in the 1990s. This shift reflects not only a desire for inclusion within the Croatian state but also a commitment to a pluralistic vision of Croatian society. It also contradicts the popular belief of the Croatian majority population (noted in interviews by Freedman et al. 2004) that Serbs do not see themselves as minorities and do not want to identify with the state of Croatia.

At the end of the panel, the moderator asked about the Danube School project. Milka, clearly irked by the question, argued that it was an assimilationist project in disguise. She explained:

"I think it was 2003 when Ajduković showed up and started surveying the students at the Gymnasium. And when they said, we are from the University of Zagreb, we have come to conduct research on the students, the parents, the teachers, to analyse absolutely everything... Can you imagine? We, who have gone through the process of the Peaceful Reintegration, who have gone through such horrors, and then they.... They say, you won't be studying Serbian anymore, we are offering you something better, you will become European citizens, you won't be backwards people from the Balkans (*Balkanaci*) anymore. Of course, the students and the parents rejected it. I experienced all of that more as psychological terror than any kind of aid. And that was like, 'we will help you get out of the ghetto, because you are ghettoised.' Nonsense! So, that means that Serbs are ghettoised. But Hungarians in the Hungarian Cultural Centre in Osijek are not ghettoised, and they have a whole building to themselves!"

Milka presents the Peaceful Reintegration—a process regarded as a success by both the majority population and the international community—as a complex, even traumatic, experience, akin to the war itself. While I have not been able to verify her claims through archival data, the lack of contradiction in the discussion highlights how her view reflects broader frustration and disillusionment felt by some members of the Serb community. Through later conversations with other teachers, I learned that many had been concerned about potential state surveillance, fearing that government observers might be sent to Serb classrooms to monitor whether they were accurately teaching the Croatian curriculum.

Furthermore, Milka makes her frustration with the imposed dichotomy between European-ness and the negative stereotypes which relegates Serbs to the Balkans evident. Her critique of the patronizing attitudes of Westerners—specifically, members of the majority population, the academic community, and the international community—is framed within post-colonial discourse (Said 1979; Todorova 2009). Milka challenges the reductionist notion that Serbs, as figures linked with the perceived backwardness of the East, are inherently opposed to European values and Enlightenment ideals. She argues that this stereotype has been weaponized to undermine the rights and recognition of Serbs as a national minority. Milka frames this stereotyping as a form of cultural imperialism—a way of encoding a hierarchical division between “civilized” Europe and the “backward” Balkans, creating a potent narrative of resistance and making her claims more resonant and internationally compelling.

Furthermore, Milka’s rejection of the term “ghettoization” reflects a broader political refusal, particularly within the leadership of the Serb community in Vukovar, to accept the narrative that their community’s isolation is self-imposed. This moralizing discourse of “segregation” and “self-ghettoization” is a political trope (El-Tayeb 2011) often utilized by the far-right in Croatia, as well as by elements of the majority population, to argue that minorities are responsible for their own marginalization, positioning them as unwilling to integrate into society. As a result, SDSS representatives consistently emphasize the shared use of school buildings by both Croat and Serb children, which they argue facilitates sufficient contact. Thus, terms like “ghettoization” and “segregation” are absent from their vocabulary. For them, the Model A programs are framed as a moral imperative; the issue of minority language education is not just a technical or bureaucratic matter but one deeply rooted in questions of justice, equality, and dignity.

In contrast, the fear of assimilation (*asimilacija*) is a key moralizing discourse that drives Serb political elites and institutions. It is not simply a matter of cultural preservation; rather, it is framed as a moral defense of their community’s identity. The fear of assimilation among Croatian Serbs is deeply rooted in a historical legacy of violence, particularly from the 1940s, when Serbs were subjected to forced assimilation under the Ustaša regime. The legacy of this violence has shaped collective memory and continues to fuel concerns about cultural and linguistic assimilation, especially following the mass exodus of Croatian Serbs during Operation Storm in 1995 and the

subsequent Peaceful Reintegration period. Today, these fears are exacerbated by the continued demographic decline and the rise of right-wing political tensions. In response, Serb institutions and political leaders argue that they must protect their community from continued ethnic cleansing.⁸⁵ Limited opportunities to defend their cultural rights—such as the Model A programs—are framed as essential for the survival of Serb identity in Croatia. In this context, the minority language schools become a unique opportunity to shape the patterns of sociability of young members of the community, providing an institutional space which encourages ethnic endogamy and the reproduction of ethnicity on an intergenerational level which would prevent assimilation in the long term (Brubacker et al. 2006).

However, the central tension in Vukovar regarding assimilation is not merely a normative question, but one about who gets to define its meaning and consequences. While at first glance, the fear of assimilation expressed by Vukovarian Serb elites might seem to reify a difference that is not culturally or linguistically evident, it is rooted in a complex history of violence and nationalizing politics. Within the frame of the nation-state, ethnic identities, though socially constructed, (Gellner 1964; Anderson 2006), play an important role in redistributive processes and are analytically relevant forms of social and political action that matter (May 2011: 26). In such a context, assimilation is not perceived as a neutral process; it is framed as a coercive form of acculturation that risks the erasure of a minority culture in favour of the dominant national identity (Kymlicka 1995; Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). However, in a post-conflict context such as Vukovar, the key question about assimilation is whether it respects individual self-definition, even if the available choices are intricately shaped by institutional structures that define how identities and languages are recognized and supported. The binary of “becoming a Croat” versus “remaining a Serb” reduces the complexity of identity to rigid categories, denying the agency of individuals to negotiate and choose their identities (Hall and Du Gay 1996). In this process, both the local government, that pushes for the removal of Model A programs, and the Serb elites, who resist this pressure, are complicit in constructing these rigid categories of identity, framing the issue in terms of an irreconcilable difference that reduces the possibilities for nuanced self-definition. While the fear of cultural erasure is rooted in historical trauma, displacement, and violence, it is crucial to also consider how these fears are mobilized in contemporary politics, shaping identity in ways that may further political agendas rather than purely reflect the community’s lived experiences.

While SDSS members and employees of Serb institutions stress the importance of Model A programs in terms of protection from assimilation, I have observed that this minority language education system is also deeply embedded in webs of clientelism. Ethnographers of the post-Yugoslav region have written extensively on the “cannibalistic” postwar nationalist state, the

⁸⁵ The term “ethnic cleansing” when applied to the treatment of Croatian Serbs is not widely accepted in Croatia, but it is accepted in mainstream academia (Ther 2016; Mann 2005). The acquittal of Croatian Army general Ante Gotovina by the ICTY on charges of ethnic cleansing during Operation Storm—when hundreds of thousands of Croatian Serbs were forced out of Croatia and many others were killed—reinforced the belief in Croatia that this event was not ethnic cleansing, but rather an act of “liberation.”

opportunistic political parties, and their impact on everyday life (Kurtović and Hromadžić 2017, see also Hodges 2019, Jansen 2015, Greenberg 2014). In fact, the dependency on clientelist networks by ordinary people is such that one's membership in a nationalist political party or their tendency to vote for such parties ought not to be considered as a reflection of one's ideological conviction (Kurtović 2011). As mentioned earlier in my dissertation, Serbs in Croatia face systematic discrimination in terms of employment in the public sector, leaving them with limited options confined to the private sector and any opportunities created by Serb minority institutions themselves (Koska 2009). As a result, the Model A programs have become a major source of employment for Serbs in Vukovar, providing rare financial security for teachers, administrators, janitors, and so on. As one of my interlocutors aptly put it, "there is even a battle for the brooms now." Given the high unemployment rate across Croatia and the disadvantaged position of the stigmatised Serb community, the local gatekeepers to these coveted employment opportunities are at times perceived as disproportionately empowered within their ethnic group and are keen on protecting the source of their power.

Furthermore, by actively discrediting and sabotaging any other schooling option for Serb parents, the local political elites are also contributing to the atmosphere of anxiety within the community and fueling the departure of the youth. If a Serb parent chooses not to enrol their child in the Model A program, the social repercussions are significant. Thus, it is undeniable that the social pressures surrounding the Model A programs are constitutive elements of the "ethno-totalitarianism of the everyday" (Jović 2017) in Vukovar which, by extension, makes them a key element in the continuous social division, violence, and demographic decline which plagues the region. As Kurtović (2021) has observed concerning national political parties in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the fervent support by nationalist elites for divided classrooms, at the cost of the possibility of securing a liveable future, demonstrates the limits of nationalist bio-politics in imagining viable futures in demographically desolated spaces. In other words, through social pressure on parents, the sabotaging of integrated education options, and the clientelist distribution of limited employment opportunities, the political elites of Vukovarian Serbs are in part perpetuating the exodus from which they attempt to shield the community.

"I JUST GO THROUGH IT QUICKLY AND THAT'S THAT": THE TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE

I was sitting in front of *Maritimo*, leafing through my yellow notebook when Milan arrived. He shook my hand hurriedly and sat down across from me, beads of sweat already forming on his forehead. He was visibly nervous. Milan, a teacher in a local Model A program, made it clear that he was hesitant to discuss his role. When I asked how he approached teaching sensitive topics like the War of Croatian Independence, he explained that he stuck to the textbook, teaching "objectively," because, "if you stick to the facts, there is not much room for politicisation." Unsatisfied with such an orthodox answer, I pressed further. Eventually, Milan revealed that he

had some freedom in the classroom and would occasionally add material, particularly on topics like World War II, when he felt the textbook coverage was insufficient.

Dragana: “Do you ever skip any chapters or spend less time on certain topics?”

Milan: “No, I don’t do that. The kids can read the textbook, I can’t prevent them from doing that. So there is no point.”

Dragana: “Right. That makes sense.”

Milan: “But do you *know* what some of those textbooks say?” (*Znate li šta je u tim knjigama?*)

Dragana: “Yes. Yes, I do know.”

Once Milan realised that I was well informed and equally aghast about the Croatian nationalism and historical revisionism that has made its way into most of the history textbooks, he visibly relaxed. Social scientists have noted how history education has evolved and been instrumentalized through the transition from socialism to ethno-nationalism, finding that historical revisionism is a rising trend in the post-socialist Yugoslav space (Höpken 1996; Brunnbauer 2004; Dimou 2009; Stojanović 2016; Koren 2016). This propensity has seeped into history textbooks, which are the chief method through which nationhood narratives are transmitted to the next generation. In the case of post-war Croatia, Pavasović Trošt (2018) notes that the ideological leaning of the authors of some textbooks are clearly visible. For instance, she notes that the “most right-wing” of all the history textbooks acknowledges that Croats committed crimes against Serbs during the 1990s, but reminds the students that, “the Serbian leadership is the *most* responsible and the number of crimes committed by Serbs is the *largest*, and as such, Serbian and Croatian crimes during the wars are simply incomparable” (cited in Pavasović Trošt 2018, 731, emphasis in original).⁸⁶ Due to the open history textbook market, teachers have been able to choose from several different textbooks approved by the Ministry of Education since 2000.⁸⁷ Milan agreed that he sees himself as a “protector” of his students because he attempts to shield them from Croatian nationalism in the classroom. Nonetheless, despite his clear distaste for the teaching material, he never overtly stated that he strategically omitted teaching certain mandatory components from the Croatian curriculum—something I suspected based on what I had heard from former students, who told me that their Model A teachers often deliberately leave out content.

Weeks later, I was invited by Nemanja, whom we met earlier, to join his trivia team at *Dublin*, a local pub stylised as an Irish pub. The trivia event there would become one of my favourite pastimes in Vukovar. Nemanja’s small team was composed of a few young Serb men and, apart from one other team of close friends, was the only Serb team partaking in the biweekly trivia competition. It was not until I was interviewing Ognjen, a middle-aged Serb man I had met while

⁸⁶ See Bekavac, S. and Jareb, M. 2014. *Povijest 8: Udžbenik za 8. Razred osnovne škole*. Zagreb: Alfa.

⁸⁷ It would be fascinating to compare which history textbooks are chosen by teachers in the Serbian language program and the Croatian language program in the Model A schools in Vukovar.

participating in the trivia competition, that the role of teachers as protectors came to my mind once again. Ognjen told me:

“I get really involved in my children’s education, I really care. Once, I had to have an entire conversation with my eldest son about the textbook because I didn’t agree with the way it was covering what happened in Borovo.⁸⁸ But I didn’t want him to get in trouble at school... so I was trying to tell him that it was just more complicated, that it wasn’t the whole story. I’m actually friends with my son’s teacher [...] I talked to him about this, and he told me that I shouldn’t have wasted any time on it, that I shouldn’t have bothered with the textbook. He told me he himself does not take the textbook seriously. He was like, ‘I just go through it quickly and that’s that’ (*ja to samo prodjem tako i gotovo*).”

It is likely that Ognjen’s friend would have been unwilling to discuss the pedagogical strategy he employs in the classroom—or might have denied it altogether—out of fear or self-preservation, had I interviewed him directly about the issue. Due to the increasingly controversial nature of the Model A programs in Croatia, not many teachers are willing to openly acknowledge their subversive teaching strategies, fearing that they would be misunderstood as forms of nationalist incitement (*huškanje*) against the Croatian state. In fact, I only started becoming aware that this was happening because countless interviewees who had graduated from Model A programs had casually mentioned that their teachers had skipped or skimmed over the textbook chapters addressing the Croatian War of Independence. Finding teachers who would be willing to discuss these strategies proved to be far more challenging.

Teachers play a crucial role in the process of knowledge transmission and education reform, given their agency and control over (re)interpreting and applying the curriculum in their classrooms (Apple 2004; Apple and Christian-Smith 1991; Campbell 2012; Lasky 2005). In post-conflict contexts, their role becomes even more significant, as they are often tasked with helping students navigate and understand the violent past (Bellino 2016; Russell 2019; Shepler and Williams 2017; Weldon 2010). For example, Worden (2022: 5-9) highlights that in contexts such as Northern Ireland, teachers make “strategic choices” and are forced to “tinker around the edges” of the education system without challenging it directly. In the case of Serb teachers in Model A programs, there is an understanding that national hegemony shapes what is considered historical truth, or “domination-through-hegemony” (Bauman 1991:232). Many of these teachers, therefore, feel a

⁸⁸ The battle of Borovo Selo, which occurred on May 2nd 1991, was one of the first armed clashes of the Croatian War of Independence. A disagreement about a flag at a police station in the Serb village of Borovo Selo escalated into an ambush and resulted in the death of twelve Croatian policemen and one Serb paramilitary. In the dominant state-narrative, this incident marks the beginning of the Croatian War of Independence and implies that local Serbs committed the first acts of violence. Vukovarian Serbs, however, stress that violence had begun earlier, with the mysterious disappearances of Serb civilians from their homes organised by war criminals such as Tomislav Merčep, and that the events of May 2, 1991, therefore happened in the context of fears caused by these disappearances.

responsibility to support Serb students and protect their national identity, sometimes through subtle pedagogical strategies. While Serb teachers and political elites may disagree with certain elements of Croatia's official curriculum, they generally adhere to it publicly in order to defend the Model A programs from criticism. As a result, these schools are often viewed as "safe spaces" where Serb identity can be preserved, providing students with a respite from the pressures of majority nationalism.⁸⁹ For instance, in these classrooms, students are less exposed to the hidden curriculums of Croatian nationalism, such as the prominent use of ethnic symbols, which are more common in Vukovar schools than in other parts of Croatia (Jelić et al. 2022).

Parents also have important expectations from teachers; those who had chosen to enrol their children in Serbian language programs often cited their concern for the child's safety, worried about the persecution they might encounter at Croatian language programs from their peers, teachers, and from the curriculum itself.⁹⁰ In this post-conflict context, protection from Croatian nationalism and discrimination is part and parcel of the pastoral care provided by the school (Worden 2022), a kind of expected non-academic support or a "hidden transcript" (Scott 1990). Deeply aware of the problematic narratives being evoked in a significant number of textbooks—only some of which have been removed from the market due to their low popularity—many Vukovarian Serb parents hope that enrolling their children in Model A programs would shield them from historical narratives which discredit their own experience of the war and their community's memory of mass violence. Often, parents highlighted that they did not want their children learning at school that they are "aggressors," implying that they expected Serb teachers at Model A programs to actively interpret the Croatian curriculum in such a way as to protect their children from such nationalist narratives.

Directly or indirectly, the teachers I interviewed revealed the pedagogical strategies they used to teach the material they ideologically disagreed with, as well as other ways they facilitated or engaged in subversive acts. Olga, a Model A program teacher at the local Gymnasium school, also denied any kind of skipping or rushing through problematic material but conceded that she made an active effort to discourage her students from attending school during November 18th—before it became a national holiday—and any other event promoted by the school which she deemed nationalistic. With a smile, she proudly told me how her students managed to get around the school's policy on language and script use.

“A few years ago, the graduates wanted to have T-shirts made for their graduation trip, but they weren't allowed to write the name of the school in Cyrillic. It had to be either fully in the Latin script or bilingual. They found this completely unfair, so

⁸⁹ It must be noted that ethnically defined safe spaces are by definition limited and exclusive. I have heard many stories of bullying and discrimination from children of mixed marriages whose parents enrolled them in Model A programs. The irony is that these children have been singled out by teachers and their peers the same way that Serb parents feared their own children would be singled out in Croatian language programs.

⁹⁰ More on physical violence (in and outside of school) in Chapter 4.

they decided to shorten the name of the school to GIM. VU. (*GIM. VU.*) so that it wasn't the official name of the school, and they didn't have to respect the rule on language."

Despite the fact that the rule was clearly put in place because of the controversial nature of the Cyrillic alphabet in Vukovar, the refusal of what Olga calls "bilingualism" in favour of ethnicized script is a form of minority nationalism which she seemingly finds not only tolerable but gratifying. To Olga, the students' wish to employ exclusively the Cyrillic alphabet was self-explanatory. This exemplifies how the divided schools can serve as shields against the nationalising state while also, at the same time, producing national (and nationalist) socialisation. In fact, these types of occurrences appear to be a frequent source of strife between Serb and Croat teachers in the divided schools. According to an administrator at one of the schools I visited, teachers are often arguing amongst themselves whenever an "incident" occurs, taking the side of "their" students and attempting to mitigate the disciplinary consequences. The loyalty these teachers feel towards "their" students implies a kind of affective intensity not only towards the students but also towards the narratives they are claiming, further solidifying the ethnic fixities produced by the divided schools.

Most of the teachers I interviewed openly expressed dissatisfaction with the official curriculum's treatment of World War II history, arguing that additional material was necessary to fill in the gaps. Olga, for example, mentioned teaching a lesson on Dudik during the Gymnasium anniversary, where she covered the former Gymnasium pupils killed by the Ustaša regime. Milan, on the other hand, cited the supplementary materials he found on YouTube about the Ustaša genocides.⁹¹ Jana, a shy young Serb who had recently graduated high school, proudly shared that she knew the location of the former synagogue in Vukovar because her history teacher had included Jewish history in their lessons. As I outlined in Chapter 1, the local tourism board excludes historical sites unrelated to the Croatian War of Independence from its maps, public signposts, and website, with the exception of a single sign pointing to the Jewish cemetery (Figure 23). Moreover, the Croatian state has faced criticism for the way it has come to terms with its role in the Holocaust (Pavlaković 2008; Radonić 2010; Subotić 2019), and the official history curriculum neglects Jewish history at the local level.⁹² As a result, the Vukovarians who know the locations of sites such as the synagogue, the Jewish cemetery, or the Dudik memorial must have been taught by teachers who included additional pedagogical material they deemed relevant, or they looked up the information themselves out of curiosity. In a context where the "ethno-

⁹¹ He praised the work of Hrvoje Klasić, a prominent Croat historian, and his documentary series *NDH* on the Independent State of Croatia.

⁹² Each year, teachers across Croatia have the opportunity to deepen their understanding of the Holocaust in Croatia and gain pedagogical tools through a workshop organized by the Zagrebian Jewish community in collaboration with Yad Vashem. In 2024, however, the Croatian Ministry of Culture and Education advised the organizers of the workshop to exclude historians critical of the Croatian state, particularly those who challenge its denial of the genocide against Serbs during the NDH. The Jewish community did not succumb to the pressure.

totalitarianism of the everyday” (Jović 2017) prevails, teaching or remembering alternative local histories becomes not only an act of subversion but also a way of signalling one’s ideological positioning.



Figure 23: From the old and decaying Jewish cemetery one can see the Memorial Centre of the Homeland War, a museum displaying tanks and other wartime paraphernalia. The barbed wire fence encircling the forgotten Jewish cemetery offers a disquieting view on the smiling mural on the museum—a reminder of Croatia’s troubled relationship with its memory of the Holocaust.

However, while adding material on antifascism or local genocide history could be perceived as conducive to creating a post-ethnic citizenship, it does not necessarily mean that anti-nationalist or anti-fascist values are transmitted to the students. For instance, Olga actively participates in the local antifascist commemorations organised by Lazo Djokić, whom we met in Chapter 1, but claims that, due to their youth, her students do not have the capacity to understand the importance of the antifascist battles fought during World War II (Figure 24). Dušanka, a teacher at a local Model A program high school, who vehemently denied any kind of strategic action in her and her colleagues’ pedagogical methods, proudly stressed that her students were emotionally moved by their participation in the Dudik commemorations. However, it became clear that Dušanka was framing the Dudik massacres and the affiliated commemoration through a nationalist historical lens of perpetual Serb suffering at the hands of Croats rather than as part of the greater Croatian or ex-Yugoslav anti-fascist struggle. In her words, as she discussed her student’s participation in the antifascist commemoration:

“It is important to awaken in them a feeling of national consciousness and a respect towards victims. It is important to love what is yours so that you can respect what belongs to others (*voleti svoje da možeš poštovati tuđe*).”

When I asked Dušanka whether she knew the location of the former synagogue, she responded without hesitation, and with a dismissive laugh, that she neither knew nor cared. It became apparent that, for Dušanka, Dudik is primarily a symbol of Serbian national suffering, serving as a point of reference for teaching Serbian identity and history.⁹³ Her disregard for the local Jewish history and her denial of the pedagogical approaches of her peers suggests that the strategies employed by Serb teachers in Model A programs to resist the Croatian curriculum and nationalist historiography do not necessarily reflect an opposition to nationalism or fascism. Rather, through their emphasis on protecting the Serbian language, the Cyrillic script, and national subjects that reinforce national identities, these teachers also contribute to the reification and reproduction of ethnic divisions.



Figure 24: Students from Model A programs playing *tamburica* and performing recitations at the Dudik commemoration.

Strategic actions by minority teachers in minority language schools are a phenomenon that has been noted elsewhere by social scientists. For instance, Palestinian-Arab teachers in Israel use diverse pedagogical strategies to circumvent the state’s Zionist ideologies (Agbaria and Pinson 2019). In a context of high surveillance and scrutiny of a minority considered to be disloyal to the

⁹³ In Chapter 1, I described the display of emotion exhibited by one of the teenage reciters at the Dudik commemoration. It should be noted that the young girl was one of Dušanka’s students. In light of her statement, one has to wonder whether the reciter was emotionally moved by the fact that the poem alluded to *Serb* suffering or because it described *civilian* suffering during World War II.

state (Benavot and Resh 2003), these strategic actions include adding supplementary material, downplaying the legitimacy of Zionism by focusing on current events, devaluing the curriculum and textbooks by ‘teaching for the test’, creating an alternative sphere of belonging for students in which the community replaces the state, and teaching students about their legal rights as citizens (Agbaria 2016). In Romania, Hungarian teachers in minority language schools employ a “hidden curriculum” to interpret history lessons in a pro-Hungarian manner (Brubacker et al. 2006: 270). While nationalist content is present, the most significant impact of these schools is not the overt ideology but their ability to shape social relations outside the classroom and to participate in the production of a Hungarian world in a Transylvanian town. To some members of the majority population, the issue is less about the content taught and more about the function that the schools serve: to separate. So, why are subversive pedagogical strategies and “hidden curriculums”, which are evidently found around the world, considered so controversial in some places more than others?

While some scholars have argued that classrooms should become political sites where teachers facilitate deliberations concerning fundamental and controversial social issues (Hess and McAvoy 2013), the Croatian context—a young and deeply divided democracy—discourages public debates of key historical events which would diverge from the state-sanctioned narrative (Koren 2016). In post-conflict societies such as Croatia, where the loyalty of certain minorities is constantly under suspicion, the discouragement is even more pronounced. Teachers working with minority groups face heightened scrutiny, not just from the majority population but also from their own political leaders who are concerned about the public image of minority institutions. In this light, minorities such as Palestinian-Arabs in Israel and Serbs in Croatia are “enemy minorities” and are a much bigger concern for the state’s ontological security (Subotić 2013) than, for instance, Hungarians in Romania. Therefore, Dušanka’s assertion that her colleagues do not engage in what she fears could be considered nationalist incitement (*huškanje*), Milan’s nervous downplaying of his pedagogical strategies, and Olga’s claim that she is not engaging in resistance (*otpor*) but that her actions are “more about preserving one’s identity” (*više je to čuvanje svog identiteta*) reveal the deep awareness of these Serb educators in Model A programs that they must keep their strategic actions from becoming public knowledge. Otherwise, they risk not only alienating the majority population but most importantly drawing the ire of political authorities within their own community, who could accuse them of causing problems for minority education. Teachers are caught between the desire to protect their students from perceived assimilation and the fear of severe repercussions if their actions are made public. In this context, the tension is not only ideological but existential, as teachers must balance their duty to their students with the need to safeguard their own livelihoods and reputations within their community.

“SHE SHOULD KNOW WHERE SHE WALKED INTO”: THE STUDENTS’ PERSPECTIVE

I had been looking forward to my interview with Nikola, a young Serb who had moved to Western Europe seeking a better life. Over the months, I had heard countless stories from his mother, one of my regular interlocutors, about the injustices he faced at a local high school. When Nikola

finally came to Vukovar that summer, his boisterous personality immediately explained why he had often clashed with his teachers.

“We had this pedagogue at the school... She was a real piece of work! For the Bread Days (*Dani Kruha*), she came into our classroom and told us that they would not allow the 4S (4C) symbol to be placed on our bread anymore.⁹⁴ I hate it when they try to argue that 4S is the same as Ustaša symbols. It can’t be. If anything, 4S is the equivalent of the [Croatian] checkerboard (*šahovnica*) since they’re both national symbols. So I gave her a history lesson until she started shaking with rage. My teacher was laughing so much, I thought he was going to give me an A on the spot! [...] She came into our classroom to tell us about the donation box the school had set up in the lobby to collect funds for the renovation of the water tower.⁹⁵ And she kept saying things like ‘The Greater Serbian Aggression’ (*Velikosrpska Agresija*) while she was talking to us. Can you imagine? She came into a Serb classroom (*sprski razred*) and started saying that! So I started provoking her, asking her questions, so that she would know where she had walked into (*da zna gde je došla*). I remained polite because she’s an older person... but still. Later, we all made a deal to each put 10 dinars⁹⁶ into the donation box. And the box disappeared from the lobby really quickly after that!”

Nikola’s stories serve as an apt entry point into examining how students actively reproduce, engage with, and sometimes subvert the ethnic dynamics that permeate the divided schools in Vukovar. For instance, by focusing on the technical difference between the ‘4S’ and ‘U’ symbols, he diminishes the emotional weight of one while amplifying that of the other. In Croatia, even if the Ustaša ‘U’ symbol is associated with the genocides of the 1940s, the ‘4S’ symbol is still strongly linked to the atrocities committed by Serb forces against non-Serbs during the 1990s.

These encounters also illustrate that the hegemonic rules of ethnic division are being reinforced by all actors involved: the pedagogue who imposes the Croatian historical narrative, the student who calls on the ethnic division of space to reclaim the “Serb classroom,” and the teacher whose

⁹⁴ The Bread Days, akin to the North American holiday of Thanksgiving, are one of the rare school-sponsored occasions for ‘mixing’, giving students an opportunity to come into contact and educate one another about their cultural heritage. On this occasion, students eat together and celebrate the year’s harvest. The Serb students often bring *slava* bread (*slavski kolač*) to school, an elaborately decorated bread used for the celebration of the Serbian Orthodox holiday of *slava*. These breads are often decorated with national symbols, such as the Serbian cross (4C) which also appears on the Serbian national flag. Due to the trauma of the war and the rise of Croatian nationalism, many Serbian national symbols have become controversial in Vukovar.

⁹⁵ The Vukovar water tower, a structure built in the 1960s was heavily damaged during the siege of Vukovar but remained standing. As a result, it became a symbol of Croatian national suffering and endurance. The reconstruction efforts ended in 2020 but purposely left much of the artillery damage visible as a reminder of the historic event. Today, it houses a museum and a restaurant (Figure 25).

⁹⁶ For Croatian Serbs to donate in Serbian currency for the reconstruction of a Croatian landmark was intended as an offensive provocation.

passivity condones the events occurring in his classroom. The teachers' passive role in Nikola's stories highlights the complex dynamics of power and authority within the divided schools, where students appear to be less constrained than their educators. The passivity signals that teachers may tacitly condone or align with students' resistance at a time when they cannot voice their own opinions. The solidarity between the students and the teacher against the pedagogue suggests that interethnic tensions in Vukovar have fostered strong alliances between students and teachers within Serb classrooms. The classroom thus becomes not only a space for learning but also an ethnicized space where Serb students assert ownership and resist "external" imposition.



Figure 25: The water tower of Vukovar is a symbol of the town and its endurance during the siege. It was renovated so as to retain the evidence of the JNA shelling.

Nikola's use of the term "Serb classroom" (*srpski razred*) contrasts with the more cautious approach of SDSS members, who avoid labeling classrooms in such explicitly ethnic terms. His confident expression of ownership of space in the school demonstrates how he is mapping out its geography in ethnic terms, where the Croat pedagogue is seen as overstepping an important boundary. Another such example of delineation of space within Vukovar's Model A classrooms was given by Croatian language and literature teacher Ljiljana Radoljubac, who shared that, upon entering a Model A classroom, she once found that her students had drawn a large 'U' on the board in an unsuccessful attempt to provoke her.⁹⁷ Thus, the classroom itself becomes not only an ethnicized space, but a location through which ethnicity is (re)produced by the power of both

⁹⁷ For the complete interview, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o2LvUql3X14>. Radoljubac describes how she walked up to the board and added a 2 next to the U, then asked her students if anyone else likes to listen to U2. She said that the students laughed and there were no more provocations after that.

ideology and pedagogy. This reflects broader patterns seen in ethnically divided schools, where the ethnic conceptualization of the school's geography impacts movements, experiences, and interactions between the social actors within it (Hromadžić 2015a). As seen in other contexts, the classroom becomes a “a built environment where these ethno-national identities are enacted, negotiated and lived through daily encounters and mundane experiences” (Laketa 2018: 197). Through Nikola's stories, it becomes clear that Model A classrooms are important locations for the production of ethnicized and national subjects, further contributing to the “ethno-totalitarianism of everyday life” (Jović 2017). In this context, students become modern self-governing subjects who absorb and perpetuate the ideologies and pedagogies of ethnic division imposed on them, even when they do not necessarily intend to do so.

While Nikola's stories shed light on the complex ethnic dynamics and the ways students navigate them within Vukovar's schools, Jana's experience offers a different perspective—one that reflects a desire to transcend these divides. I met Jana, a quiet young Serb woman and recent high school graduate, at a Youth Peace Group Danube (*Mirovna Grupa Mladih Dunav*) event, an NGO aiming to de-ethnicize space by providing opportunities for Serb and Croat youth to just hang out. Due to the neutrality of her name and the de-ethnicized nature of the NGO space, I was not able to “read” her ethnicity until she mentioned going to Serbia for cheaper orthodontics. Our conversation quickly revealed that Jana's social outlook differed significantly from her peers in Vukovar. Unlike other girls I had spoken to who made an effort to dress stylishly, Jana—much like myself—embraced her “nerdiness” and had little interest in fitting in.

“All my friends are Croats from my school, but I only managed to befriend them in the last few months of senior year. The girls in my own program rejected me (*one su me odbacile*) and so I had to look for friends elsewhere. But they still tried to convince me that they had heard my new [Croat] friends say nationalistic things [...] I like to go to a Latin dance studio in Osijek. The girls in my program are all into folk dancing (*narodni ples*) and they judged me for this. They more or less called me a traitor to my people (*maltene su me nazvale izdajicom svoga naroda*).”

Jana's story highlights the tension between individual desires and the social pressures to conform to ethno-national boundaries in post-war Vukovar, a tension that shaped in part by the divided school system she navigates. Her rejection by her Serb classmates arises not from overt political conflict, but from her refusal to adhere to ethnicized expectations around behaviour, fashion, and socialization. By befriending Croat students and engaging in activities like Latin dance—outside the national sphere of folk dancing—Jana continuously challenges the implicit rules governing “appropriate” ethnic behaviour. Her peers label her a “traitor to her people” for these choices, illustrating how even subtle forms of social resistance are framed within rigid boundaries of ethnic nationalism that schools in Vukovar perpetuate. Her experience, then, is not just a case of “border-crossing” (Palmer 2013), but a complex navigation of a fraught social space, where ethnic

divisions are not only deeply entrenched but actively policed by both peers and institutions. The school, as a site where ethnic lines are reinforced daily, shapes the limited possibilities for cross-ethnic social interaction and social mobility. Rather than a simple narrative of overcoming divides, Jana's story reflects the ongoing, everyday process of negotiating and contesting these divisions, showing how ethnic boundaries are continuously reproduced and enforced, often at significant social cost.

Despite her attempts to navigate and challenge ethnic divides imposed by the spatial and social governmentality of both her school and her city, Jana's participation in the (re)production of ethnic boundaries in everyday life emerged as an unsurprising consequence of the complex social realities she faces. This became clear days later, when we reunited for coffee at *Maritimo* and discussed the subject of language.

Dragana: "Do you think Croatian and Serbian are two different languages?"

Jana: "Of course these are two different languages. There are strict grammatical rules that set them apart!"

Dragana: "But what do you make of the fact that they are mutually understandable?"

Jana: "Well, I can also understand Macedonian but it does not mean that it is the same language as Serbian. That's just how it is. Different people, different languages (*različiti ljudi, različiti jezici*)."

As I observed in Chapter 2, the youth I encountered asserted that Croatian and Serbian are separate languages because they had been taught as two separate subjects at school, despite the arguments of many linguists who consider them to be a single pluri-centric language. Despite her openness to cross-ethnic friendships, Jana was shaped by the ideological divisions present in the curriculum. As Hromadžić (2015a: 57) observed in Mostar, "young people come of age in the context where many of these ideologies [of linguistic nationalism] became legitimate world views and embodied ways of being." A different conceptualization of the social world around them is unimaginable—what Wittgenstein (1958) would call "being in the grip of a picture"—since an alternative has never been experienced. This reveals how schools, through both discursive and non-discursive practices, ethnicize space and shape students' understanding of identity and difference.

When I met Mia, an outgoing high school senior with a Croat mother and Serb father, she told me that she adamantly rejected ethnic labels and refused to declare herself on any official paperwork. She expressed frustration with what she saw as the nationalist tendencies of her generation. However, during a visit to a Serb-owned café in Borovo Naselje, Mia's boyfriend Dimitrije, a freshman at the University of Osijek, tearfully spoke about the conflict in Kosovo, saying, "the bones of our ancestors and our churches are there." Overcome by emotion, he paused and apologised, while Mia affectionately patted him on the arm and her friends giggled nervously at

the sight of his tears. Although I had become somewhat desensitized to both latent and virulent nationalism (Bieber 2020) in Vukovar, this encounter left me reflecting on the complexity of Mia's connection to Dimitrije. Given the frustrations she had expressed to me, it was striking to see her emotionally moved by Dimitrije's passionate expression of nationalist sentiments.

Building on Laketa's (2018) concept of the "stickiness of space," which itself is drawn from Ahmed's (2004) work on emotional stickiness, I argue that the divided schools in post-war Vukovar have become sticky spaces where nationalist emotions and affect congeal through repetitive practices, making them seem natural, inevitable, or self-evident. In these schools, both institutional and everyday affects are involved in (re)materializing and reinforcing ethnic difference beyond the school walls. While Ela's personal relationship with Dimitrije plays a role in her response to his emotional display of nationalism, it is important to recognize that her reaction is not only shaped by the social norms that have been ingrained in her over years of navigating the segregated school system, but also by her complexity and fluidity as a social actor. Ela's behaviour is also relational, shaped by the dynamic of her relationship with Dimitrije and his vulnerability, as well as her capacity to navigate and negotiate complex emotional terrains. Despite being raised by her parents to reject ethnic labels, Ela's experience in the divided school system normalizes the emotional expressions tied to ethnic identity, including Dimitrije's strong attachment to the Serbian nation. While she intellectually rejects ethnic labels and strives to find an "in-between" space for herself, she does not view it as problematic that non-mixed people continue to embrace ethnic labels. Her empathetic response to Dimitrije's nationalism reveals how these affective attachments to ethnicity persist, shaping her relationship to identity even as she tries to step outside the boundaries set by the divided educational space.

Mia's brother, Dario, shared similar unwillingness to be perceived and treated according to an ethnic category. He described how, "during the local election, the girl working at the voting booth gave me a minority representative list (*manjinski list*) and I got annoyed and asked her why she had assumed I was a Serb." He even told me that, while he frequently goes to Serb-owned bars, he refuses to sing along with his friends whenever the song "*Srpkinja Je Mene Majka Rodila*" (A Serb Mother Birthed Me) is played, out of respect for himself and his Croat mother. Later, Mia told me that when Dario had been a high school student, he was attacked by a group of young Croats outside of their apartment building because he had started dating a Croat girl.⁹⁸ "He came back inside and was too embarrassed to look at any of us. He wouldn't even let my mother report it to the police because he was afraid that they would find him again," she said, with tears in her eyes. Despite all of this, Dario is now in a relationship with a Croat girl, signaling his continued unwillingness to conform to ethnic categorization and division. Dario's story led me to question why he, despite his best, was still perceived—by nationalists—as a Serb, and even subjected to violence because of it.

⁹⁸ More on romantic relationships and violence in Chapter 4.

Both Dario and Mia are attempting to navigate the fraught terrain of post-war ethnic divisions in Vukovar to the best of their abilities, striving to distance themselves from rigid ethnic categories while simultaneously being shaped by them. Despite their mixed heritage, because Mia and Dario both attended Model A programs, they have been ethnicized as Serbs in the eyes of both Serb and Croat communities. As Svetlana, a mother from Borovo Naselje, put it, “as soon as you enrol your child in school, you have picked a side (*ti si se opredelio*)”. This tension is also evident in their use of the language of ethno-national division that surrounds them. As Čorkalo et al. (2004) note, the usage of terms such as “us,” “ours,” and “them” when speaking of Serbs and Croats, indicates that, despite purported neutrality, individuals saw themselves as part of one group or another depending on the situation. This reflects what Boltanski and Thévenot (1991: 146) describe as adopting “an attitude in keeping with the nature of the situation” in order to foster a sense of belonging to a collective moral framework. The ethnic spatial governmentality in Vukovar entraps language, offering no linguistic escape to individuals whose embodied realities demonstrate the incongruity between nationalist ontologies and lived experience. As Hromadžić (2015a: 16) argues, this results in “the calcification of ethnicity and [...] the perpetual silencing and marginalisation of alternative, still-lingering and potentially agentive transethnic identities, politics, and language.” The “affective quality of stickiness” (Laketa 2018: 191) in this context traps individuals, even the most unwilling of subjects, in an ethnicized space with no exits. When I asked Mia if others imposed ethnicity on her, she gave a tight, uncomfortable smile and nodded, acknowledging the “cultural violence” she endures.⁹⁹

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Near the end of my fieldwork, I spoke with Jovan, a twenty-something Serb man from Vukovar, who articulated the issue of the Model A programs in a way that struck me as particularly insightful. Rather than denying the divisive nature of the schools, Jovan openly acknowledged it.

“It’s true that the schools make building friendships with Croats more difficult. I was good friends with a Croat boy who lived on my block, but we gradually drifted apart when we started kindergarten. We rarely saw each other anymore. But the [Model A] schools must remain. In Vukovar, nobody respects the employment quotas for minorities, the law concerning minority language in public spaces, and countless other laws meant to protect the rights of national minorities in Croatia. In Vukovar, where there is no respect for us, this becomes a matter of dignity. It’s not about Cyrillic, it’s simply about dignity.”

Jovan, like many of my interlocutors in Vukovar, implied that it would be ideal for Croats and Serbs to attend school together, as their parents had in socialist Yugoslavia. While he

⁹⁹ Here I am borrowing Dubravka Ugrešić’s words, employed in a 2017 interview by Political Critique and European Alternatives entitled “I Am a Literary Smuggler: An Interview with Dubravka Ugrešić,” in which she described the experience of being ethnically labelled a “Croatian writer” as an act of cultural violence.

acknowledges that social connections between Serbs and Croats have been made more difficult by the separate classrooms of the post-war period, he emphasized that this is not the most important factor to consider. Jovan believes that, in a context where one group has been systematically disempowered, attempting to erase differences through school integration is a problematic solution. The local far-right government is pushing for “integration” despite the apprehensions of the Serb minority or the power dynamics in Vukovar. One cannot pretend to be blind to difference without addressing the social inequalities which entrench these differences and makes living with difference a violent experience. Jovan’s focus on dignity—rather than language preservation—reflects a deeper concern with the social and political realities that shape his life and that of his community. And while scholars warn that “over-protection resulting in segregated schools and separate languages might lead to hostile separatism that can hinder the development of a common state identity and undermine the legitimacy of shared institutions” (Freedman et al. 2004: 242), Jovan’s words suggest that the issues at stake go beyond language preservation or ethnic symbolism. Instead, they point to dignity—specifically, the lack of dignity stemming from the social consequences of being positioned as an ‘enemy minority’—and to the state’s obligation to uphold minority rights, thereby reinforcing their status as equal members of Croatian society.

When I first arrived in Vukovar, I considered integrated education to be an ideal solution for addressing the challenges of post-war division, particularly given the region’s history of integrated schooling, which extends back to the pre-socialist era. However, as I became more attuned to the local dynamics, I recognized that the situation was far more nuanced than I initially perceived. While divided schools contribute to reinforcing ethnonational identities and limit interethnic contact, they also serve as protective mechanisms for the minority community, helping shield it from the pressures of national uniformity within the Croatian state. The political rhetoric of the far-right, with its push for a unified education model without consulting the minority community, suggests that the call for integrated schools may, in practice, serve not so much as a means of fostering reconciliation, but as a way of managing the ontological threat of the enemy minority and imposing a singular vision of national identity. Both integrated and minority-language schools represent legitimate models for managing diversity, but the key question lies in who decides which model is implemented, whose voices are given priority, and the power relations that influence these decisions. Given the current political climate in Vukovar, the call for integration risks becoming a tool for reinforcing a dominant national framework rather than embracing the complexity of local identities.

In conclusion, this chapter has explored the role of segregated schools in Vukovar as a central element of post-conflict ethnic governance. It argues that these schools are not simply remnants of past divisions but active forces shaping the social fabric of the region. The chapter illustrates how the schools function in two conflicting ways: as spaces that preserve ethnic identity against external nationalist pressures, and as sites that perpetuate nationalist ideologies, deepening ethnic divides. It contends that the debate over Model A language education is driven by both the desire

to protect cultural heritage and political interests, with Serb elites using it to maintain control, while also reinforcing ethnic division and marginalization. Additionally, it highlights how Serb teachers, through subtle educational strategies, seek to shield students from dominant nationalist narratives, yet, in doing so, they sustain ethnic boundaries. Ultimately, the chapter shows how the divided schooling system shapes students' identities, creating complex spaces where ethnic identities are both challenged and reinforced, and where personal agency intersects with structural constraints.

The divisions in Vukovar, explored through the lens of divided schooling, are not confined to the classroom but spill into the broader social and political life of the community. The youth violence witnessed on the streets reflects the enduring legacies of ethnic conflict and the challenges of coexistence in a post-war society. In the following chapter, I examine how these tensions manifest in public spaces, with violence becoming both a product and a tool of ongoing struggles over identity and power.

CHAPTER 4:
“THE VIOLENT STATE OF CROATIA”¹⁰⁰:
GENDERED LIFE IN A DIVIDED CITY

“The grandiose project of building an independent and
sovereign state could end no differently than the way it had
started—with violence.”
—Ante Pavić

In the early hours of Orthodox Easter in 2021, on what would have otherwise been a quiet May day in a small town, a large group of young Croat men marched through the predominantly Serb village of Borovo Selo, chanting inflammatory slogans such as, “kill the Serb” (*ubij Srbina*) and “oh Croatian mother(land), we will slaughter the Serbs” (*oj Hrvatska mati, Srbe čemo klati*). The chants echoed throughout the village as local Serbs, in stunned silence, filmed the march from their windows. Croatian police quietly followed the procession for 1.5 kilometres, though no intervention occurred.¹⁰¹ The young men involved were members of the Bad Blue Boys (hereafter BBB), a fan group (*navijači*) of the Zagreb-based Dinamo football club, who had attended a commemoration for Croatian policemen killed during the Croatian War of Independence in nearby Vinkovci before marching through Borovo Selo.

This incident can be understood as a “spectacle of identity” (Dal Lago 1990), a fan ritual that positions football fans as “agents of remembrance” (Brentin 2016), “managers of the national space” (Hage 1998), and interpreters of societal values, norms, and symbols. By the time I arrived in Vukovar a few months later, the incident remained a vivid memory for my Serb interlocutors, many of whom cited it as indicative of the climate of intimidation and the perceived inaction of the Croatian authorities. Over time, frustration has only grown—particularly among Serb, Jewish, Roma and antifascist communities—over the impunity surrounding hate speech and the absence of legal measures to adequately curb the display of fascist symbols and salutes.¹⁰²

Vukovar makes headlines in the Croatian media twice a year: during the November commemorations and whenever significant hooligan clashes erupt on its streets, often resulting in injuries. These confrontations typically involve the BBB from Zagreb’s Dinamo and the Delije,

¹⁰⁰ The title “*Nasilna Država Hrvatska*” (The Violent State of Croatia) deliberately echoes the acronym of ‘*Nezavisna Država Hrvatska*’ (Independent State of Croatia). This title was coined by Croatian journalist Ante Pavić in his 2019 article, where he argues that violence—whether physical, institutional, or symbolic—permeates Croatian society and is institutionalized at various levels of governance and daily life. See: <https://forum.tm/vijesti/nasilna-drzava-hrvatska-7075>.

¹⁰¹ See the following video of the incident: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=505519930474375>.

¹⁰² In the Law on Offenses Against Public Order and Peace, Article 14 mentions the offense of insulting “the moral feelings of citizens,” but fascist symbols are not explicitly mentioned. Furthermore, the High Misdemeanour Court ruled in 2020 that the fascist phrase “*Za Dom—Spremni*” (For the Homeland—Ready) is not an offence, which implies that Ustašism is not officially sanctioned in Croatia. See the following article: <https://www.iusinfo.hr/aktualno/dnevne-novosti/visoki-preksajni-sud-poklic-za-dom-spremni-nije-preksaj-41858>.

the fan group of Belgrade's Red Star, whose presence and influence in Vukovar have ebbed and flowed over time.¹⁰³ During the 1990s war and the Reintegration Period, it was the Delije and other Serb hooligans who targeted non-Serbs in violent acts. Today, as the demographic composition has shifted, the focus of violence also changed, with Serb youth increasingly becoming the primary targets of violence from groups like the BBB.¹⁰⁴



Figure 26: Around the same time of the march, a graffiti reading “we will fuck Serb women—ZDS (For the Homeland—Ready)” (*Jebat ćemo srpske žene—ZDS (Za Dom—Spremni)*) surfaced in the Mitnica suburb of Vukovar, adding a gendered aspect to the ethno-nationalist hate speech.¹⁰⁵ (Source: srbi.hr)

This chapter is digging into the legacy of violence in Vukovar, particularly the ways in which this violence has evolved since the end of the war and continues to shape the community, especially through the prism of youth violence. I approach these dynamics through the lens of the enemy minority, which conceptualizes how Croatian Serbs, as a marginalized group, are positioned as a perceived threat to the ontological insecurity of the Croatian nation-state. In this framework, inter-ethnic violence as well as public displays of dominance (whether hooligan or non-hooligan) are not merely episodic or individual acts, but part of ongoing social and political processes through which both majoritarian and minoritarian actors negotiate insecurity, belonging, and control in post-war Vukovar. The fact that these clashes are often seasonal (*sezonske*), flaring up during

¹⁰³ See the following video of a clash between the BBB and Delije in a suburb of Vukovar: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6TcPymN380E>.

¹⁰⁴ The most recent incident was initiated when BBB overheard two Serb teenagers speaking in *ekavica* in downtown Vukovar. See Conclusion.

¹⁰⁵ *Za Dom—Spremni* (For the Homeland—Ready) was the official salute of the Ustaša movement. Functionally equivalent to the Nazi salute “Sieg Heil,” it is widely recognized today as a symbol of ethnic hatred, particularly offensive to Serbs, Jews, Roma, and others persecuted under the Ustaša regime.

election periods, clearly demonstrates their political dimension. These frequent inter-ethnic incidents—often occurring in bars, parks, or the streets—are both a product of and a driving force behind the current social, political, and economic landscape, (re)producing and deepening persistent tensions in peacetime that shapes the lives of many groups in the community.

To fully understand the scope of the violence permeating everyday life in Vukovar, it is helpful to examine it through a feminist lens, which conceptualizes violence as expansive and deeply embedded in social, political, and economic structures. From this perspective, violence is “nonlinear, productive, destructive, and reproductive” (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004: 1). This is illustrated through the particular kinds of political subjectivities it produces, the gender regimes it reinforces, and the political ammunition it provides to local nationalist elites. Feminist theorists have long argued that violence is not confined to physical acts; instead, it exists along a “continuum of violence” (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004; Cockburn 2004), linking together various forms of harm—from verbal threats and symbolic violence to physical assaults. In fact, Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois (2004: 19) argue that focusing on the “‘little violences’ produced in the structures, habituses, and *mentalités* of everyday life shifts our attention to pathologies of class, race, and gender inequalities.” Feminist approaches are also sceptical of clear distinctions between wartime and peacetime, as the structures of violence are embedded across both realms, particularly in post-conflict societies where gendered and ethnic power dynamics continue to shape everyday interactions (Cockburn 2004; Baaz & Stern 2009; Davies & True 2015).

On a warm Saturday evening, after the bi-weekly pub quiz at *Dublin* café had wrapped up, the two Serb teams gathered outside, playfully teasing each other about their ongoing losing streaks. While most said their goodbyes and headed home, a few of the men decided to take a walk by the Danube and invited me to come along. As we neared *Madre*, a local Croat-owned bar, Stefan and Vukašin, childhood friends in their late twenties, voiced apprehension about walking past it late at night.

Stefan: “A few months ago we were having some drinks here. We had a good time and we were just about to leave when a group of BBB stopped us at the door.”

Vukašin: “One of them accused Stefan of being a Delije. He was convinced he was someone he had gotten into a fight with.”

Stefan: “Him and his friends were ready to demolish us, it took so much effort to convince him that he had the wrong guy!”

Vukašin: “Yeah... I haven’t been back there since.”

They were right to be reluctant to return. Katarina, a young Serb woman, and former bartender at *Madre*, confirmed that, on a different night, she had witnessed a security guard call some BBB to let them know that some Serb hooligans had arrived, enabling the confrontation which landed one

of her friends—a bystander—in the hospital with a shattered jaw. When her employer did nothing to discipline the security guard, she quit her job in protest. Often, young people I interviewed told me that many young Serb men are not allowed to set foot in downtown Vukovar at the moment, for fear of being jumped by Croat hooligans. Reasons abounded: they were hooligans themselves, they were intimately connected with a hooligan, or—they admitted with a mischievous grin—they had posted something nationalistic on social media. While some in Vukovar downplay the significance of such events—labelling them “isolated cases” (*pojedinici*), or the work of misguided hooligans—many Serb parents and young people directly affected by the street violence see it as a serious issue. This minimization often comes from those employed in the Model A programs, who argue that the media sensationalizes the fighting. By downplaying the issue, they seek to avoid blame for dividing the community, which could threaten the continuation of separate classes based on language of instruction.¹⁰⁶ In contrast, those directly impacted express deep concern for the safety of their male relatives and friends—who are most often targeted—and make important life choices in attempt to avoid the violence.

One has to wonder, how do Serb teenage boys in post-war Vukovar navigate the tensions between ethnic identity, masculinity, and the threat of inter-ethnic violence in their daily lives? Why do some young Serb men in Vukovar join hooligan groups? Conversely, how do Serb women experience and navigate the intersection of ethnic and gendered identities in post-conflict Vukovar? And what are the social, political, and economic consequences of defining peace as something to ‘maintain’ rather than to ‘achieve’ in post-war Vukovar?

My research is situated within the literature on fan activism in post-socialist Croatia. While many scholars have focused on fans’ activism against crony capitalist figures (Hodges and Stubbs 2016; Perasović and Mustapić 2017; Tregoures 2017), others have examined how these fans have become subjects of police surveillance and moral panic (Lalić and Pilić 2011; Hodges 2016). Recent ethnographies have challenged assumptions about working-class solidarity within fan groups (King 2017). In fact, the Croatian context is unique in this sense, with fan organizing spanning a wide range of social classes, from petty criminals to professors to politicians (Hodges 2016: 70-71). My focus aligns with the social scientists who analyse the role of football fan clubs in constructing national identity (Vrcan and Lalić 1999; Hughson and Skillen 2015; Brentin 2013; 2016; Sindbaek 2013; Hodges 2018).

Beyond hooliganism, this chapter also contributes to the literature on everyday violence in post-conflict spaces. Scholars have shown that the street becomes a male-dominated arena for public violence in communities affected by conflict (Bermudez et al. 2018) and that the normalization of violence makes it a constitutive element in the fabric of post-conflict societies (McAlister et al. 2013). Like Browne et al. (2019), I find that a history of armed conflict contributes to the

¹⁰⁶ For more details on the politics of divided schools, see Chapter Three.

perpetuation of aggressive masculinity within community systems, but with signs of shifting norms among young men.

This chapter also draws on feminist scholarship, particularly research on masculinity and gendered power structures. Feminist political theorists have explored how hegemonic masculinity legitimizes the state, defines the public sphere, and institutionalizes male privilege (Pateman 1989; Brown 1992; Connell 1990). Historians have examined how national projects produce and require specific masculinities and gender relations (Mosse 1985; Dawson 1994; Sinha 1995; Cohen 1996), demonstrating that masculinity is not uniform, but rather shaped by particular political processes. Greenberg (2006b) places this concept at the centre of her study of masculinity in Serbia, arguing that the “management of masculinity” is crucial when analysing periods of social and political crisis. My research also engages with this question, albeit in a different political and social climate.

In addition, my work draws from literature on the role of women in nationalist movements. While much of this research focuses on women in nationalist resistance movements (Aretxaga 1997; see Power, Dirik, and Lamoureux in Mulholland et al. 2018), I find more recent studies on women’s participation in the rise of xenophobia and fascism in Europe (Farris 2017; Köttig et al. 2017; Mulholland et al. 2018) to be more relevant to my own research. Regrettably, many studies on women and nationalism in the post-Yugoslav region, particularly those focused on the 1990s, tend to position women as passive victims of ethno-nationalist violence. These approaches, however, have been critiqued by scholars who argue that such framings fail to consider the complexities of women’s political agency (Kouvo and Levine 2008; Žarkov 2007; Helms 2013). I reorient my focus from the experience of “ethnic anxiety” of marginalized Serb women (Golubović 2019) towards agency and the politics of everyday life.

In this chapter, I argue that the “continuum of violence” (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004; Cockburn 2004) in Vukovar persists into so-called “peacetime,” shifting in response to evolving power dynamics. Rather than predicting the eruption of ethnic conflict, I highlight how violence remains embedded in everyday life, taking the form of nationalist rhetoric, inter-ethnic street violence, misogyny, and homophobia. This violence is not merely a reaction to historical grievances but is deeply tied to a broader crisis of masculinity amid economic uncertainty, which impacts both Croats and Serbs. The chapter zeroes in on the experience of local Serbs, for whom minoritization compounds feelings of disempowerment and marginalization, and violent performances in public spaces serve to reclaim agency. In this context, hooligan groups and national symbols provide a sense of belonging and control in a post-conflict society where many feel alienated. I also argue that the effects of these violent masculinities extend beyond Serb men, deeply affecting women and LGBTQ+ individuals. Serb women, caught between gendered expectations of passivity and nationalist demands of ethnic loyalty, navigate a double bind, with their responses shaped by intersecting gender and ethnic pressures. LGBTQ+ individuals, in turn, perform ethnic loyalty to secure belonging in a post-conflict environment dominated by rigid

gender roles. Finally, this chapter demonstrates that local NGOs, while engaged in peacebuilding, are constrained in their ability to address the enduring legacy of violence. The Peaceful Reintegration process, narrowly defined as the end of war, overlooks the continued dynamics of violence and historical trauma. Serb elites further discourage integration by undermining the NGO sector and its liberal values, reinforcing ethnic divides, gender regimes, and the survival of minority Serb institutions.

I begin with a historical overview of Vukovar's periods of violence, tracing the region's shifting power dynamics and ethnic tensions—from the Austro-Hungarian Empire through socialist Yugoslavia, the 1990s, and the post-conflict period—and their ongoing influence on contemporary forms of violence. I then look at how street violence is experienced by Serb teenagers and young men, focusing on how masculinized forms of agency like toughness and emotional detachment function as strategies for navigating power dynamics and asserting social standing in a marginalized context. The chapter also reflects on how former members of Serb football fan clubs view their past involvement as a response to powerlessness, distrust of state institutions, and the dominance of nationalist and gendered masculine norms. An analysis of the experiences of Vukovarian Serb women at the intersection of ethnic identity and gender regimes follows. It highlights their silencing and frustration, which is sometimes channelled into aggressive forms of nationalism. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the politics of peace in Vukovar, showing how Serb institutions and political parties frame themselves as essential to the community's survival, positioning their ethnic-centred approach as a necessary counter to the perceived empty promises of European liberalism, thus reinforcing divisions and nationalism rather than fostering integration.

“LESSONS ON WAR: IT NEVER ENDS”¹⁰⁷

On the night of November 13, 2021, three eighteen-year-old Serb men were physically assaulted in the courtyard of a bar in Ivankovo, a neighbouring village to Vukovar, by a group of five men, all members of the BBB.¹⁰⁸ One of the victims was seriously injured and required medical attention at a hospital in Vinkovci. The attackers were served with criminal charges and received restraining orders. While incidents of this nature are sadly not uncommon in the region, what makes this particular episode noteworthy is the involvement of Nemanja Savanović, a local politician from the DP party, a member of the Vukovar City Council and—more shockingly—a Serb. Savanović allegedly facilitated the attack by providing his personal vehicle to the BBB hooligans.

The incident caused outrage among local Serbs, many of whom were particularly bitter about the fact that Savanović, who comes from a “mixed marriage,” publicly identifies as an Orthodox Croat

¹⁰⁷ The title of this section, comes from a poem entitled ‘Lessons on War’ by Selma Asotić, a Sarajevo-born poet, where she adds that “the body remembers, but learns nothing.”

¹⁰⁸ See details on the incident here: https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/crna-kronika/policija-prijavila-petoricu-zbog-napada-na-tri-18-godisnjaka---689688.html?itm_source=InBody&itm_medium=Dnevnik&itm_campaign=Hrvatska.

and openly espouses Ustaša and neo-Nazi ideologies on social media.¹⁰⁹ The shameful affair was never condemned by mayor Ivan Penava, who, instead, openly accused the police of sabotaging the right-wing coalition of the City Council by purposely detaining Savanović on the day votes were being cast over the city budget. The fact that Savanović is a member of the Serb minority indicates that ethnic identity is fluid, negotiable and politically instrumental, and that personal ambitions and ideological alignment can transcend ethnic categorization. It also suggests that the violence in question is embedded in a larger context of political and ideological conflict, in which violence against the local Serb minority is part of a larger political agenda tied to the far-right. Most importantly, the Ivankovo incident provides a concrete example of how the legacy of violence persists in post-conflict Vukovar, not only through physical attacks but also through its institutional normalization by local government figures who are either complicit or indifferent to its perpetuation.

Since the 1970s, the Yugoslav region Ultras subculture has been known for its hypermasculine, nationalistic, and violent tendencies, becoming a significant social force, with fans often organized in structured groups that blur the lines between spectacle-driven fandom and violent hooliganism. During the socialist Yugoslavia era, four football clubs—Dinamo Zagreb, Belgrade’s Partizan and Crvena Zvezda, and Hajduk Split—dominated the league, fuelling intense rivalries that played a key role in the rise of nationalism from the 1980s onward. This reached a peak on May 13, 1990, when a match between Dinamo and Crvena Zvezda was cancelled due to violent clashes between fans. In the 1990s, these fan groups became key sources of recruits for Croatian and Serbian paramilitary units, with football fans acting as a “war vanguard” and providing social and moral legitimacy to organized political violence (Vrcan and Lalić 1999). Most notably, paramilitary groups from Serbia who committed countless atrocities in Croatia and Bosnia during the 1990s—such as Arkan’s Tigers, the White Eagles, the Scorpions—recruited volunteers from the Crvena Zvezda fanbase. At the same time, the Croatian Defence Forces (*Hrvatske Obrambene Snage, HOS*), whose use of the World War II era fascist slogan *Za Dom—Spremni* (For the Homeland—Ready) continues to create tensions, recruited heavily from Dinamo’s BBB.¹¹⁰ Therefore, some of the worst violence perpetuated in the 1990s occurred at the hands of football hooligans.

In contemporary Croatia, groups like the BBB continue to be a visible force in Croatian public spaces, displaying nationalist and fascist symbols (Brentin 2019) and maintaining strong ties to the Croatian diaspora (Hughson 1999). Often seen as Croatia’s main football club, Dinamo Zagreb is considered a national symbol and plays a crucial role in negotiating historical and national

¹⁰⁹ The concept of the “Orthodox Croat” is controversial, as it reflects either the assimilation or denial of the existence of Croatian Serbs. It dates back to the 1940s, with the establishment of the Croatian Orthodox Church, which served to suppress Serbian ethnicity in the territory of the NDH. See the Novosti article on the incident: <https://www.portalnovosti.com/kako-biti-srbin-i-filoustasa>.

¹¹⁰ HOS started out as a paramilitary group with neo-Ustaša sympathies in 1991 and were later incorporated into the Croatian Army. The state’s response to their continued use of fascist insignia and slogans remains inconsistent, often influenced by political considerations.

identities in Croatia (Sindbaek 2013). The symbolic importance of Vukovar makes it a key site for football fan groups. Despite their rivalries, they routinely gather in Vukovar to commemorate it as the “city of heroes,” (Brentin 2019) often alongside controversial military units like HOS (Hodges 2018).

In Vukovar, the Peaceful Reintegration process brought Croat refugees back to their homes, while also initiating a tense power struggle between returning Croats and Serbs who had stayed. This struggle was also reflected in the streets, where Serb and Croat children, who were born after the 1991 siege, attempted to resolve with their fists what their parents could not resolve with their words.¹¹¹ Boris, a former Serb hooligan, bitterly shared that Serb hooligans “used to hold the town” (*držali smo grad*) during the reintegration process and in the period immediately following 1998, but that this is no longer the case. In fact, in the late 1990s, as Serbs dominated the demographic picture in Vukovar, it was the Delije, the ultra-group of Crvena Zvezda, who “patrolled” the streets and intimidated returning Croats. This reflects shifting patterns of domination and violence, with soccer hooliganism playing a central role in these tug-of-wars (Figure 27).



Figure 27: An abandoned house on the outskirts of Vukovar where the Delije and the BBB are laying competing claims to Vukovar through graffiti. “We, the Croats” (*Mi Hrvati*) is scratched over and “Serb Vukovar” (*Srpski Vukovar*) is written below in Cyrillic script.

¹¹¹ While the majority of violent incidents in Vukovar involve youths, I have encountered stories of violence from adults as well as people who were uninvolved in the football fan club scene. In fact, the following article from local Serb media in Vukovar, which narrates a 2020 incident, cites another attack (which involved two adult Serb women) as an example of the escalation of tensions: <https://srbi.hr/poslednji-napad-bbb-vukovar-samo-je-jedan-u-nizu-incidenta/>.

In Vukovar, the connection between the BBB and Penava’s municipal government is not a new development but part of a larger, longstanding pattern of collaboration between football fan groups and political elites, which has been characteristic of the region since the 1990s (Figure 28). As Hrvoje Šimičević of *Novosti* notes, the BBB have long been involved in enacting the far-right rhetoric of local politicians.¹¹² The BBB’s 2016 request to use the term ‘Vukovar’ in their local association’s name, supported by Penava despite one member’s criminal record, was simply one more instance of this ongoing relationship. Since then, the BBB have been formally invited and participated in key town events: such as the celebration of the renovation of the water tower and the annual November 18th commemorations. All my interlocutors, without fail, have emphasized that there has been an increase in inter-ethnic violence since the BBB arrived in town, arguing that the football fans have the covert support of the far-right municipal government.



Figure 28: A BBB mural in Vukovar reads “long live Dinamo and mother Croatia” (*neka živi Dinamo i majka Hrvatska*) along with the WWII-era fascist coat of arms of the NDH on the right.

Mainstream Croatian media tends to frame incidents of violence between young men in Vukovar—whether they happen in the context of football matches or not—as mere “hooliganism,” ignoring the deeper ethnic, political, and even classist tensions beneath the surface. The dismissal of violence as an inevitable by-product of football fandom has a long history. As Ugrešić (2011: 111) notes, the youthful outbursts of violence in Europe past and present have been dismissed like “meteorological phenomena”, and when “the hurricane has passed, the media stitch up the seams as skilfully as if there had never been seams at all.” Today, various actions—without formal membership in football clubs—are prone to being understood as forms of ‘hooliganism’ and

¹¹² See the following article: <https://www.portalnovosti.com/u-boy-za-vukovar-svoj>.

framed as a plight on society rather than a product of society (Pearson 1998), which must be confronted with police crackdowns.

RUNNING AWAY WITH *SMOKI*: TEENAGE BOYS, IDENTITY, AND STREET VIOLENCE

Shortly before my departure from the field, I managed to organize a focus group with a group of Serb teenage boys at the Nikola Tesla Tehnička Škola, with the help of Teodor, an enthusiastic teacher in the Model A program. As we spoke, the boys began to open up about their confrontations with local Croat boys in Vukovar.

Filip: “But realistically, we have all been in situations where we had to run away.

When there is such a ... numerical advantage [for them] that it isn’t normal.”

Goran: “Yeah, that ten of them show up.”

Filip: “There are so many stupid situations (*glupe situacije*)! You go out to eat, I don’t know, at two o’clock in the morning... and then you run into...”

Goran: “Come on, it can be three o’clock in the afternoon in front of *Bosa*¹¹³...”

Filip: “Yeah! There are such stupid situations!”

Goran: “I’m carrying a bag of *Smoki*¹¹⁴ [laughing], I’m jumping on my bike with a bag of *Smoki* in my arms. I’m running away, I’m running away with the *Smoki*!”

[Everyone laughs]

Dragana: “That’s not really funny, is it?”

Filip: “But it is!”

Their exchange, filled with humour and bravado, reflects a broader cultural tendency in the region to respond to tension with dark humour, often using laughter to make light of unsettling or dangerous situations. Hromadžić (2022: 267-268) suggests that in frightening conditions, the primary tool of ‘communitas’—“or a collective relation without an essence”—is laughter and dark humour. The boys’ laughter serves as a way of embracing vulnerability as part of social interaction, where making light of difficult experiences is part of reinforcing social ties. At the same time, their humorous storytelling both reveals and contributes to the normalization of violent encounters as just another part of the landscape of their everyday lives. Their framing of these encounters as a “ritual” that “everyone goes through” or a “habit” (*navika*) that “one just gets used to” underscores how this discourse plays a role in both reflecting and entrenching the idea that violence is an ordinary, even inevitable, part of growing up in Vukovar.

In a society where vulnerability is often equated with weakness, the boys’ ability to make light of difficult situations—to show off their bravery, foolishness, and wit—signals not only their capacity to manage challenging experiences but also their effort to maintain a display of masculinity and social standing. Greenberg (2006a) argues that nationalist masculinity can be a social resource in

¹¹³ A local chain of grocery stores.

¹¹⁴ A popular peanut-flavoured puffed corn snack.

times of social and political crisis, drawn on in order to create a sense of continuity, agency, and belonging. In addition, in a region with deeply ingrained ethnic divisions and patriarchal structures—a socialization process that predates the 1990s—these boys are taught to view aggression and toughness as core components of manhood. By laughing about running away with a bag of *Smoki* or treating violent encounters as absurd, they perform emotional detachment, a key characteristic of masculinity in contexts where vulnerability and fear are stigmatized as “weak” or “feminine.”

Most of the stories I heard about inter-ethnic violence during my fieldwork shared a common theme: young Serbs often found themselves outnumbered and, more often than not, chose to avoid conflict rather than escalate it.¹¹⁵ It is not always clear from the conversations I had whether the boys they were intimidated by were actually BBB or just Croat teenagers; the lines between football fandom, local identity, and regular youth rivalries often blur in these interactions. This is likely a reflection of the demographic changes in Vukovar, where Croats had become the majority, and where the BBB had established a strong presence. Nevertheless, in this patriarchal society, it is more tolerable to maintain a sense of lightness about one’s running away from confrontation than to be vulnerable about one’s fears.

A boy in the focus group described the discomfort young Serb boys feel when navigating areas with lingering ethnic tensions, recalling a moment when Croat teenagers appeared to assert control over both the historical centre of Vukovar and, increasingly, the ethnically mixed suburb of Borovo Naselje.

Saša: “For instance, when we are walking downtown... you sometimes get a feeling that you’re going to run into someone and then you don’t run into anyone. But when you’re really relaxed, when you’re walking in your own neighbourhood, then you bump into someone! And it’s always the most uncomfortable situation... like... there were ten of us hanging out but five just went home and then... there is five of us left, we’re chilling, eating sandwiches, and then twenty of them (*njih dvadeset*) show up. Four cars pull up, and they start coming out, one by one. One is coming out through the window! He’s so eager (*toliko željan*) that he’s going through the window! So what do you do? [...] wrap it up, pack it up, run!”

Saša emphasizes the numerical disparity in order to highlight the power imbalance and the asymmetry of the encounter. His story also stresses the fact that the Croat boys arrive in cars, signalling social mobility and power, while the Serb boys were on foot, eating sandwiches, and completely unprepared for the confrontation. In fact, youth violence is strongly associated with the

¹¹⁵ My attempts to interview young men who were seriously injured in street fights were unsuccessful. Most people who mentioned knowing someone who had been involved in a violent confrontation declined to help me get in touch with the victims, arguing that they did not want to bother them or re-traumatize them.

Tehnička Škola, where most students come from working-class families or have parents who have migrated abroad for work.¹¹⁶ This class-based divide underscores the intersection of economic hardship and social behaviour, with the violence serving as a manifestation of deeper social and economic challenges. In fact, in the scenario presented by Saša, the Croat boys are presented as eager for violence and the Serb boys as completely taken by surprise. By stressing the inequality between the two groups and highlighting the eagerness of the Croats, Saša is framing the Serb boys as underprivileged victims of an unnecessary and unprovoked aggression.

However, their teacher, Teodor, offered a different interpretation. He argued that violent experiences only happen to “cretins” (*zato što je kreten on*) who ask for it by provoking the Croats with nationalist posts on social media. This view was echoed by some other adults in the community, who suggested that only “problematic” youths encountered this kind of trouble. While Teodor’s perspective emphasizes individual agency, it also reflects a broader discourse about youth delinquency and deviance, one that has long preoccupied sociologists and criminologists, especially during the late socialist era (see Mihailović 1990). In this discourse, young people, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, are often framed as responsible for their own victimization. This stance contrasts with the view that inter-ethnic violence is primarily driven by structural tensions or broader historical grievances.

However, the reality in post-war Vukovar is more complex. While some young men may assert their agency through acts of provocation, such as posting nationalist content to challenge their Croat peers, their actions cannot be seen merely as provocations or expressions of rebellion due to the power relations at hand. In many cases, it is also a response to structural inequalities—economic, social, and political marginalization—that leave these teenagers with limited opportunities and little recourse for expressing their frustrations. Therefore, the young men involved are not simply underprivileged victims, nor are they merely brazen provocateurs. Instead, they are youths who are navigating a difficult space between asserting their agency and responding to systemic exclusion, caught in the tension between social expectations, territorial disputes, and the unresolved historical trauma of the past.¹¹⁷

According to Whitehead (2004: 11), it is precisely the cultural contextualization of violent acts which provide the theoretical prerequisite for their interpretation. This is evidenced in the words of Žarko, a Serb man in his early twenties, who explained why he had gotten into trouble with local Croat boys.

¹¹⁶ This is in sharp contrast with the Vukovar Gimnazija, where such incidents are very rare. The Gimnazija generally draws students who are more academically oriented and from higher social classes.

¹¹⁷ I suspect that the same could be said for the Croat young men involved in these violent encounters, who may also be responding to their own historical trauma and economic marginalization, though this remains speculative as I did not interview them for this research.

“I play football regularly, but I never wanted to join the Delije or Partizani because those people are the least interested in football. [...] I made some really stupid decisions in the past. During the anniversary of Operation Storm, I had too much to drink, and I was really provoked by all the Instagram stories being shared by my Croat friends who were celebrating. So, I posted a story of my own, a picture of the fortress in Knin with a Serbian flag at its top and the location was set to ‘Knin, Serbia.’ I realized what I had done and took it down minutes later, but not fast enough. When I came to work, one of my Croat co-workers warned me that there had been talk of me being jumped by a group of Croats. And a few days later, at a going-away party for one of my Croat friends, a guy approached me with a telescopic baton (*teleskop*). The only reason I wasn’t beaten up is because a Serb guy who had started rumours about how he owns a gun approached us at that moment!”

Žarko’s story not only sheds light on the motivations behind a young Serb man posting nationalistic content on social media, but also reveals the complex web of social relations that shape his everyday life. He views his post as a provocation in response to another provocation, but quickly realizes that, given his social position, he cannot return provocation in equal measure without consequence. Furthermore, the fact that Žarko was warned by a Croat co-worker in a Croat-owned café and confronted at a Croat friend’s party highlights the complex inter-ethnic relationships he navigates. Like the story of Katarina at the onset of the chapter, these experiences suggest that not all interactions between Serb and Croat youths are as polarized as some of my younger interlocutors imply. Ethnic boundaries in Žarko’s social environment are not absolute; nationalist provocations occur in spaces where these identities are continually negotiated within evolving inter-ethnic networks, rather than between total strangers or enemies. Moreover, the role of informal networks—like the Serb guy who spreads rumours about owning a gun—demonstrates how fear, reputation, and social capital act as deterrents in a society where violence often remains pervasive, mediated through both personal and collective strategies.

Tensions between Serb and Croat youths in Vukovar are shaped by an informal system of surveillance and control, where local Croat boys, particularly those affiliated with the BBB, actively monitor, and regulate the behaviour of Serb youths (Figure 29).¹¹⁸ These behaviours must be understood as responses to a broader political and social environment; despite living in an economically desolated space and facing significant disadvantages, these young Croats, as part of the majority population, are currently empowered by their position and participate in reinforcing the dominance of the Croatian majority. The power discrepancy is exemplified in an anecdote

¹¹⁸ It is important to note that while my research reveals that the violence itself is relatively common, I do not know how widespread the engagement of Croat youths in this type of policing is. Are all Croat youths participating in these acts, or is it a smaller, more localized group? Do other social markers—like class or family background—play a role in determining who participates in such violence? These questions remain unanswered but are crucial to understanding the broader social dynamics.

shared by Zoran, a young man of mixed heritage: “We went to a football game in Belgrade, and my friend, who had just gotten a job as a forklift operator in a Croatian firm, asked me not to post a picture of us at the game or in Belgrade on Facebook. He was afraid of losing his job.” This highlights how even seemingly harmless actions—like attending a football game in Belgrade or wearing a soccer jersey—can carry significant consequences, such as social ostracism, violence, or loss of financial security.



Figure 29: A BBB mural located between Vukovar and Borovo Naselje. It reads “this town is protected by the BBB” (*ovaj grad čuva BBB*).

At the moment, young Croat men, empowered by the post-war demographic shift, “patrol” Vukovar and see themselves as the “managers of national space” (Hage 1998), enforcing the boundaries of Croatian national identity. Vukovar, as the symbolic heart of the Croatian nation-state, operates within an “ethnic democracy” (Štiks 2010) and “nationalizing state” (Brubaker 1996), where Serbs are framed as an enemy minority. This dynamic reflects a reversal from the 1990s and early reintegration period, when Serb youths were the ones in positions of power. The actions of these Croat youths now serve to maintain the dominance of the Croatian majority, ensuring that any challenge to this order—like posting nationalist content—results in repercussions. This illustrates the “ordinary production of domestic space” (Ahmed 2000: 36), where violence is not exceptional but is a tool for maintaining power and regulating social relations. The violence in Vukovar serves to uphold ethnic hierarchies, framing Serb youths as second-class citizens. In this context, national and ethnic identities are constantly negotiated and

policed, with Croat youths playing a central role in defining who belongs and who does not within both the physical and symbolic spaces of the town.¹¹⁹

While Serb youths in Vukovar navigate the complexities of inter-ethnic relations, my observations suggest that this cycle of conflict eventually subsides. Consider the following exchange on this topic:

Dragana: “So when does it end? When does the time come when you no longer have to think whether you are being provocative, if someone will...”

Goran: “It never ends!”

Filip: “It ends when you leave (*kad odeš dalje*).

Teodor: “You know when that will stop for them? When they start working somewhere, in some company. Then they’ll run into each other... and... it’s all the most problematic until about 20 years old. But when they start working, when they become serious people, with families, kids... Then it won’t be like that anymore. Maybe they won’t greet each other, but they definitely won’t be fighting in the streets anymore.”

Teodor’s reasoning was confirmed to me by Dario, whom we met in the previous chapter. He told me that he no longer has any fear walking around Vukovar, despite the problems he had with his Croat peers. Indeed, the violence described by the boys is almost exclusively relegated to teenage boys and men in their early twenties. While Goran hints to the cyclical tendencies of the violence and Filip emphasizes its localized nature, my observations, and conversations with older individuals, like Teodor, imply that the inter-ethnic violence in Vukovar is tied to a youth-driven identity that is still in flux, which is fuelled by structural inequalities and political tensions. However, while physical violence may subside as they grow older, the “continuum of violence” (Cockburn 2007) suggests that its forms change and that the underlying social, ethnic, and gendered power dynamics persist. These tensions do not disappear in adulthood but instead manifest in more subtle ways. For instance, as young Serbs enter the job market, where they are often at a disadvantage, they continue to experience frictions. Many of my interlocutors shared stories of feeling uncomfortable due to jokes made by their Croat colleagues or acquaintances, which often carry ethnic undertones. Such micro-aggressions, though less overt than physical violence, remain a pervasive source of strain.

By examining how male Serb youths in Vukovar navigate inter-ethnic tensions, we see how masculinized forms of agency—through toughness, emotional detachment, and bravado—serve as both coping mechanisms and strategies for asserting identity in a context marked by violence and

¹¹⁹ In the context of this conservative small-town, intra-ethnic policing is also prevalent, with individuals within the same ethnic group often enforcing conformity to certain social norms. For instance, one of my interlocutors mentioned that rumours had circulated in his Serb village about his mother’s marital infidelity, based solely on the fact that she had—wait for it—taken up jogging in the evening!

marginalization. These young men engage in violent encounters, not just as reactions to ethnic conflict but as expressions of masculinity in a society where aggression and domination are socially valorised. Their experiences highlight how gender norms are deeply intertwined with ethnic and social hierarchies, with masculinity functioning both as a shield and a survival tactic. The next section shifts focus to a group of young men who were once involved in the local hooligan scene, providing further insight into how engagement with these masculinized, violent subcultures shaped their sense of identity and belonging in post-conflict Vukovar.

“WHOSE TOWN IS IT?”: THE HOOLIGAN SUBCULTURE IN VUKOVAR

Long before my arrival in Vukovar, I had read countless stories about young hooligans who were simultaneously the perpetrators and victims of local inter-ethnic violence. While I never had the opportunity to talk to someone who was actively involved in the hooligan scene, I met many *former* members of Serbian football fan clubs, all of whom were now happily married fathers and somewhat embarrassed about their youthful indiscretions. One of these men, Uroš, agreed to have a coffee with me in Borovo Naselje.

Uroš: “We would keep at a distance from others and we would fight for the town.”

Dragana: “I’m sorry, you would be fighting for what?”

Uroš: “For the town! [laughs] Whose town is it? (*Čiji je grad?*) This isn’t really relevant anymore because most Serbs have left now... including all my old friends. Since SDP lost in Vukovar and Penava showed up many people decided to leave. It’s not the same city anymore, I don’t recognize anyone anymore.”

For an outsider such as myself, this was a disturbing realization. Despite the fact that the siege had ended in 1991, the war had formally ended in 1995, and the Peaceful Reintegration process was completed in 1998, teenagers, both Serb and Croat, were *still* “going to war” on the streets of the town. This informal militarisation becomes apparent through the linguistic framework employed by these young men to narrate their encounters with Croat hooligans. As Boris, a former Serb hooligan mentioned earlier, bitterly recalled, members of the Delije used to “hold the town” during the Reintegration period. He also pointed out that, as the demographic balance in Vukovar shifted in favour of the Croat majority, he had observed a “retreat to Borovo” (*povlačenje u Borovo*).

It is important to consider that what motivates young men to join these groups and engage in violent activities is context dependent. For example, writing about neighbouring Bosnia, Kurtović (2015) argues that the violence used by youthful protesters—who are often dismissed as hooligans by political elites—is a form of social revolt against rising inequality and political corruption. Gilbert (2018: 376) makes a similar argument about the participation of local fan clubs from Tuzla in the 2014 Bosnian Uprising, suggesting that, in post-socialist and de-industrialized contexts, membership in football fan clubs can represent as a “historically specific and gendered claim to social incorporation and rights to the city.” Like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia faces

depopulation and high unemployment, issues that are particularly visible in the former industrial hub of Vukovar. Football fandom, as it has throughout Yugoslav history (Mills 2018), offers a rare outlet for political expression, especially for young Serb and Croat men whose lives were shaped by the aftermath of wartime devastation.

If we move beyond viewing hooligan violence as mere “exceptions” (*pojedinci*) and take Ultras seriously as social agents, what social and political significance do their actions hold? Scholars argue that they should be understood as political actors actively shaping memory discourse (Perasović and Mustapić 2013; Milak 2020). In the Borovo Naselje incident in the opening vignette, the BBB performed patriotism by reminding local Serbs that the crimes committed against Croatia in the 1990s would not be forgotten. While Đorđević (2015) arrives at similar conclusions regarding the social and political roles of the hooligan figure in Serbian society, the situation of minoritized Croatian Serbs in Vukovar leads me to ask slightly different questions. In a context defined by ongoing inter-ethnic tensions, where readiness for physical assault becomes a habitus for many young men, what does political engagement in the form of joining a football fan club reveal about the social world of the Serb community in Vukovar? In other words, why do some Serb young men join hooligan groups at all?

The desire to find an alternative to the state, so to speak, might reflect a shared sense of unease within the Serb community and a deep mistrust of Croatian institutions. This mistrust is not just a product of the current generation but is often rooted in the experiences of their parents, who have long held anxieties about the institutions that govern their country. For example, a Croat woman laughed as she told me that her Serb friend had asked her to make a call to a state institution in Zagreb on her behalf, fearing that her accent would reveal her ethnicity: “I was exasperated with her. What was the worst that could happen?” the woman said, “that they swallow you through the phone?” In another instance, a Serb accountant observed that Serb clients at his firm were generally more cautious than Croat clients about paying their taxes on time. “They didn’t tell me anything, but I think it’s because Serbs here are afraid of the state,” he said. The former hooligans I spoke with expressed a deep sense of powerlessness in their youth and a strong distrust of the police, which they viewed as indifferent to violence against the Serb community.¹²⁰ In fact, Uroš names the atmosphere of unease as his main motivation to join the Delije.

Uroš: “I found a sense of family, security, and protection with these older guys. It meant so much to me that these older guys were showing me respect and sharing their stories with me. It was like I became part of a wolf pack (*kao da si upao u neki čopor*).”

Dragana: “Do you think it was a way to survive in this environment?”

¹²⁰ It is important to note, however, that since I did not speak directly with individuals who are actively involved in the hooligan scene today, I cannot claim to know definitely what motivates young people to join these groups. The motivations I discuss appear to have been significant factors in the recent past and may still inform the decisions of young men today, though further research would be needed to confirm this.

Uroš, nodding: “Croats from other parts of Croatia don’t understand this need for protection. It’s not just members of your own club who protect you, I’ve had other Serb football club members protect me against Croats. [...] I understand that often members of these clubs are involved with drug trafficking, particularly in Belgrade, but it’s different here. The worst we ever did was remove some Croatian flags at night... but that was all a response to what we were experiencing (*to je sve bio odgovor na to što mi proživljavamo*). When you encounter a boy from your school who is ripping the posters off the bus stop panel and rearranging the scraps of paper to form a giant U on the glass... those are gruesome things (*jezive su to stvari*).”

While distrust of institutions is certainly a key factor, the impulse to fight back can also be linked to the dominance of nationalist gendered norms—often referred to as toxic masculinity. In a context of heightened ethnic tensions and the ever-present threat of physical violence, Uroš gravitates toward the comforting boundaries of his national group and membership in a cult of hegemonic masculinity, which offers him—at least in his youth—a sense of agency and empowerment. Thus, the decision to join a football fan club as a way of coping with chronic vulnerability also reflects the particular forms of masculinity that dominate the Serb community in Vukovar. It is not surprising that the disempowerment and uncertainty experienced by these young men lead them to embrace nationalist masculinity—a constitutive element of the hooligan scene. As Greenberg (2006a) notes, nationalist forms are malleable social responses to changing social, political, and economic conditions. While trends of nationalist masculinity are observable across the post-Yugoslav space, I argue that, in minoritized contexts like Vukovar, anxieties about masculine inadequacy are intensified in particular ways. These norms, however, are trans-ethnic in nature. Uroš, for instance, explained that he could spot a hooligan from a mile away, simply by his body language, which, as he described it, seemed emblematic of toxic masculinity. A hooligan, he said, “takes up space” (*širi se*) and “looks around, threateningly” (*gleda uokolo, namrgođen*).

At one point, Uroš nervously laughed and, wringing his hands, admitted that he was not accustomed to discussing this exclusively male world with a woman. Yet, make no mistake: the hooligan world is keenly aware of its impact on the women around them. Uroš explained that hooligans adhere to a “code of honour” (*kodeks*) which spares women, children, the elderly, and the disabled from violence—an ethical stance oddly reminiscent of the Augustinian doctrine of just warfare. Within these codes, the structure of gender is both reproduced and preserved, with women depicted as weaker, in need of protection, and primarily tasked with caring for children and the family—roles that function as a form of biopolitical control in the nation-building process. However, Uroš’s essentialist claims are ironic, particularly given that women and children were not spared during the 1991 siege of Vukovar, carried out by the Yugoslav National Army and Serbian paramilitaries, nor in the broader context of the wars throughout the 1990s. The moral calculus that determines what constitutes legitimate violence in the fan culture is central to this dynamic. Vrcan and Lalić (1999: 177) note that this disciplinary order in fan subcultures makes it

easier for individuals to transition from chaotic spontaneity to military mobilization. Violating these unwritten rules, which Uroš routinely accused Croat hooligans of breaking, reveals one to be a coward and less of a man.

In this context, it is important to remember that these young men are typically teenagers or in their early twenties—an age when masculinity is still being formed and constantly asserted. In Vukovar, nationalist masculinity is thus defined by the ability to inflict violence but also by the ability to restrain it, particularly in the protection of “womenandchildren” (Enloe 1990) and other groups perceived as non-combatants. Bracewell (2000) explains how nationalist masculinity, reasserted through militarism, becomes a social resource through which power is both re-established and reinforced. As these young Serb men grapple with their anxieties about masculinity—an identity “never fully possessed but must always be achieved, asserted, and renegotiated” (Roper and Tosh 1991)—their violent encounters with Croat hooligans and youths on the streets also spill over, affecting the women around them.



Figure 30: The death notice (*osmrtnica*) of Jasna Veselinović in the Cyrillic script.

“WE ARE REIGNED IN”: SERB WOMEN BETWEEN SILENCE AND RAGE

I had never seen such a dense fog. On that October night, I decided to walk home instead of taking a cab. As I made my way down the Švabsko Brdo and over the bridge that cuts across the river Vuka, I was chilled to the bone. The next day, I would learn that Jasna Veselinović, a thirty-eight year old Serb woman, had been stabbed to death that very night in Borovo Naselje by her partner, in front of her children (Figure 30). Her murderer, Aleksandar Japić, had been on the loose for

hours in the fog before being arrested by the police.¹²¹ On October 30st, Jasna succumbed to her injuries in the hospital. Initially, this tragedy did not make a splash in the local news, nor did it spark any significant conversation within the local Serb community about domestic violence. It was only the Zagrebian Antifascist Association (*Mreža Antifašistkinja Zagreba*) and the local Serb-owned Radio Dunav who immediately called the event by the name that others had avoided: femicide. Since then, the murder has been widely recognized as a femicide, particularly after the killer was sentenced to 35 years in prison, drawing significant attention to the continued rise in gender-based violence in the post-Yugoslav region.

During my time in Vukovar, I often heard Serb mothers express concern about their sons, fearing that once they reached their “worst years” (*najgore godine*), they would have to face hooligan violence on a daily basis. Interestingly, this same concern was rarely voiced about their daughters, even though, as I have shown in previous chapters, they too suffer because of their Serb identity. To illustrate, consider the following exchange between Aleksandra, a Serb woman in her early twenties from Borovo, and Mirjana, a Serb woman of the same age from nearby Baranja:

Aleksandra: I hated walking by [the BBB] building while I was attending *Gimnazija*. They always stared at me, on my way to school and back.¹²²

Mirjana: That sounds so intimidating, I can’t imagine.

Aleksandra: You know, many of us refuse to go to Vukovar. Like me, I don’t go anymore. During COVID, many of us from Borovo were hanging out by the beach in Vukovar, you know, near the centre. I was there with my friends, and it was a mixed group, actually. Then a car pulled up in the parking lot and a bunch of young men got out, they were all wearing black hoodies. They approached us and asked the Serbs who had allowed them to come to Vukovar. I’ve never been back since.

Mirjana: My brother had to deal with those kinds of things all the time. I kept quiet about a lot of things because I was too afraid to stand up for myself...

In fact, while my interlocutors from Zagreb laughed off my questions about safety as a woman in Vukovar, they failed to recognize the impact of the inter-ethnic tensions and violence between Serb and Croat young men on the women living there—something that Aleksandra and Mirjana took much more seriously. As Bergholz (2016) has shown, violence can generate ethnicized and moral social categories, and as Enloe (1990) argues, it also shapes gendered identities. While it is unclear whether Aleksandra and Mirjana were specifically concerned about their physical safety

¹²¹ As is customary, Croatian media did not reveal the identity of the victim, citing only her age and the location where the incident occurred. I found out Jasna’s identity through a social media post by Dragana Jeckov, a prominent local SDSS member, on the official SDSS page, who expressed her condolences to the family on behalf of herself and the party. In the statement, Jeckov highlighted that this was a case of domestic violence and highlighted it as an ongoing issue in the Serb community.

¹²² She is referring to the building owned by the BBB association in Vukovar, which is located near the historic centre of Vukovar and at the bottom of a hill one has to climb to reach the Gimnazija.

in the stories they shared, it was evident they did not feel at ease due to the ongoing tensions. They felt powerless, choosing to stay silent or to withdraw entirely.

Some of my interlocutors, particularly teachers in Model A schools, who were keen on downplaying the extent of inter-ethnic violence resulting from the ethnic division of space in Vukovar, argued that most conflicts between Serb and Croat boys were about girls rather than nationalism. However, if women are seen as the ones who “reproduce” the nation—“biologically, culturally, symbolically”—then it could be argued that, in the context of Vukovar, conflict between Serb and Croat men over women is always, at some level, a struggle over national boundaries (Yuval Davis 1997). For instance, Dario, whom we met in Chapter Three, was beaten by a group of Croat teenagers because he had been intimate with a Croat girl, one whom another boy fancied. In gendered national discourse, national territories are often depicted as passive, feminine spaces that must be defended by brave masculine agents. These gendered narratives are made possible through gender regimes that embed these power structures with deep affective meaning (Connell 1990 in Verdery 1994). As Morokvasić-Müller (2004) notes, social groups are generally more hostile to women who marry outside the group than to men who do the same, and are more likely to accept women into the social group than men. In this context, the body of the Croat girl with whom Dario was involved becomes a powerful metaphor of the nation—something passive that must be protected from the “Serb aggressor” by a Croat man. As Federici (2014) argues, women’s bodies and labour, in the transition from feudalism to capitalism, have become substitutes for lost land. The physical altercation, then, can be seen as an attempt to control the boundaries of the nation by controlling the body of a woman, with the woman’s own desires never entering the equation. A similar structure of thought applies to Serb women in the eyes of Serb men. Danilo, a Serb man in his forties from Borovo, encapsulated this sentiment when he said: “Imagine if your daughter married a Croat man, that’s three times worse than your son marrying a Croat woman!”

While gendered power structures not only allow but often encourage aggressive behaviour in men, they simultaneously require women to embody a pacifist temperament. This essentializing rhetoric, which reproduces gender stereotypes about women’s natural propensity for innocence, victimhood, and peace, is widespread in literature on Yugoslavia, “as if these less than straightforward notions—peace and war—were a matter of hormone secretion” (Aretxaga 1997: 4). To illustrate, consider my exchange with Teodora, a thirty-something Serb woman from Borovo, whose brother was an active member of a Serb hooligan group.

Teodora: “You have to be measured (*primerena*), you can’t particularly stand out.

Dragana: “What does it mean for you to be measured?”

Teodora: “Well... it’s not like they teach us girls that it’s okay to get into fights or be aggressive. You spend your whole life restraining yourself. My brother sometimes says that if I had been a boy, I would have been worse than him. But,

unlike him, I have self-control. I control myself, I have a filter. My brother is impulsive.”

Dragana: “Yeah, women learn this skill through socialization.”

Teodora: “Exactly. We are reigned in (*sputavane smo*). Be feminine, bla bla bla!”

Teodora’s ability to recognize how Serb-ness is experienced differently by women in Vukovar is exceptional, as most of the women I spoke with tended to downplay the daily gendered differences they face. This aligns with the social world described by Golubović (2019) in her research on Serb women in post-war Sarajevo, where ethno-national governmentality in everyday life obscures any other form of representations and understandings of the self. Thus, while Serb women may see themselves as minoritized and ethnicized political subjects, their gendered experiences are often framed by liberal feminist perspectives. Their ability to engage with more complex aspects of gendered subjectivity, such as reproductive justice or labour rights, is often shaped by their level of education and social environment.¹²³ As Aretxaga (1997: 78) argues, “gender hierarchy is never a transparent system; it is always engendered as already marked by particular positions in a social universe.” In other words, Serb-ness—and the hierarchical position this identity holds in Croatia—fundamentally shapes what it means to be a Serb woman in Vukovar.

Furthermore, while Teodora has chosen to channel her frustrations through political engagement, many Serb women in Vukovar prefer to remain out of the spotlight. Anastasija, a working mother in her forties, hesitantly told me that I should be interviewing her husband instead, as he “knows more about these things.” Yet, she eventually shared her own strong opinions, including a desire to see the integration of divided schools in Vukovar. It becomes apparent that Anastasija does not see herself as a political subject, or at least not one qualified enough to occupy space in the public sphere. If we recognize that women are strategically navigating the silence imposed on them—whether reluctantly, like Anastasija, or more unapologetically, like Teodora—we can see that these manoeuvrings hold the potential for social transformation, creating space for gendered political subjectivities.

Teodora’s words suggest that Serb women in Vukovar have valid reasons to be enraged by their second-class status in their hometown. This rage—which Ahmed (2014: 175), drawing on Lorde (1984), calls “visionary” due to its connection to the future—has no proper outlet, and as a result, it surfaces in sporadic and veiled outbursts. Following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, many far-right Croatian politicians drew historical parallels between Croatia and Ukraine, portraying both as victims of aggression from their neighbours.¹²⁴ The Croatian mainstream media, which extensively covered the invasion and the influx of Ukrainian refugees, was overwhelmingly sympathetic to the Ukrainian cause. In Vukovar, local governments and citizens organized relief

¹²³ I want to thank my colleague Nina Čolović for this insight from her own experiences in feminist workshops in Serb minority communities across Croatia.

¹²⁴ See the following report: <https://www.populismstudies.org/the-repercussions-of-the-war-in-ukraine-on-croatias-far-right/>.

initiatives for the newcomers, even placing welcome signs in Ukrainian Cyrillic in the windows of certain public institutions (Figure 31).



Figure 31: A screenshot of a Facebook post from the Municipal Library of Vukovar. The employee, surrounded by donations, is holding a sign in Ukrainian Cyrillic reading “Everything will be fine. The staff of the Vukovar City Library is with you!”

However, this renewed emphasis on the hegemonic Croatian narrative of the 1990s, combined with the traditional affinity of nationalist Serbs towards Russia—regardless of its politics—and the accommodating attitude towards Ukrainians, led many conservative Serbs in Vukovar to express resentment towards the Ukrainian cause. I witnessed one of these outbursts of anger first-hand while having coffee at the home of Svetlana, a Serb woman in her forties from Vukovar. Her long-time friend Milena had just joined us.

Milena, snickering: “I couldn’t wait to get out of work today! All my co-workers are discussing the fall of Mariupol and the capture of the Azov soldiers. They’re crying about these men, saying that they will be murdered just like the Croat defenders were at Ovčara! Pathetic! They’re supporting fascists, that’s what they’re doing!”

Svetlana, sarcastically: “Oh poor soldiers!”

Milena: “But did you see the news today? A Croat soldier who went there to slaughter and rape was captured by the Russians!”¹²⁵

¹²⁵ It should be noted that since the start of the Donbas war in 2014, young, radicalized men from Croatia, many of them members of various soccer hooligan groups, have decided to join the ranks of right-wing military groups such

Svetlana: “Oh, I’m so glad!”

Milena: “I hope they cut him into little pieces! The papers are writing that he went there to join his Ukrainian girlfriend. I bet he went there because he loves to kill and pillage!”

This exchange remains etched in my memory because of its raw brutality. Historically pathologized as hysterical (see Devereux 2014), women have rarely been given the space to express such unapologetic rage. While this can be interpreted as nothing more than nationalistic hatred of a Serb toward a Croat or blind support for Russian propaganda, I want to suggest that it might be more complicated. These calls for violence could be understood as an affective reaction to the resentment felt toward their Croat neighbours, who are more tolerant of the newcomers than of the local Serb minority, despite most Ukrainians being Orthodox, many speaking Russian, and using the Cyrillic alphabet. It is important to note that while Ukrainians may seem like a distant people in a historical sense, they were very real, immediate refugees during my time in Vukovar. Given the history of hostility in the region towards refugees during the 1990s (Čapo 2007; Dragojević 2013) and more recently (Župarić-Iljić & Gregurović 2020), the unusual warmth extended to Ukrainian refugees by local Croats is significant. It is not merely an abstract sympathy, but a tangible, politically charged gesture.

The perception is that Ukrainians are treated with support and solidarity, while serbs—who share some key cultural traits with Ukrainians—remained marginalized and excluded in Croatia’s dominant narrative. I was informed that local Serb elites had discussed offering some empty Serb-owned houses to the refugees, but the proposal was rejected by more conservative members of the community. This resentment is also captured in a joke Svetlana shared with me just days earlier: “The media found a secret letter from the Ukrainian authorities dedicated to Croatian authorities: we are begging you not to send your soldiers anymore! They demolished all of our Cyrillic street signs and plaques!” (Figure 32). The joke highlights the irony of the Croatian government’s support for Ukraine, whose citizens use the Cyrillic alphabet, while continuing to regard the Serbian Cyrillic alphabet as offensive. In other words, this expression of women’s anger is not simply a reaction based on nationalistic hatred or reproduction of Russia’s discourse, but an emotional response to what is perceived as an inconsistency in the treatment of groups, shaped by both historical and contemporary injustices.

as Azov. This trend and the ongoing Russian propaganda about Ukrainian Nazis explain why Milena has chosen to call the captured Croat soldier a fascist. However, it should also be noted that the same phenomenon has been simultaneously unfolding in Serbia, where a significant number of young right-wing Serb men have joined the Russian forces.



Figure 32: A screenshot of the joke shared with me by an interlocutor.

It is interesting to note that the Serb boys in my focus group complained that the Serb girls at their school were far more radical in their expressions of nationalism online than they were and seemed drawn to boys with more extreme views. The girls in my focus group unwittingly confirmed this when they teased one of the girls for “being into fierce guys” (*voli žestoke momke*). This attraction to nationalist boys reflects both the girls’ youth, a period of self-discovery and identity formation, and their marginalized position within Croatian society. For many, the rebellious and unrestrained masculinity embodied by these boys offers a sense of empowerment and agency. Challenges to patriarchal norms are often seen as threatening by female supporters of right-wing populism because they dismantle forms of male protection without offering viable alternatives (Molyneux 1985). Indeed, female supporters are often found within the lower middle and working classes (Wippermann 2016), suggesting that right-wing movements provide an alternative model of empowerment for women who find neoliberal feminism unappealing (Grzebalksa & Zacharenko 2018). In a context constrained by gender norms and ethnic tensions, aligning with this form of masculinity might allow these women to assert control and visibility in spaces where they otherwise feel silenced and powerless. I have also observed some Serb mothers expressing pride in their sons’ roles as hooligans, viewing them as figures challenge Croat nationalists, further illustrating how such aggressive, nationalist masculinity is valorised within their community. By validating nationalist masculinities through both romantic attraction and maternal pride, some Serb women find empowerment in nationalism, thereby contributing to the formation and reproduction of aggressive, inter-ethnic masculinities that reinforce cycles of violence and division.

This vignette also illustrates how anger at disempowerment can be channelled into what Farris (2017: 4) terms “femonationalism”: the exploitation of feminist themes by nationalists and neoliberals, particularly in European anti-Islam campaigns. Milena, for example, suggests that the Croat soldier in question must secretly harbour fantasies of rape, using feminist rhetoric about sexual violence to justify his dehumanization— “I hope they cut him into pieces!” This reflects a broader trend of what Farris and Rottenberg (2017) call the “righting of feminism,” where feminist discourse is co-opted by right-wing, xenophobic politics. Marina, a Serb woman in her thirties, proudly declared herself “one of those ‘Krajina will come again (*biće opet Krajina*) types”” and, a few minutes later, invoked feminist logic to challenge the ethnic dynamics in her sister’s mixed marriage. She challenged the patriarchal framework of ethno-nationalist identity, where “the child is whatever the father is” (*ono što ti je otac, to si ti*). Marina recounted advising her sister—who had married a Croat—that baptizing their child in the Serbian Orthodox Church was a feminist act, since “she is the one who carried the child in her womb, not him.”

The experiences of Serb women in Vukovar highlight how ethnic identity and gender intersect to shape their lives, often leading to a sense of silencing, marginalization, and frustration. Despite the pressures to conform to passivity, many women, such as Teodora, are keenly aware of the ethno-national and patriarchal ontologies that simultaneously constrain them and provide different social spaces to manoeuvre. The tension between their marginalized status and the frustration it engenders often surfaces in complex, sometimes violent expressions of anger, as seen in the reactions to the treatment of Ukrainian refugees. Consequently, the intersection of gendered expectations, ethnicized violence, and nationalistic sentiments creates a volatile emotional landscape for Serb women, one where their marginalized identities fuel both personal and collective frustrations, often channelled into aggressive forms of nationalism, unfolding along a “continuum of violence” (Cockburn 2004).

“THE NGO DOESN’T RECOGNIZE YOU” : THE NATIONALIST POLITICS OF PEACE

I received a text message from Nemanja one October morning, asking if I was attending the peace activism workshop that Europe House Vukovar (*Europski Dom Vukovar*) was hosting at the Municipal Museum of Vukovar (*Gradski Muzej Vukovar*) in just fifteen minutes. Without a second thought, I threw my yellow notebook into my bag and darted out of my apartment. I ran all the way down Županijska street, arriving—at the very last minute—and plopping down into one of the chairs arranged in a neat circle in the conference room.

Vukovar is home to two youth-focused NGOs dedicated to consolidating peace and bridging the divide between the town’s two communities. Youth Peace Group Danube (*Mirovna Grupa Mladih Dunav*), founded in 1996, and Europe House Vukovar, established in 2000, share core values of tolerance and human rights, despite differing approaches. The former works indirectly to address social divisions by creating spaces and opportunities for young Croats and Serbs to interact, while the latter encourages direct dialogue about current divides and differing interpretations of the

past.¹²⁶ In fact, most of Europe House Vukovar's EU-funded projects focus on anti-war activism and peacebuilding. However, both NGOs base their activities on the assumption that the Peaceful Reintegration in Vukovar has been fully realized, a view that, as discussed in this chapter, overlooks the persistence of structural violence and social tensions in the region. These ongoing challenges, while not leading to open conflict, disproportionately affect the Serb community and have significant political and social repercussions.

That morning, it was unsurprising to me that most of the approximately 15-20 workshop attendees were women, as women are traditionally conceptualized as caregivers of the community and "agents of peace" (see Helms 2007; 2013 for critique of this phenomenon in Bosnia and Herzegovina). Given that these NGOs seek to downplay ethnicity, it was not clear how many of the participants were ethnic Serbs. The organizers had planned a series of exercises followed by discussion periods. One such exercise involved responding to the questions "how do we preserve peace today" (*kako očuvati mir danas?*) and "what is peace for me" (*šta je za mene mir?*), which were written on a large piece of cardboard. The participants jotted down responses that included: "just be good people" (*samo budimo dobri ljudi*) and "just remain positive" (*samo pozitivna*) and "prosperity" (*blagostanje*). At first glance, these responses might appear banal, or even cliché, but they reveal an underlying longing for solidarity and peace. These responses can reflect a deep yearning for a break from the cyclical violence and political gridlock that has defined their lives for decades. They are also, in many ways, an attempt to find common ground, to collectively envision peace in a context where structural violence and historical trauma remain deeply embedded. The use of neutral, depoliticized language may offer a temporary escape from these harsh realities, but it could also be a way for the participants to express what they believe is expected of them in these spaces—an effort to align with the broader values of peace building and community cohesion, seeking solidarity through a shared vision of peace.

However, the phrasing of the questions and responses in the workshop assumes that peace has already been established—something that merely needs to be maintained, rather than achieved—due to the Peaceful Reintegration. In fact, the anniversary of the Peaceful Reintegration, observed on January 15th, is the only commemorative event that the director of Europe House Vukovar attends. Yet, in an article titled "We Integrated the Territory, But Did We Integrate the People?" (*Integrirali smo teritorij, jesmo li i ljude?*), published in a Europe House Vukovar pamphlet, Gordan Bosanac argues that the true goal of the Peaceful Reintegration has been missed, as there has been insufficient investment in people (*ulagati u ljude*) in the region. During the workshop, a Serb woman shared that her house had been set on fire after the Peaceful Reintegration and that her (presumably Serb) neighbour had been harassed by the BBB on November 18th of that year. Such discrepancies suggest that the Peaceful Reintegration, and life in its aftermath, is not

¹²⁶ The director of the Youth Peace Group Danube rolled his eyes at the idea of having children sit in a circle and share how the trauma of the 1990s impacts their lives as Serbs or Croats. Instead, the NGO prefers other strategies to bridge social cleavages. For instance, they purchased musical instruments and provided a "neutral space" for youth to play together without directly addressing the issue of war or nationalism.

experienced as a unified or straightforward process for all members of Vukovarian society. Instead, war and peace are “multifaceted, ambiguous, mutually imbricated arenas of struggle” (Aretxaga 1997: 4-5).

Nevertheless, the directors of both local NGOs informed me that the Croat population in Vukovar views the NGO sector as part of the Serb world. This perception is further complicated by the leadership of these organizations: YPGP is led by a Serb man, and Europe House Vukovar by a Croat woman, whose children are enrolled in the Serbian language program. These dynamics highlight the ambiguities and disruptions of established boundaries, expectations, and norms that shape everyday life in Vukovar, challenging the rigidity with which ethnicity is perceived in the town. As a result, however, both spaces have become ethnicized as Serb spaces, leading to youth programs that attract almost exclusively Serb children. As more Serb children participate, the spaces become further ethnicized. As a result, it could be concluded that the consolidation of peace has become almost exclusively a concern of the Serb minority, who remain dissatisfied with the tense atmosphere which entraps Vukovar while the majority population believes the work of peace consolidation to be finished. This dynamic is not limited to post-war Vukovar. In fact, scholars are increasingly advocating for bottom-up, locally driven approaches to security and peacebuilding, which address structural and cultural violence often overlooked by liberal peacebuilding (Anderson et al. 2007; Nilsson and González Marín 2020).

Although the NGO youth programs attract mostly Serb children, participation remains marginal even within the Serb community. Former participants shared that most Serb children join Europe House activities mainly for the all-expenses-paid trip to the coast, after which they often drop out. Those who stay actively involved are derisively nicknamed “European sectarians” (*Europski sektaši*) by the rest of the Serb community. Local Serb political elites contribute to the scepticism towards the NGO sector, shaping the community’s reluctance to engage with these initiatives. The following vignette is a discussion about the ZVO’s plan to create a youth club “for our little Serbs” (*za naše Srbčiče*) within its own building, a proposal that seems to present an ethnically defined alternative to the multicultural youth programs offered by local NGOs:

Radovan: “That NGO sector, that didn’t take root with me because I have always been what I am. The NGO sector should be...”

Slaviša: “Multinational and multicultural.”

Radovan: “That’s right. But it does not recognize you. No. You have to give up what is yours in terms of identity, culture, and religion, in order to be [part of] the NGO. Why? I contribute something to the NGO, and everyone else contributes something. [They tell me] you’re radical, you’re this, you’re that. I am only what I am. [...] It’s this SDP¹²⁷, this NGO sector, which claims that, no, we are all citizens,

¹²⁷ The SDP, as the successor to the Communist League of Croatia, attracts many Croatian Serbs with leftist political leanings, much to the frustration of ethnicity-based parties like the SDSS.

we all love each other, we hang out, we kiss... but when the moment comes when someone needs a job at the courthouse, and they realize that it has been twenty years since they have hired a single Serb... and what now? (*i šta ćemo sad?*)”

In this context, Radovan is discrediting the NGO world and its liberal values to argue that SDSS and Serb institutions are essential spaces of cultural preservation for Vukovarian Serbs. He is arguing that the NGO sector requires individuals to renounce their national and ethnic identity in favour of a supra-national one in order to be recognized, making it impossible for those who prioritize their Serb-ness to be accepted and benefit from the multicultural NGO world. While Radovan rightly critiques the liberal violence of multiculturalism, which conditions recognition on the performance of tolerable forms of alterity (Povinelli 2002) and “ideologies of appropriate citizenship” (Ameeriari 2017: 55), his solution is rooted in nationalist ontologies. Contrary to Radovan’s view, the NGO sector in Vukovar operates within liberal discourses of citizenship and multiculturalism, which reinforce rather than challenge nationalist understandings of the social world. Thus, it is possible to enact Serb-ness within the “schemas of intelligibility” (Butler 2010: 5) of the multicultural NGO world. In other worlds, NGOs do not demand that Croatian Serbs renounce their Serb-ness in exchange for recognition, but rather that they perform a tolerable version of it. These very ontologies, however, trap the Serb community within nationalist frameworks that perpetuate essentialist associations of Serb-ness with immorality.

However, Radovan also argues that Serb institutions and political parties are essential for the economic survival of Serbs in Vukovar. During this discussion, it was pointed out that Serbs working in the public sector are retiring, yet their positions are being filled by Croats, which violates the representational employment quotas of the Erdut Agreement. In a context where trust in state institutions is low—both in terms of access to employment in one’s field (*u svojoj struci*) and protection from physical harm—a Hobbesian state of nature emerges. In this environment, Serb institutions step in to provide additional employment opportunities, often reserved exclusively for members of a particular political party. Several of my interlocutors admitted they had joined SDSS as a last resort to secure employment, noting that even then, they had to endure a long waiting period because “everyone has someone of their own” (*svako ima nekog svog*). Radovan goes on to argue the following:

Radovan: “The family is the foundation of society. [...] And the problem is... I have nothing against it, there are people in our community who are [queer] [...] with this push for gender equality, the family as a family is being destroyed. The foundation of those politics is the individual who is supposed to make up society. To break up the community. Here, as many of us as there are, if we have solidarity, we are very dangerous. When you are an individual, you feel worthless and powerless... and that is their goal.”

Radovan uses the vulnerability of the Serb community to promote a discourse of fear, framing any alternative to Serb-centred institutions—here, not only multiculturalism but also liberal gender and sexual norms—as either disingenuous or naïve. This fear narrative, which echoes broader right-wing critiques of liberal institutions, allows nationalist ideologies to flourish. Radovan argues that the ability to be recognized “as one is” is key to feeling secure—in terms of cultural and material needs—and that this is only achievable through nation-centred institutions where one is in solidarity with like-minded people. As Ahmed (2014: 64) notes, “fear might be concerned with the preservation not simply of ‘me’, but also ‘us’, or ‘what is’, or ‘life as we know it’, or even ‘life itself.’” In this sense, the narrative of fear helps solidify the boundaries of the (national) collective. Thus, Radovan’s critique of European multiculturalism—as incompatible with national identity, limited in addressing nationalist discrimination, and focused on individualism—reflects an attempt by local nationalist politicians to ensure their own survival at the expense of a better collective future, a common phenomenon in the post-Yugoslav space (see Kurtović 2021). After all, if Serbs could find meaningful employment and coexistence within Croatian society as a result of integration, it would undermine the political leverage of nationalist parties. The emphasis on Serb identity preservation and the critique of multiculturalism could be seen as part of a broader strategy to maintain the relevance of Serb nationalist institutions in a context where material security and ethnic identity are seen as inseparable.

I have observed a profound suspicion toward the NGO sector within a significant part of the local Serb community, a sentiment that also extends across different political factions and groups in Croatia (Franc et al. 2006). It is driven by a mix of apathy regarding its ability to improve their situation and a deeply ingrained belief that national identity and masculinity are incompatible with European citizenship, which they associate with multiculturalism and LGBTQ+ rights. For many, the prospect of change is seen not as an opportunity for progress, but as the erosion of cultural values, historical narratives, and established social roles that provide a sense of security and continuity. Consider the following statement by Ilija, a young gay Serb man from Vukovar.

“A photo of me at Belgrade Pride started circulating in a group chat from the folklore dance group in which I had participated for years. They wanted to kick me out of it... they felt that I wasn’t representing the values of the club. Once, when we were in the changing room, one of the older men grabbed me from behind and another threatened to cut off my hair with a pair of scissors. When I left, they continued to bad mouth me and hold [my decision to leave] against me [...] my mother continues to believe that I’m gay because of Europe House.”

Ilija’s account illustrates the clash between his queer identity and the national and gendered expectations placed on him within the Serb community. His experience reflects a broader social structure in which heterosexual masculinity is valorised, not just as a personal identity, but as a cornerstone of national identity. In this context, Ilija’s homosexuality is seen as a feminized

threat—a challenge to the masculinity that underpins both his Serb identity and the broader nationalist project. His queerness, in the eyes of those around him, becomes emblematic of what they perceive as the 'softening' influence of European cosmopolitanism, which they associate with values of individualism, liberalism, and Western decadence.

Despite being rejected by his community, Ilija consciously attempts to remain involved in its cultural life. For instance, I was surprised to run into him at the Vidovdan commemoration at the St. Nicholas Orthodox Church earlier that month, and later learned—after leaving the field—that he had attended the SNV's Politička Akademija (see Chapter Five) with his boyfriend. In contexts where ethnic division governs everyday life, being gay becomes socially dangerous, as it challenges the ontological categories that nationalist parties strive to reinforce: the nation and the nuclear family. Ilija's participation in both the Vidovdan commemoration and the Political Academy can be understood as a way of disciplining the perceived threat that his queerness poses to these nationalist frameworks, allowing him to continue behaving in a manner that aligns with social expectations.

While the stigmatization of the LGBTQ+ community and conservative views on sexual norms are widespread across the post-Yugoslav space, and especially in small towns, the Serb community's marginalized status in Vukovar intensifies these tendencies. As Greenberg (2006a: 325) notes, gay rights and tolerance are indexing a "shifting basis for citizen belonging and the rise of democratic forms of political legitimacy," which must feel unsettling for individuals who rely on clientelist political parties rooted in ethno-nationalist forms of belonging and who have little faith in the state. For the local Serb community, Ilija's homosexuality is seen as an antithesis of his national identity, which has positioned heterosexual masculinity as its norm. Within this national discourse, homosexuality becomes feminized—deemed as 'soft,' 'weak,' or 'foreign'—a feminization that is perceived as a consequence of European cosmopolitanism, further contributing to Ilija's alienation from his own national community.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

We arrived at the hotel late in the evening. We were exhausted from the long trip, which was only exacerbated by the food coma we were all in. The attendees of that month's Politička Akademija session were lounging on the musty couches of the socialist-era lobby. Vera, a twenty-something Serb woman from central Croatia, began complaining about her job.

Vera: There's this insufferable old man who keeps hanging around my desk, telling me how he was "wrongly" accused of sexual harassment back in his day.

Zoran: Poor guy, I bet he was! Did you guys hear about the Wolt incident?¹²⁸ I'm divided about the whole thing, I think the girl didn't have to report him. She could

¹²⁸ The incident occurred in Belgrade in August 2022, when a delivery driver for Wolt, a popular food delivery service, used a customer's private information—obtained during a food delivery—to contact her via text message and flirt

have told him nicely that she wasn't interested. I bet if she had found him attractive she wouldn't have reacted the way she did.

Dragana: Actually, I disagree. I don't think you're right in this case. Why does she have to nicely educate him and protect his feelings after he violated her privacy and one of the rules of his job?

[...]

Lazar: Dragana, you have a really hardcore feminist position and I think it's just creating more problems, I think you're needlessly creating antagonism between the sexes. You can't claim that every man who approaches a woman he does not know is perverted.

Zoran: Thank you!

The vignette provides a snapshot of how gender and power are negotiated within a group of politically engaged young individuals. It offers insight into how political ideologies, gender norms, and regional values intersect to shape individuals' perceptions of issues like sexual harassment and gender relations. Even the setting, a worn-out socialist-era lobby, evokes an uncomfortable sense of ideological residue, reflecting a tension between the remnants of socialist egalitarianism—which, though flawed, was progressive compared with other European countries—and the re-traditionalization of gender roles in post-socialist Croatia (Ćeriman & Vučković Juroš 2024).

None of the women around me expressed support—except Vera, who did so privately. Anja, a young woman who typically remained quiet during Academy discussions, called out to me as I was about to retire to my room at the end of the night. With a derisive smile, she asked: “Are you able to go to your room alone or are you too scared?” Her comment illustrates how women's solidarity can be undermined by internalized patriarchal attitudes and the fear of social exclusion, all of which reinforce violent masculinity. At the same time, Anja's remark draws attention to my positionality as a diasporan, revealing a tension between feminist ideals—often viewed as Western and threatening by conservatives and nationalists—and the renewed traditionalization in the post-socialist context. The exchange becomes a microcosm of the broader tensions highlighted in this chapter, where not only men but also women may be complicit in maintaining traditional gender norms.

This chapter has explored how the “continuum of violence” (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004; Cockburn 2004) in Vukovar endures beyond the formal end of conflict, adapting to changing power structures. I focused on how violence remains woven into everyday life, not as an inevitable flare-up of ethnic conflict, but through more subtle and diversified forms. The persistence of this violence is connected to a larger crisis of masculinity in the context of economic uncertainty, which

with her. The customer reported the incident to Wolt, which led to the driver losing his job. He then contacted her again, accusing her of overreacting and claiming that her complaint had cost him his employment. See: <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/ej-kakva-je-hrana-bila-juce-dostavljac-dobio-otkaz-zbog-poruke-musteriji-wolt-objasnio-sta-se-dogodilo/>.

is worsened by the Serb community's experiences of minoritization into an enemy minority. These dynamics also have significant implications for women and sexual minorities, who must navigate nationalist loyalty, enemy minority stigmatization, and gendered expectations. I have also argued that local NGOs remain hindered by an incomplete reintegration process, one that fails to address the ongoing legacies of violence, which nationalist elites utilize to secure their own institutions.

While this vignette has illuminated the ways in which European ideals of gender equality clash with local gender norms, a more detailed discussion of the Serbian National Council's Politička Akademija as a forum for negotiating and constructing Serb minority subjectivity will follow in the next chapter. There, I will expand on how the Akademija serves as a space where not only gender norms but also minority rights and behaviours are debated and reshaped.

CHAPTER 5:
“LIKE HORNS IN A BAG”:
THE POLITIČKA AKADEMIJA AND THE STRUGGLE FOR A FUTURE

“I write for the future,
because my present is demolished,
I fly to the future,
to retrieve my demolished present,
as a legible past.”
—Fady Joudah

I entered the damp conference room that morning to find my name printed on a laminated piece of paper—in Cyrillic—sitting on one of the many plastic chairs, which had been arranged in a large circle. I was not accustomed to seeing my name printed in Cyrillic and, due to the controversial nature of that alphabet in Croatia, something about having it in my possession felt quite rebellious. A lecture on Croatian Serb institutions at the Politička Akademija soon started.

Sara: “We really are a diverse community, politically speaking. The party really is composed of very different people... There are some who are more liberal and some who are more national (*nacionalni*), but it always works out.”

Danica: “Yes, we really are like a bunch of horns in a bag! (*k'o rogovi u vreći*)”

Sara: “Yes, definitely! These divisions almost led to the destruction of Prosvjeta... and later the same thing almost happened at Privrednik.¹²⁹ We have to work together and not allow this to happen again.”

In this scenario, Danica and Sara are discussing the ideological cleavages within the Serb community in Croatia. Sara, the main coordinator of the Politička Akademija, is an ambitious woman in her early thirties and the child of a mixed marriage. Her careful wording reflects the delicate balance she is trying to strike, intentionally using the word “national” (*nacionalni*) instead of “nationalist” (*nacionalistički*), as the latter has a negative connotation in the post-Yugoslav space. By doing so, she seeks to place both sides on an equal moral ground. In this context, the expression “like horns in a bag” (*k'o rogovi u vreći*) is an apt metaphor meant to convey the chaos which ensues when assertive and conflicting personalities must come together. As this chapter will demonstrate, the Politička Akademija, a supplemental educational program for young members of the Serb community in Croatia, can also be understood as a microcosm of the Croatian Serb community, as a “bag” within which sharp “horns” are being stuffed together, threatening to tear the bag open at any second.

The Akademija annually recruits young members of the Serb community in Croatia, concentrating on individuals who have pursued post-secondary education and are (or demonstrate the potential

¹²⁹ Prosvjeta and Privrednik are Croatian Serb cultural institutions. I elaborate more on them further in the chapter.

to be) active in public life in their communities. The brainchild of Milorad Pupovac and Dejan Jović, senior figures in the Croatian Serb community, the educational program explores a vast array of topics, such as the history and political position of Croatian Serbs in relation to Serbia and the European Union, facilitates trips to the Jasenovac memorial and other relevant localities, and organises workshops aimed at developing practical skills such as public relations management, interviewing, project planning, fundraising, and so on. According to the SNV website, the Akademija's purpose is to "research, promote, and raise awareness about topics of special interests for the Serb community" but also to "induce critical thinking" and create a space for networking.¹³⁰ Each year, a cohort of approximately twenty participants is selected, while future participants are regularly invited to join as observants (*gosti*). The SNV pays for the accommodation and organises the transportation of the youths, allowing them to meet for one weekend every month for the duration of the Akademija.

I was invited to join the 2022 cohort as an honorary guest after discussing my research project with Sara, the main organizer of the Akademija. Given my focus on Vukovar and its surrounding region, I had never intended to commit so much of my time to an initiative which primarily takes place in central Croatia. However, given that the Akademija was focused on Serb youth and involved participants from all over the country, I was far too curious to turn down the opportunity. I could not help but wonder how the Easterner Slavonians engage with young Serbs from other parts of Croatia. What purpose does the Akademija serve for the institutional and political entities which fund its existence? What kind of political subjectivities are being cultivated through its curriculum? How do the young Serbs who choose to participate in the Akademija see its role and how do they mobilise its resources into practice? What does the relationship between the (many) Croat lecturers and workshop leaders and the Serb attendees reveal about the social dynamics between the majority and minority population? Finally, what kind of futures does the Akademija offer for its young participants? These questions are crucial for understanding how the Politička Akademija functions as a site for negotiating identities within the context of post-war Croatia, where the Serb community in Vukovar—labelled as an 'enemy minority' by broader national discourses—faces a persistent struggle to define itself.

As this chapter argues, the Akademija is not only a recruitment tool for the SDSS but also a mechanism for producing tolerable minorities—in other words, "good Serbs." This elite-driven initiative, led by Zagreb-based Serbs, often conflicts with the participants, not only because its values do not always align with their own but also because the participants are driven by their own specific concerns, grievances, and aspirations—namely, securing a viable future. Ultimately, the Akademija is also reflection of the tensions that shape the Serb community's engagement with Croatian society, illustrating how young Serbs must navigate their marginalization within the framework of both liberal democracy and nationalist ideologies. The tensions between these competing subjectivities—those that align with the minority's history and those shaped by the

¹³⁰ See <https://snv.hr/en/category/news/what-we-do/political-academy/>.

pressures of integration—reveal the complexities of negotiation of identity and political positioning in a post-conflict society.

There is an abundance of literature on the Europeanisation process which becomes relevant for this chapter. Early literature on this subject explored the extent to which joining the European Union could incite post-socialist countries to democratise and influence values, norms, and discourses (Featherstone and Radaelli 2003), while later studies shifted to exploring the domestic factors which impacted the process (Shevel 2009; Subotić 2011; Bauböck 2019). In the post-Yugoslav space, social scientists have explored how the process of Europeanisation has impacted collective memory formation and self-conceptualizations (Mink and Neumayer 2013; Milošević and Trošt 2021), the politics of minority rights (Ramet and Valenta 2016), and citizenship regimes (Štiks and Shaw 2013; Štiks 2015). This literature reveals a much more measured and limited influence of the European Union on domestic processes, also highlighting growing “Euroscepticism” and resistance to its influence (Schäuble 2015; Maldini and Pauković 2016).

The collapse of socialism and the accession into the European Union unsettled the realities of many minority groups, a phenomenon explored by a vast multidisciplinary literature. While Bieber and Bieber (2021: 184) argue that European integration positively impacts minority right protection, mostly by “blunting the sharp edge of the nation-states,” many scholars challenge this view. This chapter embeds itself in the post-socialist ethnographic literature on the everyday experience of these changing circumstances (Polese et al. 2018; Dzenovska 2018; Suleymanova 2020). These studies reveal that the experience of minoritisation is highly contingent, with European Union integration offering no safe haven from hierarchies and normative categories of citizenship. Such ethnographies of the minority social experience in post-socialist contexts reveal a variety of pedagogical strategies to navigate identity dilemmas and complexities, strategies that, like those employed by the Politička Akademija, often resist the assumption that European integration alone can resolve these challenges.

This chapter is also embedded in the literature on youth in post-socialist contexts, and the yearnings and imaginations of the future made possible in such contexts. Ethnographers of the post-Yugoslav space demonstrate how the transition into political liberalism in the wake of socialism has failed to address the everyday struggles that have been caused by neoliberalism, its ideological twin, generating a sense of “futurelessness” (Kurtović 2015). These institutional and discursive shifts have not only limited the scope of the visions of the future but have actively participated in the banal forms of violence experienced by people living its realities. Disillusioned youths must manoeuvre in a limited space, simultaneously defined by the death of a utopian past and capped by the failures of its political restructuring and privatisation (Greenberg 2014; Razsa 2015; Kurtović and Hromadžić 2017). In this light, participation in the Politička Akademija could be understood as an attempt to create an alternative future—to stay in Croatia—by Croatian Serb

cultural institutions, a bid to reform the frustrated minority subject rather than to attempt to temper or resolve the crisis which drives the youth away.

The fifth chapter of this dissertation demonstrates how the *Politička Akademija* functions as a technology for the (re)production of the national subject and the liberal minority subject. The SNV funds the *Akademija* in order to produce acceptable Serbs in Croatian society, ones who have given up on irredentism and have adopted European virtues of liberalism, democracy, and capitalism. This strategic function emerges directly out of the enemy minority framework, within which the Croatian Serb community is positioned as an ontological threat to the Croatian nation-state. However, the *Akademija* often falters when it encounters participants who come from diverse backgrounds, are at times socially conservative, and have their own personal ambitions. This mismatch between the elite-driven goals of the *Akademija* and the lived realities of the participants often leads to mixed results in achieving its intended outcomes. At the same time, it also shows that the *Akademija* functions as an arena of debate and immense tension, where its participants and organisers can deliberate over what it means to be a Serb in contemporary Croatia. The chapter also explores some of the tensions between the liberal and national minority subjectivities being simultaneously constructed by the *Akademija*, and the ways in which the Serb community's minoritised positionalities are being (mis)understood by the majority Croat population. Finally, this chapter examines contestations of these imposed identities and the expressions of alternative futures and self-understandings being articulated by Croatian Serb youths. As it becomes clear, assimilation and the loss of national identity is not the scariest outcome to some young Croatian Serbs—it is a life with no secure future.

First, the chapter delves into the political history of the Serb community in Croatia, focusing on its self-understanding, political aspirations, and its relationship with its Croat neighbours and its kinstate of Serbia. It then highlights the deep ideological divisions within the Croatian Serb community, showcasing the tensions within the *Akademija*'s efforts to bridge these gaps and the pressures it places on constructing a unified minority identity. The chapter then dives into the discourses of political liberalism and the processes of forging a liberal minority identity, while discussing the tensions and contradictions that these mechanisms bring to light. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of the constraints on imaginations of the future in post-socialist contexts, highlighting the ways in which alternative conceptualisations of the self and one's yearnings can expose the limitations of such institutional technologies of subject formation.

“SERBS” OR “SERBIANS”?:

There is a large portrait of Svetozar Pribićević, a prominent 19th century Croatian Serb politician in Austro-Hungary and later the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, hanging in the office of Milorad Pupovac. The office is located in the headquarters of the Serbian National Council in downtown Zagreb, an inconspicuous locale, only identifiable by a discrete “SNV” tag next to one of the buzzers at the front door of the building. When I first saw the portrait, I asked myself why

Pribićević would be singled out as a historical figure by the current leadership of the Croatian Serb community. As I became better acquainted with Croatian Serb institutions, I discovered that Pribićević's political positioning—a Croatian Serb who aligned himself with Croatia instead of Serbia during the Kingdom of Yugoslavia—is representative of the aims of contemporary Croatian Serb politicians. While many foreign scholars still use the terms 'Serbian' (*srbijansko*, *Srbijanac*) and 'Serb' (*srpsko*, *Srbini*) interchangeably, it is important to distinguish between Serbian political positioning, interests, and self-conceptualizations, and those of the Croatian Serb community.¹³¹ In the following paragraphs, I use the figure of Pribićević to explore the unique and evolving political position, interests, and self-conceptions of the Serb minority in Croatia throughout history.

The "question" of the Serb minority in Croatia has been a thorn in the side of the Croatian national project, as were many of the "minority questions"—or rather, "problems"—throughout the European continent in the nineteenth century (Case 2018). Throughout this period and the century that followed, Croatian national political theorists conceptualized the nation as the basis for the organization of state politics. These theorists could be divided into two camps: those who acknowledged the existence of the Serbs as a separate nation within Croatia's territory, and those who denied their existence in an attempt to absorb them into the Croatian national project. However, historical analyses which centre on the way in which the Serb minority in Croatia defined itself, and its precarious position within the webs of competing national projects, is often absent, an oversight I will attempt to address.

Turning to the broader ideological landscape, Gross (1979) identifies two principal ideological systems which dominated late nineteenth and early twentieth century Croatia in its process of forging its independence from the Austro-Hungarian empire: Yugoslavism, and exclusive Croatian nationalism. The Party of Right, the leading party of Croatian nationalism, which sprang from the mind of Ante Starčević, denied the existence of Serbs in Croatia, preferring the term 'Orthodox

¹³¹ There is an important difference between "Serbian" (*srbijansko*, *Srbijanac*), which can be used as both an adjective to indicate a *geographic* relation to Serbia and as a noun referring to a person from Serbia, and "Serb" (*srpsko*, *Srbini*), which is used as both an adjective and a noun to denote belonging to the broader Serb *ethnicity*. For example, a Croat from Serbia could be called a Serbian Croat (*Hrvat Srbijanac*), an unusual but possible linguistic construction. Similarly, terms like "Bosnian" (*bosansko*, *Bosanac*) and "Montenegrin" (*crnogorsko*, *Crnogorac*) can also be used to indicate geographic rather than ethnic belonging. However, such constructions do not exist to describe solely geographic origin from Croatia, where only the ethnic designations "Croat" or "Croatian" are used. While the term "Croatian Serbs" in English (*Hrvatski Srbi*) is not considered offensive, the term most used by the community is "Serbs in Croatia" (*Srbi u Hrvatskoj*), preferring to emphasize the autonomy of Serb identity within the recognized Croatian state. Serb nationalists aim to erase cultural, social, and political differences between Serb communities across the former Yugoslav regions to create what Siniša Vulin, the former Serbian Minister of Internal Affairs, has ominously called the 'the Serb world' (*srpski svet*). For instance, Milorad Dodik, president of Republika Srpska, rejects the term "Bosnian Serbs" (*Bosanski Srbi*) as part of a nationalist project that, on the one hand, seeks to sever any connection between Serbs and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and, on the other, to deemphasize any separation between all Serbs in the former Yugoslav region. In sum, it is important to distinguish "Serbians" and "Serbs" as two distinct categories of analysis not only due to their distinct historical trajectories and processes of identification, but also to challenge the reification of ethnicity as both a social process and a common assumption among scholars of the region.

Croats,' while the Yugoslavist system acknowledged ethnic differences between the two groups but placed emphasis on their shared South Slav origins. Importantly, Gross (1979: 5) notes that both ideologies appealed to the Croatian intelligentsia and failed to involve the masses until much later. The Croatian Peasant Party, headed by Stjepan Radić, was also ideologically aligned with exclusive Croatian nationalism, but emphasised the shared peasant culture of the Serbs and Croats to obtain immense popularity with the masses.

In this context, the Serb community in Croatia was initially predominantly in favour of the centralised Yugoslavist system, which is reflected in the politics of Svetozar Pribićević, a Croatian Serb politician from the Slavonia region who would become the “natural leader of the Serbs of Croatia-Slavonia” (Banac 1984: 170). With the dissolution of the Hapsburg empire at the end of World War I, Croatian elites made the decision to enter a union with Serbs and Slovenes and establish the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, a decision Bellamy (2003: 46) claims was supported by the elite in Croatia, which consisted, at the time, of a high proportion of Serbs. Banac (1984) notes that Pribićević, who had initially been in favour of the 1918 unification of Croatia with the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, had vehemently believed in the superiority of the unitarist Yugoslav project and favoured strong-arm methods to bring about its unitarist policies against Croatian national sensibilities. For instance, he opposed Slovene and Croat elites who wanted to retain remnants of their distinctiveness in the new state, such as pre-war internal jurisdictional boundaries and historical titles, believing that institutions of the Serbian kingdom should be extrapolated onto Yugoslavia to prevent future separatism (Nielsen 2014: 32-33). However, Pribićević radically changed his political position as a result of his disillusionment with Belgrade-dominated policies and the inability of the Serbian king to “forget his blood” (ibid; 60). The king’s prioritization of Serb interests over the unity of the kingdom led Pribićević to conclude that Serbia’s dominance would continue to undermine Yugoslavia’s cohesion. He joined forces with Radić, creating the Peasant-Democratic Coalition (*Seljačko-Demokratska Koalicija*), marking the unification of Croats and Croatian Serbs in political interests against Serbian hegemony. In fact, Pribićević even characterized “Serbia and Croatia as two incompatible worlds” (Nielsen 2014: 59).

The capitulation of the Yugoslav state to the invading Nazi forces in 1941 was followed by the creation of the NDH, where the Ustaša regime enacted the Holocaust and the Porajmos, and committed a genocide against the Serbs of Croatia, attempting to provide a final “solution” to the Starčevićan understanding of the Serb question in Croatia. The socialist regime of Yugoslavia, established in the wake of the Second World War, reimagined the multi-ethnic character of the region through the ideological framework of “brotherhood and unity,” establishing both Serbs and Croats as the constitutive peoples of Croatia and relegating the concept of ‘minority’ to non-Slav

peoples.¹³² However, the death of socialism and the rise of ethno-national states in the 1990s once again brought the Serb question in Croatia to the fore.

In light of the 1990 Croatian constitution, which downgraded Serbs from a “constitutive nation” to the status of “other nations and minorities”, the rising frequency of discrimination against Serbs across Croatia (Gagnon 2004, 147; Woodward 1995, 390) and the consequent “fear of becoming a minority” (Jović 2001), some Croatian Serb political leaders pushed for ethno-political territorial autonomy, while others had alternative conceptualizations of what life could be like for Serbs in Croatia. This local context, marked by the silencing of moderates and the escalation of ethnicization, is best described as an “amoral community,” where “people perceived that their personal choices were severely limited to the options imposed on them by the conditions that created the context in which morality, or any decision-making ability based solely on one’s own values, was absent altogether” (Dragojević 2019: 6). In such an environment, advocating for peace and coexistence was seen as a betrayal to one’s community.

Škiljan (2016) attempts to trace the chaotic timeline of political options for Croatian Serbs during the 1990s, including the history of the Serbian Democratic Party (*Srpska Demokratska Stranka, SDS*), one of the leading political parties for Croatian Serbs, from the outbreak of war and throughout the duration of RSK. The party was founded by Slavonian psychologist Jovan Rašković, who was ousted by more radical opponents who condemned his attempt to pursue a peaceful course with the Croatian state. Under increasingly more extremist leadership, violence against non-Serb populations proliferated on Serb-held territory as Serb political elites rejected all cooperation with the Republic of Croatia. Once RSK was established, non-Serb civilians were driven out en masse, often leaving behind their homes, belongings, and elderly relatives at the mercy of the lawlessness of their increasingly radicalized environments. Intimidation and brutalization of (groups who became) minorities in Krajina was an everyday occurrence consistently met with impunity, often in the pursuit of personal enrichment.

Resistance to Croatian independence and irredentism in the Croatian Serb community have often been conceptualised as the consequences of Serbian propaganda, reducing Croatian Serbs to puppets of the Milošević regime in Belgrade. Unlike many other scholars who have explored the region, Brubaker (1996) highlights Croatian Serb agency and motivations, pushing for the adoption of a “triadic lens” in his analysis of the Croatian War of Independence. In fact, he downplays the dominant role of Serbian propaganda and argues that Croatian Serbs also had substantial fears and grievances that local Serb politicians were able to mobilise, highlighting that “memories of and stories about the murderous wartime Independent State of Croatia, and especially about the gruesome fate of many Croatian and Bosnian Serbs [...] were [...] locally

¹³² The consequences of socialist Yugoslavia’s marginalisation of non-Slavs is only beginning to be explored by scholars, who remind us of the colonial logics of racialization present as “racist pre-socialist hangovers” in socialism (Rexhepi 2022: 18, see also Subotić and Vučetić 2019).

rooted, sustained within family and village circles, and transmitted to the post-war generations” (Brubaker 1996: 72). In fact, he notes that it was in rural areas and small towns, where most atrocities against Serb civilians had occurred during the 1940s, rather than cosmopolitan centres, that Serb nationalists and irredentists were able to garner the most opposition to Croatian independence in the 1990s.

During the Croatian War of Independence, some prominent Serbs chose to remain on the territory of the Republic of Croatia instead of fleeing to Krajina and attempted to advocate for an alternative conceptualization of the future of Serbs in Croatia. For instance, Milorad Pupovac, once a professor of linguistics at the University of Zagreb, advocated for a moderate approach to the resolution of inter-ethnic tensions during the 1990s, which ostracised him from both the Croat and Serb communities. After the war, his Zagreb-based Independent Serb Party (*Samostalna Srpska Stranka*, SSS) party merged with the remnants of the Knin-based SDS party, under the name of the Independent Democratic Serb Party (*Samostalna Demokratska Srpska Stranka*, SDSS), becoming the dominant Serb-led party in contemporary Croatia.¹³³ Importantly, the name of the SDSS is also a nod to Svetozar Pribićević’s Independent Democratic Party (*Samostalna Demokratska Stranka*), established in 1924.

In the long run, the violence which unfolded in Krajina and the political myopias of nationalist Croatian Serb politicians resulted in disastrous consequences for the Serbs living within RSK territory. As a result of the loss of the war, the mass exodus of Serbs from Croatia in 1995 due to Operation Storm, and the end of support from Serbia, the current political and legal structure pledges to Croatian Serbs “cultural autonomy, proportional representation and a very limited form of territorial autonomy,” which are similar to the demands made by the community in early 1990, but without constituent status (Caspersen 2003: 20). Škiljan (2016) notes that proportionate employment of members of minorities in administration and judicial bodies is still missing, which actively hinders the return of Serbs who left Croatia in the 1990s. Also, it is important to remember that asking for these rights to be respected remains a contentious political issue in regions like Vukovar, where public display of Serb cultural symbols is perceived as provocative.

The ideological orientation of the post-war Croatian Serb leadership is also important to note. Best described as a liberal moderate, Pupovac stresses that antifascism is a crucial element of Croatian Serb identity and cultural heritage (Pavlaković 2012; Milošević 2007: 20-21) and advocates for a pro-European political positioning. Most recently, in light of the 2024 exhibition “Stories from Srebrenica” jointly organized by the Bosnian and Herzegovinian embassy in Zagreb and the Mothers of Srebrenica, an activist group representing the survivors of the Srebrenica genocide, SNV shared their attendance and their support for the initiative on their social media platforms.

¹³³ While SDSS is the biggest Serb-led party in Croatia, the fact that it frequently forms coalitions with the ruling party (whether it is HDZ or SDP) is a political move that is perceived as controversial by many members of the Serb community, who perceive this as a sign of Pupovac’s shifting loyalties.

This stance places the political leadership of Croatian Serbs directly at odds with the state of Serbia and the Republika Srpska entity, which continue to deny the Srebrenica genocide.

Today, the dominant Croatian Serb cultural institutions are the Serbian Cultural Society 'Education' (*SKD Prosvjeta*) and the businesses association 'Entrepreneur' (*Privrednik*), both of which are rather politically conservative, funding events which place emphasis on ethno-national and religious belonging. On the other hand, the Serb Archive in Croatia (*Arhiv Srba u Hrvatskoj*) and the weekly newspaper *Novosti*, are also SNV-funded entities and can be characterised as oases for antifascists and leftists in Croatia, providing a public platform for debates which are not possible elsewhere.¹³⁴ However, while spaces can be understood as 'oases,' they must always be placed in their political and social contexts, which reveals their important limitations as spaces of contestation. The Serb Democratic Forum (*Srpski Demokratski Forum*, hereafter SDF), is an SNV-funded and recently renewed civil society organisation which focuses on the advocacy of human and national minority rights with a particular focus on issues concerning youth and women. When the SDF was first founded in 1991 in Zagreb, the founding assembly set forth a set of 'Starting Points for the Resolution of the Serb Question in Croatia', in which the cultural and territorial autonomy of Serbs in Croatia was proposed. Interestingly, Škiljan (2016: 114) notes that the proclamation "emphasises that the Serbs of Croatia do not want to be 'Palestinians in a Greater Serbia or in an Independent State of Croatia.'" This fascinating formulation reveals that the political representatives of Croatian Serbs who chose to "vote with their feet" by remaining in Zagreb during the war had a distinct vision of their position in Croatian society: they wanted to be a minority whose rights are respected, while avoiding being used as political pawns by Serbia. The comparison to Palestinians is striking, underscoring the Croatian Serbs' fear of continuous marginalization and vulnerability. Today, the SDF is ideologically diverse, engaging in various renovation projects (*radne akcije*).¹³⁵ They have restored both Serb Orthodox churches and antifascist monuments which were destroyed in anti-Serb violence in the 1990s.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ During my fieldwork, I read the following article by Viktor Ivančić, provocatively entitled "Ognjen Kraus and Mickey Mouse" (*Ognjen Kraus i Miki Maus*), which heavily criticised Pupovac's decision to end the Serb commemorative boycott and to participate in the state-led Jasenovac commemoration, which the Jewish community, led by Ognjen Kraus, continues to snub in response to rising tolerance towards hate speech. See <https://www.portalnovosti.com/ognjen-kraus-i-miki-maus>. At the same time, the provocatively titled "Fuck the Flag" (*Jebo Zastavu*), in which Ivančić wrote "fuck the flag, the Croatian flag just as much as the Serbian flag," was deemed too provocative to be published in *Novosti*. See <https://lupiga.com/hiperlink/viktor-ivancic-jebo-zastavu>.

¹³⁵ The term *radna akcija* is better translated as "work actions" and has strong historical and socialist implications in the region. The Yugoslav post-war (re)building efforts, also called *radne akcije*, mobilised an extensive system of youth worker brigades in an effort to rapidly modernise Yugoslav infrastructure. Importantly, they also served an important ideological purpose, as they brought together and bonded youths from all over Yugoslavia in building a collective future. See <https://www.portalnovosti.com/omladinska-mreza-srba-cistila-crkve-na-baniji-i-kordunu-fotogalerija> and <https://www.portalnovosti.com/uredeno-partizansko-groblje>.

¹³⁶ The SDF has also organised a supplemental education program for young Serb women called *Kata* and a magazine, *Nada*, which is included with *Novosti*. SDF leaders proudly explained that the names were chosen to honour Kata Pejnović and Nada Dimić, two Croatian Serb anti-fascist women and celebrated Yugoslav war heroes.

So, why is there a portrait of Svetozar Pribićević in the office of the most influential political representative of Croatian Serbs in contemporary Croatia? Choosing to accentuate the historical legacy of Pribićević could be interpreted as an attempt to articulate the complicated political position of Croatian Serbs today. Pribićević (1933: 206) wrote that Belgrade, “would sacrifice the Serbs of Croatia without hesitation and with merry heart” when it becomes convenient for them to do so. Initially an advocate for centralized Yugoslavism, he turned away from Belgrade and allied himself with a fellow Croat, choosing to stress their shared interests. In the same light, Pupovac understands that the Croatian Serb community is least protected when it is aligned with the interests of Belgrade against those of the Croat majority with which it lives. Pupovac stresses a pro-European orientation and antifascism, outlining a particular conceptualization of the Croatian Serbs as a minority: no longer irredentist—while still nationally-defined—but rather one that sees their future and their interests to be aligned with Croats in Croatia, with Western Europe, rather than Serbs in Serbia.

“LIBERALS AND NATIONALS”: REGIONAL DIVIDES AND IDEOLOGICAL TENSIONS

I was crammed into a van shared with seven other young Serbs from Eastern Croatia, all of whom not only already knew one another but had already heard about me through the “Serb grapevine.” The road to Donja Stubica, a hot-spring resort town on the slopes of the Medvednica mountain, was so long and winding that Tanja got car sick, and the rest of us, exhausted and hungry, were more than thankful to finally arrive for the first session of the Politička Akademija. After dinner and the introductory session, we made our way to the conference rooms at the back of the hotel to engage in the less publicised aspect of the Politička Akademija: drinking, dancing, and socialising. Evidently well prepared and informed about the “other” side of the Politička Akademija experience, Vladimir and Damjan broke out a huge balloon of homemade wine and smoked sausages they had hauled from their village. Soon, music boomed through the damp conference room. I was chatting with Maja and Danica, who had arrived together from central Croatia, when someone started playing the infamous and, in my opinion, awful *Kad Zagrmi iz Borova Sela* song by Branko Marinković Lalić.

*Kad zagrmi iz Borova Sela,
zaljulja se Slavonija cela,
zaljulja se do Osijeka grada,
beži Glavaš,
ispred njega garda,*

When thunder sounds from Borovo Selo,
all of Slavonia shakes,
the tremor is felt all the way in Osijek,
Glavaš¹³⁷ is running away,
and in front of him are his troops.

*Oj Ustaše,
šta ste naumili,*

Oh Ustaša,
what were you thinking,

¹³⁷ Branimir Glavaš, a convicted Croatian war criminal and former general of the Croatian Army, was one of the founders of the HDZ party. In 2009, the Hague found him guilty of crimes against humanity and murders of civilian Serbs living in the Osijek region during the 1990s.

*u Borovo kad ste dolazili,
iz Borova peške niste smeli,
prevezli vas vojni transporteri.*

when you came to Borovo,
from Borovo you didn't dare leave on foot,
you were ferried by military trucks.

I am not very familiar with nationalist music from the region, so I did not even notice what was being played until Maja expressed her discomfort. In fact, such nationalist songs from the RSK-era are taboo in contemporary Croatia. *Kad Zagrmu iz Borova* mocks the Croatian forces during the war, particularly highlighting their retreat from Eastern Slavonia. The song uses a taunting tone to boast about the strength of the Serb forces in the region, drawing a parallel between the Croatian forces of the 1990s and the Ustaša of the 1940s. "It must have been played by someone born after the war, someone who clearly doesn't understand the meaning of the song or how it could make someone feel," she said, crossing her arms across her chest. This genre of folk music (*cajke*) was particularly popular in the 1990s, when even the most mediocre of musicians could gain immense popularity and profit by producing RSK-worshipping music. As Baker (2016) notes, popular music in Croatia is still used as a tool to construct and contest identities and, as many of my interlocutors have also pointed out, Serbian *cajke* are a popular choice even for Croats. To be fair, I never heard another RSK-era song being played at Politička Akademija. On a separate occasion, however, someone played the Yugoslav national anthem, creating a veritable medley of contradictory and incompatible narratives of nationhood.

As time went on, I continuously noticed the ideological rift between young Serbs from Eastern Slavonia and Baranja and the ones from Central Croatia and the Istrian coastal region. Igor, a young Serb from Vukovar and active member in the SDF, initially pointed out these cleavages to me, arguing that Serbs from the Kordun, Lika and Banovina/Banija regions had "red stars on their foreheads," and described Easterners and Dalmatians as far more conservative.¹³⁸ These stark discrepancies are the result of complex historical processes: the communist Partisan movement found its strongest support in the rural regions of Kordun, Lika and Banovina/Banija, where the Ustaša genocide against Croatian Serbs was also the most intense, while the collaborationist and fascist Četnik movement had the strongest footing in the Dalmatian hinterlands. The Partisans had a strong following among Serbs from Eastern Slavonia as well, but the proximity of the border with Serbia has a mitigating effect, creating a stronger affiliation with Serbia than is the case for other Croatian Serbs. However, it is important to recognize that these are general impressions of ideological positioning in these regions, and they often come with a degree of simplification—there is always more complexity at play, and such essentialist depictions must be taken with a grain of salt. Igor, however, stressed that these cleavages were being actively minimised and overcome by Serb institutions in Croatia. "We show a united front, always, no matter how much we disagree behind the scenes," he stressed.

¹³⁸ While Dalmatia is now considered one of the most conservative regions of Croatia, Markovina (2012: 77-78) reminds us that the ideological assault on anti-fascist memory, including the sacrifice of over 1500 young partisans in Split alone, is the result of a politically orchestrated and systematically executed erasure that began in the 1990s.

I observed that the drive to overcome internal differences and to prioritise Serb-ness and shared minority identity were evident goals of the Politička Akademija, spotlighted throughout the various workshops, seminars, and field trips we attended. In fact, this elite project highlights tensions within the community, especially when contradictory values are imposed on the participants. One such exercise was a hypothetical enactment of a town council meeting, in which each individual was given a role. The scenario, in which a small town was switching from non-renewable energy to thermal energy in light of the energy crisis engendered by the conflict in Ukraine, required the participants, whose roles and interests were at odds, to come to a political compromise. The exercise engendered chaos: the confused participants struggled to follow the instructions, failed to stay in character, and did not reach a conclusive solution to the conflict of interest in the hypothetical scenario, much to the annoyance of Sara, whom we met earlier. Her irritation, however, was not procedural but political. In particular, she found fault in the participants who were enacting the role of Serb politicians, accusing them of not speaking from an ethnically-defined position, but rather focusing on their official functions. She reminded them that their primary concern was the future of the Serb community, which had to come before the interests of the rest of the community if need be. It remained rather unclear what this ethnicized position would actually look like in the context of this scenario, a confusion that I and the other participants shared.

During my time in the field, I never fully grasped Sara's political views, but I could sense her effort to put personal opinions aside to fulfil the pedagogical goals of the Politička Akademija. Igor once told me that Sara was even more conservative than he was, though she was adept at masking this. But my own observations were more nuanced. For instance, during a discussion about the SDSS's decision to send Boris Milošević, a senior party member, to the 2020 Operation Storm commemoration in Knin, Sara expressed strong opposition, arguing that Serbs in Croatia needed to maintain their refusal to participate. "It's fine to downplay our Serb-ness on a daily basis to survive, I understand that. That's all fine as long as we continue to refuse to celebrate Operation Storm. That is a sign of life (*znak života*)," she remarked. Yet, her views were not consistently conservative. When discussing the SDF's co-organization of a short film festival in Vukovar, Sara voiced deep frustration at a local Orthodox priest who attempted to censor certain films being screened in the Srpski Dom, calling his actions "Nazi-esque" and displaying visible anger at the attempted repression. While Sara's political stance remained somewhat elusive, it became clear that she carefully navigated tensions within the group. She often withdrew into strategic neutrality, particularly in moments of conflict, aiming to maintain a middle ground that allowed her to unite the diverse participants under the Akademija's broader mission.

Sara's recommendation to prioritise one's national identity and interests might appear shocking to some locals in the post-Yugoslav space who believe that joining Europe and adopting European values will bring an end to nationalist divisions and lead to peaceful coexistence. However, it is

important to remember that the values Sara is seeking to impart are perfectly in line with the predominant model of governance in contemporary Europe. At first, there seems to be a juxtaposition between Western European civic nationalism and Eastern European and Balkan ethnic nationalism, making the latter appear as an undesirable dysfunctionality relegated to post-socialist contexts. However, the contemporary nation-state system which remains dominant in Europe “still requires nations for there to be states” (Dzenovska 2018: 79), imposing regimes of inclusion and exclusion on the bodies within its national borders in order to clearly define ‘majorities’ and ‘minorities.’ In other words, whether defined as ‘civic’ or ‘ethnic,’ nationalism is still the rule of the game. Like Russian-speakers in post-Soviet Latvia described by Dzenovska (2018: 49-50), Croatian Serbs are expected to “subscribe to the vision of virtuous life as a national life,” in which they must prioritise national identification and concede that they “live in someone else’s state.” By asking her fellow Serbs to prioritise the interests of the Croatian Serb community—to act like nationalised and minoritized subjects—Sara is encouraging them to embrace both the ‘national’ and ‘minority’ categories imposed on them and disciplining their conduct to align with these new European ethical and political dispositions. She is embodying and attempting to transmit to the attendees precisely what it means to “become European.”

At the same time, I often observed Sara’s conscious efforts to widen the parameters of the national imaginary of Croatian Serbs to make space for queer members of the community, a strategic move supported by the Politička Akademija and its organizers. During an animated discussion following a lecture, each participant was asked to name a form of social difference which is stigmatised in contemporary Croatian society. While most of the participants focused on issues of Serb-ness, I raised my hand and mentioned the LGBTQ+ community.¹³⁹ A few minutes later, Sara chided everyone, “I won’t count Dragana because she grew up in Canada and things are different there. I am very disappointed in everyone here... I can’t believe that nobody in this room would have remembered to mention the LGBTQ community!” While widening the scope of what is included in the definition of Croatian Serb-ness can be understood as a demographically strategic move for an increasingly small minority population, it can also be interpreted as a ‘turn towards Europe.’ To many people in the post-Yugoslav space, it seems like homonormative epistemologies dominate what it means to be properly European, and sexual diversity and sexual rights are often used as measuring sticks for modernity. In what El-Tayeb (2012) calls “strategic humanism”, the inclusion of groups whose status within the nation has been historically contested can be understood as a move by the Zagrebian Serb elites to (re)define the Croatian Serb minority as one which is oriented towards the West in its ability to tolerate difference. This project serves to not only challenge the way that the Serb community has been conceptualised by the Croat majority throughout recent history—Eastern, uncivilised, aggressive—but also to improve the ability of the

¹³⁹ To be fully honest, I was intentionally stirring the pot, correctly predicting that nobody would remember the LGBTQ+ community. I wanted to see how my suggestion would be received in this particular context.

community to solicit European institutions for the protection of human and minority rights, and, importantly, gain access to funding.¹⁴⁰

The Politička Akademija does not appear to leave much room for a wider conceptualization of Serb-ness, given the emphasis on national identity and political liberalism. To my surprise, however, the possibility to lecture at the Akademija was open to far more radical members of the Serb community than I had anticipated. For instance, some participants never returned to the Akademija after the second module, claiming that it was run by a bunch of “commies” (*komunjare*), after historians Čedomir Višnjić, Milan Radanović, and Nikola Vukobratović lectured on the history of Serbs in Croatia and highlighted antifascism as a collective value. On another occasion, Nina Čolović, a feminist linguist working at the Archive of Serbs in Croatia, engaged in what she later described to me as “guerrilla education” in order to demonstrate that language in the post-Yugoslav space is not ethnically defined, calling into question the nation-language nexus altogether. The fact that Čolović’s lecture shook the ideological foundations of the Akademija did not seem to bother Sara, who had not even asked to see the pedagogical material beforehand and seemed unphased during the lecture.

“Think of this as a long job interview,” said Sara, laughing, as she addressed the Akademija participants for the first time. It became evident to me that many of these young Serbs, particularly the ones who came from rural and underdeveloped regions, were placing all their hope on the Serb institutions to find employment in the future. In fact, given that the Akademija recruits participants by selecting the most political and socially engaged youths, the hopes and expectations of the youths were quite transparent. As a result, however, not only was the Akademija a technology through which acceptable minorities were forged, but it was also an arena in which many performed what they believed was expected from them. Consider the following interaction between Iskra, one of the Politička Akademija participants, and Domagoj, a Croat journalist holding a workshop on interviews. The following interaction occurred during a mock interview exercise.

Domagoj: “So, you say you’re a journalist. But you continue to speak to me in Serbian. How do you justify this? How do you juggle this in Croatia?”

Iskra: “Uh... well.... I’m speaking Serbian right now because we are at the Akademija. And I also speak Serbian when I’m at home... But I will always write and speak exclusively in Croatian at work.”

Domagoj: “Okay... and what will you teach your children?”

Iskra: “I will speak to them in Serbian and they will know the Cyrillic alphabet, that’s for sure.”

¹⁴⁰ The SNV obtains its funding from the Croatian state budget. Individual projects are sometimes funded directly by the European Union. In 2016, while Tomislav Karamarko held the office of the Deputy Prime Minister of Croatia, all funding to “anti-Croatian associations” was cut, leading the SNV to appeal to Serbia for a one-time financial bailout, which was granted.

[...]

Domagoj, turning to the others: “She gave me way too much power by even answering completely inappropriate questions... [Turning to Iskra] you didn’t even have to answer them. The only thing you have to say is that it is your right as a national minority to speak in your minority language in Croatia. That’s it, that’s the end of it.”

I noticed that Iskra was becoming more and more uncomfortable during the exercise, which Domagoj exploited as a pedagogical moment. What appears very simple to him—that national minorities should insist on the rights given to them by the state—is in reality a delicate balancing act, as evidenced by Iskra’s growing discomfort. On the one hand, she understands the importance of linguistically performing “proper Serb-ness” in front of Sara and the rest of the Serb community, since she is hoping to find employment with one of the institutions or the political party. On the other hand, she understands that she must manoeuvre strategically in order to be considered an acceptable minority in Croatian society, a performance of political liberalism directed at both Domagoj and Sara.

AN AWKWARD ENCOUNTER: ON EUROPEANNESS AND TOLERANCE

In November 2022, the Politička Akademija participants were given a lecture by Lucija, a Croat lawyer and former European Union bureaucrat. The lecture, intriguingly titled “A Serb, a Migrant, and a Woman Walk into a Bar” (*Ušli Srbin, Migrant i Žena u Bar*) focused on issues of inequality and tolerance in Croatian society. However, many participants felt that her lecture was elitist and disregarded their own experiences as a minority in Croatia. This clash highlights the tension between European ideals of multiculturalism and the realities of ethnic hierarchies in post-Yugoslav spaces, revealing the complexities of the Europeanization process.

The contention between the lecturer and the participants of the Akademija was anticipated by Lucija, who warned that there would be disagreements and that the participants should warn her if she was “on a slippery slope” (*na skliskom terenu*). The tension quickly became apparent and lasted throughout the day. The first lecture, which focused on the concept of inequality and the importance of early childhood education, was marked by a lively debate on the issue of the Model A schools. Lucija perceived the school as problematic, to which the participants took issue, arguing that they were “not up for discussion.” After the coffee break, the lecture resumed with a narration of the story of Madina Hosseini, a six year-old Afghan girl who was killed by a train on the Croatian border with Serbia after her family was illegally denied asylum by a group of Croatian policemen.¹⁴¹ Lucija used the tragic story as an opener to discuss the violence employed by Croatian border police against asylum-seekers on the Balkan route, an increasingly well-documented phenomenon (see, for instance, Rexhepi 2022). Consider the following heated exchange:

¹⁴¹ See the following article: <https://total-croatia-news.com/news/politics/madina-hosseini/>.

Lucija: “That little girl and her family never should have been turned away. It was completely illegal, irresponsible, and wrong for the cops to have acted the way that they did!”

Vladimir: “Yes, sure, but you also can’t place all the blame on the cops who were just doing their job!”

Lucija, aping Vladimir’s body language: “You have a very macho stance on this!”

The encounter with Lucija could be conceptualised as a lesson in one of the most fundamental virtues of Europeanization: tolerance. Here, the cultural, social, and political effects of the discourse of tolerance must be considered. Brown (2008: 25) argues that tolerance is “necessitated by something one would prefer did not exist,” and the management of “the undesirable, the tasteless, the faulty—even the revolting, repugnant, or vile.” Similarly, Žižek et al. (2005: 3) asserts that the multicultural notion of tolerance is a “strategy to keep the intrusive neighbour at a proper distance.” This is exemplified in Lucija’s argument that the ‘intolerance’ of the wider Croatian population towards asylum-seekers can be explained by fear of the unknown, bringing her to exclaim that the state “should have organised transportation by bus” to prevent the panic which had ensued in rural Croatia at the onset of the so-called European Refugee Crisis. While it is commonly depicted as the morally superior epitome of liberal management of difference, it is more useful to conceptualise tolerance discourse as a practice of governmentality, one which organises conduct, constructs and positions liberal and non-liberal subjects, cultures, and regimes. In this light, Lucija seems to employ “tolerance talk” to position certain forms of conduct and attitudes as problematic—“very macho”—and in need of tolerance education or liberalisation. In contrast, she positions herself as an authority on tolerance, a proper tolerant subject, ignoring her “conceit of neutrality that is actually thick with bourgeois norms” (Brown 2008: 7).

As Lucija was concluding her lecture, she held up a pamphlet upon which the words ‘Constitution of the Republic of Croatia’ (*Ustav Republike Hrvatske*) were printed, declaring to the attendees that this is the only compass they needed to determine what was “normal” and whether they were witnessing inequality or injustice. I raised my eyebrows, but the irony of this move seemed lost on the other attendees who, at this point, seemed to have mentally checked out of the classroom. Her claim was tone deaf, as it is precisely the Croatian constitution that enshrines the state’s ethno-national character and exclusionary narratives, normalizing discrimination against undesirable minorities and reinforcing impenetrable national borders. Tolerance discourse assumes normativity to such an extent that the parameters which are defined by power dynamics in Croatian society are obscured and normalised. According to Dzenovska (2018: 85), tolerance as a project is focused on conduct and attitudes rather than a radical reimagination of the foundations of the state, meaning that it strives for a “cultivation of manners to mitigate the state’s foundational exclusions.” The Croatian constitution is fundamentally exclusionary, as it provides the polity with the ideological foundation for the supremacy of one ethnic group over all others (Hayden 1992;

Verdery 1998). Štiks (2010) points out that Croatia was granted membership in the European Union in 2013 without being obligated to change its citizenship policies and ethnocentrism; it only had to demonstrate that it was capable of satisfying the democratic criteria of non-discrimination. However, the state does not seem keen to fulfil its obligations, as the inconsistent implementation of minority rights—in Vukovar in particular—demonstrates.

Furthermore, feminist constitutional critiques have challenged key constitutional norms—such as the separation of power, rule of law, democratic legitimacy, and human rights—arguing that legal structures often exclude women and disenfranchised minorities (Higgins 1997; O’Donoghue and Houghton 2019). As Dzenovska (2018: 79) aptly notes, “citizenship is by definition an exclusionary formation.” Lucija’s idealization of the Croatian constitution, presenting it as a standard of moral integrity, reflects a fetishization of constitutional law and a form of normative liberalism. This perspective, however, comes across as elitist and disconnected from her audience, which includes working-class individuals, many of whom live in rural, marginalized areas. Lucija’s lecture also expressed deep concern for migrants, underscoring her empathy for those suffering from displacement and violence. Yet, it is ironic that she places so much weight on a legal contract between the state and its citizens without acknowledging that the very structures of states, borders, and citizenship are the root cause of much of the violence migrants face. This is because a “liberal citizenship” is fundamentally a fiction (Papadopoulos & Tsianos 2013). By assuming that everyone is treated equally before the law (*nacionalno jednaki*), Lucija’s liberal sensibilities overlook the power dynamics at play and the intersectional processes of differentiation that continue to shape Croatian society. Her approach not only ignores these inequalities but also perpetuates a broader liberal obsession with constitutions, treated as neutral and universally just, without addressing the exclusions they often reinforce.

Once the lecture was finished, the young participants huddled outside to share a smoke, rubbing their hands together to keep warm. I overheard Iskra complaining about the lecture to someone else.

Iskra: “She didn’t even listen to us at all!”

Dragana, interrupting: “So I take it that you really didn’t like the lecture today?”

Iskra, turning towards me: “Not even a little bit! I think it was just so... European. It was too...”

Dragana: “Patronising?”

Iskra: “That’s exactly it!”

There was something about the encounter between the Croat bureaucrat and the Serb youths that had been decidedly experienced as awkward and, to a certain extent, offensive. It was interesting to me that Iskra, a young woman who presents herself as a progressive member of the Serb community in Vukovar, reproachfully described the encounter as too “European” and

“patronising.” Tolerance promotion projects such as these reveal some underlying tensions about the process of Europeanisation in Croatia, a unique context with its own complex power dynamics. In this case, the European virtues of tolerance and multiculturalism are being taught to an ethnic minority which continues to be targeted due to the primacy of ethno-national categories in everyday life and the ethnically based hierarchy of citizenship in Croatia (Koska and Matan 2017). Given that Croatian Serbs as a minority hold Croatian citizenship and are not racialized, their social experience is vastly different from that of the Roma community and of asylum-seekers, whose experiences Lucija focused on during her lecture. However, there is some irony in Croatian Serbs being disciplined into viewing ethnic, religious, and racial difference as a desirable form of diversity in a state where their own ethnic difference is barely tolerable. This could explain why Lucija’s lecture had been experienced as patronising to Iskra, someone who readily associates herself with projects and initiatives funded by the European Union. Lucija’s presentation of tolerance and multiculturalism as universal ideals seemed to impose a standardized, top-down approach, overlooking the specific social and historical realities that her audience faced. In this case, “European”, a qualifier with a traditionally positive valance in the region, becomes pejorative as it reveals itself to be a disciplining tool. The unruly minority subjects are being disciplined to incentivise them to embody its neoliberal values of multiculturalism and tolerance.

There is also a tension between the liberal politics of difference being promoted by the Politička Akademija, which places emphasis on minority rights and identity, and those of liberal bureaucrats such as Lucija. During the coffee break, Lucija approached me and openly discussed her opinion of the Model A schools, making it clear that she considered them to be tools for political manipulation and subpar in pedagogical quality. To my surprise, despite this controversial opinion, Lucija was being courted by SNV before she was hired elsewhere. How do we make sense of this contradiction? Perhaps this is about public relations: Croatian Serbs want to be perceived as politically liberal subjects by the rest of the population, as “good minorities” who care about the human rights of all minorities in Croatia. At the same time, the Serb institutions are attempting to straddle ethno-national identification and political liberalism, a feat that is far more manageable than it first appears. Ugrešić (2008: 167) highlights this European paradox: (Western) Europe “grants admission only to clearly defined Croats, Serbs, Bulgarians, or Albanians”, while simultaneously presenting the Balkans as backward for its outdated obsession with ethno-national identities.

While the ambitions of Croatian Serb institutions are aligned with European ideals of difference management, they come to a head with some Croatian liberals who, as a result of the hegemonic national narrative and wartime traumas, do not conceive of Croatian Serbs as a minority like the others. Lucija views the Croatian Serbs to whom she is teaching tolerance as empowered subjects—and in racially embodied ways, they certainly are—and does not see them as belonging to a politically recognized category of difference and disempowerment. Such an understanding of Croatian Serbs is prominent in the Croatian mainstream, and is evidenced in other aspects of

everyday life. For instance, in Dalmatia, it is customary for carnival organisers to burn an effigy which symbolises the community's biggest source of stress that year. In 2019, in Kastel Sucurac, an effigy of the Croatian Serb leader Milorad Pupovac was burned, to popular indifference. A year later, the immolation of an effigy representing a kissing gay couple and their baby was burned in Imotski, causing widespread outrage throughout the state and condemnation from prominent politicians.¹⁴² This is also in line with the recent revisionist statement of the Ministry of Culture, led by Nina Obuljen Koržinek, which claims that the NDH committed genocide against Croatian Jews and Roma, and a *mass crime* against others.¹⁴³ Croatian nationalists and liberals alike struggle to view Croatian Serbs as a minority like the others due to their framing as enemy minorities. As one of my interlocutors in Vukovar aptly put it, "in Croatia, there are minorities... and then there is us."

"WE ARE NOT MINORITIES, WE ARE PEOPLE": ALTERNATIVE VISIONS OF THE FUTURE

The last session of Politička Akademija took place in December 2022, in Gjalski Dvorac, an 18th century castle-turned-hotel tucked into the foggy plains of the Zagorje region. The participants had been asked to turn in a paper for the final session of the Akademija, in which they were asked how they envision the future of the Serb community in Croatia (*kako vidite budućnost srpske zajednice u Hrvatskoj?*) Every cohort of the Politička Akademija had been asked to answer the same question over the years. During the closing lecture of Dejan Jović, it was revealed that the participants had a relatively pessimistic outlook of the future. In fact, when asked how they imagined the future situation of the Serb community in Croatia to be in 2030, six out of eleven thought that the situation would get worse. At the same time, however, most argued that they believed the stigmatisation of the Serb community would decrease over time and that far-right options were unlikely to come to power in Croatia. Consider the following exchange:

Zoran: "There was a group of young Serbs who participated in a SNV initiative back in 2011 who said that their lives had improved since they had returned to Croatia, but they still refused to have their picture taken for fear of having problems... there seems to be this popular belief among Croats, that they do not want their Serbs to be political Serbs (*bili su protiv toga da njihovi Srbi budu politički Srbi*)."

Tanja: "The situation is completely different now in my [majority Serb] village... people aren't afraid to declare themselves and to be political. I guess things didn't use to be like that either, so I believe that things will continue to get better. The same thing will happen with Cyrillic... We have to give people time to get used to it."

¹⁴² See the following article: <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/02/24/torched-effigy-of-gay-couple-causes-outrage-in-croatia/>.

¹⁴³ See the following article: <https://www.portalnovosti.com/gdje-su-nestali-srbi>.

Damjan: “Yeah, I mean all the political parties have their own Serbs (*svaka stranka ima svog Srbina*). They are filling the quotas so they can take advantage during election time. Even Domovinski Pokret has three Serbs in the city council of Vukovar.”

How is it possible to be optimistic about the de-stigmatisation of the Serb community in Croatia while, at the same time, claiming that the overall predicament of the community would worsen over time? In the discussion outlined above, Zoran, who comes from Zagreb, makes a distinction between Serbs and *political* Serbs—Serbs who continue declaring themselves as Serbs, who vote for ethnically defined parties, and who ask for their minority rights to be respected—implying that the latter is less tolerable than the former. As such, a politically engaged minority is conceptualised as an “unruly” minority (Sheth 2009: 26), because it is understood to be “an element that is intuited as threatening to a political order, to a collectively disciplined society.” As literature on marginalised minorities reveals, what is considered acceptable political engagement and enactment of citizenship is far narrower for members of minority groups (Sardelić 2021). Tanja and Damjan, both of whom come from the Vukovar region, challenge this claim, arguing that the ability of Serbs to be political has improved over time. To answer my question, it seems that the demographic factor must be taken into account, an aspect of the Serb question in Croatia which was routinely discussed in the Politička Akademija. It appears that there is increasingly more space in the Croatian national space for “political Serbs” as the size of the minority group decreases over time and how much they are able to solicit the state.

However, many of the young Serbs attending the Politička Akademija chose to invest their time in the program with the hope of securing a future for themselves in concrete, financial terms—particularly by finding employment within Serb institutions or the SDSS. Some of them, like Vladimir, were more open about this motivation. During one of our long commutes, he shared: “I went to work on the coast to help my parents buy a calf for their farm. But I won’t go back anymore. I’ll work on the farm until a position in the party opens up for me.” As he spoke, I remembered that Vladimir had eagerly told Dragana Jeckov, a senior SDSS member, during a lecture that he aspired to become a member of the Croatian Parliament (*Sabor*). I had watched the interaction with a mixture of discomfort and sympathy. After hearing his background story, however, I regretted the sense of second-hand embarrassment I had felt earlier. Other participants in the Akademija shared similar concerns about securing their futures, though more indirectly than Vladimir, as seen when most visibly recoiled when Jeckov began her lecture by asking those who are in the party to raise their hands. However, the participants’ practical concerns were never addressed in the Akademija’s workshops or lectures. This omission created a disconnect, as they were being asked to think about their futures, but only within the limited framework of ethno-nationalist discourse. Discussions were framed around issues like the exodus of Serbs, minority rights, and historical revisionism—important concerns, but ones that failed to engage with the immediate economic realities that the participants were facing.

In the context of the post-socialist present, which is continually marked by the past, one must question what kinds of futures can be imagined when the space for such imagining is so limited. Critiques of post-socialist analyses have outlined the complexities and limitations of such a temporal lens (Verdery 1996; Thelen 2011; Chelcea and Druta 2016). As Pupovac (2016) observes, the post-socialist present is a “present of destruction, regression, and humiliation, a present of the dramatic exacerbation of contradictions.” These contradictions stem from the frameworks of liberal democracy and capitalism, which structure and limit the ways in which the future can even be conceived after socialism. Dzenovska (2018: 92) characterises this quagmire as a “state of permanent transition.” In this light, the Politička Akademija can be seen as a unique political stage where the future of the Croatian Serb community is being negotiated within the post-socialist present. But the limitations of this imagination become increasingly more apparent. None of the Akademija’s workshops dealt meaningfully with the political economy or the practical issues participants were grappling with. Instead, the discussions remained tethered to ethno-national frameworks. Confined by ethno-national ontologies of the present, the discussion of the future of the Croatian Serb community remains locked in debates over demographic decline, “political Serbs,” and the use of Cyrillic.

The last moments of the Politička Akademija were moderated by Milorad Pupovac, who encouraged the participants to be candid and asked what questions they had for *him*. The participants did not hold back, revealing their sincere dissatisfaction with the present moment. Aleksandra, a young Serb woman from the region of Lika, expressed her frustration with the local Serb institutions and political leaders in her village.

“I came here to see if I can do anything for my community by bypassing the local politicians. I think our institutions on the state-level are doing a fine job... but not on the local level. The elders (*starosjedioci*) in my village got to where they are out of dumb luck. I don’t mind that they have held their position for a long time, I just mind that everyone else is so passive! Nobody ever asks my opinion or whether the youth should be more involved. I swear, if this fails, I’ll declare myself a Croat, I don’t care anymore!”

Complaints about corruption, nepotism, financial insecurity, and inefficient local politicians were echoed by several participants, alongside frustrations over the narrow scope of cultural programs that focused exclusively on traditional and folkloric conceptions of Serb-ness. In response, Pupovac acknowledged that problems exist on the ground and encouraged Aleksandra and others to get politically involved in the party to replace these problematic local leaders. In fact, Sara had stressed to me that the Serb community values the democratic process, highlighting that the Politička Akademija is often consulted at crucial political moments to vote on the community’s best course of action. For example, the youth voted in favour of Pupovac attending the state-led

November 18th commemoration a few years ago, a decision that implied a willingness to engage with Croatia's broader political narrative and honour the victims of the 1990s from both sides. This vote signalled the Croatian Serb youth's readiness to build bridges with their Croatian neighbours, recognizing a shared history of suffering, and potentially paving the way for reconciliation. The decision to encourage political mobilization suggests that the Akademija is seeking to reinforce democracy as a shared value. At the same time, this also implies that the resolution of all problems within the Serb community must be found within the Serb community itself, reinforcing notions of locally based democracy but also ethno-national identification. For instance, reaching out to the Croatian media to discuss issues within the community is discouraged. While the political elites of the Croatian Serb community seem to advocate for a model of civic engagement rooted in democratic principles, this is not necessarily compelling to youth like Aleksandra. Disillusioned by local political corruption and a lack of economic opportunity, Aleksandra is considering declaring herself a Croat to escape the limitations imposed by her Serb identity, seeking better prospects for financial stability. Her decision illustrates that democratic principles, while important, do not address the immediate material needs and frustrations she faces, leading her to question whether those principles alone can provide a viable future.

During the last weekend of the Politička Akademija, the participants were introduced to Bruno, a Croat filmmaker and satirist, who organised a workshop on the topic of populism. One of the exercises required the participants to analyse and discuss the strategies of various populist politicians, one of which was Aleksandar Vučić, the current president of Serbia. While presenting her analysis of Vučić, Maja, a young Serb returnee from central Croatia, was challenged by Tanja, a Serb woman from Eastern Croatia, leading to a tense exchange.

Bruno: "Great, now can you discuss Vučić's policies towards minorities?"

Maja: "Well, I grew up in Serbia and I don't remember Vučić having spoken about minorities all that much."

Tanja, raising her hand: "Maybe it seemed like that to you because you were a member of the majority population in Serbia. You're still a minority in Croatia so you notice when issues about minorities are being discussed."

Maja, visibly annoyed: "No. I don't feel like a minority anywhere."

Bruno, who had been watching the presentation, raised his eyebrows in surprise. It is unclear to me which aspect of this exchange he had found surprising. Was he taken aback by how quickly the tension between Maja, a woman who had left Croatia as a refugee during Operation Storm and had chosen to return as an adult, and Tanja, a woman who remained in a Serb-majority village her entire life, had escalated? Or was he surprised by the fact that Maja did not want to consider herself a minority? Later that same day, during a smoking break, I joined Iskra and Maja on the terrace.

Iskra: “I find that Bruno is really sympathetic to our position... he told me in confidence that he had overheard and observed many things this weekend which made him realise how difficult it is to be a minority.”

Dragana: “Do you think he found it strange that Maja refused to consider herself a minority?”

Maja: “If he did it’s because he didn’t understand me! And neither did Tanja. I meant to say that we aren’t minorities. We are people! (*mi nismo manije, mi smo ljudi!*)”

I found it both amusing and fascinating that after all these sessions at the Politička Akademija which were aimed at forging a tolerable minority identity, Maja outright rejected her own minoritisation. Instead, her memorable words “we are not minorities, we are people” articulate an alternative conceptualization not only of her own self-understanding in Croatian society, but also offers a competing vision of what a liveable future could look like. It suggests that Maja has understood and rejected the limitations imposed by the over-emphasis of her national identification by Croatian Serb political elites, which places her in a constant position of disempowerment. In contrast, Tanja seems to readily accept the minority label perhaps because it not only leaves her ethno-national identification uncontested but also reinforces it. Tanja, who lives in a Serb-majority village in eastern Croatia, does not feel that the label of ‘minority’ is a disempowering one, because she feels more like a majority than a minority in that space. Maja, however, lives in central Croatia where the Serb community is almost non-existent and where her ethnic difference is frequently a topic of discussion. By arguing that she does not “feel like a minority,” Maja is not arguing for a constitutional change in which Croatian Serbs would be renamed a constitutive people of Croatia. Instead, she is rejecting the entire premise of the majority/minority hierarchical order of the properly European subject. The juxtaposition between “people” (*ljudi*) and “minorities” (*manjine*) might be a historical remnant of “the fear of becoming a minority” in the Yugoslav region (Jović 2001), but it is also a consequence of the awareness that being a minority in a nation-state means not only being politically disempowered but also endangered (Appadurai 2006). Like Aleksandra, Maja had expressed her frustration with the gatekeeping of the Croatian Serb political elites, who make financial security contingent on joining SDSS, and their political conservativeness by bitterly exclaiming “I hope they all assimilate!” (*da bog da se svi asimilirali*) when we were alone.

The participants of the Politička Akademija are often at odds, expressing differing views on the Serb community’s future in Croatia. While some predict worsening conditions, others maintain optimism about de-stigmatization and political participation. Maja’s rejection of minority status—“we are not minorities, we are people”—challenges the prevailing narrative of Serbs as a marginalized minority, proposing a vision of equality. This tension highlights the complexity of the position of young Serbs in contemporary Croatia, pointing to the limitations of current political frameworks and the need for reimagining the future of the Serb community beyond the conventional minority paradigms.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

In the summer of 2024, I asked Maja, now married and a mother, if she still envisioned her future in Croatia and what that future might look like. She expressed both disillusionment and uncertainty about what lies ahead, revealing an inability to imagine a future:

“If you had asked me two or three years ago when we were at the Akademija, I would have gladly told you, ‘Yes, no problem, I will stay in Croatia.’ But so many things have changed, and I’ve realized so much now, especially now that I am a mother... everything I could somehow tolerate before now really bothers me. So, I don’t know. We’ll probably stay in Croatia because we have everything here now, but I don’t think there is currently any place in the world where I’d feel safe. [...] I don’t like the fact that my child might have problems at school or on the street tomorrow because his mom is a Serb, I don’t like that. And if we go to Serbia, he will definitely have problems because his dad is a Croat. [...] I’m just tired of it all, Serbs, Croats, I’m exhausted from it all. [...] I hope that people will remove these right-wingers from power and that the situation will normalize enough for us to live normally (*da živimo normalno*). My husband and I have an apartment and a house, we’ve secured ourselves materially... I don’t know, it’s really hard for me to imagine the future right now. I don’t imagine it. I just hope that everything will be fine, that there won’t be a war, and that we’ll all be here together.”

Maja's frustration with both Serb and Croat political identities speaks to the exhaustion of ethno-national categories as viable frameworks for personal and collective futures. Her concerns are particularly poignant given that her husband is a Croat and her child, who embodies a “mixed” identity, could face discrimination from both sides. When I asked her to elaborate on what she meant by a “normal life,” she clarified that she meant “without fear for your livelihood” but also “without fear of whether someone will harass you because of your nationality.” In this light, Maja’s words can be interpreted as a political demand for something akin to the yearnings that ethnographers of the post-Yugoslav space have also observed: a longing for “normal life” (*normalan život*) (see Helms 2007; Greenberg 2011; Kurtović 2012; Jansen 2015). Such post-Yugoslav discourses of normality invoke the socialist past in its imaginings of the future, a phenomenon not readily observed in other post-socialist or post-conflict contexts. While Maja’s longing for a “normal life” evokes a sense of Yugo-nostalgia, a yearning for the socialist past’s semblance of peaceful coexistence and financial stability, it also reflects a broader desire to escape the hyper-politicization that now defines not only Croatian society but most post-Yugoslav societies. Born in the early 1990s and having lived in both Serbia and Croatia as an adult, Maja’s desire for a stable, peaceful existence is not merely a nostalgic longing for a romanticized past she never personally experienced, but a wish to live outside the confines of the ethnic and national divisions that have shaped her life. These desires also explain Maja’s continued frustration with

the Politička Akademija, where the absence of any kind of significant discussion of the political economy did not do much to assuage her growing anxieties. In turn, this brings to light the imaginative limits of the hyper-ethicized space which dominates this post-socialist context.

In contemporary Croatia, the “present of destruction, regression and humiliation” (Pupovac 2010), the recurrent “catastrophe” (*katastrofa*) (Hemon 2020) of everyday life, makes a liveable future unimaginable without looking back at the socialist past, which offered the parents of these youths a semblance of a “normal life.” Since Croatian independence, privatization, factory closures, and rising unemployment—especially in rural areas—have worsened economic hardship. While the urban elite benefited from market reforms, many in smaller towns and villages now face precarious living conditions, with rigid working conditions and decreased job security. The post-war promotion of traditional gender roles and rising religiosity have also negatively affected women in Croatia, a trend that continues today (Hofman 2015). As I was leaving the field, Croatia was about to join the Eurozone, something ordinary people dreaded due to fears of rising living costs and inflation. In this context, Maja’s response ends on a hopeful note, this hope seems more like a fragile desire for basic stability rather than a vision of a more expansive or optimistic future.

In this chapter, I have reflected on my experience at the Politička Akademija, a political and educational program for young Serbs in Croatia. The Akademija serves as both a space for intellectual exchange and a tool for constructing minority subjectivities. I have explored the ideological divisions within the Serb community, where competing understandings of what it means to be a national minority creates significant tension. Despite its emphasis on fostering European liberal values, the Akademija simultaneously navigates the struggle to preserve Serb identity, revealing the complex and often contradictory dynamics at play. The chapter has delved into how the program encourages participants to reconcile their national identity with the pressures of conformity in post-socialist Croatia. Finally, it examined how the Akademija shapes the political consciousness and conceptualizations of the future among young Serbs, offering an alternative to the pervasive sense of “futurelessness” that many face.

CONCLUSION:
“THEY BEAT UP VUKOVAR”:
BETWEEN POLITICAL POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS

“That night, they did not only beat up children, they beat us, the parents, too. They beat up Vukovar (*istukli su Vukovar*). [...] This is the last drop. This is the last time that someone who is so much older puts his hands on Vukovar (*netko tko je toliko stariji digne ruku na Vukovar*) Yes, on Vukovar. In this incident we are all together. This incident is about all of us.”¹⁴⁴

These words were spoken into a megaphone by a protester at a large anti-violence rally in Vukovar in the winter of 2024 (Figure 33 and Figure 34). The self-declared politically unaffiliated (*nestranački*) and multiethnic protest—the first of its kind—was organized by frustrated parents and concerned citizens who specifically requested that politicians refrain from attending. The rally took place in response to yet another violent incident involving local youths. On January 6th, 2024—Serbian Orthodox Christmas Eve—a group of teenage boys was attacked in downtown Vukovar by members of the BBB. The assault resulted in the hospitalization of three teenagers and the arrest of several hooligans. The attack was triggered when two of the boys were overheard speaking in *ekavica*, a dialect associated with Serb identity (see Chapter 2). Assuming that all the boys were Serbs, the assailants attacked the entire group, even though most of the teenagers turned out to be Croats.



¹⁴⁴ See the following link for the speeches cited in the following paragraphs: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MfHmt2bs9Vo&t=2s>.

Figure 33: A banner put up by the anti-violence protesters hanging on the bridge over the Vuka river, the location of the incident, reads “Stop the violence in Vukovar, Vukovar is not a ‘problem city’!” (*Stop nasilju u Vukovaru! Vukovar nije grad slučaj!*) (Source: dnevnik.hr)

A little over a year after I left the field, I received news of the protest with a mix of shock and excitement. I recognized the political significance of a multinational and politically unaffiliated protest in a divided and politicized town such as Vukovar. What had seemed like a political impossibility during my time in the field had become a reality: the protesters appeared to reject the logics of ethno-national spatial governability, spurn local politicians, and demand peace on their own terms. After so many similar incidents over the years, I could not help but wonder: why was this particular event the one that pushed the people of Vukovar to a breaking point? And what did it signal for the future of Vukovar?

Miloš, the father of the Serb twin boys whose *ekavica* speech had brought about the assault and one of the main organizers of the protest, narrated the event in an exclusive interview provided by VIDA TV, a news broadcaster funded by the SNV.¹⁴⁵

“The night that this happened, my son called me. He said, ‘Dad, come to the city... they beat us up.’ This is about my children belonging to the Serb national minority group. [...] My boys grew up alongside them from the first grade, from kindergarten with some of them. They hang out, they sleep at each other’s houses, they tell each other their problems, they solve each other’s problems. This is a group of boys who grew up together [...] I drove up with my car here... this is where I met up with them, here in this passage. That’s where I saw the two of them staggering towards me. Faces demolished, bloody, one of them, a busted eye, mouth, ear. One of them had lifted one of them above the fence and tried to throw him into the [river] Vuka. And of course, it was January, we all know what the temperature of the water was like. [...] that’s where they also kicked them, while they were unconscious.”

As Miloš recounts the event, the emotional weight that he carries is palpable, as is his struggle to make sense of the violence his family endured despite their “integration” into Croatian society. He had enrolled his sons in the Croatian language program, and for years they had built strong friendships with their Croat peers. He explained that his children could have to commute to Borovo Naselje to attend Model A programs, and he saw no need for that. Despite his deep religiosity and regular church attendance, Miloš had also grown increasingly mistrustful of Serb institutions and political parties. His frustration began when one of his sons fell seriously ill and needed medical treatment abroad, but when Miloš sought financial assistance from Serb institutions, he was turned down. As a result, when the January attack occurred, Miloš turned to the families of his sons’ Croat friends who had also been harmed, in the hope of inspiring change in his community.

¹⁴⁵ For the entire episode, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s3daViKlio>.

The protesters' demands focused on holding individuals accountable for violent crimes, calling for an adequate institutional response that criminalized the hooligans responsible for the incidents. They expressed disappointment and anger over the BBB's failure to issue a statement or apology, and specifically demanded the following:

“Immediate and unconditional detention of all attackers for whom arrest warrants have been issued. We demand the maximum prison sentences for the perpetrators as a warning to ensure that no one ever thinks of doing this again. We demand more frequent police patrols in the city.”

The protest in Vukovar, like other recent anti-violence movements in the Balkans, centred on demands for stronger institutional accountability, particularly from the judiciary. Miloš, speaking at the protest, echoed frustrations with what he described as “laughable” court rulings. This fits into a broader regional context of protests calling out systemic violence and impunity. The 2018 protests in Bosnia, sparked by police inaction in investigating the murders of young men, expanded into a wider outcry against systemic corruption and government neglect. In Serbia, protests following the 2023 mass shootings accused the government of fostering a culture of violence. And since November 2024, unprecedented and massive student protests, fuelled by a deadly train station canopy collapse in Novi Sad as a result from poorly executed renovations, have gained widespread support not only from various segments of the population in Serbia but also across the Balkans. Across the region, these increasingly more frequent protests reflect growing demands for justice, not just in cases of youth violence, but against what is perceived as broader institutional failure and negligence.



Figure 34: The anti-violence protest drew a sizeable crowd in the city centre. (Source: dnevnik.hr)

In the regional context, an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ dynamic is evident, with protestors framing themselves as victims of systemic violence and corruption, while those responsible—whether it be the government, the media, or specific empowered groups—are cast as the antagonists. This narrative is mirrored in the Vukovar protest, where the local community is positioned as a collective and undivided ‘us’ and the hooligans as ‘them.’ Consider the following excerpt:

“In this city, there is room for everyone. If we now don’t say that it is enough, they will find another target for their hatred. But we will not give them that. No child of Vukovar should ever experience this again. Not one! These people did not survive the war so that their children would go to war (*nisu ovi ljudi preživeli rat da bih njihova djeca ratovala*) [...] we will not give you our children (*našu djecu vam nećemo dati*).”

The rhetoric of the speech clearly pits all the innocent, enduring citizens of Vukovar against the perpetrators of violence and hatred, positioning the protest as a stand against further destruction and trauma. The speaker appeals to the collective memory of the war, implying that the community will not allow a repeat of the past—especially for the next generation. The line “we will not give you our children” acts as a final, powerful declaration that the community—here, undivided ethnically and politically—will fight to protect its future from the threats posed by what is perceived as an outsider force.

Furthermore, the protestors frame the rally and their demands as apolitical by explicitly asking politicians to stay away and the media not to speak to politicians during the protest. They continued to claim that, “this is not a political gathering, this is a howl from parents (*jauk roditelja*).” This is likely due to the narrow understanding of “politics as a whore” (*politika je kurva*) in everyday discourse in the Balkans, which is often limited to affiliation with political parties and, by extension, deep corruption and immorality (Helms 2013: 168). By distancing themselves from political affiliations, the protesters also seek to prevent their legitimate grievances from being co-opted or drowned out by ethnic or partisan agendas, underscoring their unity as a community.

However, the discourse surrounding the protest largely ignored deeper social realities that were critical in shaping the violence in question. While the protest signals a potential shift in the political possibilities in Vukovar, its framing reflects the complexities and local dynamics at play. For instance, the protestors focused primarily on the attack itself, while the role of inter-ethnic tensions remained unaddressed. Notably, the term ‘Serb’ (or even ‘minority’) was absent from statements made during the protest or to the media, despite the attack having been caused by the use of *ekavica* in downtown Vukovar. This absence reflects a key dynamic of life as an enemy minority: because Croatian Serbs are socially stigmatized and rarely recognized as grievable victims, explicitly foregrounding their identity would have risked delegitimizing the protest. Instead, the violence

was framed more generally as a state of terror in Vukovar, one that threatens all children equally. Additionally, the protestors did not engage with the ethno-national logics that define everyday life in Vukovar, which might contribute to social divisions, hatred, and violence. In fact, one of the protestors implied that the division, rather than being a source of violence, is a Vukovarian inevitability that can be temporarily set aside to address the immediate issue of hooliganism.

“We have gathered here today in the name of all the parents of this city, regardless of national belonging. We have gathered because we want our children to be safe. We do not have to like one another or greet one another on the street, but we have to know that when we go out into the streets, we are safe. Our children must be safe.”

The issue of political responsibility for inter-ethnic division only emerged after the rally, during a press conference with Miloš and another organizer. While Miloš also downplayed the role of politics in the incident (*ne uvlačite politiku u ovo*) and, along with the others, called for harsher punishment for the perpetrators, he also expressed dissatisfaction with the municipal government’s politics of intolerance towards Serbs (Figure 35). When asked by a journalist who they believed should be held responsible for the incident, he responded:

“The political narrative in this town, also, needs to... to shut up (*da više začuti*) and to start communicating normally, with the media and with the citizens of the town of Vukovar, because this... really, people, that we, in the 24th year of the 21st century, have a problem with how one expresses himself (*kako se ko izražava*). That someone comes from the depths of Croatia and utters a word in *ekavica* in the town of Vukovar and to be treated differently... people, we have a problem as a society. Really, people, we have a problem. What, in our country only *ijekavica* is spoken? Let the academics—normal academics—stand up and say what dialects of the Croatian language exist. Really, that we have no basic understanding of culture as a people, as a nation, that we are still at war for so long... My childhood was taken when I was eight years old, and who should I blame? The war also came into my town (*mjesto*). I was born in this town, I served the army here. People, I have no other town! Give me another town! I will go live there! [voice breaking] Don’t touch my children! That’s all and nothing more! But nothing more! Thank you, goodbye.”

This emotionally charged moment, one in which his voice breaks, his eyes fill with tears, and he quickly concludes his statement, is exemplary of the kinds of careful negotiations that some members of the Serb community in Croatia are willing to adopt in order to make life as enemy minorities liveable. Even in his anger, Miloš tempers his words, balancing the need to express outrage with the awareness that overtly foregrounding Serb identity could delegitimize or expose

him to further vulnerability. His critique of the “political narrative in this town” and call for communication to “start normally” reflects a strategic manoeuvre: he conveys frustration with the current political climate while navigating the constraints imposed by his position as an enemy minority. His reference to the war and the personal loss he shared with other Vukovarian adds both emotional and historical weight to his statement, while subtly signalling his ethnic identity, reminding listeners of his and the Serb community’s shared belonging in Vukovar. While the other protestors envisioned and performed solidarity in an apolitical and seemingly post-ethnic sense, Miloš’s words imply that solidarity on this issue requires a more radical questioning of the status quo. When I asked him how he felt about the support he received from his fellow organizers, he answered that, “in principle, we agree but... I was left with a bitter taste in my mouth. I always felt like something was missing, like there was something left unsaid on their side (*nešto su mi prešutili*).”



Figure 35: A screenshot of Miloš Nikić and another organizer speaking to journalists during the protest.
(Source: Pixsell)

During interviews with Zagrebian journalists from *Novosti* and VIDA TV who covered the protest, they argued that, based on their experience documenting past incidents, they believe that the protest would never have occurred if the victims had been only Serbs. They also suggested that the Croatian media was mobilized only because the violence had also affected Croat children. However, when I met Miloš and his family in their home in Vukovar, I asked him why he thought that the protest was able to happen at this moment. Without hesitation, he explained that it was all thanks to the grandfather of the Croat boy who been hospitalized along with his sons. Rather than emphasizing the child’s ethnic background, Miloš focused on the fact that the grandfather—a local *branitelj* renowned for his role in the defence of the city—decided to support the protest and its

message. Miloš shared that he had watched the *branitelj* make a series of calls, adding, “I don’t know anyone who could have called the people he called and spoken to them the way he did.” His statement implies that, in a community like Vukovar, such protests may require the endorsement or backing of figures who are seen as authoritative by the majority population. This underscores how local power dynamics rather than the legitimacy of the cause play a crucial role in determining when and how protests can take place.

While the hospitalization and endangerment of Croat children may have initially triggered the interest of the media and sparked the interest of the community, the dynamics surrounding it reflect a more complex set of relationships that are not purely defined by ethnicity. The involvement of a *branitelj* in mobilizing support for the protest demonstrates that personal relationships can transcend ethnic lines in Vukovar. This complexity suggests that the protest is not just a reaction to a single event but also reflects the possibility of shifting dynamics in the town. While ethnic divisions are undoubtedly a key factor in the violence occurring on the streets of Vukovar, the presence of cross-ethnic friendships points to the potential for more fluid, interconnected identities—at least among segments of the population. However, this possibility is discouraged by the broader political context, particularly the Croatian state’s framing of Serbs as an enemy minority and the municipal government’s divisive and exclusionary politics, which provides fuel for nationalist discourse and anti-minority violence. In short, the protest reflects both the normalization of ethnic division as well as the possibility for solidarity across those divides.

Despite the amount of community solidarity expressed during the protest, Miloš ultimately decided to move his family to Germany in the aftermath of the attack, citing the inability to guarantee the safety of his children as the primary reason for his difficult decision.¹⁴⁶ Despite financial, social, and personal hardships, Miloš’s family had managed to remain in Vukovar for years in the post-war period before finally choosing to leave Croatia as a result of anti-Serb violence. During our conversation, he told me that while his sons had experienced bullying based on their ethnicity since kindergarten, the continuation of this mistreatment after the January attack felt like a fresh wound. In fact, when I met Miloš, he had just driven all night from Germany, where he works, to attend a parent-teacher conference about the bullying one of his sons was now facing. Some Croat boys had been calling him a Četnik, and in turn, his son had called them Ustaša. Miloš was outraged that the homeroom teacher (*razrednica*) decided to resolve the issue by separating his sons, despite a prior promise from the principal that they would be kept in the same classroom. “The parents of the Croat boy weren’t even there! Can you imagine? I told her she was discriminating against us because we are Serbs, why else would she insist for us to come when they weren’t obligated to attend? [...] She said that my son was answering their provocations much more forcefully than

¹⁴⁶ The family had not yet moved from Vukovar at the time of the interview. My most recent communication with Miloš revealed that although his sons had initially insisted on pursuing their post-secondary education in Croatia, the family has since relocated and left Croatia.

they were provoking him. So now that my son is defending himself, he's being accused of being a nationalist," he explained.

His bitterness and disillusionment were further deepened by the judicial system's handling of the perpetrators of the attack. His lawyer had advised against pursuing the attackers for hate crimes—which would have resulted in longer prison sentences—due to what he perceived to be a lack of evidence. He also recommended not suing for damages, despite the fact that, after months of recovery, one of his sons had permanent vision loss in one eye and the other required surgery on his shoulder as a result of the attack, as there was little chance of recovering money from individuals who were unemployed and had no prospects for future work. Most of the young men involved in the attack were quickly released, and the five who were convicted received short prison sentences. "They only got two and a half years, and one of them only received a year. It's absurd, these are people who had committed this same crime, in this same location, multiple times," Miloš added bitterly.

As one of the protestors said, "for what is happening right now, children are not to blame (*za sve ovo što se sada dešava, djeca nisu kriva.*)" Children symbolize both vulnerability and hope for a better future, making them central to protests against violence and social division in the post-Yugoslav region. In Vukovar, the anti-violence rally was not only a response to a specific act of violence but also a reflection of the complex circumstances that parents and communities navigate in a context still deeply shaped by nationalist ideologies. Much like the children playing war as Serbs and Croats around my apartment building (see Introduction), the Serb and Croat children targeted for speaking *ekavica* are also shaped by the nationalist ideologies that influence their upbringing, sense of identity, and the challenges they will face. While the rally in Vukovar signals a potential for new forms of solidarity and a more inclusive future, it is not clear whether this will lead to lasting change. The protest suggests that there is a shared desire for peace and unity, but also highlights the enduring presence of ethnic divisions and nationalist ideologies that continue to shape the town. Miloš's planned departure for Germany reflects the continued difficulties individuals face in navigating these complexities, suggesting that overcoming these divisions may feel impossible for some. Yet, the rally marks a start—a moment of collective action that, while limited in scope, points to the possibility of greater solidarity in the future, even if its outcomes remain uncertain.

Enemy Minority has demonstrated the complexities of identity formation and social dynamics for Croatian Serbs in post-conflict Vukovar, where the state and its institutions solidified an ethno-national order of things that continues to hold the town hostage to its wartime traumas. But it has also shown the strategic ways in which ordinary people found ways to make life liveable within the cracks and crevasses of this fraught nationalist landscape—whether by challenging or

reinforcing the “ethno-national spatial governmentality” (Merry 2001; Hromadžić 2015) of the town. The ethnographic narratives spotlighted in this dissertation shed light on how Croatian Serbs deal with the historical legacies of violence, nationalism, and collective memory in both personal and collective terms. This ethno-national order, enforced through state institutions and social norms, reflects the nation-state’s concern with its own ontological security: the perceived need to manage any group that might threaten the coherence of the nation. By introducing the concept of ‘enemy minorities,’ the dissertation makes known how such groups are constructed as a threat to the nation-state when they are politically disempowered and socially marginalized. Most importantly, this work provides insight into how Croatian Serbs, particularly the youth, articulate political subjectivities and navigate everyday life within an ethnically homogenizing state. It shows the contradictions and tensions between people who are outraged by the consequences of their stigmatization and collective guilt while at the same time actively participating in the reproduction of the violent ideologies which make such violence possible.

By exploring the experiences of the Serb community in Vukovar, I aimed to contribute to post-conflict and post-socialist literature by examining the complex processes of minority subject formation in such contexts. *Enemy Minority* adds to the post-conflict scholarship by exploring how memory and trauma shape everyday life in a town marked by war (Pavlaković et al. 2013; 2018; 2019; Banjeglav 2012). Moving beyond memory studies, this ethnography addresses the lived experiences of marginalized communities in post-conflict societies (Schäuble 2014; Jansen 2015) and challenges the victim-perpetrator dichotomy that dominates post-war narratives (Helms 2013; Golubović 2019; Jankowitz 2018). In the post-socialist context, the research contributes to the understanding of Croatia’s transition to EU membership, critiquing the rise of nationalism and historical revisionism (Sokolić 2019; Blanuša 2016; Jović 2017). At the same time, it engages more broadly with nationalism studies by showing how hegemonic nationalism in Croatia is reproduced not only through state institutions but also through everyday practises and interactions. By tracing how linguistic choices, educational practises, commemorative rituals, and gender relations sustain national belonging, *Enemy Minority* builds on and extends the literatures on everyday and banal nationalism (Billig 1995; Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008). It also contributes to debates on national indifference (King 2002; Zahra 2008), highlighting the limits of disengagement in a tense post-conflict context. Finally, *Enemy Minority* also engages with a growing scholarship in political anthropology that explores post-socialist and post-conflict political subject formation (Kurtović 2019; Razsa 2015; Greenberg 2014). It contributes to debates on national inclusion and exclusion (Wimmer 2002) and the complexities of minority survival strategies in the face of exclusionary nationalism (Povinelli 2002; Hage 1998). Through the concept of enemy minority, this dissertation complicates the notion of “minority” and demonstrates how the nation-state manages ethnic and political differences after conflict, situating nationalism as both a macro-level ideology and a lived, everyday force.

Lastly, I hope that by telling this story, I have provided the Serb community in Vukovar with a semblance of recognition that their stigmatized status has long withheld. One of my motivations for writing this dissertation is the realization that soon there may be no one left to interview. In the aftermath of Operation Storm, the majority of Serbs have already left Croatia, and many continue to do so. As such, this work stands as one of the last opportunities to document the lived experiences and perspectives of a community that has been marginalized and displaced. Rather than undermine the prevailing narrative of the 1990s, my dissertation aimed to broaden, deepen, and complicate the story. My intent was never to provide a victimology of the Serb community in Croatia. Instead, I hoped to provide an opportunity for local political leaders to critically reflect on their position and their role in the present. Both validation and self-evaluation are necessary to move forward. By focusing the complexity of these stories—the grey areas—I wonder if we can resist essentialist narratives that fuel ethno-nationalist rhetoric. Ultimately, I hope that offering recognition might contribute, even in a small way, to the process of de-radicalization, fostering a more nuanced understanding of the past and a less divisive future.

While *Enemy Minority* contributes to understanding the everyday lives of Serbs in post-conflict Vukovar, there are notable limitations that future research could address. One key limitation is the exclusion of the majority population, Croats, as well as other minorities living in Vukovar. The everyday experiences of the majority population could provide crucial insights into the broader social dynamics of the town. Additionally, this dissertation does not delve deeply into the political economy of the region, a significant factor driving the demographic changes and local population decline among both Serbs and Croats. This is an area I hope to expand upon when this dissertation is developed into a book. By addressing these gaps, one can provide a more holistic view of the ways in which ethnic identity, politics, and economics intersect in post-conflict communities like Vukovar.

The current political moment is marked by the rise of the far-right globally, with nationalist and exclusionary ideologies gaining tractions in many regions. Amidst this, the ongoing student protests in Serbia have emerged as a potential counterforce, offering a glimmer of resistance in an otherwise darkening political landscape. The failure of the Vučić administration to take accountability for its negligence and corruption sparked widespread outrage, particularly among students who saw it as a stark example of systemic failure. Their demands, however, go beyond transparency regarding the Novi Sad train station renovation project; they also call for accountability for those responsible for physically attacking student protestors—attacks that appear to have been orchestrated by the ruling political party.

Through their organizing and the broader regional support they have garnered, these protests have not only captured attention in Serbia but also resonated with youth across the Balkans. In fact, I have observed that some of my young interlocutors from Vukovar, now studying in Serbia, have become active participants in the protests. Their involvement underscores a broader desire among

younger generations to challenge the historical legacies of corruption, impunity, and violence that shaped their lives. These protests also sparked solidarity across borders, with students in Zagreb joining in by holding signs of support in Cyrillic. This gesture of unity transcends historical divides, emphasizing the potential for cross-border alliances rooted in shared values of justice, democracy, and mutual respect.

Ultimately, these protests offer a glimpse into the possibility of imagining alternative futures—where the next generation can collectively reshape political discourse and challenge the rising tide of fascism. In this sense, the student protests in Serbia and their regional popularity demonstrate that other worlds are possible, where resistance is not only about confronting oppressive forces but also about envisioning and fighting for a more just and equitable future.

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