

Magdalena Rekić*

Vukovar – memory conflicts as an obstacle to Serbo-Croatian reconciliation

Vukovar – konflikty pamięci jako przeszkoda na drodze serbsko-chorwackiego pojednania

Abstract: 30 years after the tragic events in Vukovar, the Serb and Croatian communities live side by side, each cultivating their memory of their own tragedy and their own victims. The peaceful reintegration, that Croats are proud of, did not go hand in hand with building an atmosphere of reconciliation. No wonder then, that Vukovar is a model example of a divided city, where the mental divisions and psychological barriers affect its politics and everyday life. It seems that such a situation is favourable to politicians in Belgrade and Zagreb. One gets the impression that, as in 1991, Vukovar is becoming a victim of great politics and the clash of Serbian and Croatian nationalism.

Keywords: collective memory, memory conflicts, Croatia, Vukovar, Domovinski rat

Streszczenie: 30 lat po tragicznych wydarzeniach w Vukovarze tamtejsi Serbowie i Chorwaci żyją obok siebie, jedni i drudzy kultywują wspomnienia o własnej tragedii i ofiarach. Pokojowa reintegracja, którą szczerzy się strona chorwacka, nie idzie w parze z atmosferą pojednania. Nic więc dziwnego, że Vukovar uważany jest za modelowy przykład miasta podzielonego, gdzie podziały mentalne i bariery psychologiczne wpływają na życie codzienne. Wydaje się, że taka sytuacja jest na rękę politykom w Belgradzie i Zagrzebiu. Trudno nie odnieść wrażenia, że podobnie jak w 1991 r., Vukovar staje się ofiarą wielkiej polityki i ścierania się serbskiego i chorwackiego nacjonalizmu.

Słowa kluczowe: pamięć zbiorowa, konflikty pamięci, Chorwacja, Vukovar, wojna w Chorwacji

* Dr hab. Magdalena Rekić – Faculty of International and Political Studies, University of Lodz, Poland, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6927-5489>, e-mail: mreks@uni.lodz.pl.

*Ne znaš ti šta znači ubiti grad
Ne znaš ti bauke kaljavih rovova Ne znaš ti šta znači spavati sad
Kad sklopim oči... Ništa... Osim tih krovova*

Dorđe Balašević

Introduction

According to the popular view, collective memory performs an integrating function, because by arranging narratives about the past and giving them a specific interpretation framework, it provides even the internally very diverse community of millions with an analogous symbolic apparatus with which its identity is easily established and confirmed. However, collective memory can also become a source of division and even social conflict if there is disagreement about its shape and if different narratives about the past are directed against each other. This is the case in Vukovar – a city in eastern Croatia (Slavonia), inhabited, according to the 2011 census, 57.4% by Croats and 39.4% by Serbs¹, which painfully experienced the fighting of 1991, the background and circumstances of which to this day remain the subject of a dispute between both communities that significantly hampers, if not prevents, the process of reconciliation, even though 30 years have passed since those events.

Reflection on today's animosities implied by the conflict of memory will be preceded by a short outline of the city's drama according to both Serbian and Croatian points of view. As will be shown, the versions of events on both sides are so different from each other, and the emotions are constantly so heated, that it is difficult to conduct any rational debate, although this task is being attempted by alternative-thinking circles in Belgrade and Zagreb. The local population remains hostage to antagonistic narratives about the perpetrators and victims, which in turn affects the inter-ethnic relations in the city, considered a model example of a divided city – a centre marked by the stigma of conflicts in which ethnic divisions overlap with conflicts of memory, psychological and mental barriers, and hostile projections of identi-

1 D. Živić, *Je li Vukovar (bio) srpski grad?*, [in:] *Vukovar 91. – istina i/ili osporavanje (između znanosti i manipulacije)*, D. Živić, S. Špoljar-Vržina V. B. Lupis, S Cvikić (eds.), Zagreb-Vukovar 2013, p. 117.

ties. In such places, the difficult economic situation is only one link in a long chain of problems, since communities live side by side, their attitudes towards the past differ and there is no optimistic vision for the future.

Reconciliation specialists indicate that apart from physically separated cities, such as Jerusalem or Nicosia, there are many cankers in which strong mental divisions are present such as Beirut, Kigali, or Johannesburg. It is not difficult to notice that all the above-mentioned metropolises are unable to free themselves from their difficult history and are doomed to have people hostile to each other inhabit them. There are plenty of such places in the area of the former Yugoslavia, for example, Mostar, Sarajevo, Srebrenica, Kosovska Mitrovica, Skopje, Tetovo, and Vukovar. Although each of the aforementioned cities has its own specificity, they have all become areas of ethnic rivalry and the reproduction of negative stereotypes and emotions.

During the existence of Yugoslavia, Vukovar was an important industrial centre. Its most recognizable brand was the shoe factory, founded in 1931 by Tomáš Bata, later nationalized by the communists and called Borovo. Today, despite numerous difficulties, it remains the largest employer in the area. According to the 1991 census, Vukovar was inhabited by: 47.2% Croats, 32.3% Serbs, 9.8% Yugoslavs, 3.2% Rusyns, 1.6% Hungarians, 0.2% Germans, while 5.8% declared a different nationality.² Mixed marriages were common; 80% of the inhabitants declared having at least one grandparent of a different nationality, so it is no wonder that this city on the Vuka river was considered a place where Tito's doctrine of *brotherhood and unity* was successfully implemented.³ The direct consequence of the war was the loss of the multi-ethnic and multicultural character of the city in favour of bi-ethnicity, nationalism, and constant tensions between Croatian and Serbian inhabitants. Moreover, Vukovar – wealthy in the Austro-Hungarian period⁴, prosperous in the Yugoslavian period

2 Ibidem, p. 109.

3 B. Baillie, *Memorialising the 'Martyred City': Negotiating Vukovar's Wartime Past*, [in:] *Locating Urban Conflicts: Ethnicity, Nationalism and the Everyday*, W. Pullan, B. Baillie (ed.), New York 2013, p. 117.

4 D. Birač, *Privredni razvoj Vukovara: historijsko-komparativna studija*, "Tragovi: časopis za srpske i hrvatske teme", 2018, no. 1, pp. 22-23.

(income significantly above the national average), is today one of the poorest and most backward cities in Croatia.

1. The Battle of Vukovar – Croatian and Serbian perspectives

The Battle of Vukovar (25.08-18.11.1991), mythologized today in many ways, is one of the most tragic chords of war in the former Yugoslavia. During the 87-day siege, historic baroque buildings and the vast majority of houses were destroyed, and the tragedy of civilians did not end with the cessation of the fighting, because after the conquest of the city by the forces of the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA – *Jugoslovenska narodna armija*), there were executions, deportations to concentration camps located in Serbia, ethnic cleansing, and displacement. Vukovar was incorporated into The Republic of Serbian Krajina (*Republika Srpska Krajina*), but it was not returned to Croatia until January 1998 under the Erdut Agreement (November 1995), which envisaged the peaceful reintegration of Eastern Slavonia, Barania, and Western Srem with the rest of the country after a two-year transition period (1996-1997), when the control of the disputed territory was taken over by the UN mission (UNTAES). In the collective consciousness of the Croats, the symbolic regaining of control over the city took place in June 1997, when Franjo Tuđman arrived there (along with a group of state and church dignitaries) on the peace train.⁵ Today, the Croatian discourse emphasizes the “success” of the peaceful reintegration of the area and even sets it as an example for Donetsk. Unfortunately, as will be shown later, the situation in this city is far from ideal, and the conflicting nature of collective memories makes it impossible to develop a formula for an inter-ethnic agreement. Although the incorporation of Eastern Slavonia took place in a peaceful manner, which was a great achievement for the Balkan realities of the end of the 20th century, the situation in Vukovar does not seem optimistic, at least not enough to recommend it to others.

5 8. lipnja 1997. Dolazak Vlaka mira i predsjednika Tuđmana u grad heroj – Vukovar, <https://narod.hr/hrvatska/8-lipnja-1997-dolazak-vlaka-mira-i-predsjednika-tudmana-u-grad-heroj-vukovar> [29.08.2020].

The fighting for Vukovar and the subsequent tragedy of the city's inhabitants are one of the central aspects of the war in Croatia, known in the local discourse as the homeland war (*domovinski rat*), considered to be the founding myth of a state that has been independent since 1991. It is worth recalling that one of the properties of myths is the appropriate profiling of the narrative, adapting it to the current realities and political goals. So, the story of the heroism and drama of Vukovar as the basic building block of Croatian memory and collective identity has been nationalized as a Serbo-Croatian clash, while the actual circumstances turn out to be much more complex. As previously noted, Vukovar was a multi-ethnic city, and although some Serbs left the city when the political situation deteriorated, some who opposed the Croats, many stayed at home and endured the hardships of the siege with their Croatian neighbours. As Sabrina Petra Ramet notes, the chauvinist propaganda of Slobodan Milošević convinced mainly the Serbs who settled there after 1945, while at the same time the idea of building a Greater Serbia did not appeal to the families living there for generations.⁶ Filip Tesař described a similar regularity in the example of Bosnia and Herzegovina; he showed that in many cases the current neighbors did not succumb to the calls of politicians, and the crimes were committed by troops coming from outside.⁷ However, as the Czech researcher adds, the result of these events is today's animosities and the lack of mutual trust.⁸ The situation is similar in Vukovar, where Serbs and Croats live side by side, and the old atmosphere of multi-ethnicity remains only a memory.

For Croats, Vukovar has become a classic place of remembrance (Pierre Nora's *lieu de mémoire*), which to this day releases large amounts of collective emotions. This process was further promoted in 2019 by the decision of the authorities to declare the anniversary of the city's surrender a national holiday in honour of the victims of the homeland war [This issue will be discussed later in this paper]. Vukovar is sometimes described with numerous metaphors, such as the city-hero, pride

6 S. P. Ramet, *Thinking about Yugoslavia: Scholarly Debates about the Yugoslav Breakup and the Wars in Bosnia and Kosovo*, New York 2005, pp. 230-231.

7 F. Tesař, *Etnički konflikti*, Beograd 2019, pp. 169-175.

8 *Ibidem*, p. 171.

of Croatia, Croatian knight, hell.⁹ Britt Baillie draws our attention to the enormous intensity of various places and memorials in a relatively small city, with a population of only several thousand people, as a result of which collective identities are strengthened while at the same time the atmosphere of mental barriers between Serbs and Croats is being created.¹⁰ It is worth adding that in Vukovar, monuments erected by the Croatian side commemorate only its victims, while those on the Serbian side often portray people with the status of villains, such as Blago Zadro (defence commander of Borovo Naselje).

The mythical story of the city's defenders, their sacrifice and tragedy, ignores the crimes committed by the Croats against the Serbs, and these – as the Serb side has shown – were committed both before and during the fighting. Croats find admitting to them difficult, and if they do, they immediately add that their scale is marginal compared to the suffering inflicted by Belgrade. It should be remembered at this point that a natural feature of myth is the division of reality into good and evil, so it is hardly surprising that the heroic narratives about the defence of Vukovar try to ignore the harm done by their own side, especially since the city is presented in them as an innocent victim. Adopting such a victimological perspective additionally ennobles one's own community, making it morally superior. This, in the reality of constant Serbian / Croatian opposition, acquires a special meaning. Rajka Glušica demonstrates that the property of Balkan nationalism is to justify and positively evaluate their own transgressions while emphasizing victimological themes¹¹, which is why two different interpretations of the events in Vukovar are not surprising. This, unfortunately, translates into mental divisions among its inhabitants.

It is worth adding that the story of the city's heroism is consistent with other Croatian national myths, such as the myth about the bulwark of Christianity (*antemurale christianitatis*), considered to be one of the key pillars of Croatian collective identity.¹² According to

9 K. Kardov, *Remember Vukovar, Memory, Sense of Place, and the National Tradition in Croatia*, [in:] *Democratic Transition in Croatia: Value Transformation, Education, and Media*, S. P. Ramet, D. Mantić (eds.), College Station 2007, p. 65.

10 B. Baillie, op. cit., pp. 115-118.

11 R. Glušica, *Crnogorski jezik i nacionalizam*, Beograd 2020, pp. 18-19.

12 I. Žanić, *Simbolični identitet Hrvatske u trokutu raskrižje – predziđe – most*, [in:] *Historijski mitovi na Balkanu*, H. Kamberović (eds.), Sarajevo 2003, pp. 161-162.

this version of reality, the Vukovar experience was due to its borderline location. On November 17, 1991, i.e., the day before the city surrendered, Croatian television broadcast the latest song by the Zlatni Dukati group entitled *Vukovar, Vukovar*, at the end of the main issue of the news, with a fragment of the refrain: *Vukovar, Vukovar, gori na braniku svoje Hrvatske (Vukovar, Vukovar, burns on the bulwark of his Croatia)*.¹³

Another myth on which the collective identity of the Croats is based is the myth of the sacrifice that the Croatian people suffer from the forces of evil. Functions of such forces are performed by Serbia /Yugoslavia, Orthodoxy, and communism.¹⁴ It is hard not to notice that the defence of Vukovar against the JNA forces sent from Belgrade, supported by Serbian militias, fits this perfectly.

In the Croatian internal discourse, not only are the narratives about struggles and sacrifices of the city's defenders reproduced, but also other aspects of the conflict, including, in particular, the tragedy of patients and hospital staff (renamed the National Memorial Hospital in 2019 – Nacionalna memorijalna bolnica), the massacre of prisoners of war in a nearby village, Ovčara, or the shelling of the water tower (*Vukovarski vodotoranj*), where two volunteers constantly hung a new flag.¹⁵ Vukovar's martyrdom as an important component of the myth of the homeland war has become an important motive on which the contemporary Croatian collective identity is based. In 2014, a compulsory school trip to the hero city was introduced for eighth-grade students, funded by the Ministry of Croatian War Veterans (Ministarstvo hrvatskih branitelja).¹⁶ From 2020, November 18 – the day of the city's surrender – was included in the catalog of Croatian public holi-

13 ZANIMLJIVOSTI Zlatni dukati su pjesmu "Vukovar, Vukovar" prvi puta predstavili na kraju Dnevnika HRT-a dan uoči pada grada!, <http://pozeskivodic.com/zanimljivosti-zlatni-dukati-su-pjesmu-vukovar-vtkovar-prvi-puta-predstavili-na-kraju-dnevnika-hrt-a-dan-uoci-pada-grada/> [11.09.2020].

14 M. Czerwiński, *Semiotyka dyskursu historycznego. Chorwackie i serbskie syntezy dziejów narodu*, Kraków 2012, pp. 162-179.

15 Njezin je otac svakoga dana stavljao zastavu na vodotoranj, <https://dansjecanja.hrt.hr/clanak/42/njezin-je-otac-svakoga-dana-stavljao-zastavu-na-vodotoranj> [1.09.2020].

16 *O projektu*, <https://www.mcdrvu.hr/skolski-program/posjet-osmih-razreda-vukovaru/> [1.09.2010].

days¹⁷, and in March 2020, the law establishing Vukovar as “a place of special homeland piety” entered into force.¹⁸

2. The Vukovar tragedy as a local myth

On the other hand, it is easy to see that the myth of Vukovar is above all a local myth, constantly reproduced in the collective memories of the Serbian and Croatian inhabitants of the city. The collective identities of both are designed on different pillars than in Belgrade and Zagreb. The collective images of both Croats and Serbs are not uniform; as in all post-communist societies, there are strong divisions between “modernists”, striving to fully adapt to Western norms and standards, and “traditionalists”, who have difficulty in adjusting to the rules of the new reality. Moreover, it is quite peculiar that in Croatia a third strong group exists – the veteran circles, known for their radical, extremely nationalist, and anti-EU views. This milieu, still living with the memory of the homeland war, causes the increased ritualization of the Vukovar myth, a myth that does not necessarily appeal to the general public. Many Croats want to close the sad past and live in the present and the future. Additionally, even conservative circles are reluctant to reproduce the Vukovar myth, as it turns out to be inconvenient for them for many reasons.

The specificity of Vukovar lies in the fact that while being part of the Croatian mythical imaginarium, it is also sometimes interpreted in opposition to Zagreb. Such beliefs are shared not only by the veterans but also by the majority of the Croatian inhabitants of the hero city. In their opinion, Vukovar would not have had to give up if it had only received more aid from Zagreb, but the rulers sacrificed the city, condemning it to extermination and ethnic cleansing at the cost of recognizing Croatian independence by the West. They believe that the decision to surrender was taken “at the top”, where “big interests”

17 *Zakon o blagdanima, spomendanima i neradnim danima u Republici Hrvatskoj*, <https://www.zakon.hr/z/372/Zakon-o-blagdanima,-spomendanima-i-neradnim-danima-u-Republici-Hrvatskoj> [12.12.2020].

18 *Zakon o proglašenju Vukovara mjestom posebnog domovinskog pijeteta*, <https://www.zakon.hr/z/2503/Zakon-o-progla%C5%A1enju-Vukovara-mjestom-posebnog-domovinskog-pijeteta> [12.12.2020].

came to the fore. It is said that the heroic defenders, despite their extreme sacrifice, had no chance against the conspiracy of three great forces: the Serbs, the international community, and the central government.¹⁹ Such allegations are not unfounded, they are confirmed by Western researchers such as Sabrina Petra Ramet, who argues that Franjo Tuđman tended to avoid stronger support for Vukovar, wanting the most negative image of Belgrade to strengthen in the eyes of Western public opinion, and the Croatian president also planned, together with Milošević, the division of Bosnia and Herzegovina, hence he tried to save energy for the possible opening of a new front.²⁰

The inhabitants of Vukovar also regret that, despite their sacrifice, the state forgot about them, because the standard of living in the city is lower than the Croatian average (it was 5% higher in the SFRY times), unemployment is high, and salaries are low. As a result, young people are gradually leaving the city.²¹ As Catherine Baker notes, the reproduction of the Vukovar myth weakened after the city's reintegration with Croatia, because the authorities, striving to integrate a regionally and dialectically diverse society according to the principle of unity in diversity, could not allow favouring one element of the Croatian puzzle.²² Probably not every outside observer is aware of the scale of mental and linguistic differences between Slavonia, Lika, Dalmatia, Istria, and etc.²³ which the independent Croatia is trying to reconcile in some way by promoting the slogan *I kaj, and ča i što*, expressing the conviction that in the heterogeneous Croatian society, there is room for speakers in the following dialects: Kajkavian, Chakawan, and Shtokavian.²⁴

19 K. Kardov, op. cit., p. 64.

20 S. P. Ramet, op. cit., pp. 122-123.

21 M. Damjanović, *Najveći problemi iseljavanje i nezaposlenost, a mladi se žale: 'Malo je mjesta za izlaske'* <https://www.rtl.hr/vijesti-hr/novosti/hrvatska/sjecanje-na-vukovar/3289617/najveci-problemi-iseljavanje-i-nezaposlenost-a-mladi-se-zale-malo-je-mjesta-za-izlaske/>, 16.11.2018 [11.10.2020].

22 C. Baker, *Sounds of the Borderland: Popular Music, War and Nationalism in Croatia Since 1991*, Farnham-Burlington 2010, p. 45.

23 Por. M. Czerwiński, *Chorwacja. Dzieje, kultura, idee*, Kraków 2020, pp. 10-13, 42-43.

24 'Ča-kaj-što' na listi hrvatske nematerijalne baštine, <https://magazin.hrt.hr/564181/ca-kaj-sto-na-listi-hrvatske-nematerijalne-bastine> [11.09.2020].

3. Vukovar in the Croatian collective memory

Moreover, as has been observed, a significant part of Croatian society, which we conventionally call “modernist”, is oriented towards the present and the future, expresses readiness for reconciliation and understanding with the Serbs, and admits that both sides committed atrocities and ethnic cleansing.²⁵ For many of them, Vukovar evokes alternative associations, they visit it mainly because of the museum of Vučedol culture (*Muzej vučedolske kulture*) or the film festival (*Vukovar Film Festival*). In this part of society, you can hear voices that Vukovar could become the Croatian Strasbourg, a symbol of reconciliation between Zagreb and Belgrade; that by promoting the tradition of its multi-ethnicity it would be easy to obtain funds from outside for the development of the city and the region, but all these postulates sound at the very least somewhat abstract in Vukovar.

The situation in the former Yugoslav capital of the footwear industry can be described as a constant struggle for identity and memory; constant recalling of controversies from the past; scratching at wounds and ethnic segregation in schools, public spaces, and even cafes. The situation was aggravated by the publication of the results of the 2011 census in 2012, according to which 34.87% of the population declared themselves as Serbs²⁶, which meant that the Serb minority constituted more than 1/3 of the city’s inhabitants, and for this reason – in accordance with the law passed just prior to this, in order to meet the criteria for accession to the EU – it has the right to use its own language and alphabet. Among the local Croats and veterans, there were immediate demands to disrespect the regulations and find a way to bypass them. It was argued that introducing Cyrillic, into the public space of Vukovar would be offensive to the victims of 1991, for their sacrifice and martyrdom. In 2013, during the wave of protests, there was a demand to grant Vukovar the status of a “place of special piety”, which, moreover, was supported by the then opposition HDZ (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica, Croatian Democratic Union*)²⁷, i.e.,

25 M. Bačić, *Vukovar, ljeto 1991.*, <http://www.h-alter.org/vijesti/vukovar-ljeto-1991> [12.09.2020].

26 2. Stanovništvo prema narodnosti po gradovima/općinama, *Popis 2011*, https://www.dzs.hr/Hrv/censuses/census2011/results/htm/Ho1_01_04/Ho1_01_04_zup16.html [15.12.2020].

27 A. Ljubojević, *Speak up, Write out: Language and Populism in Croatia*, [in:] *Narratives of Identity in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change*, L. E. Hancock (ed.), Bingley 2016, pp. 43-44.

the party of F. Tuđman, which took power in 2016 and governs until today (March 2021). A year earlier, the presidential office was taken over by the party's candidate, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, and the tension between Zagreb and Belgrade during the election campaign is mentioned as one of the reasons for her victory.²⁸

Even if no one questions the fact that the HDZ has revised its profile significantly and is far from the radicalism of the 1990s, it still attracts the conservative electorate, mixes patriotism with nationalism, and promotes the Croatian perspective of Vukovar's martyrdom, hence the recently mentioned Acts: one establishing Vukovar as "a place of special homeland pietism"; the other to include the day of the city's surrender as a national holiday and a day off from work, should not be seen as surprising. On the other hand, it should be noted that within the HDZ, more and less radical factions clash, with the latter being the backbone of the eastern part of Croatia, led by Vukovar. If the group officially distances itself from the fascist slogans referring to the NDH (Independent State of Croatia, *Nezavisna Država Hrvatska*), openly voiced in the 1990s²⁹, then its Vukovar activists are not so determined in their statements. In the public space of the city, the Ustasha's greeting, "Za dom spremni", regularly appears on the walls, and although local HDZ politicians claim that it is the work of the local football fan community (mainly Dinamo Zagreb, the favourite club of veterans)³⁰, they do nothing to stop them. Meanwhile, representatives of the Serb minority indicate that the new law granting Vukovar the status of a place of special pietism has *de facto* elevated it beyond the constitution and the legislation that is in force in the state.³¹

Grabar-Kitarović was not elected for a second term. Her successor was Zoran Milanović (February 2020), who, during the aforementioned

28 See M. Rekšć, *Wyobrażenia zbiorowe społeczeństw byłej Jugosławii w XXI wieku. Perspektywa politologiczna*, Łódź 2019, p. 273.

29 M. Cesarz, *Elementy tradycji ustaszowskiej i ich znaczenie w procesie kształtowania się chorwackiej tożsamości narodowej po rozpadzie Socjalistycznej Federalnej Republiki Jugosławii*, "Acta Universitatis Wratislaviensis", 2014, nr 4, pp. 74-79.

30 M. Rekšć, *Maksimir 1990 roku w chorwackiej pamięci zbiorowej*, [in:] *Polityczne kształty sportu*, A. Dubicki, R. Jung, M. M. Kobierecki (eds.), Poznań 2020, pp. 42-43.

31 *U VUKOVARU NACRTAN GRB HOS-a I USTAŠKI POZDRAV 'ZA DOM SPREMNI'* Milaković: 'To su napravili navijači Dinama, a bila je prisutna policija', 6.05.2020, <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/u-vukovaru-nacrtan-grb-hos-a-i-ustaski-pozdrav-za-dom-spremni-milakovic-to-su-napravili-navijaci-dinama-a-bila-je-prisutna-policija-10279288> [29.12.2020].

protests of 2013, as prime minister, opposed the exclusion of Vukovar from solutions to guarantee minority rights, and called for reconciliation with Serbs in the name of a European future. It is interesting that one of the reasons for the defeat of the president is her inconsistent statements about the NDH: condemning the puppet creature on the international arena, and at the same time making attempts to please Croatian radical circles, striving for the rehabilitation of NDH.³² Ultimately, these circles were rather reluctant to vote for the HDZ candidate. This fact is mentioned in this text to emphasize the attitude of some Croats towards the fascist ideology, a small part of the population, but so important that HDZ must take it into account, and which in Vukovar turns out to be the majority.

4. The stigmatization of Serbs

As previously mentioned, post-war Vukovar has become a place of commemoration for the Croatian point of view of the events of 1991. This relatively small city is full of monuments dedicated only to one side of the conflict, and moreover, many celebrated heroes are treated as enemies by the other side. Additionally, the Croatian side nationalized the tragedy, although many Vukovar Serbs did not succumb to Belgrade's propaganda even though, together with their Croatian neighbours, they too endured the hardships of the siege – Josip Jagodar estimates their number at around 2000.³³ After the city was taken over, the so-called *podsumasi* (from the Serbo-Croatians: podrum – basement) were stigmatized as hedgers³⁴, and among the victims of Serbian ethnic cleansing, there were also Serbs whose offense was to passively stay in the city together with the “Ustashe”.

After the peaceful reintegration of Eastern Slavonia with the rest of the country, the Serb population again became the target of stigmatization, being accused of the tragedy of the city, its inhabitants (of course only Croats), and the destruction of infrastructure. If the

32 S. Milekić, *Fascist Legacy Causes Persistent Headache for Croatian President*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/02/28/fascist-legacy-causes-persistent-headache-for-croatian-president/> [28.12.2020].

33 J. Jagodar, *Vukovar kao primjer multietničkog i podjeljenoga grada*, “Balcanica Posnaniensia”, 2017, no 24, p. 123.

34 K. Kardov, op. cit., p. 71.

reality of the 1990s resulted in the creation of a whole spectrum of terms with the ending -cid (from the word *genocide* – genocide)³⁵, in languages created on the rubble of Serbo-Croatian language, many of them arose precisely in relation to the tragedy of the city on the Vuka river, such as: *urbicid*, *etnocid*, *ekocid*, *hramocid* (from *hram* – temple), *kulturocid*.

Unfortunately, today, Croats practice *hramocid* or *kulturocid* in relation to Serbian objects. While Catholic churches have been renovated and, what is more, they contain threads of martyrdom that fit in with the myth of harm done by the Orthodox Church / Serbs / Communists, such as in the Franciscan church of St. Filip and James³⁶, most of the Serbian churches frighten with their appearance, as well as the neglected Orthodox cemetery. It is worth adding that the Croatian Catholic Church supports the “national” vision of the events of 1991, which raises the objection of the Serbian Orthodox Church³⁷ and certainly does not help to build an atmosphere of reconciliation.

Although the anniversary of the fall of Vukovar was first celebrated as a public holiday only in 2020, and, due to the coronavirus pandemic, on a less grand scale than originally assumed³⁸, every year (since the reintegration with the rest of the country), November 18th becomes an occasion to ritualize the tragedy of 1991. At this time, thousands of Croats flock to the city, including representatives of the political elite, participants in the fighting for the city, and the families of the victims. The central theme of the celebrations lasting up to a week is a procession of remembrance (*kolona sjećanja*) leading from the hospital building to the Memorial Cemetery of the Victims of Homeland War. At this time, Serbs either leave the city or stay in their homes.

On the other hand, local Serbs complain that their attempts to commemorate their victims are viewed by the Croats as a provocation, and

35 Por. M. Rekšć, *Wyobrażenia zbiorowe...*, p. 111.

36 *Istina o Vukovaru*, <https://filipjakov-vu.com/istinu-o-vukovaru/> [3.01.2021].

37 M. Jarzębski, *Kwestia prawnego równouprawnienia języka serbskiego w Vukovarze*, [in:] *Balkany w XXI wieku. Problemy konsolidacji i integracji*, M. Babić, I. Jakimowicz-Ostrowska (eds.), Warszawa 2014, p. 287.

38 *Vukovar i Škabrnja: 18.11.2020. je po prvi put državni praznik!*, 10.11.2020, <https://narod.hr/hrvatska/znate-li-da-je-18-11-2020-prvi-put-drzavni-praznik-koji-obiljezava-zrtvu-vukovara-i-skabrnje> [6.01.2021]; *U Koloni sjećanja oko deset tisuća*, <https://hr.minfo.com/vijesti/a576945-kolona-sjecanja-u-vukovaru/> [6.01.2021].

that Croats label all Serbs as criminals.³⁹ The dominant narrative in the city stigmatizes Serbs and does not allow alternative views on the difficult history, which causes a natural counter-reaction on the other side as a result of which negative stereotypes and emotions continue to grow among both communities.

According to the statute of the city (*Statut grada Vukovara*), one of the deputy mayors must come from the Serb community; Srđan Milaković, who holds this position, complains that his Croatian colleagues isolate him, do not invite him to the college meetings, and do not consult with him on the most important decisions.⁴⁰ He points out that the city has notorious ethnic incidents that are classified differently by the police, thus they are not visible in the statistics, and the Croats can boast about the success of the peaceful reintegration of Eastern Slavonia.⁴¹

Conclusions

30 years after the tragic events, the Serb and Croatian communities live side by side, each cultivating their memory in their own tragedy and their own victims. Different views on the past, and thus also on the present, reinforce mental divisions and do not indicate that the situation is going to change, since the younger generations are being taught in national classes, based on Croatian or Serbian curricula. Serbs do not want to give up the right of minorities to education in their own language, while on the other hand, Croats are not ready for their youth to confront their vision of reality with their Serb peers. The situation was to be changed by the opening of the first joint school, the construction and equipment of which was financed by Norway, while after the completion of the works in 2019, it turned out that

39 A. Milošević, *European Commemoration of Vukovar: Shared Memory or Joint Remembrance?*, [in:] *Framing the Nation and Collective Identities, Political Rituals and Cultural Memory of the Twentieth-Century Traumas in Croatia*, V. Pavlaković, D. Pauković (eds.), Abingdon-New York 2019, p. 230.

40 S. Kljajić, *Vukovar – još uvek ista priča*, <https://www.dw.com/sr/vukovar-jo%C5%A1-uvek-ista-pri%C4%8Da/a-41434675> [5.01.2021].

41 *Srđan Milaković za N1 o situaciji u Vukovaru*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yZTCgThNf1c> [5.01.2021].

neither Serbs nor Croats intended to enrol their children there.⁴² It is worth mentioning that language differences do not stand in the way of combined extra-curricular activities or private courses, but they are rather far from politics. Ivan Markešić seems to be quite right when, commenting on the failure of the joint school project, he states that in the eastern parts of Croatia there is no state, or it is invisible, that the power is *de facto* exercised by local Serbian and Croatian nationalists who, instead of reconciling, persist with deepening the ethnic segregation.⁴³

It should be added that the stalemate situation in Vukovar (and other towns inhabited by the Serb minority) suits the politicians in Zagreb and Belgrade. As has been noted, since 2016, the government of Croatia has been exercised by HDZ, while two years earlier in Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić (Serbian president since 2017) took the office of prime minister, under whose populist rule the country is increasingly moving towards authoritarianism. His Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska napredna stranka*) was created as a result of a split in the Serbian Radical Party, founded in 1991 by Vojislav Šešelj, whose militias participated in the pacification of Vukovar. As Florian Bieber rightly points out, the common feature of the Balkan nationalists of the 21st century is the cyclical inciting of minor conflicts with their neighbours, which on the one hand serves to strengthen social support and, on the other hand, gives the impression on the international arena that they are the guarantors of stability in the region.⁴⁴ It will not be particularly revealing to note that these strategies are eagerly used by both Serbian and Croatian politicians and that the permanent tensions and increasing ethnic distance in Vukovar are very helpful for them.

It is hard not to get the impression that, as in 1991, Vukovar is becoming a victim of great politics and the clash of Serbian and Croatian nationalism. The disastrous economic situation is conducive to radical moods, additionally heated by local and national politicians.

42 M. Drmić, *Isti grad, isti uzrast, ali druge škole: Koje su razlike i kako funkcioniraju odvojene škole u Vukovaru?*, <https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/isti-grad-isti-uzrast-ali-odvojene-skole-koje-su-razlike-i-kako-funkcioniraju-odvojene-skole-u-vukovaru---546541.html> [5.01.2021].

43 I. Markešić, *Interkulturalna škola u Vukovaru kao "protudržavni element"*, „Večernji list”, 29.07.2019, <https://www.vecernji.hr/premium/interkulturalna-skola-u-vukovaru-kao-protudrzavni-element-1335111> [5.01.2021].

44 F. Bieber, *Ušpon autoritarizma na Zapadnom Balkanu*, Beograd 2020, pp. 139-147.

Since there is the belief in social sciences that a city is also the sum of the ideas and values attributed to it⁴⁵, it should be noted that Vukovar still remains a hostage to the nationalist discourse. The alternative vision of transforming the city into a symbol of Serbo-Croatian reconciliation does not appeal to its inhabitants or the rulers and, therefore, has not been put into practice. So, if Zagreb is trying to promote the reintegration of Eastern Slavonia as a model solution that could be replicated in other regions, such as Donbas, the question arises as to whether it is really worth copying an idea that has not turned out to be entirely successful thus far.

References

2. *Stanovništvo prema narodnosti po gradovima/općinama, Popis 2021*, https://www.dzs.hr/Hrv/censuses/census2011/results/htm/Ho1_01_04/Ho1_01_04_zup16.html.
8. lipnja 1997. *Dolazak Vlaka mira i predsjednika Tuđmana u grad heroj – Vukovar*, <https://narod.hr/hrvatska/8-lipnja-1997-dolazak-vlaka-mira-i-predsjednika-tudmana-u-grad-heroj-vukovar>.
- Baillie B., *Memorialising the ‘Martyred City’: Negotiating Vukovar’s Wartime Past*, [in:] *Locating Urban Conflicts: Ethnicity, Nationalism and the Everyday*, W. Pullan, B. Baillie (eds.), New York 2013.
- Baćić M., *Vukovar, ljeto 1991.*, <http://www.h-alter.org/vijesti/vukovar-ljeto-1991>.
- Baker C., *Sounds of the Borderland: Popular Music, War and Nationalism in Croatia Since 1991*, Farnham-Burlington 2010.
- Bieber F., *Uspon autoritarizma na Zapadnom Balkanu*, Beograd 2020.
- Birač D., *Privredni razvoj Vukovara: historijsko-komparativna studija*, “Tragovi: časopis za srpske i hrvatske teme”, 2018, no. 1.
- Cesarz M., *Elementy tradycji ustaszowskiej i ich znaczenie w procesie kształtowania się chorwackiej tożsamości narodowej po rozpadzie Socjalistycznej Federalnej Republiki Jugosławii*, “Acta Universitatis Wratislaviensis”, 2014, no. 4.
- Czerwiński M., *Chorwacja. Dzieje, kultura, idee*, Kraków 2020.
- Czerwiński M., *Semiotyka dyskursu historycznego. Chorwackie i serbskie syn-tezy dziejów narodu*, Kraków 2012.
- ‘Ča-kaj-što’ na listi hrvatske nematerijalne baštine, <https://magazin.hrt.hr/564181/ca-kaj-sto-na-listi-hrvatske-nematerijalne-bastine>.

45 J. Purchla, *Miasto jako dzieło sztuki?*, „Herito – dziedzictwo, kultura, współczesność”, 2016, no. 22-23, p. 28.

- Damjanović M., *Najveći problemi iseljavanje i nezaposlenost, a mladi se žale: 'Malo je mjesta za izlaske'*, <https://www.rtl.hr/vijesti-hr/novosti/hrvatska/sjecanje-na-vukovar/3289617/najveci-problemi-iseljavanje-i-nezaposlenost-a-mladi-se-zale-malo-je-mjesta-za-izlaske/>, 16.11.2018.
- Drmić M., *Isti grad, isti uzrast, ali druge škole: Koje su razlike i kako funkcioniraju odvojene škole u Vukovaru?*, <https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/isti-grad-isti-uzrast-ali-odvojene-skole-koje-su-razlike-i-kako-funkcioniraju-odvojene-skole-u-vukovaru--546541.html>.
- Glušica R., *Crnogorski jezik i nacionalizam*, Beograd 2020.
- Istina o Vukovaru*, <https://filipjakov-vu.com/istinu-o-vukovaru/>.
- Jagodar J., *Vukovar kao primjer multietničkog i podeljenoga grada*, "Balcanci Posnaniensia", 2017, no 24.
- Jarzębski M., *Kwestia prawnego równouprawnienia języka serbskiego w Vukovarze*, [in:] *Balkany w XXI wieku. Problemy konsolidacji i integracji*, M. Bačić, I. Jakimowicz-Ostrowska (eds.), Warszawa 2014.
- Kardov K., *Remember Vukovar, Memory, Sense of Place, and the National Tradition in Croatia*, [in:] *Democratic Transition in Croatia: Value Transformation, Education, and Media*, S. P. Ramet, D. Mantić (eds.), College Station 2007.
- Kljajić S., *Vukovar – još uvek ista priča*, <https://www.dw.com/sr/vukovar-jo%C5%A1-uvek-ista-pri%C4%8Da/a-41434675>.
- Ljubojević A., *Speak up, Write out: Language and Populism in Croatia*, [in:] *Narratives of Identity in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change*, L. E. Hancock (eds.), Bingley 2016.
- Markešić I., *Interkulturalna škola u Vukovaru kao "protudržavni element"*, "Večernji list", 29.07.2019, <https://www.vecernji.hr/premium/interkulturalna-skola-u-vukovaru-kao-protudrzavni-element-1335111>.
- Milekić S., *Fascist Legacy Causes Persistent Headache for Croatian President*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/02/28/fascist-legacy-causes-persistent-headache-for-croatian-president/>.
- Milošević A., *European Commemoration of Vukovar: Shared Memory or Joint Remembrance?*, [in:] *Framing the Nation and Collective Identities, Political Rituals and Cultural Memory of the Twentieth-Century Traumas in Croatia*, V. Pavlaković, D. Pauković (eds.), Abingdon-New York 2019.
- Njezin je otac svakoga dana stavljao zastavu na vodotoranj*, <https://dansjecanja.hrt.hr/clanak/42/njezin-je-otac-svakoga-dana-stavljao-zastavu-na-vodotoranj>.
- O projektu*, <https://www.mcdrvu.hr/skolski-program/posjet-osmih-razreda-vukovaru/>.
- Purchla J., *Miasto jako dzieło sztuki?*, "Herito – dziedzictwo, kultura, współczesność", 2016, no. 22-23.
- Ramet S. P., *Thinking about Yugoslavia: Scholarly Debates about the Yugoslav Breakup and the Wars in Bosnia and Kosovo*, New York 2005.

- Rekcć M., *Maksimir 1990 roku w chorwackiej pamięci zbiorowej*, [in:] *Polityczne kształty sportu*, A. Dubicki, R. Jung, M. M. Kobierecki (eds.), Poznań 2020.
- Rekcć M., *Wyobrażenia zbiorowe społeczeństw byłej Jugosławii w XXI wieku. Perspektywa politologiczna*, Łódź 2019.
- Srđan Milaković za N1 o situaciji u Vukovaru, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yZTCgThNf1c>.
- Tesar F., *Etnički konflikti*, Beograd 2019.
- U Koloni sjećanja oko deset tisuća, <https://hr.n1info.com/vijesti/a576945-kolona-sjecanja-u-vukovaru/>.
- U VUKOVARU NACRTAN GRB HOS-a I USTAŠKI POZDRAV 'ZA DOM SPREMNI' Milaković: 'To su napravili navijači Dinama, a bila je prisutna policija', 6.05.2020, <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/u-vukovaru-nacrtan-grb-hos-a-i-ustaski-pozdrav-za-dom-spremni-milakovic-to-su-napravili-navijaci-dinama-a-bila-je-prisutna-policija-10279288>.
- Vukovar i Škabrnja: 18.11.2020. je po prvi put državni praznik!, 10.11.2020, <https://narod.hr/hrvatska/znete-li-da-je-18-11-2020-prvi-put-drzavni-praznik-koji-obiljezava-zrtvu-vukovara-i-skabrnje>.
- Zakon o blagdanima, spomendanima i neradnim danima u Republici Hrvatskoj, <https://www.zakon.hr/z/372/Zakon-o-blagdanima,-spomendanima-i-neradanim-danima-u-Republici-Hrvatskoj>.
- Zakon o proglašenju Vukovara mjestom posebnog domovinskog pijeteta, <https://www.zakon.hr/z/2503/Zakon-o-progla%C5%A1enju-Vukovara-mjestom-posebnog-domovinskog-pijeteta>.
- ZANIMLJIVOSTI Zlatni dukati su pjesmu "Vukovar, Vukovar" prvi puta predstavili na kraju Dnevnika HRT-a dan uoči pada grada!", <http://pозeskiwodivoc.com/zanimljivosti-zlatni-dukati-su-pjesmu-vukovar-vtkovar-prvi-puta-predstavili-na-kraju-dnevnika-hrt-a-dan-uoci-pada-grada/>.
- Žanić I., *Simbolični identitet Hrvatske u trokutu raskrižje – predziđe – most*, [in:] *Historijski mitovi na Balkanu*, H. Kamberović (ed.), Sarajevo 2003.
- Živić D., *Je li Vukovar (bio) srpski grad?*, [in:] *Vukovar 91.–istina i/ili osporavanje (između znanosti i manipulacije)*, D. Živić, S. Špoljar-Vržina V. B. Lupaš, S Cvikić (eds.), Zagreb-Vukovar 2013.