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Research Article

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Fragmentation as a Silencing Strategy: Serbian War Veterans against the State of Serbia

Lea David*

Abstract: This article draws on Lev Grinberg's notion of political space, understood as symbolic spheres in which political actors represent and further their interests, identities and agendas. The political space notion is designed to analyze and criticize political power and its dynamics in cases such as the Serbian one, where governments do not rely on heavy-handed control of civil society. I suggest here that following the wars of the 1990s, the democratic governments in Serbia have excluded the war veteran population from the political space of representation, since gaining control over this population was perceived as a crucial step in the attempt to silence any public reckoning of the nation's criminal past. Through the case study of a decade-long "Per Diem Affair", designed to alienate the war veteran population, I show how the mechanism of fragmentation has served the ruling elite to close the political space for open debate regarding the role of Serbia in the wars of the 1990s, first and utmost, in order to maintain control over the narrative of the recent wars. This, I suggest, comes as a result of the alteration in the role of the state: from being the direct source of power to becoming a mediator between the opposing local and international demands for particular national images and identities.

Keywords: Political space, Serbia, memory politics, war veterans, fragmentation

Introduction

After struggling for years to gain social status and benefits, a group of Serbian war veterans finally sued the state of Serbia at the European Court for Human Rights in Strasbourg, claiming that the government had violated their rights and discriminated against some of them. The lawsuit was launched because the Serbian government only paid the long overdue wages to those war veterans from the southern parts of Serbia¹ who had held large protests in 2008 demanding their money. Though the European Human Rights Court ordered for Serbia to pay around 17 million euro to veterans of the conflicts of the 1990s proving that the state had deliberately discriminated against the veteran population, in the appeal this decision has been suspended followed by the explanation that not all domestic legal remedies have been exploited. I suggest that this "Per Diem Affair" has proved to be an exemplary case of how a post-

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¹ Towns of Prokuplje and Kuršumlija.

conflict state may disable major political actors to further their interests and negotiate political and mnemonic agendas.²

In post-conflict states, where the past is disputable in multiple ways, memory and memorial practices often become contested sites. Thus the politics of memory is increasingly prominent when nation states – more precisely, their ruling elites, which include both the decision making and policy execution bodies – as well as other segments of societies, take an active role in forging collective memories of the contested past. There seems to be a global phenomenon in which post conflict nation-states, or, more correctly, their ruling elites, are engaged in constructing and editing national images and identities suitable not only for local purposes but also for international display in ways more calculated than ever. States strategically not only choose how to deal with the contested elements of their national past³ but, they apparently also manage their difficult past with clear aims in mind: to portray the nation in a more positive light in international arenas. Apart from the state, the biggest mnemonic groups that employ memory to further both their ideal and material⁴ are those which have directly experienced war, such as veterans, refugees or witnesses of atrocities. Those, however, only have a chance to shape the national memory if they command the means to express their vision. Most importantly, narratives will be socially acceptable only if their vision is compatible with social or political objectives and inclinations among other important social groups, like political elites and parties.⁵

Those mnemonic clashes between different segments in society are always revealed in political spaces, i.e. in symbolic spheres in which political actors represent and further their interests,⁶ which appears to be crucial for negotiating different political agendas. The political space for discussions and representation is influenced by the internal tensions and local hostilities between different societal segments. Drawing on the Grinbergian analytical conceptualization of political spaces dynamics, I show here that the last resource of legitimate representation channels for the already vastly marginalized group of Serbian war veterans, was to be found in the “Per Diem Affair”, a decade long attempt to achieve legitimacy for the wartime spent in Kosovo in 1999. Through various sets of legal tools, such as road blockades and hunger strikes, court appeals, negotiation with governmental representatives, and finally, bringing the case to the European Court of Human Rights in

² I conducted my fieldwork in Belgrade from 2009-2012. My research consisted of about 25 semi-structured interviews with the veteran organizations' representatives and several government officials, together with the collection of rich archival data from the government databases and numerous newspaper articles on the subject.

³ Rivera, Lauren. 2008. Managing "Spoiled" National Identity: War, Tourism, and Memory in Croatia. *American Sociological Review* 73, 613-634; Roberman, Sveta. 2007. Commemorative Activities of the Great War and the Empowerment of Elderly Immigrant Soviet Veterans in Israel. *Anthropological Quarterly* 80, 1035-1064.

⁴ Jeffrey, Alexander. 2004. *Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma*, in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, edited by Alexander, Jeffrey / Eyerman, Ron / Giesen Bernard, Smelser / Neil and Piotr, Sztompka. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1-31.

⁵ Kansteiner, Wolf. 2002. Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies. *History and Theory* 41(2), 179-197.

⁶ Grinberg, Luis Lev. 2010. *Politics and Violence in Israel/Palestine, Democracy vs. Military Rule*. London: Routledge, 14.

Strasbourg, the Serbian war veterans struggled to attain the minimum of societal benefits – however, currently, without much success.

I show here that in order to maintain exclusivity over the narrative of the 1990s wars, and consequently political power over visions of the state future, all ruling elites, regardless of their political affiliations, have used simple tactics of allotting different privileges to different war veteran groups. This helped to create a strategic and consistent fragmentation of the war veteran population in Serbia, which consequently served the ruling elites in disabling the war veterans' participation in the political space. This was intended to mitigate their political power and weaken their struggle for their rights, but also to reduce the financial burden which war veterans might impose on the state budgets. However, this was also directed toward maintaining a supremacy over the memory agenda. Disabling the war veterans' representation in any public debate regarding the role of Serbia in the wars of the 1990s was crucial for maintaining control over the recent wars' narrative. The use of this strategy of fragmentation, I suggest, comes as a result of the alteration in the role of the post-conflict state: from being the main source of power to becoming a mediator between the opposing local and international demands for particular national images and identities. This role shift brings to the fore new strategies adopted and distributed by the ruling political elite whose purpose is to control, regulate, design and create lifestyles between the citizens and the state, by the use of power or authority in day-to-day encounters.

Political Space

The political process of contestation needs to be understood in the light of the dynamics of memory, both at the temporal and the spatial level, where memory entrepreneurs operate within certain arenas of articulation. The term “arena” refers to social and political spheres in which various actors struggle for their specific memories.⁷ However, this term proves to be vague and is defined only in broad terms. Therefore, I find the term “political space”, as defined by Lev Grinberg, most relevant as it help us analyze dynamic processes of negotiation between different political actors.

Grinberg made the political space concept a useful analytical tool due to its ability to depict complex and multilayered encounters between the state and civil society. This is contrary to other uses of this term where, for the most part, “political space” remains an extremely abstract and elusive concept and its substance is mostly unidentified. Bourdieu⁸ used the term “political field”, and defined it as a symbolic field of representations of social groups, arguing for its autonomous character. One current definition in the Anglo European literature on social movements defines political space in terms of a political opportunities structure, which Charles Brockett⁹ has neatly summarized as “the presence of

⁷ Ashplant TG Dawson Graham and Roper, Michael 2000. *The Politics of War Memory and Commemorations*. London: Routledge, 17.

⁸ Bourdieu, Pierre. 1991. *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

⁹ Brockett, D. Charles. 1991. The structure of political opportunities and peasant mobilization in Central America. *Comparative Politics* 23, 253-74, 254.

allies and support groups; the availability of meaningful access points in the political system; the capacity of the state for repression; elite fragmentation and conflict and the temporal location in the cycle of protest". The most common use of the term is both figurative and taken for granted in connection with the politics of the territorial state.¹⁰

Grinberg¹¹ gives a more precise and useful interpretation by showing that the political space is a symbolic sphere in which political actors, in this instance memory entrepreneurs, represent and further the interests of specific groups in society through the use and construction of language, narrative, discourse and myth. It bridges tension between the state and civil society, since it mediates conflicts between dominant and dominated groups.¹²

Grinberg¹³ analyzes mobilization of social movements, such as the J14 in Israel and the Tahrir Square movement in Egypt, where he also takes into account both the dynamic nature of encounters and the idea of a constantly changing structure of opportunities. According to him, the political actors are entrepreneurs whose primary task is to mediate between the particular groups to which they belong. These actors demand social and economic rights, as well as legitimization for the agendas of the groups they are identified with. Since civil movements and organizations have a possibility to recruit support from different social groups and to mould and change policies, there is a dynamic opening and closing of the political space of representation, which is therefore subject to perpetual change. According to Grinberg, this dynamic feature of political space, due to its symbolic and non-autonomous character, provides us with a set of conceptualization tools enabling us to assess preconditions to possible social movements' outbreaks through a number of parallel processes. Such processes include: constructing and propagating a specific national image, largely generated by the dominant group; forming a system of symbols and ceremonies; creating a differentiation process between those that belong or do not belong to the nation, and finally defining common enemies, whether real or imagined.¹⁴

The conceptual use of "political space" is of particular worth when analyzing processes such as transitions to democracy, mainly because this demonstrates that the dynamics of the opening and closure of political space are influenced not only by local power relations, but also by global power relations that shape the power of different social groups within the nation-state.¹⁵ It is important to stress, however, that having democratic rules of the game is not a guarantee that political spaces will open to new identities, ideas, demands and agendas. Contrary, they might be an effective tool that facilitates and legitimizes the

¹⁰ Dalby, Simon. 2005. Political Space: Autonomy, Liberalism, and Empire. *Alternatives* 30, 415–441.

¹¹ Grinberg, *Politics and Violence*.

¹² Grinberg, *Politics and Violence*, 14.

¹³ Grinberg, Luis Lev. 2013. The J14 resistance mo(ve)ment: The Israeli mix of Tahrir Square and Puerta del Sol. *Current Sociology* 61(4), 491–509.

¹⁴ Guibernau, Monserrat. 2004. Anthony D. Smith on nations and national identity: a critical assessment. *Nations and Nationalism* 10, 125–141.

¹⁵ Grinberg, Luis Lev. 2012. Resistance, politics and violence: The catch of the Palestinian struggle. *Current Sociology* 61(2), 206–225, 26.

closure of political spaces of representation¹⁶ as in case of Serbia presented here. As there is always danger that political actors may try to close the political space, barring entry to new identities, agendas and actors, one has to ask under what conditions do they succeed in doing so? I will show here that the analysis of political space in Serbia helps us understand the nature of the encounter between both the state and war veterans that have participated in the wars of the 1990s, as well as the ways Serbian governments are dealing with Serbia's contested past. I argue that one of the basic mechanisms developed in order to maintain control over political spaces – as part of the encounters between the state and civil society, to debate over the contested nature of the 1990s wars – is to be found precisely in the *fragmentation* of the war veteran population. The particular social setting, in which the entire war veteran population has been neglected and alienated by both the ruling political elite and the wider segments of civil society, forced war veterans to reduce their memory agendas to the most minimal benefits they were entitled to. Moreover, the use of the fragmentation strategy shows the shift in the way in which the state, through its ruling elite, institutions and practices, uses and distributes power. This functional alteration, from being the source of power to becoming a mediator explains why memory has become extensively perceived as a supplementary and easily accessible source of power.

The Post-Conflict Serbia: War Veterans Pushed to the Margins

Serbian participation in the wars of the 1990s was anti heroic, filled with violence, atrocities and bloodshed. Moreover, to date, there is still no public consensus in Serbia regarding participation in these wars, the national narrative being contested in multiple ways. After the overthrow in the year 2000 and the fall of the Milošević regime, there was a great sense of optimism and enthusiasm in Serbia. The newly elected government heading the country was willing to approach the European Union, and this was raising high expectations for the country's prospects. However, these expectations, which came mainly from the civil society, soon turned to disappointment. Early on after the overthrow of the Milošević regime, it became clear that the newly emerged political elites were deeply and inextricably linked to the politics of the 1990s. Although many initiatives for taking responsibility for the misdeeds during the wars of the 1990s have been brought to the fore by the civil society, the Serbian governments never took full, or even partial, responsibility for their part in these wars, consistently refusing to engage in any publicly transparent reckoning with the past.¹⁷ This is in spite of the fact that, as a part of the democratization processes, the international community conditioned Serbia's financial well-being and its candidacy for the EU on facing up to the nation's criminal past. While Serbia did eventually collaborate with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and extradited many of its key figures, the process of facing its criminal past was viewed as not only prohibitively expensive, but also politically undesirable, as it would alienate huge segments of society. Those likely to feel aggrieved by

¹⁶ Grinberg, Luis Lev. 2014. *Mo(ve)ments of Resistance, Politics, Economy and Society in Israel/Palestine, 1931-2013*. Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 313.

¹⁷ Gordy, Eric. 2013. *Guilt, Responsibility and Denial: The Past at Stake in Post-Milošević Serbia*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press; Subotić, Jelena. 2009. *Hijacked Justice: Dealing with the Past in the Balkans*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

any such public reckoning include not only those who participated first-hand in the wars, but also the wider layers of society who supported the Milošević regime. The vast majority of the population wished to mourn over the lost wars that were perceived by Serbians in general as being righteous.¹⁸ Due to this polarization of Serbian society, all Serbian governments, from the very beginning (including that of the assassinated president Djindjić), have looked for ways to silence any public debate regarding the wars of the 1990s, rather than accept any responsibility.¹⁹ It was deemed preferable to close political spaces in order to avoid publicly dealing with the past, rather than to take potential politically-damaging risks by openly confronting vast segments of the society.

This silent vacuum was a product of an intentional blurring of the links between the state and the army during the wars of the 1990s, as well as a distortion of individual responsibilities and political aspirations. For the past 15 years in Serbia, there has been a tendency to blame the atrocities, allegedly committed by Serbia, on the paramilitary formations, as if it had nothing to do with official Serbian policy. However, it has been shown, predominantly through the work of legal bodies such as the ICTY, investigative journalism and research conducted by certain NGOs,²⁰ that nearly all paramilitary units not only actively combined forces and cooperated with the Milošević regime, but also were formed under the regime's sponsorship. Moreover, the regime and the political elite made "deals" with these units by having specific rules; for example, paramilitary units were to go in first and "clean" the area (kill, burn and plunder), and only then the official Yugoslav army was to come in and annex the territories. This, however, has never been publicly acknowledged by any Serbian government to this day. This is, among other things, a direct result of the fact that the majority of the current leadership has already held some decision making position during the wars.²¹

But how did the ruling political elites succeed over time in closing political spaces, preventing any new political actors from entering them, and thereby avoiding any significant dealing with the past? In particular, how did they manage to silence the veteran population that represents close to 10% of Serbia's entire population? This question becomes especially relevant when bearing in mind that the participants of the wars, such as veterans, refugees or witnesses of atrocities, represent an inevitable factor in the post-war reconstruction period as mnemonic groups, and that national "recovery" cannot be completed without addressing the suffering they have endured in past wars. Thus in many senses, gaining control over the veteran population was a crucial step in achieving control over political spaces, where any public reckoning with the past might be possible.

¹⁸ Logar, Svetlana and Srđan, Bogosavljević. 2001. Viđenje istine u Srbiji. *Reč* 62, 7-34.

¹⁹ This, however, does not claim ideological homogeneity of the ruling political elites; rather, it suggests that different ideological approaches were blended into a mutually accepted decision to obfuscate the role of Serbia and its responsibility for the crimes conducted during the 1990s wars. Some politicians and smaller political parties did try to implement, at least partially, the idea of acknowledging Serbia's responsibility (such as LDP), but their influence was marginal.

²⁰ Particularly the Humanitarian Law Center.

²¹ Gordy, *Guilt*, 143.

The situation in Serbia regarding the war veterans is drastically different from that in Croatia or in any of the Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) entities. According to a World Bank Study²² on Veterans in Bosnia, there are over 202,000 direct beneficiaries of current veterans' programs in the two entities of the country, and if one considers extended family members at least one-third of the population is directly affected by veterans' affairs. According to data from the Registry of Veterans Affairs and the Census in 2011 of the Central Bureau of Statistics in Croatia, the defenders/war veterans make up about 11% of total population. In Serbia it has been estimated that the veteran population from the wars of the 1990s numbers somewhere between 400,000 to 800,000 people.²³ According to the Centre for War Trauma in Novi Sad, about 15% of Serbia's male population are veterans of the ex-Yugoslav wars. The centre estimated that the overall number of people recruited in Serbia alone during the wars of the 1990s was around 700,000, with at least 10,000 combatants who fought in the various paramilitary units.²⁴ The exact number is unknown, and while certain lists exist, they are incomplete and secretive. However, while in Croatia and both BiH entities (Republika Srpska and Federation of BiH) war veterans have been in many ways a privileged segment of population, and occupy a special place in collective memory, in Serbia that is not the case.

This is not only due to the fact that Serbia lost those wars and "there are no spoils to share"²⁵ but also because the formal policy line regarding the wars is that Serbia never officially participated in them; this contention is further supported by terminology from the Milošević regime, saying those wars were de facto just "manoeuvres", "armed conflicts" or "military exercises". It is this stand, held by the ruling political elites, which has enabled a series of additional tactical decisions to be taken – all of which were meant to hinder the veteran population from organizing themselves around a unified meta-narrative on the nature of Serbia's participation in the 1990s wars. There has been no official narrative whatsoever, especially when trying to understand how Serbia is positioned in relation to the five discrepant wars/armed struggles of the 1990s (i.e. in Slovenia, Croatia, BiH, Kosovo and the NATO bombardment). On the contrary, the post 2000 ruling elite, coming from a variety of political parties, often has used "it belonged to different regime" excuses to escape from taking any direct responsibility for the wars. Apart from sporadic state apologies, which were also highly instrumentalized,²⁶ even the ICTY decisions were used to individualize blame rather than to face the national criminal past.

²² Gregson, J. Kendra. 2000. Veterans' programs in BiH. *World Bank Study* (accessed: 8. April 2015).

²³ Numbers vary greatly and are a contested topic, since there is no official institution that has systematically collected data on veterans and related populations. There is no exact number of people, neither of those officially recruited nor volunteers who belonged to various paramilitary units, nor even the wounded or dead.

²⁴ Beara, Vladan / Miljanović, Predrag and Boris, Popov. 2004. Zašto uopšte pomagati ratnim veteranima? Pojedinačni projekti u vezi istine i pomirenja u bivšoj Jugoslaviji i svetu. *DoiSerbia* 7(4), 47-49, 47.

²⁵ Alimpić, Zoran. 2011. Deputy Mayor, interview conducted on 4. May.

²⁶ Dragović-Soso, Jasna. 2012. Apologising for Srebrenica: The Declaration of the Serbian Parliament, the European Union and the Politics of Compromise. *East European Politics* 28(2), 163-179.

Thus, forging a common collective memory project, that is not backed-up by the state, has proved impossible. This fact is clearly apparent in the tremendous number of different veterans' unions existing. Indeed, for example, in the Belgrade municipality alone, more than 60 such organizations operate simultaneously. Currently, there are 22/24/25/40/50²⁷ organizations – depending on who is being asked – that are operating at the state, municipality and district levels. There are many more who are active on the municipality or district levels alone, which means that a few hundred organizations related to the previous wars currently have or have had, at some point, some membership and activity. The diversity between the groups is enormous, with each organization being defined by any one of a number of different unifying criteria, such as the fighters' common origins (from the Krajina region, northern Herzegovina...), common battlefields (Slovenia, Kosovo...), belonging to a particular paramilitary or army unit (Yugoslav army, Scorpions...), a common status (invalids, families of deceased, missing, wounded...) and so on. The list is almost endless, and includes very different and sometimes even opposing agendas. Notwithstanding this, each different positioning means first and foremost a different veterans' perception of what happened in the wars of the 1990s. It would be correct to argue that all Serbs fought for their homeland, yet apparently it was not clear to anyone what that homeland was: was it Yugoslavia or Serbia, and if so – in which borders? Some were forcibly conscripted, while some were already serving in the Yugoslavian military at the time of the wars, and were certain that they were defending the integrity of Yugoslavia. Some saw the wars as a direct threat to Serbianism, and enlisted in the sacred wars in the name of "The Great Serbia"; and some exploited the chaos so as to increase their personal wealth, symbolic or material, through theft, shows of force and dubious businesses. For example, a Serbian who lived and fought in Bosnia had nothing in common with a reserve soldier from Serbia conscripted against his will to fight in Croatia, or with a Serbian policeman who fought in Kosovo, or with "weekend warriors".²⁸ All ultimately fought under the banner of "Serbian fighters", and it is precisely here that the difficulty lies when trying to understand what Serbia was fighting for during the wars of the 1990s.

It is crucial to understand the utmost importance of these veteran organizations, against the backdrop of the war veterans' ongoing struggle to recover their post-war lives, in the prevailing atmosphere of tacit or open hatred toward them.²⁹ While in Croatia and BiH veterans are not only provided with a wide range of benefits and privileges and are in possession of significant political power, but also enjoy status of heroes; in Serbia the veteran population is generally neglected by society and typically lives in harsh material conditions, deprived of any social status and positive attitude towards

²⁷ Various numbers were mentioned: the President of the Army War Veteran claimed there are 22/24 state financed organizations while his Vice President talked about 40, the President of the Fighters of the Wars of the 1990s mentioned 25, the President of the Serbian War Veterans spoke of 50 such organizations; but they all claimed they 'knew' the exact numbers.

²⁸ This expression describes volunteer fighters from Serbia who committed acts of theft as well as war crimes, and essentially went to 'fight' in order to return with the spoils of war.

²⁹ David, Lea. 2015. Dealing with the Contested Past in Serbia: De-contextualization of the War Veterans Memories. *Nations and Nationalism*. 21(1), 102-119.

its members. Additionally, “without being properly heard”³⁰, the ICTY was determining and re-writing their role in the wars of the 1990s, creating open animosities among the wider society who continued to put blame on the veterans. Thus it is not surprising that in Serbia of today, the frustration of veteran populations, feelings of injustice and deception, are all directed toward the state and not towards the ethnic groups they were fighting during the wars of the 1990s.³¹ Thus for many, the veteran unions are their last resource and refuge for addressing their financial and emotional problems.

Fragmentation and silencing of the veteran population: “Per Diem Affair” as the last resource of legitimate representations channels

Praising veterans of lost wars is neither popular nor economically rational. Though many of the members of the ruling political elite themselves participated the wars of the 1990s, ironically, political calculations, economic depression and social instability were at the root of the political elite’s strategic decision to invest its resources in mechanisms that help closing political spaces for new political actors, as the best possible solution for dealing with Serbia’s contested past. All governments have employed various techniques in order to disassociate themselves from these veterans and to belittle their potential united power. Not only did the ruling Serbian elites refuse to frame a unified narrative that could gather all war veterans under one umbrella organization, but they also actively encouraged veterans’ fragmentation to suppress their potential political influence and power. The most effective way of doing so was found to be through allocating different rights and privileges to different groups of veterans according to the place and time of their operations, thereby further fragmenting the veteran population.

After the wars, the Law on Rights of Veterans, War Invalids and Families of the Fallen Soldiers, from 1998 (amended in 2000 and 2005), was found to rapidly become outdated and insufficient. According to this law, veterans eligible for benefits are: “the Serbian and Montenegrin soldiers who participated in the wars between 1912 to 1918”; “participants in the anti-fascist struggle in WWII in the allied troops and the participants of the army of the Yugoslav kingdom”, “the participants at their army duty during the armed attacks after 17 August 1990” and “soldiers on duty that participated in any activity for purposes of defending sovereignty, territory and independence of the Federal Yugoslav Republic.”³² Though certain privileges were statutory, in practice the veteran population had to face enormous bureaucratic difficulties even to get registered with the appropriate status. There is no official body in charge of records of those who fought in the wars of the 1990s, and a significant part of the veteran population were also refugees or internally displaced persons, with these factors posing additional challenges to claiming veterans’ rights. Though obvious differences between the war veterans and the ruling elites exist in both Croatia and Bosnia, veterans there provide a crucial

³⁰ This perception was a general grievance in many of the interviews I conducted.

³¹ Marković-Savić, Olivera. 2012. *Društveni položaj ratnih veterana u Srbiji – Studija slučaja*. PhD-thesis, Belgrade: University of Belgrade.

³² “Zakon o osnovnim pravima boraca, vojnih invalida i porodica palih boraca”, Službeni list SRJ br. 24/98, 29/98, 25/00, 101/05.

category of forging ethnic identities.³³ In Serbia, however, the treatment of the veteran population mostly depended upon the good will of the political structures and of the bureaucrats at the local level. The veterans were often dependent upon the sympathy of local politicians, or upon the self-interest of these politicians who may be induced to act out of the hope of gaining the veterans' votes. For example, in Belgrade and nowhere else, veterans succeeded in receiving a permanent reduction of 50% for communalities expenses. However, also within Belgrade itself, there are significant differences between various municipality districts in the attitude of the local government toward veterans; only in the Čukarica district, for instance, do veterans receive financial support on an annual basis, as this has been pre-planned in their budget.³⁴ While some districts have shown willingness to support veteran unions, others ignored and obstructed them; nevertheless, the most common attitude was simply not to interfere. This is overtly evident not only in the illegal erection of monuments and memory plaques across both urban and rural spaces, but also in the construction of illegal facilities, where, regardless of the nature of the relationship between the local political structures and the veterans, the local governments preferred to look the other way and avoid any direct confrontation.

While it is true that the veteran population has succeeded in receiving some privileges over the years,³⁵ these were all conditional upon them keeping publicly silent, thus disabling their representation in any political space. Many of the war veteran informants testified that they had to avoid any encounter with the press in return for these social privileges. Veteran union representatives said that when facing the state, they were frequently offered certain personal benefits in return for "shutting down the protests and avoiding the press",³⁶ "directing their union members to vote for certain political parties/figures"³⁷ etc. The President of Army War Invalids³⁸ has illustrated this policy of purposeful silencing of the veteran populations, by stating that in 2003, the veterans' representatives made an agreement with Gordana Matković the General Advisor of the former President of Serbia, Boris Tadić to receive financial support in return for avoiding any public appearances.

The best example of the deliberate fragmentation and silencing of the veteran population, which also best illustrates both the war veterans' demand for the legitimization of their agenda and their silencing and removal from all political spaces, is to be found in the affair over per diem disbursement for the participation in the wars. After war veterans had engaged in years of unsuccessful protesting in their attempts to achieve social privileges, the "Per

³³ Bojicic-Dzelilovic, Vesna. 2006. *Peace on whose terms? War Veterans' Associations in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, in *Challenges to Peacebuilding: Managing Spoilers During Conflict Resolution*, edited by Edward Newman and Richmond, Oliver. Tokyo - New York - Paris: United Nations University Press, 200-219; Soldić Marko. 2009. *A land fit for heroes: Croatian veterans of the homeland war*. MA-thesis. Oslo: Oslo University.

³⁴ Alimpić, Deputy Mayor, interview.

³⁵ As opposed to, for example, the Bosnian veterans who enjoyed the increment of the budgetary spending each year. See more in OSCE OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina (2012) *The Right to Social Protection in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Concerns on Adequacy and Equality*. OSCE: Sarajevo.

³⁶ Vasiljević, Željko. "Army War Invalids", interview conducted on 28 April 2011.

³⁷ Milošević, Mile. "Serbian War Veterans", interview conducted on 24 April 2011.

³⁸ Vasiljević, "Army War Invalids", interview.

Diem Court Affair” in 2007 triggered some truly unexpected outcomes, inter alia, revealing the dynamics of the political space. This affair brought to light the extent to which the ruling elite had been strategically oppressing the veteran population in order to keep them from entering negotiations over the nature of the 1990s wars. In the southern province of Serbia,³⁹ two war participants Slavko Maljević and Radomir Jovanović, who also happened to be judges by profession, realized that the best way to achieve their social rights was through suing the state for not paying veterans per diem in the fullest for participating in the armed struggles in Kosovo in 1999. Since none of the state army representatives appeared at court, over the course of several months, those two veterans, followed by another 40 of their close friends and relatives, won their cases and were granted serious sums of money.⁴⁰ Though they had no intention of representing a wider veteran population, the state refusal to even acknowledge them proved to be very beneficial. A veteran explains: “He starts bragging in a bar that he won (at the court) and then, suddenly, that was not enough. His wife also suffered emotional damage when he was in the war, and he won again. Now everybody wants to appeal.”⁴¹ As a result, over the following months, there was an avalanche effect, with an additional 2,500 lawsuits having been filed. The sheer quantity of the lawsuits actually made the veterans a visible entity in political space, but after this, all their rights were denied. The Ministry of Defense then annulled all new processes, claiming that “In the previous rulings, there had proved to be serious irregularities and abuses of position, in addition to the fact that the lawsuits could not be placed due to the Statute of Limitations.”⁴²

The discontent amongst the veterans was enormous, and they started accusing and blaming each other for the situation. In the rise of the veterans’ struggle for the legitimization of their rights and after four months of strikes, daily blockades of roads and governmental buildings and two weeks of persistent hunger strikes, the veterans from the southern province of Toplice finally succeeded in claiming their right to the same privileges that the judges and their families had received. According to the agreement that was signed on 11 January, 2008 by the Minister of Justice Mirko Cvetković and the Minister of Finance Dušan Petrović, veterans from the seven districts of Toplice province,⁴³ who had fought in Kosovo in 1999, were to receive financial assistance in six equal installments to the amount of 200,000 Dinars.⁴⁴ However, as an additional means of silencing the veterans’ representation in political space, the money was classified as “social welfare support for developing the Toplice province”⁴⁵ and not as war compensation. This unexpected victory was explained by the veteran who I interviewed as another trick of the regime’s endemic: “The Tadić campaign was getting closer, then someone suggested – we have an extra 2 millions of Dinars in the budget. Let’s give that money away in the south (of Serbia). We will spread it among those 10,000 veterans,

³⁹ Opština Kuršumljija.

⁴⁰ Around 600.000 Dinars per capita (approximately 6.000 Euros).

⁴¹ Vasiljević, “Army War Invalids”, interview.

⁴² Grujić, Jelena. 2008. *Rezervisti Srbije: Južnjački inat i pare*. *Vreme*, 21. August 2008 (accessed: 8. April 2015).

⁴³ Kuršumljija, Lebane, Bojnik, Žitorađa, Doljevac, Prokuplje and Blice.

⁴⁴ Around 2.000 Euros.

⁴⁵ Grujić, *Južnjački inat i pare*.

and they will vote for us in the coming elections.”⁴⁶ Naturally, the veterans from other parts of Serbia saw in this agreement verification of their entitlement to gaining exactly the same benefits. In the course of the next year, veterans’ protests were held all across Serbia. However, neither the blockades in the very center of Belgrade nor the hunger strikes brought about the desired results. Excuses, prolongations and promises were all frequently used as part of the strategic fragmentation, while constantly depriving the veterans of any political power. For the Serbian government, these were just minor headaches. As the protests lacked size, partly due to the freezing temperatures, these attempts failed to bring about any serious results. Their representation was denied, with media coverage being very sporadic and didn’t produce any empathy. It seemed as though the protests were taking place on the very margins of society; not only did no one care, but the veterans were also openly mocked: “That Milošević gang is allegedly having a hunger strike, but they actually just hang around, eat and make noise.”⁴⁷ After a series of promises, and even a governmental decision from April 2008 to pass a statute that would systematically address the problem, in practice nothing happened, and the appointed committee in charge of formulating the statute was never actually convened. Numerous explanations were offered as to why the government was not meeting the veterans’ demands. The Serbian Prime Minister⁴⁸ stated that the problem lies in the fact that the reimbursement would cost the state “around 120 billion Dinars”,⁴⁹ and that “in order to pay out so much money, it would first be necessary to pass a new law”. The Deputy Minister of Labor and Social Policy Miro Čavaljuga said that “if there are no clear criteria for granting the financial assistance to the reservists who were fighting in Kosovo, tomorrow there may naturally appear other reservists who were placed, during that period, in the military bases across Serbia, to ask for the same privileges.”⁵⁰

The prolonged attempts to silence and fragment the veteran population and to ensure that their power remained limited eventually resulted in the unprecedented decision on behalf of the veterans, to file a lawsuit against the Serbian state with the European Court of Human Rights. Following the decision of the Government of Serbia in January 2008 to pay wages to reserves from seven municipalities in the south of Serbia, the outraged reservists⁵¹ brought the case to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg on the grounds of discrimination, article 14.⁵² According to Attorney Aleksić, while the government referred to these payments as “social welfare support”, they were paid exclusively to wartime reservists who were not asked to show any documentation proving that they belonged to a socially underprivileged category; in addition, the lists for this support were composed solely for the

⁴⁶ Vasiljević, “Army War Invalids”, interview.

⁴⁷ Vasiljević, “Army War Invalids”, interview.

⁴⁸ Mirko Cvetković.

⁴⁹ 1,200,000 Euros.

⁵⁰ Grujić, *Južnjački inat i pare*.

⁵¹ The case was filed on behalf of 8,500 reserves, under the name “Vučković and 29 others against Serbia”.

⁵² Gajin, Saša. 2013. *Zabrana Diskriminacije – Član 14 Evropske konvencije*, in *Evropa ne stanuje u Babušnici*, edited by Lukić, Svetlana and Vuković, Svetlana. Beograd: Peščanik, Čigoja Štampa, 173-181, 174.

purpose of paying wartime wages.⁵³ Unexpectedly, on 28 August, 2012, the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg ruled in favor of the war veterans and ordered Serbia to ensure the payment of war wages that were not paid to these reservists for their service during the NATO intervention in 1999. The Strasbourg court concluded that the payment of wartime wages to a selected number of municipalities constituted discrimination against reservists from other parts of Serbia. In October 2011, the court had delivered an advisory opinion that Serbia was obliged to facilitate a peaceful settlement of lawsuits relating to the payment of wartime wages by 16 December, 2011. The court then concluded that the failure of the courts in Serbia to act upon a number of lawsuits, which were filed by war veterans claiming wages, constituted a violation of Article 6 Paragraph 1 of the Convention on Human Rights. However, contrary to the war veterans expectations, on 25 March, 2014, the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Serbian veterans of the Kosovo war should pursue their cases in Belgrade rather than Strasbourg, arguing that not all legal remedies have yet been exhausted to win compensation for unpaid wartime allowances in their home country, what should be done before taking their case to Europe.⁵⁴

A moral and budgetary hole:⁵⁵ The Strasbourg decisions

Although the above decision is a recent one, it has already further deepened the existing gap between the state and the veteran population, showing at the same time how the mechanism of fragmentation has been used to mitigate veterans' power and marginalize them. The unbearable feeling of the war veterans, who perceive themselves as having been betrayed by the state, was very clear, both in the interviews I have conducted and in the wider literature, which brings forth war veterans' narratives.⁵⁶ "The state is our enemy"⁵⁷ and "We are second class citizens in our own country"⁵⁸ are some of the most commonly expressed statements, which strongly emphasize the veterans' frustration with the ways in which the state has treated them since their return from the war. Veterans often stated that: "The state was serving its own interests (during the wars), never the interest of its people, never the interest of the participants of the wars (...). The state imposed the war and the combatants are just cannon fodder, expendable goods, nothing else."⁵⁹ Moreover, such feelings of injustice, abandonment and betrayal are reinforced through the combatants' perceptions of society's attitudes toward them. Statements such as: "They see in me a monster, they are afraid of me, they

⁵³ N.N. 2013. *Strazbur: Rezervisti traže odštetu*. B92, 12 February 2013 (accessed: 8. April 2015).

⁵⁴ Ristić, Marija. 2014. *European Court Rejects Serbian War Veterans' Case*. *Balkan Insight*, 25 March, 2014 (accessed: 8. April 2015).

⁵⁵ A paraphrase of an article by Tončić, Bojan. 2013. *Nadnice za Kosovski Učinak*. *Peščanik*, 28. May 2013 (accessed: 8. April 2015).

⁵⁶ Such as Grujić, Jelena. 2006. *Ratni veteran – factor nestabilnosti ili factor (u izgradnji) mira*. *Termida* 9(2), 33-37; Vladan, Beara and Miljanović, Predrag. 2006. *Gde si bio, sine moj?* Novi Sad: Centar za trauma društva za zaštitu zdravlja ratnih veterana i žrtava ratova 1991-1999; Spirić, Željko (ed.). 2008 *Ratna psihotrauma Srpskih veterana*. Udruženje boraca rata od 1990 opštine Zvezdara: Beograd; Gojković, Drinka / Bašić, Natalija and Delić, Valentina, (eds). 2003. *Ljudi u ratu – Ratovanja I*. Dokumentacioni centar Ratovi 1991-99: Beograd.

⁵⁷ Vasiljević, "Army War Invalids", interview.

⁵⁸ Beara and Miljanović, *Gde si bio sine moj?*, 109-110.

⁵⁹ Gojković / Basić and Delić, *Ljudi u ratu – Ratovanja I*, 8.

think I'm dangerous to live next to"⁶⁰ – are often expressed, and reflect the extensively adverse effect of perceived attitudes on all war veterans. One of my informants⁶¹ told me the following story, saying that occurrences like it “happen all the time”. He said that “every time a war invalid goes to the Veteran Administration Office, the clerk lady *hates you pathologically for no reason*, she sees that you receive state money, more money than her, and she hates you – and she is supposed to help you, to give you information, a service”. Regardless of the differences in their motivations for joining the war, the manner of their participation or its duration, upon their return, the veterans were all faced with animosity and even hatred from the wider Serbian society. Society is not perceived as a source of support, but rather a source of further alienation: “Society does not appreciate the fact that we went to war. Now they mock us at the pub. They keep harassing us: Where are you warriors? Where are you heroes, where are you robbers?”⁶² Even the Human Rights NGO sector often treat war veterans as part of the problem, passively or actively promoting highly negative images of the entire veteran population. In return, the Human Right NGO sector is widely perceived by the veteran population as “collaborators with the West” and “foreign mercenaries.”⁶³ “Most of those NGO organizations try to prove that the Serbs are guilty, that the veterans are guilty, in order to justify the NATO aggression, banishment of the Serbs, unification of the Republika Srpska with Bosnia, to justify the Kosovo secession.”⁶⁴ The president of “Association of the Families of Soldiers who Died in the Line of Duty During the 1990-1999 Wars of the Republic of Serbia”, mentioned the RECOM project – the civil initiative to promote truth on the wars of the 1990s. In his words: “Yes, they (RECOM) called us. I would go to Nataša Kandić⁶⁵ but I am afraid the families of the fallen fighters will hang her. They spent half million Euros per year! What truth? Whose truth?”⁶⁶

This double neglect, both from the state and from the wider civil society, and their inability to create an effective representation in political space, is also a core reason why the international and domestic trials did not, except in the high profile cases, enable the framing of war veterans in Serbia as “heroes”. While in both Bosnian entities and in Croatia, veterans are used to promote master-commemorative narratives and foundation myths, in Serbia, they are pushed aside as “unfit” for the current political aspirations. This is by no means to say that the veterans in Serbia have no support on the ground but those voices are also marginalized, de-contextualized and set on the outskirts of the public discourse.⁶⁷

The absurdity is that though different veteran groups support a wide range of ideological agendas; their solitude and overwhelming feeling of betrayal by the state and society; provide them with fertile ground for creating a commonly

⁶⁰ As it is greatly elaborated in Beara and Miljanović.

⁶¹ Vasiljević, “Army War Invalids”, interview.

⁶² Beara and Miljanović, *Gde si bio?*

⁶³ Those expressions were often used to describe the most influential Serbian NGOs, especially Humanitarian Law Center.

⁶⁴ Vasiljević, “Army War Invalids”, interview.

⁶⁵ The leader of the human rights fighters and the RECOM founder.

⁶⁶ Paunović, Sava, “Association of the Families of Soldiers who Died in the Line of Duty During the 1990-1999 Wars of the Republic of Serbia”, interview conducted on 18. May, 2011.

⁶⁷ David, *Dealing with*.

shared social narrative of suffering. This is precisely where an understanding of political space helps us in defining the shared identity, when some social groups are excluded from the national community. Thus, though the appeal to the Strasbourg court finally brought the veterans together, and the results were to some degree in favor of promoting war veterans' rights, it actually intensified the process of their alienation from the state and from wide parts of society. The war veterans lost this court round, the Strasbourg court decision labeled them as *the official burden to society*, as in the future, significant sums of money were to be spent on them at the cost of other interest groups.

In addition, and contrary to what might be expected, the Strasbourg court decision did not cause the opening of any political spaces where the national past could be finally publicly addressed. To the contrary, it diminished the possibility of conducting an open debate on the wars of the 1990s, and once again, narrowed the war veterans' struggle for representation in political space. The decision to harmonize the rights and benefits amongst different veteran groups has only reduced the prism of contested issues of the 1990s wars to finding a legally suitable formula for paying off the veterans. Now, via the encounter between the veterans and the EU, all of the big questions on the role and responsibility of Serbia in the 1990s wars were narrowed down to an "inconvenient hassle"⁶⁸ to the state budget, which at this point seems to be unlikely to be ever paid at all. In other words, though war veterans perceived the Strasbourg court decision as a sign of hope, in practice, it further confined the possibilities of collectively debating the contested wars of the 1990s.

The shift in the role of the state

What seemed at the beginning like purposeless and unintentional governmental practices, turned out to be strategic thinking – not always synchronized, but at all times intentional and present. It seems safe to suggest that fragmentation, overtly used by Serbian governments in post-war Serbia, is a strategy of silencing that is meant to mitigate the power of war veterans and disable their representation in the political space. "Silencing" means the closure of political space and the control of public debate. Thus, it seems that the ruling elite "occupied"⁶⁹ political spaces in order to maintain control over the narrative of the 1990s wars, and thereby over the role of Serbia within it.

Serbia, like other post-conflict states, or more correctly, their ruling elites, struggles to find ways to deal with the transitional justice mechanisms and with the human rights demands forced upon them by the international community while simultaneously responding to local demands to be acknowledged as the righteous party in the conflict. Caught in between the opposing international and domestic demands and defined by the power-relations with the EU, the ruling political elites in Serbia provided limited or no access to war veterans to political spaces where any open debate on the recent wars could take place. Thus, the role of the state as the main memory promoter, in the process of Europeanization, didn't disappear but was altered.

⁶⁸ My expression.

⁶⁹ Grinberg, *Politics and Violence*.

Some researchers, such as Hobsbawm,⁷⁰ Hirst and Thompson⁷¹ and Smith⁷² argued that the role of nation states in a wider context of globalization and transition, stayed unchanged and that they still have a central function in the propagation of power. Others claimed that the post transitional nation-states no longer function as independent actors and that “their power is substantially limited due to the establishment of international institutions and the rise of transnational organizations.”⁷³ Kaldor⁷⁴ asserted that this has shattered the hegemony of the nation state. I suggest that the particular power relation configuration inevitably alters the “traditional” role of the nation-state but it does not necessarily mean that it also weakens it. The imbalance in power between Serbia and the EU, expressed throughout the processes of Europeanization, forces the post-conflict government to become artful and canny when mediating between external and internal factors. This functional alteration, from being the source of power to becoming a mediator and often a gate keeper explains why memory is often treated as a supplementary source of power. In addition to more traditional sources of power, such as social cohesion, political stability, economical wealth, military capabilities, memory and the representations of the past became increasingly valuable supplies for achieving real and symbolic goals. Thus, in transitional, and more importantly, weak states with troubled pasts, it seems unlikely that the ruling political elites will open political spaces for public negotiation over their contested pasts, mostly as such processes lead to uncertainty, instability and social chaos. Instead, the ruling elites will create, find or adopt mechanisms to promote memory contents that are simultaneously suitable for both international and domestic display, even if it this comes at the expense of whole social segments, such as, for example, the war veterans in Serbia. That is precisely why Gordy,⁷⁵ referring to the unwillingness of the Serbian governments to open a political space for the public discussion regarding Serbia’s responsibility for the 1990s wars, rightly coined it “the ongoing persistence of an authoritarian political culture”.

Epilogue

As a response, and in their struggle to open political spaces of representation for their interests and identities, the war veterans tried over years to produce a symbolic language of power that enables articulations of social forces with state authoritative policies. The outcome is that not only are the war veterans, as the most significant mnemonic group, being reduced to a simple “budgetary matter”, but they are completely excluded from the process of reckoning with the past and getting Serbia accountable for the atrocities conducted in the wars. The strategy of fragmentation, transparent in allotting different privileges to different war veteran groups, was part of the government’s effort of resolving not only the high cost problem of Serbian war veterans, but more

⁷⁰ Hobsbawm, Eric. 1993 *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

⁷¹ Hirst, Paul and Thompson, Grahame. 1996. *Globalization in Question: The International Economy and the Possibilities of Governance*. Polity Press: Cambridge.

⁷² Smith, D. Anthony. 2001. *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History*. Polity Press and Blackwell Publishing: Cambridge.

⁷³ Guibernau, Monserrat. 2001. *Globalization and Nation-state*, in *Understanding Nationalism*, edited by Guibernau, Monserrat and Hutchinson, John. Polity Press: Cambridge 242-268, 256.

⁷⁴ Kaldor, Mary. 2004. Nationalism and Globalisation. *Nations and Nationalism* 10(1/2), 161-177.

⁷⁵ Gordy, *Guilt*, 121.

importantly – that of Serbia’s role in these wars. This was done through a low cost solution, whereby the government could keep the veterans and the greater public quiet. Disabling the war veterans from speaking their war-time stories out loud, enables Serbia to continue blurring the facts, roles and responsibilities for the atrocities conducted during the wars of the 1990s.⁷⁶

Grinberg⁷⁷ pointed out that “once certain marginalized groups have no access to political space in order to express themselves, and receive no recognition of their claims, agendas, identities or ideas, they might initiate a movement of resistance to the oppressing power.” He suggested that once all legitimate channels of representations are being exploited and closed, massive resistance and even violence are likely to burst out. Unfortunately, it might be that the Serbian society is heading just there.

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⁷⁶ David, Lea. 2014. Mediating international and domestic demands: Mnemonic battles surrounding the monument to the fallen of the wars of the 1990s in Belgrade. *Nationalities Papers* 42(4), 655-673.

⁷⁷ Grinberg, *The J14 resistance*. 493.

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