



Forget About It

Slow Peace in Collective Memory of the 1990s War in Croatia

Tamara Banjeglav

Institute of Culture and Memory Studies, Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (ZRC SAZU), Ljubljana, Slovenia

Corresponding author

tamara.banjeglav@zrc-sazu.si

Dea Marić

Department of History, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,
University of Zagreb, Zagreb, Croatia

dmarić@m.ffzg.hr

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Abstract

This article examines how peaceful reintegration of Croatia's Danube region is today publicly remembered and shows that it has remained a marginal part of collective memory of the 1991–1995 war in Croatia. The article attempts to move the attention from research on the memory of violent events during conflict and to focus on the slow memory of a peaceful process in the aftermath of violence. It is argued that, in post-war Croatia, public remembrance of the war has mostly included only violent episodes from the war and has marginalised public memory of peace. This has created an impression that alternatives to violence were and are not possible, although a non-violent, peaceful solution proved exactly the opposite by playing a crucial role in ending the conflict. The article aims to expose this cultural continuity of seeing conflicts as necessarily and inevitably violent and pays more attention to peace processes that are harder to recognize because they are not one-off events and because of their slowness.

Keywords

war – violence – Croatia – slow memory – peace – peaceful reintegration – UNTAES mission

1 Introduction

Wars and conflicts are today largely marked and publicly remembered through different means, such as commemorations, monuments, plaques, street names, museums, murals, and other memorials. What is being remembered are usually violent past events. As Rigney (2018, 369) pointed out, “the field of cultural memory studies has unquestionably gravitated towards violence and its collective legacies” and research in this field has generally focused on studying how individuals, groups and societies remember, commemorate, and deal with this violence. However, recent discussions in memory studies have shifted the attention to studying everyday experiences and processes rather than one-off events. Similarly, scholars in peace and conflict studies have been recently calling attention to the everyday peace (Mac Ginty 2014; Richmond and Mitchell 2012; Kostovicova et al. 2020), which is “often subaltern, marginal and not particularly obvious” (Mac Ginty 2014, 561). Wüstenberg (2023, 63) also argues that we must learn to recognize that which is not spectacular, which is slow or even uneventful, while Knowles (2022, 312) talks about a transition from studying “the memory of *an event in time* to *an event through time*”.

This article is situated at the intersection of memory studies and peace and conflict studies and aims to add to the research on the concept of “slow memory” (Wüstenberg 2023) by studying public memory of a peace process. The article examines how peaceful reintegration of Croatia’s Danube region is today publicly remembered and what role it plays in collective memory of the Croatian War of Independence (referred to in Croatia as the Homeland War, or Domovinski rat).

The Croatian War of Independence ended with military operations, but the final integration of the occupied territory into Croatia’s constitutional and legal framework was achieved with a peace process and by signing a peace agreement. While most of the occupied Croatian territory was liberated by the Croatian army through military operations in 1991 (operations “Otkos 10” and “Orkan”), in 1993 (operations “Maslenica” and “Medački džep”) and in 1995 (operations “Flash” and “Storm”), the Danube basin region still remained

occupied at the beginning of 1996. Peaceful reintegration of the still-occupied territory was negotiated during the Dayton Peace Conference on 1 November 1995, but the agreement was signed in the Eastern Slavonian town of Erdut on 12 November 1995, and thus became known as the Erdut Peace Agreement. Its aim was to facilitate the reintegration of the remaining occupied region and its population into Croatia's political and institutional order.

The reintegration was to happen under the auspices of the UN Transitional Administration (UNTAES). Different in both form and purpose from previous UN missions to Croatia (the United Nations Protection Force/UNPROFOR and the United Nations Confidence Restoration Operation/UNCRO), UNTAES became known as one of the most successful UN peacekeeping missions. However, the process of peaceful reintegration is mostly absent from the national narrative and collective memory of the war. The aim of this article is to examine why has peaceful reintegration of the Croatian Danube region remained a marginal part of Croatian collective memory of the war and how was this achieved.

In the article, we do not view the start of the peace process as the moment when the peace agreement was signed¹ nor do we believe that the process of rebuilding a community after a conflict can be pinned down to a specific date or time-frame. This is because it is not linear, it usually develops over longer period of time and is still ongoing. In this sense, “slow memory” of the peace process can also be reflected in “slow healing” of the community. We argue that the slow emergence of memory regarding the peaceful reintegration of the Croatian Danube region is a result of both the “negative peace” (Galtung 1969) in this region and a prolonged, incomplete peace-building process. Thirty years after the war's end, the process remains unfinished. Croatian memory politics continue to reinforce narratives of victimhood and victory, sidelining memories of peace efforts and non-violent conflict resolution. We also argue that commemorating only violent episodes from the war leaves little room for remembering peace and creates an impression that alternatives to violence were and are not possible, although a non-violent, peaceful solution proved exactly the opposite by playing a crucial role in ending the conflict. This selective remembrance constrains the deeper societal

1 As peace activist Kruhonja (2010, 66) shows, peace efforts of Croatian and Serbian peace activists started two years before the UNTAES mission, in 1994, when ten peace organizations from Croatia and three from Serbia organized, in Hungary, meetings first only between peace activists, followed by meetings of citizens separated by the front line. These meetings were organized between 1994 and 1996, when the activities shifted to the UNTAES zone.

transformation of collective memory into one that would acknowledge the importance of peace.

Thus, the article attempts to answer the following research questions: (RQ₁) Why has peaceful reintegration of the Croatian Danube region remained a marginal part of collective memory of the war in Croatia and how was this achieved? (RQ₂) Does the existing memory of peaceful reintegration and the peace process constitute what scholars have called “slow memory”? This research also raises broader questions – beyond the scope of the present study – regarding how scholars of memory studies can identify and analyse slow, long-term transformations in collective memory.

2 Theoretical Framework

Rigney (2018, 369) wrote about the need to open the field of memory studies because it has been paying too much attention to traumatic events and perpetuating the idea that violence is the primary subject of collective memory. Reading and Katriel (2015, 1) similarly argued that the field of memory studies has greatly studied cultural memories of war and atrocity, but that cultural memories of nonviolent struggle remain little examined. The authors further conclude that there is a notable lacuna in research in ways in which nonviolent struggles have been inscribed in local and national memory projects (Ibid., 3). Rigney (2021, 303) also argues that there has recently been a growing interest among memory scholars in the relationship between memory and activism, which signals a significant shift in focus beyond war and violence, as it places a renewed responsibility on researchers to uncover and reveal the memory of peaceful and non-violent forms of contention.

Although there is notable literature on anti-war activism and peace actions in the post-Yugoslav region (Bilić 2012; Bilić and Janković 2012; Dević 1997; Fridman 2011; 2022), there is virtually no research on how peace processes, that took place in the region, are today inscribed in the region countries’ memory politics. By looking into the memory of the peaceful reintegration in the Croatian memory politics, this article attempts to address this lacuna.

The article is grounded in theoretical considerations about slow memory (Wüstenberg 2023), but also slow peace (Lederach 2023). Slow memory “begins from the premise that we are quite skilled (and have much practice) commemorating sudden or extreme events such as wars, atrocities or catastrophes. But we are less certain about how to reckon with slow-moving

transformations" (Slow Memory 2021).² Conflict transformations are inherently slow in themselves, because they are not one-off events, but processes. Sara Dybris McQuaid (2023) argues that "conflict transformations should always be understood as ongoing processes, not events or particular points at which accords or agreements have been reached". One of the most important scholars in peace-building, Johan Galtung, saw peace as a never-ending process from "conflict transformation" to "transcendence" (Galtung and Fischer 2013, 136). Another important peace and conflict scholar, John Paul Lederach (2010, 63), wrote that "peacebuilding is a process made up of various functions and roles". Slow memory then, as Dybris McQuaid (2023) points out, is something that is gradually produced during the process of peacebuilding. Similarly, Angela Jill Lederach (2023, 16) defines slow peace as a permanent social process, as something that is not achieved at a negotiating table, but is built into everyday life.

Galtung has also warned that "the major sociopolitical obstacles to a culture of peace, is, indeed, a culture of war and violence" (Galtung and Fischer 2013, 153). This is evident in memory politics in the post-Yugoslav space where, as Pavlaković and Fridman 2022 argue, peace initiatives are obscured by the militarized scenes from the battlefields. In this article, we argue that militarisation of public memory and remembering of only past violence in public space and discourse constantly reminds us of violence, which creates an impression that violence is an inevitable outcome of a conflict. Galtung (1969), however, argued that violence is socially constructed and not a natural trait of human interactions, but that it is only one of the ways in which people relate to each other around conflict situations. We believe that normalisation of violence is a discursive process and is closely connected to the shaping of national histories and cultural memories in ways that glorify violent action.

However, cultural memories, which regard violence as inevitable, structure how we understand and relate to the world, but also prevent progressive change. Continuity of belief that violence during conflict is to be expected and accepted prevents a change of our expectations for a non-violent solution to a conflict. Jones and Thomas Van de (2024, 5) understand slow memory as part of this cultural continuity, as a way of seeing the world that "becomes entrenched through repetition." In their understanding, slow memory is a subset of cultural memory that is generally unnoticed, but has a conservative effect on ways of viewing the world (Ibid.). In this article, we aim to further this argument by showing that public memory of only violent events is

² For details on the Slow Memory COST Action, see www.slowmemory.eu.

“entrenched through repetition,” which becomes normalised and prevents us from seeing the world through the lens of alternatives to violence. We argue that slow memory studies scholars should expose this continuity of remembering only violent events during conflicts. We also suggest that scholars should focus their studies on slow-moving changes reflected in the gradual inclusion of memories of peaceful resolutions of conflicts and of peace processes in memory politics, because this can contribute to de-normalisation of violence in public memory of conflicts.

3 Methodology

In order to answer our research questions, we employ a range of different methodologies. We analyse both top-down and bottom-up approaches to remembering Croatia's peace process, and show how these practices are reflected on the national and international levels, while first situating our research within the regional context of peace agreements and peace processes in the post-Yugoslav space.

To address both research questions, we first analyse the commemorative calendar and the official memory politics related to the war and to the peace process. The end of peaceful reintegration is marked every year on January 15, the date when in 1998 the UNTAES mission ended. We employ content analysis in order to analyse underlying themes in speeches held by high-ranking state officials on the occasion of marking the end of peaceful reintegration. The analysis of the speeches reveals the official narrative constructed around the event. We also analyse how peaceful reintegration, mostly marginalised on the national level, has slowly started to achieve a more prominent role on an international level, in Croatia's foreign policy. In order to do this, we examine foreign policy documents and statements given by political leaders on different occasions to show how peaceful reintegration became useful for Croatia's foreign politics and its image abroad.

Furthermore, we argue that memory of the peace process, although largely marginalised in official memory politics, is present in bottom-up activities of memory activists. To address the second research question, we examine the various practices of civil society actors, whom we conceptualize as memory activists. We explore how their mnemonic activities contribute to the construction of a slow memory of peaceful reintegration and how their advocacy fosters the gradual integration of this memory into the broader collective memory of the war. However, as other scholars have argued regarding the role of civil society in Serbia (Fridman 2022) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Moll

2013), we believe that in Croatia too the civil society's role in official memory politics is largely marginal and their activities constitute what can be called alternative memory.

The first research question is again addressed in our analysis of history teaching regarding the topic of peaceful reintegration. Notwithstanding its role in fostering historical thinking, in this study we approach history teaching as an instrument of collective memory and examine how peaceful reintegration is presented in history teaching, what are the curricular instructions regarding the teaching and learning about the topic, but also what (and how much) history textbooks teach students about these events. We employ comparative analysis to analyse content, tone and perspective in two sets of history textbooks intended for the final year of gymnasium.³ These are textbooks published by the following publishing houses: *Alfa*, *Meridijani*, *Školska knjiga* and *Profil*.⁴ We first analyse history textbooks published in the period after the topic of peaceful reintegration of the Danube region became part of the Croatian history curricula in 2006. We then compare them to the set of textbooks published in 2019, which are in use still today. The aim was to assess whether topics of the peace agreement and peaceful reintegration have gained increased prominence over time, and to evaluate the degree of attention devoted to these themes within history education.

Furthermore, building on the trends identified throughout this research, we sought to examine their potential effects on recipients by conducting a survey among university-level history students. Rather than aiming for a representative sample, we deliberately selected students enrolled in the MA programme in Modern and Contemporary History, based on the assumption that they possess a foundational level of knowledge about the events in question. For this purpose, in October 2024, we conducted a survey questionnaire with students at the Department of History, University of Zagreb. We deliberately chose history students in the final years of their studies because they had classes in contemporary Croatian history throughout elementary school, high-school, and at the university. For this reason, we expected them to have the most advanced knowledge about events from the Croatian War of Independence and the post-war period.

The survey was conducted on the sample of 56 students with the use of a structured questionnaire consisting of twelve questions, seven closed questions and five open questions. Closed questions asked the students from

3 In Croatian, "gymnasium" is a term for secondary school that prepares students for higher education at the university level.

4 All textbooks are listed in the bibliography.

which sources they had received the most information about the Croatian War of Independence and to assess how much they knew about certain events, but also when certain events had happened. In the open questions, we asked the students to write what UNTAES was; what its role in Croatia was; which events from Croatia's recent history were marked every year on January 15; what was achieved with the Erdut peace agreement; and what made the most impression on them during mandatory elementary school field trips to the town of Vukovar. The survey was voluntary and anonymous, and did not ask for any of the students' personal data. Prior to conducting the survey, the students were orally informed about the purpose of the study.

The conclusion of the article summarises our findings and brings recommendations for slow memory scholars studying memories and narratives of peace processes and non-violent struggles.

4 Peace Agreements in Former Yugoslavia and Peaceful Reintegration of the Danube Region: An Overview

With the exception of the conflict in Kosovo, the wars in former Yugoslavia ended with three peace agreements: the Washington Agreement, which created the Muslim-Croat Federation;⁵ the Erdut Agreement, which peacefully reintegrated Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmium into Croatia; and the Dayton Agreement, which established a detailed framework for peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Galbraith 1997). The Kosovo War ended in 1999, following a NATO intervention, but without a peace agreement. In 2013, the first agreement on the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia was signed in Brussels under the auspices of the EU. However, as Kostovicova et al. (2020, 427) remark, "the result is a paradox: the implementation of the peace agreement lags, but the process of peacebuilding is still considered 'ongoing'."

The Dayton Peace Agreement or the General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) was negotiated in Dayton, Ohio, in November 1995, but the agreement was formally signed on 14 December 1995 in Paris. Guzina (2019, 73) argues that there are two schools of thought about the Bosnian peacebuilding experience. The first one praises stability and the

5 The Muslim-Croat Federation was created in 1994 with the Washington Agreement to end the conflict between Bosniaks (Muslims) and Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It established a joint political entity where these two groups would cooperate and share power, replacing their previous hostility with a federal structure. This federation became one of the two main political entities in BiH.

end of the war that was achieved by the Dayton Peace Agreement. The more critical one argues that efforts of liberal peacebuilding in the Bosnian case produced a political system that is inflexible, a civil society that is deeply divided and citizens who are disempowered and lack local ownership (Guzina 2019, 74). The Dayton Agreement is today criticised as being the main obstacle in dealing with the legacies of the war in BiH because it enabled the prolonged effects of the war. However, as Hozić (2021) writes, in diplomatic circles it is also “now remembered as ‘one of the great U.S. diplomatic triumphs of the past generation’ and a ‘historic diplomatic achievement’”. This reflects a deep gap between top-down and bottom-up memories. For people in BiH, although it ended the armed conflict, the agreement also froze the ethnic politics that fuelled the war and only created what Galtung calls a “negative peace.” Mac Ginty and Özerdem (2019, 3) also argue that, despite massive international support of the peace agreement, many people in Bosnia “remain politically disaffected and economically marginalised.” This constant tension between the agreement’s success in reaching a short-term objective of ending the war and a failure to achieve the long-term goal of “post-conflict state making” (Guzina 2019, 87) and rebuilding of the Bosnian society is perhaps the reason why the Dayton Agreement, unlike the Erdut Agreement, is “over-remembered” in the sense that the agreement and its legacies keep being the topic of numerous academic discussions, media reporting and scholarly research.

But the road to Dayton, as Galbraith (1997, 647) wrote, “necessarily ran through Eastern Slavonia, for as long as a part of Croatia remained in Serb hands, it would also present an insurmountable barrier to peace in the region.” Šimunović (1999, 134) also argued that Dayton provided a framework for an effective “peace drive” that encompassed several regional issues, including Eastern Slavonia. With the start of negotiations on Bosnia and Herzegovina at Dayton on 1 November 1995, Croatian President Franjo Tuđman and Serbian President Slobodan Milošević also opened the question of the Croatian Danube region (Holjevac-Turković 2015, 623).

After reaching an agreement in Dayton, the Erdut Agreement or the Basic Agreement on Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmium was signed between the Government of the Republic of Croatia and the local Croatian Serb authorities in Erdut on 12 November 1995, less than two weeks before the Dayton Agreement was concluded. As Vesna Škare-Ožbolt, former President of the National Committee for Reconciliation,⁶ and Ivica Vrkić, her deputy,

6 Full name of the committee was National Committee for the Implementation of the Program for the Establishment of Trust, Accelerated Return and Normalisation of Life in the War-Torn Areas of the Republic of Croatia.

explain, “the Basic Agreement foresaw the end of the war, the return of the displaced persons to their homes, full demilitarization of the occupying army and for the introduction of Croatian authorities without any special Serbian autonomies” (Škare-Ožbolt and Vrkić 1998, 343).

The peaceful reintegration began on January 15, 1996 when the United Nations established a Transitional Authority in Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmium (UNTAES) and when the Security Council adopted Resolution 1037. It consisted of 5,000 UN troops. UNTAES mission ended two years later, on 15 January 1998. In those two years, the mission governed the region during the transitional period and oversaw the return of refugees and displaced persons to the region. The tasks of the UNTAES mission included demilitarization of the area, creating conditions favourable to the return of Croat and Serb refugees, reintegration of the civil and public administration, formation of a temporary police force, organization of free elections, and creation of an atmosphere of inter-ethnic trust (U.N. Security Council 1996). The UNTAES mission had a precisely defined political and security mandate, clear objectives and had a firmly set timeframe for their implementation (Bandov and Hajduković 2019). It is considered as a successful mission because it managed to achieve territorial integrity of a state; a peaceful, negotiated resolution of a dispute; and a guarantee of the rights of refugees and displaced persons. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan argued that the success of UNTAES represented “a positive precedent for peace throughout the former Yugoslavia” (Šimunović 1999, 129). Scholars, however, argued that “the success of UNTAES will be judged on the extent to which it helped to build a peace momentum and to develop a process of reconciliation and a culture of tolerance and dialogue” (Ibid., 139).

The process of reconciliation was intended to be supported by the Programme for the establishment of trust, accelerated return, and normalization of living conditions in the war-affected regions, monitored by a multi-ethnic national committee, which Croatian President Tuđman founded in 1997. The Programme’s goals were: the creation of a general climate of tolerance and security; the realization of equality of all citizens with regard to the State administration; the establishment of trust between all citizens; the creation of general social, political, security and economic conditions for normalization of life; the speedy, secure and organized return of all Croatian citizens to those regions of Croatia from which they had been expelled or displaced; the inclusion of all citizens in building a democratic society; and creation of a political framework for the implementation of relevant legal norms (United Nations 1997, 329). The existence of this national committee showed that attempts for improving the human rights situation and for reconciliation

existed at the governmental level. However, Kasunić (2018, 57) argued that the “National Programme for Reconciliation was initiated largely to satisfy the requirements imposed on Croatia by the international community. Moreover, it can serve as an indicator for the unwillingness of the Croatian leadership to foster the reconciliation of the population.” The author came to this conclusion because she was unable to find any official documents, reports, or information pertaining to the work of the national committee, which ceased to exist in 2000 (Ibid.). Similarly, a peace activist from the Danube region who was active during peaceful reintegration, Kruhonja (2010, 87), claimed that “the National Programme for Return and Restoration of Trust which is supposed to deal with residual or emerging problems in rebuilding trust and the actual integration of people has never really come to life”.

Following the reintegration of the territory into Croatia’s constitutional and legal framework and the conclusion of the UNTAES mission in January 1998, the state made minimal efforts to promote reconciliation. Local Serbs and Croats – former adversaries during the war – were left to live next to each other without substantial institutional support. No formal or structured dialogue was established between the two communities, leaving the burden of reconciliation largely to individuals and civil society. As Mac Ginty points out (2014, 550), “in the absence of formally endorsed and people-orientated reconciliation strategies, individuals and communities are left to their own devices, and self-directed coping mechanisms come into play.”

Thus, the process of reconciliation in the Danube region remains incomplete to this day and is yet to be fully achieved. Its slow progress can be seen from more recent problems surrounding the use of the Cyrillic script in Vukovar. In the aftermath of the war, the 2011 Croatian census revealed that Serbs comprised more than one-third of Vukovar’s population. Consequently, under the provisions of the Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities, the Serb community became entitled to use its language and the Cyrillic script in both private and official public settings. Following the official release of the census results in December 2012, the Croatian government initiated the installation of bilingual signs on state institutions in Vukovar to implement this legal obligation. However, this measure provoked widespread protests, both in Vukovar and throughout the country. Led by war veterans and supported by right-wing political parties, the demonstrations framed the Cyrillic as an ‘enemy script.’ Despite public resistance, bilingual signage was installed in Vukovar in September 2013, though many of the signs were repeatedly vandalized and forcibly removed by war veteran groups. In November 2013, the Vukovar City Council – dominated by right-wing parties – passed an amendment to the city statute, declaring Vukovar a ‘city of special

piety' due to the suffering endured during the 1991 siege, and claimed exemption from the national minority rights legislation.⁷

Except for the abovementioned problems with minority rights, evidence of the lacking integration of the people can be also found in Vukovar's schools, where primary and secondary schools, as well as kindergartens, have remained divided along ethnic lines to this day (Čorkalo-Biruški and Ajduković 2007). Although communities in Vukovar are not separated physically (for example, with walls, as is the case with other divided cities such as Belfast), the town is still functioning as a socially divided city (Baillie 2012; Čorkalo-Biruški and Ajduković 2009). Additionally, inter-ethnic divisions can be witnessed from the marking of the 25th anniversary of the end of peaceful reintegration, in 2023, when political representatives of the Serb minority in Vukovar refused to attend the official ceremony. This was because they believed that "the ruling political option (...) denies the acquired rights of Serbs, which this same peaceful reintegration guaranteed".⁸

Thus, one of the main criticisms of the peaceful reintegration was that it achieved integration of the territory, but not of the people (Bosanac 2016, 10). Peace activist Bosanac (2016, 10) argued that this was mainly due to the fact that the peace process was seen merely as a technical process with a clear start and end date. However, Mac Ginty and Özerdem (2019, 14) point out that the question of when a peace process begins and ends does not have an easy answer and it is difficult to determine a terminal point. Lederach (2023, 172) also understands peace not as a linear, sequential or measured, but as "slow" and actively built in the everyday.

5 (Un)useful Memory? Peaceful Reintegration in Top-Down Approaches

Vukovar is a small town in the Danube region which was occupied by Yugoslav People's Army (YPA) forces. The fall of the town is marked every year on November 18, the date when, in 1991, YPA forces entered the town and when the most massive crimes against civilians in the Croatian War of Independence were committed. An annual commemoration

⁷ For an extensive discussion of the issues around the introduction of the Cyrillic script in Vukovar see (Banjeglav 2021).

⁸ "Vukovar: Obilježavanje 25. obljetnice mirne reintegracije hrvatskog Podunavlja" available at: <https://radio.hrt.hr/radio-osijek/vijesti/vukovar-obiljezavanje-25-obljetnice-mirne-reintegracije-hrvatskog-podunavlja-10556440>.

(Memory procession⁹) has been organised in the town every year since 1998 when Vukovar was returned into Croatia's political and legal order with peaceful reintegration. In 1999, the Croatian Parliament declared the date when Vukovar fell, November 18, as the official Memorial Day i.e. the Day of Remembrance of the Victim of Vukovar 1991, while in 2019 it was also declared a public holiday. The dates of some military operations from the war are also publicly remembered with annual celebrations and/or commemorations, while one of them is also a public holiday. The date when the military operation "Storm" took place (August 5, 1995) was declared a public holiday already in 1996. It is celebrated annually as Victory and Homeland Thanksgiving Day and the Day of Croatian Defenders and it is commonly referred to as Victory Day. It is marked with a central state-organized celebration in the town of Knin and it plays an important role in Croatia's commemorative calendar,¹⁰ since it occupies the central place in the national narrative on Croatia's victory in the war.

Vukovar is today known for its numerous monuments, memorials, memorial plaques, museums and memorial centres dedicated to the memory of the war that are scattered around the town and its surrounding, which has been the topic of numerous academic research. As Baillie (2012, 20) argued, "in Vukovar, the violence of the siege has not been expunged from the landscape but has rather metamorphosed into memorial form". Thus, the memorial landscape in Vukovar today serves as a constant daily reminder of the horrors of the war. However, memory of non-violence and peace is absent in public space, since a monument or memorial that would commemorate the local peace process¹¹ still does not exist in the Vukovar area.¹²

This silence in public memorialisation about the peaceful resolution of the conflict is also reflected in the state commemorative calendar, from which peaceful reintegration has been largely absent. The end of peaceful reintegration is marked on the same date (January 15) as the international recognition of the Republic of Croatia, which happened in 1992. For this reason, the anniversary of peaceful reintegration often remains in the shadow of this

9 Memory procession (*kolona sjećanja*) is the official name of the commemoration.

10 In Serbia, operation "Storm" has, since 2015, been commemorated as an official day of mourning through state ceremonies at different locations under the slogan "Storm is a Pogrom". For more details, see Fridman (2022) and Đureinović (2020).

11 A memorial plaque exists in the town of Erdut marking the signing of the Erdut Agreement.

12 There is, however, a peace gong, erected in 2019, that was donated to the city by a world peace movement and the Republic of Indonesia. This memorial, however, refers to peace in general and is neither situated into the local context nor does it in any way refer to the town's peace process.

other event from Croatia's recent history that happened on the same date, as discussed below.

President Stipe Mesić, who served two mandates from 2000 to 2010, regularly marked international recognition of Croatia on January 15. However, his speeches held on this occasion never mentioned that Croatia's territory was fully integrated with the end of peaceful reintegration that had happened on that same date. As many as fourteen years after the end of peaceful reintegration, in 2012, Mesić's successor Ivo Josipović was the first president to attend marking of the peaceful reintegration organised by the City of Vukovar. The next president, Kolinda Grabar Kitarović's office organized the 20th anniversary of the event in 2018 in the town of Ilok. Her successor Zoran Milanović, in 2021, only issued a public message on the occasion of the Day of International Recognition of the Republic of Croatia and the Day of Peaceful Reintegration of the Croatian Danube Region. In the message, however, peaceful reintegration is mentioned only in one sentence as an event "which we also commemorate today" as "an example of success in peacebuilding and democratic development of the Republic of Croatia in the years after international recognition."¹³ The 25th anniversary of peaceful reintegration, commemorated in 2023, brought together the President, representatives of the government and the Parliament at an event organised by the city of Vukovar. While the event is marked on January 15 every year on the local level by local politicians, state-level commemorations align with more prominent anniversaries (20th and 25th). Thus, the slowness of including the peace process in public memory of the war is reflected in the fact that it took more than twenty years after the conflict had ended (in 2019) for the Croatian government to declare peaceful reintegration a so-called national day (but not a public holiday), and for an official state-sponsored ceremony marking the event to be organised.

On the occasion of the 20th anniversary of peaceful reintegration in 2018, Prime Minister Andrej Plenković only stated that it was one of the most successful peace operations (UNTAES) in the history of the UN, which created the basis for the process of reconciliation, coexistence, and integration (Lozančić 2018). Five years later, in a more elaborate address on the 25th anniversary, Plenković emphasised that

13 Message from the President of the Republic on the Day of International Recognition of the Republic of Croatia and the Day of Peaceful Reintegration of the Croatian Danube Region, available at: www.predsjednik.hr/en/news/message-from-the-president-of-the-republic-on-day-of-international-recognition-of-the-republic-of-croatia-and-day-of-peaceful-reintegration-of-the-croatian-danube-region.

the peaceful reintegration of the occupied parts of our country is an exceptional success of the Republic of Croatia and one of the key political legacies of the first Croatian President, Dr. Franjo Tuđman. It is also one of the most successful peacekeeping missions of the United Nations since its inception, and an achievement that still makes it the best model of peaceful conflict resolution and reintegration of occupied territories in other parts of the world.¹⁴

In 2024, Plenković also mentioned an important role played by the United Nations, but emphasised that “none of this would have happened without the previous sacrifice and victory of Croatian defenders in the military-police operations Flash and Storm, which led to the end of the war and the Dayton peace agreement, signed in Paris.”¹⁵

Thus, the official narrative on peaceful reintegration emphasises the importance of the UNTAES as one of the most successful peace keeping missions, and frames it as a model of diplomacy. What is frequently referenced is President Franjo Tuđman’s strategic foresight, particularly in choosing diplomacy over conflict in 1997–1998. What is also highlighted is the final, peaceful restoration of Croatian territorial integrity which would not have been possible without previous victories in military operations.

Moreover, Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) prime ministers often used reintegration as a foreign policy narrative tool, presenting Croatia as an example of successful conflict resolution. Former Prime Minister and HDZ president Ivo Sanader was the first to mention Croatia’s experience in peaceful reintegration of territory at the UN General Assembly in 2008. Sanader stated that, with its experience in this area, Croatia wished to contribute to finding solutions for a peaceful resolution of conflicts (Vlada RH 2008). In 2016, another HDZ Prime Minister Andrej Plenković offered for the first time, during his visit to Kiev, Croatia’s help in peaceful reintegration of occupied Ukrainian territories (Vlada RH 2016). He repeated his offer during another visit to Kiev in 2021. Plenković emphasized Croatia’s experience in peaceful reintegration that could be used as a success model in Ukraine. In

14 “From a victim of aggression to international recognition, peaceful reintegration and the completion of the European integration process”, Government of the Republic of Croatia, 15 January 2023. Available at <https://vlada.gov.hr/vijesti/od-zrtve-agresije-do-medjunarodnog-priznanja-mirne-reintegracije-i-zavrsetka-procesa-europskih-integracija/37653?lang=hr>.

15 “International recognition of the country and reintegration of the Croatian Danube region”, 15 January 2024. Available at www.andrejplenkovic.com/article.php?id=5217.

2016, the government adopted a Decision on the establishment of the Working Group for Cooperation between the Republic of Croatia and Ukraine, which included state officials who participated in peaceful reintegration of the Danube region, with the aim of providing assistance to Ukraine in transferring experiences and knowledge from the successfully implemented peaceful reintegration of its territories. In his address to citizens on the 20th anniversary of the end of peaceful reintegration, in 2018, PM Plenković again repeated that peaceful reintegration “can serve as a model of peaceful resolution of a crisis in other similar situations” (Lozančić 2018). Moreover, in 2023, PM Plenković told foreign media:

I was advocating for the last eight years, since the crisis in 2014, since the occupation of Crimea, the illegal referenda, the annexation and everything that happened in Donetsk and Luhansk region[s]. (...) And the experience of Croatia, which we've had, and we just had the 25th anniversary of the peaceful (...) reintegration of the former occupied territories of the Eastern Slavonia (...) That was the fantastic operation 25 years ago, and I think that was the model that could have and should have been applied also for Donetsk and Luhansk region[s].

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Finally in 2024, Croatia and Ukraine signed the Agreement on Long-Term Cooperation and Support between Ukraine and the Republic of Croatia, which states that “Croatia’s successful peaceful reintegration of Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmium could serve as a valuable model to draw experiences from. Croatia stands ready to continue sharing its own expertise with Ukraine in this area”.¹⁶

We argue that peaceful reintegration and the peace process were largely marginalised domestically as they were not seen, by political elites, as “useful”. This was partially due to the fact that, as some authors argued, after severe war devastation and a large number of killed, missing and imprisoned people, a part of the Croatian public, at that time, expected Eastern Slavonia to be returned through a military action similar to Operation “Storm” (Holjevac-Turković 2015, 625). Joško Morić, the then assistant minister of interior and deputy president of the trust-building committee, in his article titled “(Un)wanted reintegration”, wrote that “after the victorious ‘Flash’ and ‘Storm’

¹⁶ Agreement on Long-Term Cooperation and Support between Ukraine and the Republic of Croatia, 9 October 2024, available at: www.president.gov.ua/en/news/ugoda-pro-dovg-ostrokov-e-s-pivrobotnictvo-ta-pidtrimku-mizh-uk-93733.

[military operations], a small number of citizens, especially war veterans, saw a valid reason for peaceful reintegration" (Morić 2016, 14). Similarly, Vrkić (1997, 8–9), another deputy president of the national trust-building committee, wrote that after the victory of the Croatian Army in Operations "Flash" and "Storm", in May and August 1995 respectively, the Croatian public expected another military victory in Vukovar and refused peaceful reintegration.¹⁷

The other reason why peaceful reintegration was and still is not useful for Croatian political elites is because it does not fit into the official narrative on Croatia's military victory in the war, which has been carefully crafted since the end of the war. Peace activist Gordan Bosanac wrote that post-conflict Croatia "has partially built its own national identity on 'military victory' and a militarized identity was an essential part of Croatian sovereignty" (Bosanac 2014, 112). Political scientist Jović (2017, 19) also argued that, in the national narrative, the war is considered as the "birthplace" of the Croatian state and the state is presented as having been created in the war. Writing about another peace initiative which started at the beginning of the war in Croatia in 1991, the Anti-War Campaign (ARK),¹⁸ and advocated for peace alternatives and de-escalation of the war, Milekić (2023, 39) pointed out that peace initiatives open up the possibility of questioning the dominant narrative. For this reason, they have been erased from state memory policies and are marginalised in public memory of the war. Jović (2017, 245) also believes that the absence of signing the Erdut Peace Agreement and of peaceful reintegration from the state memory calendar is a clear message that war is more important and more useful than peace.

Furthermore, marginalisation of the peaceful reintegration domestically, as other authors have remarked (Savković 2024, 163), reflects a broader reluctance of successive Croatian administrations to fully achieve internationally accepted standards for the protection and promotion of minority rights and to tackle enduring mistrust and inequalities between communities, as well as the economic and demographic devastation, in the areas formerly administered by UNTAES.

¹⁷ Research conducted in 1996, on a sample of 1499 persons displaced from the Danube region, regarding the plan of peaceful reintegration, showed that a narrow majority of the displaced interviewees (50.1 percent) actually preferred a peaceful solution based on the plan. One third of those interviewed believed that the occupied territory could not be returned without military action (see Šakić et al. 1997).

¹⁸ For a discussion on Croatia's Anti-War Campaign see Janković and Mokrović (2011).

The experience of peaceful reintegration, however, proved useful for political elites on the international scene, because it set the country apart from other EU countries as the only member state with a unique experience in peaceful resolution of a recent conflict and in peaceful reintegration of territory. Thus, a memory of peace, not viewed as “useful” at home, proved useful as Croatia’s “foreign policy export product”¹⁹ and peaceful resolution celebrated as a unique Croatian experience.

At the regional level, memory of the peace process is equally unuseful, because of a lacking culture of peace and non-violence in all post-Yugoslav states, where only violent events are publicly remembered and only victories in military battles celebrated,²⁰ which is usually in the service of nationalistic political goals.

6 Memory Activism: Slow Memory of Peaceful Reintegration “from Below”

Fridman (2022, 163) views the post-Yugoslav space as “a region of memory activism” and argues that memory activism in former Yugoslavia is grounded in critical civic emancipatory peace and is employed as a strategy of peace activism. The author also calls for studying memory activism in its local and regional form and argues in favour of analysing “bottom-up actions that occur outside the channels of the state” (Ibid., 21). We follow Fridman and, although we focus our research mostly on official discourses, policies and state memory practices to show how memory of peace has been erased top-down, we also give examples of bottom-up actions of remembering the peace process. The aim is to demonstrate that, for years, civil society actors have actively worked to ensure that the peaceful resolution of the conflict is not completely erased from public memory. We, thus, argue that mnemonic practices of memory activists “from below” contribute to the construction of slow memory of peaceful reintegration. We also show how their activities function as advocacy for the gradual inclusion of peaceful reintegration into the collective memory of the war.

19 The phrase was used by Prime Minister Plenković in the Croatian parliament in June 2017. See HINA 2017.

20 Signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement (21 November) is marked as a national holiday in BiH, but in only one of the two entities (Republika Srpska). This is, however, not because peace is celebrated, but because the Dayton agreement was the first official document that legalised the existence and the name of the Republika Srpska entity.

Just as peaceful integration would never have been so successful without the strong engagement of the civil society, preserving the memory of peaceful reintegration today would not be possible without the efforts of civil society organisations. Already in 2010, on the occasion of the 12th anniversary of peaceful reintegration, three civil society organisations²¹ asked the authorities to recognize 15th January as a day of peace-building, trust and inter-national reconciliation. They argued that Croatia, as a country that would soon become an EU member state, should promote the values of peace, nonviolence and human rights and should present peaceful reintegration as a model of good practice.²²

A Zagreb-based organisation, Centre for Peace Studies (CMS), has been active in advocating that marking the end of peaceful reintegration becomes the central event in commemorating the war in Croatia (Centre for Peace Studies 2018). CMS also recognised, in 2015, the potential of the model of peaceful reintegration to be implemented on the then occupied Ukrainian territories, and advocated for integrating the experience of peaceful resolution of a conflict into Croatia's foreign policy in order to create a "peaceful" image of Croatia abroad (Bosanac 2016). The organisation called the government to recognise Croatia's peace process as a comparative advantage and to include it into its foreign policy.

However, the most active civil society organisation in advocating against forgetting of the peaceful reintegration is European House Vukovar. It has been repeatedly organising in Vukovar, every year on 15 January, round-table discussions and other events concerning peaceful reintegration. The organisation has also been advocating for political actors to take the initiative and organise marking of the anniversary of peaceful reintegration on the local and national levels. As the organisation's then president Lana Mayer pointed out,

the role of the European House Vukovar in highlighting the importance of this peace initiative is an example of a bottom-up approach (...) With these events, we work to ensure that the importance of peaceful reintegration is recognized in the wider community, at the local and national levels, and to encourage other stakeholders and political actors to organize similar events.

ANTUNOVIĆ-LAZIĆ 2015, 7

²¹ These are Centre for Peace Studies, *Documenta* – Centre for Dealing with the Past, and Centre for Peace, Non-Violence and Human Rights Osijek.

²² See "Peaceful reintegration as a model of good practice in Croatia" at www.humanrightshouse.org/articles/peaceful-reintegration-as-a-model-of-good-practice-in-croatia.

Throughout the years, the organisation issued a number of publications about the peaceful reintegration and the peace-building process in the Danube region. For example, in 2022, the organisation published a collection of narratives of the citizens of Vukovar who were direct participants of the peaceful reintegration process.²³ In 2023, it also produced a documentary film in cooperation with the Croatian National Television. Additionally, the organisation launched, in 2023, a special web site dedicated to this peacekeeping mission, bringing information to the wider public in the form of different publications, life stories, videos and conference transcripts, as well as educational activities.²⁴ On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the end of peaceful reintegration an exhibition “Steps to peace” was set up,²⁵ showing the timeline of peaceful reintegration through newspaper articles.

Another civil society organization engaged in sustaining the memory of the peaceful reintegration in the Slavonia and Baranja region – the Centre for Peace, Non-Violence and Human Rights Osijek – organized a “living library” event in 2023 aimed at facilitating intergenerational memory transmission. The event brought together high school students from Osijek with peace activists, eyewitnesses, and direct participants in the reintegration process, fostering dialogue between those who experienced the events and younger generations.

We see these civil society organisations as memory activists from below. We understand “memory activism” in line with Gutman and Wüstenberg’s (2023, 5) definition as “the strategic commemoration of a contested past to achieve mnemonic or political change by working outside state channels”. These memory activists have engaged with the memory of peaceful reintegration in order to influence societal understanding of peace as a fundamental value within the EU and to advocate for social transformation from commemorating only violent events to also including, in the public memory of the war, non-violent attempts to end the war and to achieve peace. We argue that their efforts to sustain the memory of the peaceful reintegration and the broader peace process in the Danube region constitute an example of *slow memory*. This is evident not only in their attempt to shift collective remembrance from a focus on (violent) events to the processes of peacebuilding, but

23 See Bosanac and Matejčić (2022).

24 See the project web site at www.mirna-reintegracija.info/en.

25 The exhibition was jointly organised by European House Vukovar, Vukovar city museum, Vukovar city library, public institution Croatian Home Vukovar and civil society organisation Centre for Peace, Non-Violence and Human Rights from Osijek.

also in the sustained nature of these efforts over the past three decades, which reflects the gradual and protracted character of mnemonic transformation.

7 Peaceful Reintegration and Croatian History Education

We have, so far, looked at memorialisation practices and narratives which reflect the official memory politics about the studied events. In the following section, we move our attention to the official historical narrative about this period of Croatia's recent history that can be found in history education. As is often the case in post-conflict societies, history education in Croatia was perceived and used as one of the channels for transmission of the official history of the conflict (Marić 2016; Psaltis et al 2017). In this section we, therefore, analyse history textbooks in regard to their treatment of peaceful reintegration of the Danube region.

The Croatian War of Independence was already introduced as a teaching topic in 1992, while the war was still ongoing. As many authors have pointed out, the interpretation of the war, together with the moral messages it contained, were brought to the core of political and national identity formation (Koren and Baranović 2009; Koren 2019; Jović 2017). This is very different from the goals of development of critical and historical thinking which have also been ascribed to history teaching in Croatia from as early as 2006. Among other things, these goals also imply that students should in fact learn to analyse and evaluate various historical interpretations (Koren 2019; Marić 2016). The tension between these two visions of the purpose of history teaching has been present in Croatia for the past twenty years (Koren and Baranović 2009; Marić 2016). Goals that are ascribed to teaching sensitive and controversial topics in curricula, textbook representations of these topics, and approaches fostered through teacher training are a good indication of the strength of a particular vision of history teaching at the given moment.

As emphasized elsewhere, the level of prescriptiveness when it comes to teaching the Croatian War of Independence rose over time in Croatia (Koren 2019; Marić 2016). At present, history curricula refer to specific events, battles, processes and aspects of the war that should be taught (Narodne novine 2019). The share of textbook space devoted to this topic has been on the rise in all textbooks covering the topic and is larger than in any previous generations of

textbooks. Out of all current textbooks²⁶ for secondary education covering contemporary Croatian history, we analysed four history textbooks intended for the final year of gymnasium as they contain the longest, most elaborate accounts of the war.

The topic of peaceful reintegration of the Danube region has been a part of Croatian history curricula since 2006 (Ministarstvo znanosti, obrazovanja i sporta 2006). In the current curriculum, due to the organization of historical content into domains (political, social, economic, technological, philosophical-religious-cultural history) most topics are presented as adhering to one of the domains (Narodne novine 2019). Unlike other events from the Croatian War of Independence, the curriculum does not see peaceful reintegration as part of the *Politics* domain, but as a part of the *Society* domain. While the process of peaceful reintegration undoubtedly had important social processes at play, as well as various social implications and consequences, reducing it only to this component undermines for instance, the political context in which it took place or the agency of political actors behind reaching the agreement.

Previous research showed that history textbook narratives prevent any critical reflection about violence and leave out discussions about any roots, causes, consequences and alternatives to violence (Bermudez 2021, 271). Scholars have demonstrated how school history textbooks make different aspects of violence invisible, and by doing that, actually normalize violence and make it acceptable (Bermudez 2015, 2021; Jovanović and Bermúdez 2021). The model developed by Bermudez (2019) explains how textbook narratives of violence contribute to normalization of violence in society by removing agency from the discussion of violence. However, our study shows that the removal of agency is also present when narrating the history of alternatives to violence.

In the first set of textbooks that we analysed, published between 2006 and 2009, the peace agreement and peaceful reintegration are mentioned very briefly, while the actors remain mostly hidden. For example, the *Alfa* textbook (Akmadža et al 2009), only states that the peace agreement was signed under

26 After the introduction of the new history curriculum in 2019, new textbooks were approved for use in 2021. In December 2023, the *Profil* textbook, authored by Hajdarović et al. (2021), was withdrawn after being initially approved and used in Croatian schools for almost three years. The withdrawal happened after a campaign was launched by right-wing politicians at a round table in the Croatian parliament because of their disagreement with how the textbook covered the period of socialist Yugoslavia and the Croatian War of Independence. For an extensive coverage of the public debate see: www.historiografija.hr/?p=39635.

the auspices of the international community and the US, but says neither who signed the agreement nor who participated in the process of peaceful reintegration. The *Školska knjiga* textbook provides even fewer information and mentions neither the peace agreement nor peaceful reintegration, while only stating that “eastern Slavonija, Baranja and eastern (sic!) Srijem, under the supervision of UN representatives, were included in the Republic of Croatia during 1997” (Matković and Mirošević 2007, 279). The only textbook that mentions actors on both sides who signed the peace agreement and later participated in the peace process is the *Profil* textbook (Leček et al. 2006). However, none of the analysed textbooks gives the full name of the UN peace-keeping mission (UNTAES) and they only refer to it as the UN mission or UN representatives.

All four textbooks dedicate very little space to the topic of the peace agreement and peaceful reintegration. The *Alfa* textbook (Akmadža et al. 2009) dedicates four sentences (out of 16 pages dedicated to the topic of the Croatian War of Independence); in the *Školska knjiga* textbook (Matković and Mirošević 2007) only one sentence is dedicated to the topic (out of 11 pages dedicated to the topic of the war); in the *Profil* textbook by Miljan and Miškulin (2009) one third of the page is dedicated (out of 13 pages dedicated to the topic of the war). The most space dedicated to the topic of the peace agreement and peaceful reintegration is in the *Profil* textbook by Leček et al. (2006) – three quarters of a page, while there is also a separate section on other UN peace missions in Croatia (the topic of the war is, on the other hand, represented on 21 pages).

When comparing these textbooks with the set of history textbooks in use today, published since 2019, we noticed a slight improvement in the treatment of the topic. It is discussed a bit more extensively with additional information offered to students, although the presentation of the topic continues to lack sufficient contextualisation and clear historical agency.

Among the current textbooks, only one – *Meridijani* – notes that the Erdut Agreement was signed after the Dayton Peace Agreement. However, none of the textbooks adequately contextualizes the Erdut Agreement within the broader post-Dayton political framework that created favourable national and international conditions for the peaceful resolution of the conflict in Croatia. Furthermore, all textbooks fail to use the opportunity to discuss why political leaderships on both sides were willing to end the conflict peacefully after years of armed conflict. When agency is removed from representations of peace agreements and peace processes, this makes them decontextualized and detached from responsibility of individuals, institutions, and states.

When it comes to textbook representations of the peaceful reintegration, none of them describe social mechanisms at play in the peacefully reintegrated territories, even when the curricular requirements point exactly to that aspect of the phenomenon. While textbooks devote a lot of space to the topic of the Croatian War of Independence (the *Alfa* textbook devotes forty-eight pages, *Školska knjiga* textbook thirty-eight pages, *Profil* textbook forty pages, and *Meridijani* textbook thirty-one page), peaceful reintegration is presented only marginally (in the *Alfa* textbook on two thirds of one page; in the *Školska knjiga* textbook on a half of a page; in the *Profil* textbook on a quarter of a page, and in the *Meridijani* textbook on one page). Content-wise, most of the textbooks focus on dates of signing the peace agreement and only mention institutions in charge of overseeing the peaceful reintegration. The textbook published by *Meridijani* (Raguž et al. 2021) is the only textbook that gives political context of the Erdut agreement and does so by also referring to the Dayton Peace Agreement that brought an end to the armed conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is also the only textbook that mentions in brief the civil and military mechanisms behind the process. Moreover, while these textbooks bring a substantial number of personal experiences of war veterans and civilians during military operations, none of them bring experiences of civilians during the process of peaceful reintegration. Out of all the political and civil society actors involved in the process, the only person mentioned in textbooks is Jacques Paul Klein as the head of UNTAES mission. The textbooks are similar in their marginalization of peaceful reintegration, but they differ substantially in how they interpretatively frame it. The *Alfa* textbook brings the following interpretation: “Despite military readiness and strong public pressure in Croatia to regain the occupied part of Eastern Slavonia by military means, the Croatian leadership again sought a peaceful resolution to the conflict” (Anić et al. 2021, 288). On the other hand, in the *Školska knjiga* textbook, peaceful reintegration is portrayed as a result of “the mutual wish of both sides to avoid further victims and destruction”. The sentiment of Croats at the time is described as follows: “a majority of Croatian citizens backed a peaceful approach to reintegrating Croatia’s Danube region; only a minority feared the process might drag on and considered war the better course” (Erdelja and Stojaković 2021, 221). The *Profil* textbook only states the basic historical facts (name and date of the signing of the peace agreement), and mentions the right of refugees to return and cultural autonomy of local Serbs (Hajdarović et al. 2021, 265). The *Meridijani* textbook brings more details around political implications for the local community; for example, it discusses the political representation of local Serbs (Raguž et al. 2021). The textbook also brings secondary historical sources that speak about violence of

the local Serbs in the course of peaceful reintegration, due to their disagreement with the arrangement.

It is not unusual to find different interpretations of an event across different textbooks, but when it comes to other aspects of the war, this is usually not the case. For example, the military aspects of the war are described in detail and interpreted in a very similar way. Peaceful reintegration, on the other hand, is hardly mentioned and its interpretations vary across textbooks. This is primarily a reflection of its marginal position.

In democratic societies, educational systems ought to support younger generations in constructing knowledge and forming their value systems. Exploration of possibilities at hand in times of conflict, choices people make and the context that enables them to act in a certain way is one of the important goals of history education. Not discussing it with students when dealing with topics of armed conflict and peace-building, when human doings are so consequential to so many people, is a failed opportunity in this regard.

History education in post-conflict societies is usually used for political and national identity formation and those identities are often grounded in heroic achievements and victories in military battles. Militarised identities and narratives often push out lessons about compromise and peaceful initiatives because, as we argue above, narratives of peace and non-violence open up the possibility of undermining the dominant narrative.

In our analysis of history textbooks, we have noticed that the topics of peace agreement and peaceful reintegration receive more coverage and are addressed in more details today than they did at the time when the topics were first introduced in history textbooks. However, the discussion of the topics still lacks nuance and offers limited contextualisation. This trend may reflect slow transformations in official memory politics, which have, over time, started to gradually place more emphasis on the commemoration of these events.

8 Likely Implications of the Marginalization of Memory of the Peace Process

Considering the scarce information about the peace process in the Danube region that could be found in history textbooks, in political discourses and state-level commemorative practices, we were interested in examining the level of knowledge about the process of peaceful reintegration and the UNTAES mission among students studying Croatian history at the university

level. We were also curious in comparing that knowledge to their knowledge of certain battles and military events from the war.

We asked them from which sources they had predominantly gained their knowledge and information about events from the war, and offered them to choose from the following categories: persons who directly participated in the war; parents and close family members; friends and peers; elementary and high-school classes; university courses; the media (newspapers and TV); social networks; the internet; school field trips to Vukovar; work of a civil society organisation. The three main sources selected were persons who directly participated in the war, parents and family members, and the media (newspapers or TV). Classes in elementary and high-school were equally selected as the source from which they had received very little to least information (49.98%) and as the source from which they had received some to most of the information (49.99%).

Most of their knowledge about events from the war is related to military actions. When asked to self-assess how much they knew about certain events, 80.35% stated they knew about military operation "Flash" either to a certain extent (57.14%) or a lot (23.21%). Almost all of those surveyed claim to possess knowledge about military operation "Storm" (96.42%) – 30.35% said they knew about it to a certain extent, while 66.07% stated they knew a lot about the operation. In comparison, they know much less about the peace process. Only a little more than a half of those surveyed (51.78%) said they possess knowledge about the peaceful reintegration of the Danube region – 39.28% knows about it to a certain extent, while 12.5% knows a lot about the event. Furthermore, almost 75% said they knew nothing to very little about the signing of the Erdut Peace Agreement. Consequently, almost half of those surveyed (48.21%) said they did not know when the Erdut Peace Agreement was signed, while 35.71% gave the wrong answer. Similarly, almost half of those surveyed (46.42%) had no knowledge about the duration of the peaceful reintegration of the Danube region – 28.57% stated they did not know when it had taken place, while 17.85% gave the wrong answer.

Their knowledge of military battles was much better. Only 10.71% stated they did not know when the military operation "Storm" had happened, while almost 85% (84.92%) gave the correct answer. The second event which received the most correct answers (64.28%) concerns the duration of the military operation "Flash". When it comes to the UNTAES mission, the same percentage of those surveyed (67.85%) said they neither knew what UNTAES was nor what its role in Croatia was. More than half (58.93%) also said they did not know what event(s) from Croatia's recent history is/are marked every year on January 15. Of those who did provide an answer, 25% said it was the

date when international recognition of Croatia had happened. Only 12.5% said this was the date when peaceful reintegration was marked, while as little as 3.5% knew that both events (international recognition of Croatia and the end of peaceful reintegration) were marked on this date. This is in line with our previous findings showing that political elites emphasize this date as the date when international recognition of Croatia had happened, while peaceful reintegration, as an event that happened on the same date, is either not mentioned or is in the shadow of marking the anniversary of international recognition.

It can be concluded that Croatian history students are not very well informed about the period of the Croatian War of Independence in general and the peaceful reintegration in particular. Their main sources of information are family members and persons who directly participated in the war, which points to the importance of subjective experiences and emotions in the formation of the young people's knowledge about this period in Croatia's recent history. This finding is in line with findings reached by other studies dealing with the young in Croatia and their knowledge of the 1990s (Gvozdanović 2022). Interestingly, however, the survey results showed that those surveyed equally consider elementary and high-school education as both the source from which they had received very little knowledge and as the source from which comes most of their knowledge about the war. This ambivalence likely reflects the fact that formal education is the only institutionalized source of knowledge about the war to which students have been exposed, while simultaneously pointing to a widespread perception that the information provided through schooling is insufficient. Another important source are the media (mostly newspapers and TV), which is not surprising considering the fact that the 1990s war is constantly present in Croatian media, as well as in public discourse (Jović 2017, 325). Most of their knowledge, however, is related to military battles, such as military operations "Flash" and "Storm", while they are not very familiar with the peace agreement and the peace process. Arguably, this is because the date when Operation "Storm" happened is a national holiday, marked with a large state ceremony, and on this day a lot of media attention is paid to different aspects of the operation, military events, but also the war in general. On the other hand, peaceful reintegration, as argued above, is at the margins of state memory politics and consequently does not attract a lot of media attention. Another event marked on the same date as peaceful reintegration, international recognition of Croatia, receives much more attention. This is also the reason why the survey participants predominantly knew about marking January 15 as the anniversary of

international recognition of Croatia, but not as the date when peaceful re-integration had ended.

Although additional research would be needed on a more representative sample and including groups of young people beyond history students, our research results point to the fact that knowledge about the peace process today slowly “travels” to younger generations. We argue that this is partially due to the comparatively weaker emphasis placed on these events in history textbooks, which continue to prioritize military battles during the war. Additionally, this limited transmission of knowledge can be attributed to the marginal presence of peace-related events in the broader public sphere, where narratives surrounding military actions and battles remain dominant.

9 Conclusion

This article has argued that peace-building after conflict is fundamentally a slow and long-term process which does not have a clear start and end date and does not finish with signing of a peace agreement or with the adoption and implementation of required legal acts. Instead, we argue in favour of “slow peace” (Lederach 2023), which is understood as a social process and continuous effort at transformation and rebuilding of a community after conflict. In post-war Croatia, however, the peace process was treated not as a long-term process, but as a mandate-bound event of fixed duration which started and ended with the UNTAES mission. After the mission had ended, larger efforts at peace and trust-building between communities in the Danube region, that were on the opposite sides during conflict, were lacking, which has led to what Johan Galtung has called a “negative peace”. As a result, official memory politics in Croatia today largely focuses on remembering only the mandate of the UN mission, while the larger context of every-day peace-building and community-building is missing from collective memory. Arguably, this is because peaceful reintegration was seen merely as a technical process of a limited duration and not a long-term effort. This is evident, for example, from the fact that political leaders, when marking the anniversary of peaceful reintegration, mention mainly the technical aspects of the UNTAES mission, its achievements and its mandate, while information on later efforts from different social actors to build trust in peacefully reintegrated territories is largely missing.

Furthermore, we argue that political leaders made systematic effort to marginalize the memory of peace domestically, because it could have been disruptive to the dominant narrative of the war which is grounded in heroic

military victory. However, as we attempted to show, although memory of peace was not useful for political elites at home, since it did not fit into the official narrative about the war, it proved useful at the international level as a unique Croatian experience and a “foreign policy export product.” As other authors have remarked, “among politicians in Croatia, there is an idea of the usefulness of the experiences gained in the process of peaceful reintegration, but there is also a noticeable lack of willingness to see this process as permanent, which is being implemented even after the end of the formal UNTAES mission and the return of Croatian state institutions to the Danube region” (Savković 2024, 163).

In the article, we expose the mechanisms that were behind the marginalization of both the peace agreement and the peace-building process in different memory politics and practices. We show how political elites, when marking the anniversary of the end of peaceful reintegration, actually put emphasis on another event from Croatia’s recent history, international recognition of Croatia, that happened on the same date. Furthermore, we show the “slowness” of including memory of peaceful reintegration into collective memory of the war, since it took Croatian authorities more than twenty years after peaceful reintegration had ended to mark the date when it happened as a national day and with a state-sponsored ceremony. We also demonstrate how history textbooks slowly include more detailed discussions of the peace agreement and peaceful reintegration, although textbook representation of these topics is still lacking. Textbooks place much greater attention to military aspects of the armed conflict and to military battles than to the peace building process. We argue that this provides students with suboptimal ground for exploring how the conflict was peacefully resolved in the end. The potential effect of the marginalization of peaceful reintegration in history teaching is reflected as the weak knowledge that students in Croatia today possess of this topic. Arguably, socially available knowledge and public remembrance of the peace process are scarce and this results in the ignorance of younger generations about the process.

We further traced activities of civil society organisations, which we view as “memory activists” from below, and showed how they advocated for social transformation of the commemorative culture from commemorating only violent events to commemorative practices that would also include memory of non-violent attempts to end the war and to achieve peace. We argue that by tracing their memory work, which we see as an example of “slow memory”, we actually trace slow processes of change in collective memory of the war.

In the article, we also warn of the danger of marginalising memory of peace, because this results in understanding conflicts as necessarily and inevitably

violent. This can cause normalisation of violence in public space and discourse. Insisting on remembering only violence leads to perceptions that non-violent alternatives did not exist, although final reintegration of the Croatian territory, and ultimately the end of the war, happened exactly because a peace process and peaceful resolution of the conflict made it possible. We do not, however, argue that past violence should not be remembered and victims of this violence commemorated, but rather that memory of war should also include memories of peaceful episodes and attempts at non-violent initiatives for conflict resolution.

With this article, we wish to contribute to slow memory studies and argue that scholars should pay attention to efforts by different actors to introduce into public memory the experiences and attempts at non-violent initiatives and peaceful resolutions of conflicts, rather than focusing only on violent events when commemorating war. We suggest that paying more attention to peace processes and peace initiatives and the way they are remembered/included in public memory, or to their absence, could contribute to denormalisation of military solutions and to more critical thinking about the inevitability of violence in conflict situations. Thus, we propose that slow memory scholars move the attention from research on memory of violence during conflicts to the messy reality of their aftermath and to focus on those slow-moving changes and processes that are harder to recognize and acknowledge due to their “everydayness” and their slowness. This could not only enrich the field of memory studies, but also influence how we, as individuals and societies, understand our agency and choices we have at hand in the face of conflicts.

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