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# **Between Human Rights and Nationalism: Silencing as a Mechanism of Memory in the Post-Yugoslav Wars' Serbia**

LEA DAVID\*

*Anthropology Department, Haifa University*

**Abstract:** Just as norm-complying states adapt their practices to expected behaviors, post-conflict states are forced to adapt their practices and rhetoric to better resist pressures to comply with particular norms. Building on this insight, this paper analyzes three mechanisms through which the ruling elite in present day Serbia strategically constructed commemorative arenas for the purpose of dealing with the opposing demands and norms made both on the international as well as the national level: 1) de-contextualization of memory contents, 2) creation of social narratives of suffering and 3) promotion of the Holocaust memory as a screen memory. These are strategies of silencing which prevent public debate, representation, negotiation and are intended to reduce the tension between the contradicting demands at the international and the domestic levels. I suggest that the gap between the local and global forces and the changing role of the state, makes it possible for memory content to become a currency, a means of achieving certain real or symbolic benefits.

**Keywords:** Serbia, contested past, international demands, mechanisms of silencing

## **Introduction**

“We live in a country where, as to this date, neither our victory nor our defeat has yet been declared in the wars, in which Serbia was not officially involved. It has not yet been said whether this war, to whose victims a monument should be raised was a war of aggression or defense; who the heroes are and who were the criminals and was it worth any of it (...) We live in the country where we are increasingly forced to learn the truth from others because we ourselves do not want to talk about it.”<sup>1</sup>

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1 Mitrinović, Biljana. 2003. “Koliko traju večne vatre?” NIN, January, 16, <http://www.nin.co.rs/2003-01/16/26864.html>

\* [lead@post.bgu.ac.il](mailto:lead@post.bgu.ac.il)

This article, based on an extensive empirical research conducted between 2009–2012,<sup>2</sup> deals with the ways in which a contested past may be negotiated and channeled into collective memory. However, where disagreement regarding a difficult past exists, the manner in which collective memory is constructed is no longer solely an internal matter; external factors exert significant influence on local memory.<sup>3</sup> Post-conflict states, or more correctly, their ruling elites, face enormous pressures from both domestic and international audiences to please their often contradictory demands. These political elites often struggle 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. The aim of the ruling elites is, to construct a certain sellable image for international display while simultaneously shaping a certain national identity to accord with local demands. Consequently, many tensions between global and local demands exist, and these tensions influence the process of reinforcing particular identities.<sup>4</sup>

In this paper I suggest that the process of the construction of collective memory in Serbia after the wars of the 1990s has proved to be an exemplary case of how a post-conflict nation-state may best manage its contested past in order to bridge the gap between domestic demands and those of the international community. States often struggle to find ways to simultaneously deal both with the transitional justice mechanisms and the human rights demands forced upon them by the international community and the local requirements to be acknowledged as the righteous party in the conflict. In order to deal with the conflicting demands, the ruling political elite created and adopted mechanisms of silencing. “Silencing” means the closure of political space to any other political actors and the control of public debate. These mechanisms suited the need for strategic maneuvering between the international and the domestic demands. All three mechanisms: 1) decontextualization of memory contents, 2) creation of social narratives of suffering and 3) promotion of the Holocaust memory as a screen memory, are strategies of closing political spaces which thus prevent public debate, representation, negotiation and compromise. These strategies of silencing were intended to reduce the tension between the contradicting demands at the international and the domestic levels. Thus, the ruling elite “occupied” political spaces,<sup>5</sup> in order to maneuver and mediate the international demand to confront Serbia’s criminal national past and the domestic demands to be validated as a righteous party in the conflict.

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2 My research consisted of about 40 semi-structured interviews with the veteran organizations’ representatives and governmental officials together with the collection of rich archival data from the governmental databases, numerous newspaper articles and other supplementary materials.

3 Blustein 2012.

4 Subotić 2013.

5 Grinberg 2010.

## **Decontextualization of Memory Contents**

‘Victims and war veterans are not the same thing. It is only possible in Serbia, to equate victims with veterans. It is due to this international pressure, apparent in the media and NGOs. You cannot fight it. (...) The only way is to reach a compromise, to suck it up!’<sup>6</sup> Or, ‘We are not in the position to demand things, we lost those wars, we have to understand it! So whatever they give we take!’<sup>7</sup>

The rationale behind choosing this population of war veterans lies in the fact 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 ‘healing’ cannot be completed without addressing the suffering they endured in past wars. Mnemonic groups are memory agents that, through their discursive and performative practices, may impact the processes of memory construction in both private and public spheres. It has been estimated that, in Serbia alone, the veteran population from the wars of the 1990s numbers somewhere between 400,000 to 800,000 people. However in Serbia of today, the veteran population which should have been the most significant mnemonic group involved in forging a national memory, has been left out of the process. I suggest that the silencing and neutralizing of the veterans of the wars of the 1990s in the post-war Serbia was partially enabled through the use of the mechanism of fragmentation and de-contextualization of memory contents.<sup>8</sup> This mechanism is demonstrated in the case of the war veteran’s mnemonic battles, in which the political elite was engaged in fragmenting the war veteran population. 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.<sup>9</sup>

The political elite primarily intended to mitigate the veterans’ political power,<sup>10</sup> weaken their struggle for their rights, and to reduce the financial burden which war veterans might impose on the state budgets. However their actions were also directed towards maintaining supremacy over the memory agenda. The first step of seizing control over the veteran population and of mitigating their potential political and social power was done very effectively through persistently fragmenting them. This was carefully achieved by using policies of ascribing different privileges to different veteran groups. The best

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6 Željko Vasiljević, ‘War Army Invalids,’ interview conducted on 28 April, 2011.

7 Zoran Marković, ‘War Army Invalids,’ interview conducted on 27 April 2011.

8 Numbers vary greatly and are a contested topic since there is no official institution that has systematically collected data on the veteran and related populations. There isn’t an exact number of people, either of those officially recruited nor volunteers who belonged to various paramilitary units, or of even the wounded or dead. Additionally, there are currently more than 100 organizations operating at the state, municipality and district levels. The strongest among them are: 1) War Army Invalids, 2) Fighters of the War of the 1990s, and 3) Association of the Families of Soldiers who Died in the line of Duty During the Wars 1990–1999 of Republic of Serbia.

9 David 2015.

10 David 2014c.

example of such policy towards the veteran population is to be found in the affair over per diem disbursement for the participation in the wars when a group of war veterans sued the state of Serbia at the European Court for Human Rights in Strasbourg, claiming that the government violated their rights and discriminated against some of them.<sup>11</sup> All governments, regardless of their political tendencies, supported this policy, which consequently led to endless quarrels, disputes and allegations between different veteran groups.

After the veterans had been extensively fragmented, the state found successful ways to filter and decontextualize the war veterans' memories, thereby bridging both the domestic and the international aspirations. The ruling political elite, through mediation of political spaces and the state institutions, through mostly not intentionally,<sup>12</sup> filtered and decontextualized the war veterans' memory contents in two main ways: through the adoption and implementation of the European Standards laid out in the Law on Associations; and through changes in the process of granting financial support to war veteran associations. The ruling elite had concluded that filtering and de-contextualizing certain adverse memory contents may better Serbia's chances of being accepted to the European Union, even though neither the Europeanization nor the Transitional Justice mechanisms directly proscribe what should be remembered or forgotten. However, in the intertextuality of the processes it is clearly suggested that praising Serbs as heroes of the wars in the 1990s is not an option.<sup>13</sup> Veterans speak out loud about the reasons why they have been neglected by the state: "There is that constant tendency among the political elite to ingratiate themselves with the EU, to show themselves as Serbian peacemakers, and logically we are the stain in that story, so the easiest way is just to crush us."<sup>14</sup>

After having fragmented them,<sup>15</sup> the ruling political elite has also found an efficient way, through implementation of filtering and de-contextualization of memory contents, to reshape veterans' memories. Understanding the EU as a "big brother,"<sup>16</sup> but still unwilling to conduct a genuine debate on Serbia's contested past, the filtering and de-contextualization of the memory contents proved to be a satisfactory solution for the ruling political elites in the attempt to reduce the tensions both at the international and the domestic levels. Levy and Sznajder<sup>17</sup> rightly pointed out that de-contextualization of the concrete memories

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11 David 2015.

12 I thank Prof. James Seroka for his valuable remark at the Belgrade Security Forum (2014) that, though both fragmentation and decontextualization actually took place, it is cannot be argued those processes were concisely premeditated and directed by the ruling political elite.

13 Zoran Alimpić, the former Belgrade Mayor Deputy openly expressed his concern asking how it would look like if Serbia was to glorify the wars of the 1990s, interview conducted on 11 May 2011.

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

15 On this issue see more in David 2015.

16 On discourses developed in Serbia on the EU see more in Petrović Tanja (2012) "YUROPA – Jugoslovensko nasleđe i politike budućnosti u postjugoslovenskim društvima." Edicija Reč: Beograd.

17 Levy and Sznajder 2010.

in particular suits the needs of the ruling political elites as it enables the closure of political spaces. The institutionalization of the de-contextualized and filtered memories, which requires a shift from concrete memories to abstract remembrance of barbarous acts, always occurs at the expense of the barbarity of these acts.<sup>18</sup> What is at stake is the transformation of lived and witness-embodied memory into institutionally shaped and sustained memory. This transition corresponds with the inevitable shift from the concrete to abstract. The idea is to reinforce certain categories but to avoid going into any specifics. In other words, wars are bad but liberation wars are a necessity. Thus the real victims are those who fought those wars: not some concrete wars, but wars in general; not some concrete soldiers but soldiers as a category.

This particular logic was assigned to the ways in which the war veteran organizations were to be granted financial support. We may learn from the overall list of projects that were granted financial support from 2008 onwards that the radically different memories across historical lines were promoted. One can see, for example that from 2008 on, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy in charge of veteran population in general,<sup>19</sup> granted money in the same breath to the WWI organizations, partisan organizations from the WWII, descendents of the Balkan wars in 1912–1913, several organizations with some variations on the generic name 'Homeland wars,' several war veteran organizations from the 1990s' wars and several Chetnik organizations.<sup>20</sup> Such a diverse palette of memory agendas is quite striking and once again, it might appear to reflect a true democratic change in Serbia.

However, I suggest here, that there are particular trends present, especially when it comes to framing the memory agenda regarding the wars of the 1990s. Amazingly, in 2011 when 59 organizations submitted projects<sup>21</sup> and in 2012 when 65 organizations submitted projects,<sup>22</sup> none of the veteran organizations' of the wars of the 1990s submitted any proposals specific to the wars in which they fought. None of the projects granted money mentions any specific battle, event, troop or even individual; neither indeed do any of the overall submitted projects: any possible identification to indicate places, dates or people is omitted from all of the project proposals submitted by the war veteran organizations of the wars in the 1990s. On the one hand, this is, without any doubt, a direct consequence of the general unwillingness to conduct a national debate on the contested wars of the 1990s. On the other hand, the war veterans' deliberate covering up of any specific details

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18 Levy and Sznajder 2010, 14.

19 This included not only the veteran organizations of the wars in the 1990s but also organizations which promoted memory agendas of WWII, WWI and even the Balkan wars (1912–1913).

20 See for example: Republika Srbija (2011) Ministarstvo Rada i Socijalne politike: Poziv za podnošenje predloga programa/projekata, Sužbeni glasnik, [www.minrzs.gov.rs](http://www.minrzs.gov.rs)

21 Đorđević, Katarina. 2011. „Bitka za podelu novca među veteranima.” *Politika*, April 24. <http://www.politika.rs/rubrike/Drustvo/Bitka-za-podelu-novca-medju-veteranima.lt.html>

22 „Lista prihvaćenih projekata koje je raspisalo Ministarstvo rada i socijalne politike iz oblasti negovanja tradicija oslobodilačkih ratova Srbije i poboljšanja položaja boraca, veterana invalida i porodica palih boraca.“ (2012) Službeni glasnik Republike Srbije. Beograd. Br. 5/12. 27 January 2012.

regarding their military service, is closely connected to the fact they are highly stigmatized group that is associated with military defeat and/or criminal activities that transpired during the wars. The present social context of being fragmented and marginalized further enables particular framing of the war veterans' memories where the concrete is reduced so as to be transformed into universal.

Not only does this process of abstraction facilitate escaping from dealing with the misconducts in the wars of the 1990s and evading all national responsibility, but it is also makes possible the framing and stigmatizing of the war veterans primarily as victims. Out of the 15 war veterans' projects submitted in 2011, 12 dealt with the wars of the 1990s, with those selected and granted financial support dealing exclusively with psychological rehabilitation in connection with the PTSD syndrome. In 2012 the pattern was the same as in 2011, with 16 out of 19 projects fitting these criteria. Such particular framing is enabled through the instrumentalization of the universal notion that 'wars make everyone a victim' which downplays the crimes through the idea that we are all victims.<sup>23</sup> Psycho-social recovery and rehabilitation, together with PTSD is used as a device for the purposes of renationalization of conceptions of victimhood. It is precisely this absence of hierarchies of victims and perpetrators that de-contextualizes and de-historicizes the actual deeds of the past injustice.<sup>24</sup>

On the one hand, the category of 'fighter' was reinforced: various war veteran organizations representing different wars across historical lines, such as the Balkan wars, WWI, WWII, and the wars of the 1990s, were granted financial aid. On the other hand, it seems rather clear that only organizations that contextualized their war experience as traumatic, and highlighted their victimhood, were selected as grant recipients.<sup>25</sup>

Processes of filtering and de-contextualization by which memories of concrete (particular) atrocities are transformed into abstract (universal) violations and suffering of humanity prove to be crucial for satisfying the contradicting demands at the international and the national level. It is a process through which, instead of accepting responsibility for the misdeeds, the state tries to find the lowest common denominator between the international demands to adopt human rights regime while at the same time to be acknowledged locally as the righteous party in the past conflict. Due to the process of Europeanization, Serbian governments have to filter and decontextualize certain adverse memory contents to better their chances of being accepted into the European Union. Precisely here, in the gap between the local and global forces memory contents become a valuable resource. It is the changing role of the state that makes it possible for memory content to become a currency. For example, war veterans agree to be labeled as victims and not heroes in return for some basic societal and symbolic privileges. As a result, the state continued the previous pattern of Serbian victimization.

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23 Levy and Sznajder 2010, 135.

24 *Ibid.*, 131.

25 David 2015.

## **Social Narratives of Suffering**

“The soldiers of the Radnički battalion sacrificed their own lives to enable the rescue of enormous numbers of people as well as the continuation of the armed struggle for the liberation of the country,” The battle of Kadinjača, November 1941.<sup>26</sup>

The second mechanism deals with the ways through which the social narratives of suffering are endorsed and embraced to further promote the characterization of Serbs as victims. The narrative and commemorative networks of victimhood were developed as a way of tacitly claiming the righteousness of the wars in the 1990s wherein the Serbs were betrayed, sacrificed, expatriated and destroyed. In order to promote this memory agenda, it was necessary to construct wide sets of societal infrastructures to successfully enroot the vision of the victimized nationhood.

By careful assessment of the evolving national calendar during the last decade, understood not as a cognitive map,<sup>27</sup> designed to ensure mnemonic socialization through recalling certain “sacred” moments,<sup>28</sup> I show that the Serbian political elite have managed Serbia’s contested past through cover-ups and cultural reframing rather than through public acknowledgement<sup>29</sup> while manipulating memory contents and using it as a resource to ingratiate to the EU. The newly emerging national calendar came to life after a process of debate lasting several years, in which an eight-member committee,<sup>30</sup> together with various professionals, “negotiated” over Serbian history and past events. The initiative to form such a committee had already begun in 1997, but was finally established in 2001.<sup>31</sup> The last and complete version of The Program was designed and published on the 11th of March 2009 by the “Committee for Fostering Traditions of the Liberation Wars”, an official governmental body of the Republic of Serbia. The rationale of those prolonged negotiations over Serbia’s past was to find a suitable formula, “to adapt it to local needs, and to align it with international standards and with similar programs established by governments in many other European countries”.<sup>32</sup>

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26 Republika Srbija, Obdor za negovanje tradicija oslobodičkih ratova, “Državni program obeležavanja godišnjica istorijskih događaja i oslobodilačkih ratova Srbije”, broj 401-00-00024/2009-11/2, datum 11. Mart 2009. Beograd, 10.

27 Zerubavel 2004.

28 Zerubavel 2003.

29 David 2014a.

30 For the President of the Committee: President of the Committee of Public Service of the Government of the Republic of Serbia; members of the Committee: 1) President of the Committee for Defense and Security, 2) Minister of Social Affairs, 3) Minister of Education and Sports, 4) Minister of Culture, 5) Minister of Religion, 6) Minister of Urban Planning and Construction and 7) deputy Minister for Social Policy.

31 “Odluka o osnivanju odbora za negovanje tradicija oslobodilačkih ratova Srbije”, Službeni Glasnik, 38/97, i 46/01.

32 The advisor in the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, personal correspondence, 29 December 2010.

The master narrative is purposefully centered on the 19th century and is designed to legitimize the current Serbian state as one based on democratic values and born from a prolonged and arduous struggle for freedom. The 19th century commemorates the foundation of Serbia's legal system and institutions. The reason for placing the master commemorative narrative in the 19th century is well explained by the member of the Committee for National Holidays<sup>33</sup> who said it would be possible to justify such a choice to Europe, since Serbia did not chose a date that exclusively refers to national military history, but also to statehood and constitutional history.<sup>34</sup> Avoiding confrontation and seeking the acceptance to the European (mnemonic) Community, the leading idea of the Committee was to choose a national holiday that will be acceptable for the united Europe.<sup>35</sup>

The whole calendar illustrates the government's best efforts at overcoming the gap between the international and the domestic demands. On the one hand, the calendar intends to present Serbia as a democratic and progressive state. Naturalization of "European values" is achieved by presenting Serbia, from her early beginnings, as developing according to democratic principles. Thus, one can see for example that Candelmas, currently the main commemorative day in Serbia, has been chosen not only to stress the liberation character of the Serbian wars but also to claim democratic foundations of the Serbian state via the adoption of the Constitution in 1835. Nineteenth-century Serbia is portrayed as being enlightened, thus planting the seed for further democratic development from the establishment of an executive authority,<sup>36</sup> to diplomatic skills during the Second Serbian Uprising<sup>37</sup> and finally with the glorious declaration of the Constitution.<sup>38</sup> The culmination, as shown in "The Program", was to come in WWII where Serbia bravely fought fascism and anti-Semitism while supporting "nonviolence and understanding".<sup>39</sup>

By contrast, on the local level, the promoted memory of Serbian victimhood is presented and preserved in seven<sup>40</sup> of the 21 commemorative days. This not only suggests that Serbia

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33 Radoš Ljušić.

34 Kovač 2003.

35 *Ibid.*

36 August 27, 1805.

37 April 2, 1815.

38 February 15, 1835.

39 Republika Srbija, (2009) Obdor za negovanje tradicija oslobodičkih ratova, "Državni program obeležavanja godišnjica istorijskih događaja i oslobodilačkih ratova Srbija", broj 401-00-00024/2009-11/2, datum 11. mart, Beograd, 6.

40 1) The Day of Remembrance for Those Killed in the NATO Bombardment of 1999, 2) The 6th of April Bombardment 1941 – the beginning of the Second World War, 3) The Breach of the Thessaloniki Front in 1918, 4) The Day of Remembrance for Civilians and Serbian soldiers in the First World War, 5) The Day of Remembrance for Genocide victims in the Second World War, 6) The Day of Truce in the First World War, 7) Battle of Kadinjača in 1941, and 8) Battle of Čegar in 1809. All of these days are narrated in a similar fashion, where the main theme portrayed is the sacrifice of the Serbs, with their victimhood transformed into heroism.



perpetuates already well embodied patterns of victimhood, but that such patterning makes room for the expression of grievances, unresolved historical accounts and comprehensive feelings of injustice. The calendar deliberately chooses to revive and symbolically rebuild 19th century Serbia by placing and enforcing the new Serbian commemorative master narrative in the 19th century, and thereby, completely ignoring the wars of the 1990s. Apart from March 24, the date commemorating the beginning of the NATO bombardment of Serbia, which further promotes Serbian victimhood, the wars of the 1990s and Serbian participation therein are conspicuously absent from the calendar. Indeed, according to the new Serbian calendar, these wars and atrocities apparently never happened, and if they did happen, then Serbia had nothing to do with them. More importantly, such tailoring blurs Serbia's responsibility for the wars in the 1990s.<sup>41</sup>

In other words, the new Serbian calendar is made both to meet European expectations and to further Serbian interests of joining the EU, but also to allow wider audiences in Serbia to express feelings of animosity, injustice and frustration as a means of settling historical accounts. In many ways, Serbia is behaving like a job applicant who is trying to "look good and lies to do it".<sup>42</sup> This attitude is supported by conformity to European standards, as well as by a self-presentation exemplifying Serbia's good and moral deeds. The latter includes the struggle against fascism, a culture of negotiation, and continuously fighting anti-semitism.

### **Holocaust Discourse as a Screen Memory**

At the opening of the "Topovske Šupe" memorial plaque, on the first commemorations of the International Holocaust Day in 2006, the president of the Belgrade assembly Milorad Perović stated: "This event is especially significant today when Serbia is making huge efforts to join the European Union".<sup>43</sup>

The third mechanism, developed by the ruling political elite and intended to cover an open debate on Serbia's contested past, is the creation of the Holocaust discourse. I suggested that the Holocaust memory discourse in Serbia has been currently promoted by the state in its effort to conceal any political space where an encounter between the state and the civil society can occur and redirect public debate regarding the wars of the 1990s.<sup>44</sup> Thus, in Serbia, Holocaust memory is currently being brought to the fore as a platform for articulating national interests and thus is activated as a screen-memory. Moreover, I suggest that the state embraces the Holocaust memory and uses it as a pretense for the sake of a trade off for the EU economical benefits and as way of improving Serbia's image.

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41 David 2014b.

42 Weiss and Feldman 2006.

43 U petak otvaranje spomen-parka "Topovske Šupe", 25.01.2006. <http://www.beograd.rs>

44 David 2013.

The concept of screen memory serves to draw attention to the complexities of social memory, as it simultaneously produces and interrogates knowledge about the past as a way to both conceptualize and trouble contemporary notions of social memory.<sup>45</sup> Thus, it is not that the Holocaust has become a single universally shared memory, as Levy and Sznajder<sup>46</sup> envisaged, rather as Assmann<sup>47</sup> suggested - it has become the paradigm or template through which other genocides and historical traumas are very often perceived, presented or shuttered. The Holocaust has thereby not replaced other traumatic memories around the globe but has provided a language for their articulation or a wider context that enables reframing of the past.<sup>48</sup> In Serbia it is a zero-sum game where, instead of dealing with their roles and responsibilities, Serbian governments are engaged in reframing and obfuscating the contested elements of their national past. In Serbia, Holocaust memory discourse is promoted not only to better Serbia's image on the international stage but also to equate the Serbian victims with the Jewish victims. While in Croatia Holocaust memory was subsumed to the upgrading of the Jasenovac museum,<sup>49</sup> in Serbia from 2006, the ruling political elite did actually start promoting Holocaust education. The real power behind the adoption and promotion of the Holocaust memory in Serbia lies in the fact that Serbs were perceived both internally and externally as those who helped saving the Jews during WWII and as their "brothers in suffering".<sup>50</sup> This widely held common perception was especially prevalent during the Milošević regime and was further endorsed by the Serbian Orthodox Church claiming that "anti-Semitism is not our national tradition".<sup>51</sup> Byford rightly pointed out that generalized statements about Serbian and Orthodox tolerance rooted in the common statement that "Serbs never hated the Jews" is used to cover up the very same xenophobic and anti-Semitic elements of Serbian nationalist discourse that it is meant to negate and refute.<sup>52</sup> Thus, the necessary societal framework for bringing the Holocaust to the forefront and framing it as a context for the promotion of victimhood of the Serbs were already in place when the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) took Holocaust education and commemorations under its patronage. The SOC has proved to be a major actor in promoting both commemoration of the Holocaust and education on the Holocaust, especially from 2003 when the Jasenovac Committee of the Synod of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church was founded. However, the primary goal of the Jasenovac Committee was to establish the claim that Jasenovac is the new Serbian Kosovo, as the ultimate place of Serbian suffering.<sup>53</sup>

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45 Freeman, Niensan and Melamed 2013.

46 Levy and Sznajder 2005.

47 Assmann 2007.

48 Byford 2007.

49 With virtually no one who researches the Holocaust in Croatia as discussed at the international workshop: *The Holocaust in Yugoslavia: History, Memory and Culture*, Yad Vashem Museum, Jerusalem, 2013.

50 MacDonald 2005.

51 "Dan borbe protiv fašizma." 11 November 2008, [www.naslovi.net](http://www.naslovi.net)

52 Byford 2006.

53 Byford 2007.

The ruling political elites in Serbia perceived that the Holocaust, from the international perspective, has proved to be a suitable device for gaining certain privileges and for claiming membership in a unified moral community. Thus, only after realizing that promoting the Holocaust memory might work in their favor, both at the domestic and international level, the Holocaust became an important issue for the ruling elites. Mixing and merging different and at times even contradicting agendas promoted at the local and international level, the Holocaust came in handy for the Serbian political elite as a device for simultaneously satisfying both domestic and international demands. Moreover, the creation of the Holocaust discourse serves the ruling political elite as a means to cover up any open debate on Serbia's contested past. Thus, in Serbia, Holocaust memory is brought up to the fore as a platform for articulating national interests, and not as reference point for opening a debate on Serbia's contested past but, to the contrary, as a cover up for the compromising past.

In other words, looking from outside, embracing the Holocaust memory is understood as a necessary step suitable for international display that adds extra points and improves Serbia's chances of getting accepted into the EU. Looking from the inside, the promotion of the Holocaust simultaneously beats several "flies" at once: it seemingly promotes both the Serbian victimization throughout history by equating Serbian victims with Holocaust victims, and serves as an exemplary case for the highest standards of appreciation of human rights. It also purposefully constructs a discourse that covers and redirects any open and sincere discussion on the accountability and responsibility on Serbia's part for the wars in the 1990s.<sup>54</sup> However, Holocaust memory discourse is utilized and tailored in such way that, while in theory it is supposed to preach human and minority rights, in practice, it not only actually promotes nationalism and Serbian victimhood but also disguises the discourse on the role of Serbia in the wars of the 1990s.

### **Memory Content: Victim Is a New Hero**

While these strategies determined how the process of collective memory construction looks, Serbia's triple contested pasts<sup>55</sup> determined the question of the content, of what is to be remembered/forgotten. Serbia, similar to other ethno political groups in the former Yugoslavia, is deeply immersed in the role of being a victim.<sup>56</sup> This is the case, I suggested, because the victimization narrative is found to be the most suitable in bridging the gap between demands at the international and domestic levels. This choice is, however, not a result only, as it has been widely argued until now, of the embedded historical and cultural patterns, but was also the most suitable option available, in providing a satisfactory solution for both the international and the domestic communities. The role of the victim enables nations to select one particular past that annuls other pasts. For example, promoting

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54 David 2013.

55 Post-war, post-communist and post-Yugoslav.

56 Franović 2008.

Serbia's sacrifices for the sake of Europe in WWI and their brotherhood in suffering with the Jewish people in WWII allows issues of Serbian responsibility for other events in their history to be swept under the carpet. Considering the events of the 1990s wars, it becomes apparent that this is actually a very powerful positioning. It allows Serbia to play the role of an under-privileged and victimized nation that cannot be held responsible for the wars, while helping to forge a desired national identity. This particular memory framing explains why both in the newly tailored national calendar and in the emerging Holocaust discourse, potentiating the prism focusing precisely on the Serbian victimhood in the country's national past, was found to be suitable for both international and domestic display. Embracing Serbian victimhood where Serbs are to be perceived, both internally and externally as victims, served (and still serves) the attempts of the ruling elite to close political spaces to any frank debate on the wars of the 1990s.

Thus, it seems that the choices in memory content selection were not random. On the contrary – they followed a particular logic. Caught between the opposing international and domestic demands, the ruling political elite in Serbia provided other actors with limited or no access to political spaces where any open debate on the recent wars could take place. Nevertheless, the role of the state as the main memory promoter in the process of Europeanization didn't disappear but was altered. The imbalance in power between Serbia and the EU, expressed throughout the processes of Europeanization, the rise of transitional justice mechanisms and the human rights regime, forces the post-conflict governments to become artful and canny when mediating between external and internal factors. While there is an extensive literature that deals with the ways by which states manage transitions to democracy, including the evasion of laws, opportunism, nepotism, favoritism and clientelism, camouflage and double moral standards,<sup>57</sup> the change in the role of the state in the process of forging a collective memory is rarely ever addressed. This functional change, from being the source of power to becoming a mediator and often a gatekeeper explains why memory is extensively perceived 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. Consequently, 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.

In this sense, victimhood seems to be the best suited position to choose as it deconstructs the category of justice and responsibility. In human rights discourse, victims and perpetrators are usually referred to as two completely separate and homogenous sets of people, while in reality not all victims are the same, nor are all perpetrators the same, and some victims are also perpetrators.<sup>58</sup> On the one hand, the universal human rights

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57 Sztompka 2004.

58 Borer 2003.

stance rejects the hierarchy of victims, while on the other “it is precisely the absence of the hierarchy that de-contextualizes and de-historicizes the actual deeds of past injustice”<sup>59</sup> Thus, it seems beneficial for nations with compromising pasts to choose exactly the motif of victimization as it promotes sympathy instead of responsibility. In the end, it looks like the question is not why nations with contested pasts chose to promote their own victimization, rather, how do they produce societal webs and networks of suffering to enforce and embed the victimization into life of a nation. The category of victim was found to be a suitable one. For the international community it was meant to express full appreciation and understanding that wars are terrible things, which only produce victims on all sides; while for the domestic community, reframing war veterans as victims was a mode of settling the internal differences between those who perceived the war veterans as criminals and those who recognized them as national heroes.

Having said that, however, it is important to stress that I do not imply here that a collective memory is solely an artificial construction but rather a competing and negotiating arena wherein individuals and collective selves operate within a discursive terrain.<sup>60</sup> The way collective memory is forged is fundamentally shaped by resources that are either available or not, with this being a straightforward outcome of the existing power relations in the society.

## **Conclusion**

Trapped in between the opposing international and domestic demands and defined by the power-relations with the EU, all the ruling political elites in the post-Yugoslav spaces, without exception, limited the access that other mnemonic groups have to political spaces where any open debate on the recent wars could take place. At the political level, the processes of settling accounts with the past in terms of responsibilities, accountabilities and institutional justice are overlaid with ethical imperatives and moral demands. These imperatives, however, may be hard to settle given the post-conflict political hostilities, in which social catastrophes unleash the destruction of social bonds. This seems to apply also to the ruling elite in Serbia that has found itself in a rather problematic position. On the one hand, the opening of the political spaces for a frank and truthful discussion of Serbia's role and responsibility for the wars of the 1990s would cause “Serbia's poor democratic potential to be trapped by its strong, populist right-wing”<sup>61</sup> The effect of opening political spaces for negotiation of the contested past, would not only cause general instability, additionally burden the state budget which is already in deficit, but might actually cause riots and new social divisions. The process of reckoning with the past in Serbia means

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59 Levy and Sznajder 2010, 131.

60 Verdery 1991.

61 Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia (2012) Annual Report on Human Rights in 2011: European Options Obstructed: Belgrade, 1.

stepping into the unknown, opening a Pandora's box in which shadows of the past are hidden, waiting to be unleashed.

On the other hand, by closing the political spaces, Serbia is "not taking any substantive steps in the domain of transitional justice which causes factors contributing to destabilization of neighboring countries".<sup>62</sup> Consequently, as long as it fails to open its political spaces for reckoning with the past, Serbia is actually moving backwards away from the desired EU candidacy. Faced with this dilemma where the situation is at best described by an oxymoron of building stability through enforced instability seems to leave no other choice but to manipulate these two very opposing demands. Precisely here, the mechanisms of silencing open public debates are meant to reduce the gap between the opposing demands at local and international level.

Moreover, I suggest here that it is not memory *per se* that matters. All sides who participate in memory construction, from transnational actors, nation state to communities of memory and individual practitioners, when entering the arena of articulation, such as social and political spaces in which various actors struggle for their specific memories understand that memory is a tool in achieving very particular goals. Finally, the coupling of EU candidacy acceptance with human rights values makes treating memory contents as currency possible. However, the unfortunate outcome is that at the top-down level ethnic nationalism is being reinforced and strengthened and not dissolved by the Europeanization process while simultaneously at the bottom-up level a multitude of contradicting and competing narratives are created and preserved, awaiting for the apposite social setting to burst out.

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62 *Ibid.*, 1.

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