



A LAND FIT FOR HEROES

Croatian Veterans of the Homeland War

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War's wounds can only be healed by those who have suffered its fury.

Deborah Cohen
The War Come Home

0. Introduction

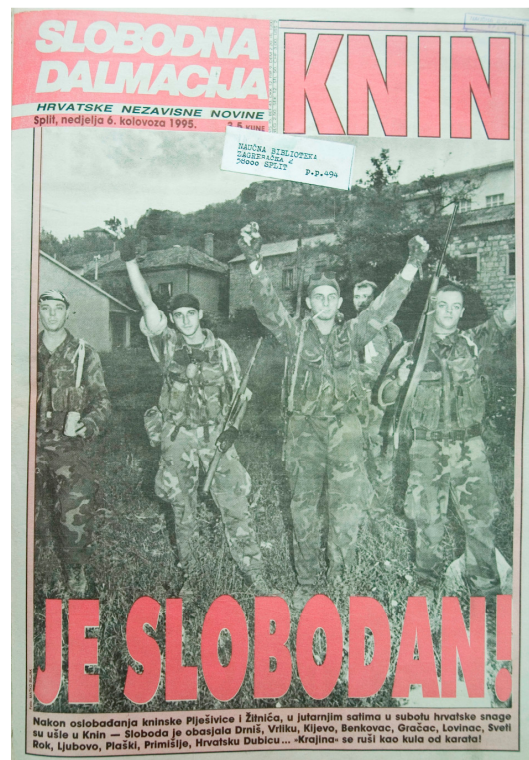
0.1. General Introduction

On 5 August 1995 Croatian forces entered the region known as *Krajina*, or military frontier. Historically, this was a more or less self-governing frontier region established by the Habsburg Empire in 1538 to serve as a buffer zone against the advancing Ottoman forces. The *Krajina* was inhabited by, among other, a large Serb population who remained inside Croatia when the Habsburg Empire collapsed, and *Krajina* became Croatian soil. Roughly three quarters of a century later, as Yugoslavia spiralled into its violent break-up in the early nineties, this border region was the ignition point for the conflict in Croatia, following the “log-revolution” and the establishment of the para-state Republic of Serbian Krajina (*Republika Srpska Krajina*). As the tables of history turned once again four years later, the Armed Forces of the Republic of Croatia (*Oružane snage Republike Hrvatske* – OSHR) were re-establishing control of the area which comprised approximately one third of the entire Croatian territory, while the Croatian soldiers were celebrated in the public sphere as liberators and noble defenders of Croatia’s self-established right as a sovereign nation. Their sacrifices “on the altar of the Homeland”, as the popular phrase went, had been substantial, yet now they were part of the winning team again, and the soldiers of operation “Storm” (*Oluja*) interacted with the media and the public in an intoxicating celebration of heroism, martyrdom and the rebirth of the Croatian state tradition. At this important and controversial point in modern Croatian history the fulfilment of the “thousand year old dream” of statehood

became the symbolical and mythical vantage point for the construction of the image of the Croatian soldier and veteran, the *branitelj*,¹ in the post-war discourse.

The initial great enthusiasm continued into the period following Operation Storm, which was marked by the increasingly tight control of President Franjo Tuđman and his party, the Croatian Democratic Union (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica* – HDZ), over the media and public discourse. Through the construction and idealization of the official Croatian narrative of the state’s re-birth, and its reproduction and enactment through public ritual and “historical” research, an atmosphere was created where the effort of the Croat people to realise their natural right to a state was viewed in an unquestionably favourable moral light. Any criticism of the role of the leadership in the theatre of war, not to mention of that of its main actors, the *branitelji*, was equated with treason. Croatia, as well as her bravest sons, was the moral imperative.

Twelve years later, when I undertook my first research-trip to Dalmatia in March 2008, the veterans were once again occupying the headlines of the national press, as they had done quite frequently since the war ended. The *branitelji*, now veterans instead of soldiers, surely never had really left the forefront of the discourse. Yet this time the media image of the *branitelji* was quite pronouncedly negative, as the question of “fake” veterans and the immense privileges some of them enjoyed while most citizens were experiencing increasingly difficult economic times, was dominating the discourse. Incredibly as it seems to most Croats, the number of veterans that allegedly participated in the Homeland War has been established at closer to 500 000, or well over 10% of the entire populace. However, the details behind this figure – especially how and on what basis the rights to these privileges have been distributed – have never been revealed to the public, as the register containing the names and grade of disability as well as details of



“Knin is Free!” Front page of the biggest Dalmatian daily, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, the day after the liberation of the “capital” of Krajina, Knin.

¹ Literally “defender” or “guardian”. *Branitelj* as a concept, however, is coloured by a distinct Croatian post-war setting, thereby conveying a meaning which this provisional definition fails to cover. I will return to a discussion of the term shortly, thereby approaching a more satisfactory understanding of the concept of the *branitelj*.

individual roles in the war has been proclaimed a national secret. Speculations run wide as to the reasons for this secrecy which especially HDZ is insisting on. When I visited the country, a badly needed revision and investigation of so called “fake veterans” was under way. The privileged group of veterans could constitute a potential for the manipulation of war records and the simulation of sufferings of war, which are difficult to diagnose, as well as a huge strain on an economy already under massive pressure, especially now that Croatia has entered a difficult recession. Suspicions that the scale of this fraud was immense had been fanned by rumours down to individual level, and many of my interlocutors were convinced that diagnoses, invalidity and war records had obviously been for sale for quite some time, and that, according to some undocumented claims, of 11 000 cases this investigation had looked in to at the time, more than 10 000 were believed to be so called “fake veterans”.

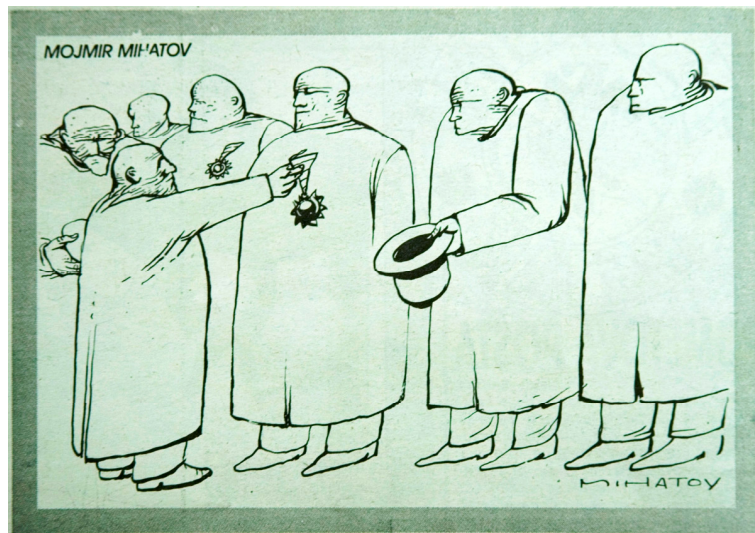
Demands were abundant that Jadranka Kosor of the Ministry of Family, Veterans, and Intergenerational Solidarity (*Ministarstvo obitelji, branitelja i međugeneracijske solidarnosti* – MOBMS) should grant public access to the disputed register, so that the full extent of this scandal could be known. In the words of Heni Erceg, one of Croatia’s most fearless and outspoken journalists, this “mother Teresa of all those who live on state benefits” was the high end of a “mafia chain” which tolerates corruption and threats in the name of the Homeland War, thus in fact ruining the dignity of those who *really* defended Croatia to secure the support of the “half million strong voting machinery” that the *branitelji* constituted.² Kosor had also earlier come under heavy verbal attack by another columnist, Ante Tomić of Jutarnji List, who put responsibility for the high number of *branitelji* committing suicide – 1632 since the end of the Homeland War, according to several sources – on Kosor, stating that her performance as minister was characterised by “cynicism and stupidity”. The large and still increasing number of *branitelji*, even though the war ended a decade and a half ago, under the auspices of Kosor had brought “inflation” to the status of the veterans, thus reducing the worth of their substantial wartime sacrifice. Tomić concluded wryly that “among the 1632 unlucky ones who killed themselves, you may rest assured that there were no fake veterans”.³

Erceg and Tomić were obviously in line with the public – I was amazed to experience several of my initial informants reacting with contempt bordering to disgust when confronted by my questions about the veterans. According to a survey completed at the time, around 80% of Dalmatians were supportive of opening the register of veterans and legally pursuing those

² Erceg 2008. All translations in this paper are my own, unless otherwise stated.

³ Tomić 2006.

who had obtained benefits on false grounds.⁴ The scepticism towards the *branitelji* had probably also been strengthened by fear and uncertainty, as violent and dangerous acts committed by this special segment of the population were frequently reported in sensationalist detail by the most important media in Croatia. The latest incident had also been arguably the most grave among desperate deeds, namely the murderous rampaging by retired general and official war hero Ivan Korade, which left a trail of five persons killed and one injured, Korade's own suicide included, in early spring 2008. A journalist saw Korade as the "production of a system which no one has made any serious attempt to deconstruct"⁵, aligning himself with Erceg who in the comment mentioned above pointed to the obvious paradox of the public fearing their own heroes.



Caricature artists' diverging conception of the branitelji.

Between these two diametrically opposed images of the branitelj – that of the nineties and that of the new millennium – what had happened? The gradual development of a more relaxed society, where necessary critical reassessment of Croatia's role in the break-up of Yugoslavia slowly became possible, only partly explains the surprisingly firm discontent and widespread suspicion – or even fear – that the veterans were viewed with. How had the greatest heroes of the rebirth of Croatia become such villains in the eyes of the Croatian citizen? It is within the span of these binary opposed normative conceptions of the *branitelji* – the *branitelj* as *hero* versus the *branitelj* as *villain* – that the argumentative space of this thesis is constituted.

⁴ "Lažne branitelje treba kazнено goniti". Slobodna Dalmacija, 03.03.2008.

⁵ Đikić 2008.

0.2. An Outline of This Study

In the earliest phases of my work on this thesis I had a strong preference for meditating on nationalism and its origin in “social” difficulties in a post-war society in transition, i.e. the link between general dissatisfaction and right-wing extremism. Quite quickly, this proved to be an enormous task, difficult to narrow down to manageable bricks of scientific construction. Yet this final result has perhaps, in some ways, gone surprisingly little astray from this original point of orientation, as both nationalism and social discontent are highly present in this thesis, though perhaps more between the lines than on them. The veterans are a social category and a social phenomenon, and as such they must be studied in their “natural surroundings”. It follows from this holistic approach that *context* is vitally important for the clarity of this thesis – a context which in the case of post-war Croatia necessarily must be described by using terms such as the mentioned “nationalism” and “social discontent”, yet also by other terms and concepts such as post-communism, corruption, struggle for political power and the fight for personal gain. The remnants of a near past in which standards of living and privileges were closely intertwined with political loyalty, and a critical reassessment of Croatia’s role in the break-up of Yugoslavia was political as well as – in many instances – social suicide, kept societal tensions high and provided difficulties for making viable plans for Croatia’s future. The fact that the wounds of the Homeland War⁶ were kept open by the collective memory as well as by new political priorities demanding a reassessment of the past, contributed to this problematic coming to terms with the recent past.

As my research on this theme progressed, I was amazed to discover what an apt door opener the veterans of the Homeland War were to wider problems marking Croatia’s post war history. It seemed as if I, in one way or the other, encountered the veterans on every important political, social or historical crossroad that had presented itself in Croatian society since 1995. Yet given the above considerations, it is perhaps not surprising that the veterans are in the foreground of this transitional discourse. They might easily be pictured as the *embodiment* of the recent past, and thus it is not surprising that the history of the *branitelji* is also the history of post war Croatia. Few other groups in Croatian society can claim to have experienced and sacrificed on the level of these veterans, many of whom will never be able to escape the memory of the Homeland War. Indeed, for many that memory is all they have left. The

⁶ The war of the break up of Yugoslavia has been officially termed the “Homeland War” (*Domovinski rat*) in Croatia, its capital letters and usage reflecting the extremely important place it has in the modern history of Croatia. In October 2000, as the role of Croatia in the war was slowly beginning to undergo critical analyses, the Croatian parliament, the *Sabor*, adopted the Declaration of the Homeland War which stated its value and, some would say, its unassailability as a ideological concept (Narodne Novine, issue 102/00).

veterans occupy a special place in society as their destinies are intimately linked to the (re)birth of Croatian state tradition. The veterans are indeed the “official” heroes of the Homeland war, alongside the “father” of the Croatian nation, the deceased President Tuđman. Given that Tuđman based the main body of his political activity on this thesis of rebirth and its unquestionable moral justification, since it represented the “fulfilment of a century long struggle of the Croatian nation”, it was apparently only a natural consequence that the veterans and their destinies should become intangible from the destiny of Croatia. In the hands of powerful actors in the political discourse the *branitelji* were ideally constructed as symbols of pure “croatness”, a homogenous mass whose ideals are essentially the same as those of Croatia, in the nationalist sense propagated by the HDZ of the nineties. However, this ideal construction blurs the fact that the veterans, as a large social group, are ideologically and normatively diverse and complex, just as the Croatian populace as a whole. And this supposition is highly important to the argument of this thesis.

Still, given this artificial, yet immediate closeness between the *branitelji* and one narrow side of the political landscape, it is not surprising that the reintegration of the veterans into the plurality of Croatian society after demobilization has been extremely difficult. The immense privileges they were granted during the Tuđman era – and the failure of both the subsequent governments of Ivica Račan and Ivo Sanader to put the record straight – has gradually made many Croats look askance at the *branitelji*, rather than welcoming them back after well performed service. Not only have these privileges, when taken in consideration the number of citizens that enjoy them, posed a serious threat to an already weak economy; they have also given rise to widespread suspicions that the majority of the veterans have received their status without deserving it, either as rewards for political loyalty or by manipulating or buying off contacts. Through the veterans’ interest organizations, this “hijacking” of hero-statuses and benefits has apparently taken the form of a well organized onslaught. Meanwhile, the veterans have received substantial negative coverage from the national press, which has curbed its hunger for sensationalism and big figures by exploiting some of the more ill-tempered and poorly timed statements and actions of certain individual veterans. Added to this is the political intermingling of certain organisations, which seem bent on influencing society to become more to their liking. This has contributed to the fact that many Croats hold a view of the veterans as organized hard-line nationalist desperados who systematically exploit the fear of ordinary citizens as well as the structural legacy of Tuđmans regime to secure privileges for themselves as well as political power, thereby continuing to drain the state budget and exercising some form of control over the democratically elected government.

However, the reasons for the widespread scepticism directed at the veterans are, of course, far more complex than those stated by this preliminary and almost popularly superficial cause and effect analysis. This thesis seeks to explore in detail the possible reasons for the turn in popularity of the veterans, partly by asking such questions as: Behind the media coverage and the ongoing political discourse, who are really the veterans? How are they organized? What are their aspirations, and what privileges do they enjoy? How have these organizations developed in relation to Croatian society and political discourse as a whole?

Related to the organisations themselves, there is simply no hiding the fact that many of the veterans' organizations have had – and to some extent still have – important political connections and ideological sympathy with actors on the far right side of the political spectre. At the same time, these organizations are to perform the highly important task of providing its members with support in their struggle to resume life and return to society after their strenuous ordeals in the Homeland War. The question arises: are these quite different commitments possible to fulfil at the same time? Are these organizations to be reckoned as part of civil society or are they purely political, possibly even militant? Are they as politically homogenous as they appear? Have the organizations been infiltrated by loud-speaking, well-informed and connected individuals who exploit the misery of the veterans to gain political points for specific parties?

Finally, as mentioned, the *branitelji* have become so closely intertwined with post-war Croatian politics that viewing them as separated from the domain of the political is extremely difficult, if not impossible. In accordance with this, it is unavoidable that this thesis must also explore *context*, understood as domestic and international political considerations which have put a mark on Croatian post war society. How have the *branitelji* and their organisations influenced this aspect of developments? And what effect has this political involvement, as well as every other aspect of the veterans and their organisations, had on the *branitelji* themselves, their “cause”, and their status in society?

0.3. Launching the Hypothesis

In the following pages I will argue that the veterans' organizations have represented a context-specific hybrid between civil and non-civil society, something which, in many ways, reflects the transitional phases Croatian society itself has passed through in the last two decades. However, it is not within the scope of this thesis to establish if the veterans' organizations are to be reckoned as part of civil society or not. Still, I hope to indirectly show that the associations are civil in some of their activities, but their status as such, as well as

their objective success – measured against their own goals as stated in the statutes of the various organizations – is challenged by political allies of various parties as well as fake veterans and well connected leaders who are actively or passively manipulating many of these organizations for the sake of their personal political careers and financial winning. The organisations have, from the start, invested a lot more effort into political ambition than the humanitarian ideals which they support on the surface. This is by no means the work of individuals alone; political parties have also more or less secretly actively engaged in securing their own henchmen top positions in various organizations to secure stability of and control over the close to 500 000 strong electorate that the veterans constitute.

Further, I argue that the mingling of roles of these organizations has proven destructive for the veterans themselves. Mainly due to the politicization of the organizations and its various effects, the veterans have – in the eyes of the ordinary citizen – become synonymous to a corrupted, lawless and fearful phase of recent Croatian history. Yet it is also important, in my opinion, to point out that various hard-line nationalist individuals within the organizations, not necessarily “on the payroll” of any political party, have contributed to the widespread mistrust and suspicion with which the veterans are viewed with. The erratic and fanatic behaviour of such “celebrities” among the *branitelji* continues to set an unfortunate example to the rest of the public; such actions have become the popular, easily comprehensible, essence of the *branitelj*. In this the media must also take some of the blame, given their sensationalistic delight in reporting the activities of such “desperados”.

The final points of my argument will hopefully become clear when I assess the widespread effects of the destruction of the popular status of the veterans. I argue that the process of reintegration of Croatian veterans to society after their tormenting experience of war has essentially failed, though it might be difficult to extract cause from effect on this point. After all, whether the reintegration has failed because of the low popularity of the veterans or the low popularity of the veterans is to blame on the failed reintegration is a difficult question to answer. My argument will lean on the principle of the vicious circle on this matter, trying to depict the relation between cause and effect as a downwards spiral of perpetual deterioration. Importantly, I do not view the fact that the overwhelming majority of veterans today have been “taken care” of financially by the Croatian state as proof of successful reintegration – quite contrary, actually, as will hopefully become clear when I discuss the Law of Rights of the Branitelji and the privileges and benefits it secures for them. Successful reintegration can not be understood as anything but active participation in society, something which is not provided for by immense, unconditional privileges.

0.4. Dalmatia as the Main Field of Study

Initially, I decided to delimit my main field of focus geographically to the region of Dalmatia. The idea was that some geographical narrowing down would be required to make this endeavour practically realizable within the limitations in time and resources that are available for a thesis of this kind. However, it remains questionable whether this delimitation can be said to have been successful. As I returned to re-evaluate this decision when I was approaching the end of my work, it dawned upon me that, rather than a clear cut delimitation, it was more a question of placing more weight on incidents and developments taking place in Dalmatia contrary to those in the rest of Croatia, though such events also figure prominently in my argumentation. Moreover, I realised that the weight was automatically placed on Dalmatia without my really following the methodical delimitation launched on the outset. This provokes the necessity of some reflections on Dalmatia as a region.

Firstly, the region of Dalmatia has some of the most actively engaged veterans' organisations of Croatia as a whole, perhaps only comparable to those who are located in the region of Eastern Slavonia, which is, at any rate, a far smaller and less populous region. Both these regions were far more affected by the Homeland war in the early 90's than the rest of Croatia and perhaps this is why one also finds the highest density of organizations here. Indeed, Dalmatia, a region from which parts of the infamous Republic of Serbian Krajina stole a large part of territory, still licks its wounds even today. Not only are most of the areas that were liberated by the Croatian army in 1995 Dalmatian, many of the more profiled Croats indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) are also residents of this region. This perhaps also partly explains why it is in Dalmatia that one has seen the most furious outbursts of nationalistic sentiment and opposition to the ICTY and the European Union. One should also – parallel to this – keep in mind that Dalmatia has arguably seen an even more conflict-ridden history than the rest of what today constitutes Croatia. Wars and revolts against Venetians, Ottomans, Hungarians, Austrians, Fascists and Communists have definitely made their mark on the collective memory of Dalmatians. The latest conflict with the Serbs of Dalmatia left the entire region “on the edge”. The eviction of Croatian squatters to facilitate the return of the “Serbian enemy”, excavations of Croat and Serb victims of war crimes, war profiteers and criminal ruffians flashing their wealth in public and other controversies of the legacy of the Homeland War are still at the forefront of the regional political and media discourse.

Another of Dalmatia's peculiarities is what one may call the strong warrior traditions which put their mark on the region. I return to a discussion of the *hajduk* myth shortly, as it is

relevant also in a far more complex way – suffice to say here that Dalmatia, especially the hinterland, is fused by tales of heroism and warriors. Due to these reasons it is perhaps no surprise that the aura of heroism surrounding the veterans is especially pronounced in this region. Another point, or more precisely, an overlapping point, is the fact that Dalmatia is a region which in long periods throughout history has in various ways been separated from the northern parts of Croatia, something which contributes to the strong identification with the region that most inhabitants testify of even today. Perhaps part of this separation has come from the fact that Dalmatia has been forced to relate to the Venetian and Ottoman empires in a far greater degree than the Croats of Northern Croatia, who were relatively firmly established within the Hungarian, and to some extent Austrian, spheres for longer periods of time. One should for obvious reason avoid cultural generalizations; however it must be acquiesced that cultural differences between Dalmatia and for instance the Zagreb-area are quite pronounced, in many respects even greater than that between Dalmatia and neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina. The reason I stress this is that political dispute and uncertain, war-like conditions have contributed to the development of a distinct Dalmatian identity, something which leads to tensions along centre-periphery and urbanism-ruralism axis in Croatia even today. It follows that tensions on the Split-Zagreb line are frequent, as will be seen also in this thesis. The “Dalmatian identity”, I will argue is connected to a wider, “Balkan” identity in a much more profound way than is the case for the areas of Croatia which suffered more directly under magyarization and germanization. This “Dalmatian identity is therefore also strongly influenced by the hajduk-myth, which originated in the Ottoman context. Perhaps it is no coincidence – though one must take into consideration phenomenon such as ethnocentrism and romanticism, not to say the historical context in which such notions emerge – that ethnographers and historians have to a varying degree subscribed to the notion of the Dalmatians of the hinterlands as representing the essence of the primitive South Slav.⁷

All the above reasons hopefully explain to a satisfactory extent why the balance of this thesis is slightly leaning towards the advantage of a Dalmatian field of study. However, one last point needs to be made. The area that I describe as Dalmatia does not concur completely with the precisely defined – and historically quite recent – administrative unit of today called the County of Split-Dalmatia. Indeed, the “definition” of Dalmatia which this thesis utilises would obviously include the County of Šibenik-Knin, the County of Zadar, as well as large parts of both the County of Lika-Senj and the County of Dubrovnik-Neretva. My point is that

⁷ Wolf 2003.

my “definition” of Dalmatia is purely cultural-regional; it is geographically vague and flexible, just as the region of Dalmatia has been throughout history. Only by approaching Dalmatia in this wide sense can one begin to acknowledge the region not only as a geographical area, but also as a cognitive construction and a cultural sphere to which its inhabitants relate to in myriads of ways.

0.5. Outline of the Chapters

The first chapter examines the methodology and theory which forms the conceptual fundament on which this thesis is built. Firstly, I will describe the methodological repertoire which was activated during the research phase of this thesis, before I will move on to a discussion of the operational understanding of the phenomenon of the *branitelj* which this thesis utilises. Finally, I shall relate this thesis to other theoretical viewpoints and suggestions.

In the second chapter, I aspire to show how the *branitelji* grew quickly in number and hence in influence, and thus became a potential political force which nobody could afford to overlook in their governmental or oppositional politics. As the chapter progresses, it will hopefully gradually become clear to the reader how the largest and most important organisations of the *branitelji* slipped into the sphere of influence of political parties. Light will also be cast upon the effect of this growth and the political influence that it had on “the cause” of the *branitelji* themselves.

We shall look closer in the third chapter at how the political potential mentioned above was realised. As President Tuđman had passed away by the end of the last millennium, and a societal climate change took place following the takeover of a new and different government, certain developments on the national and international arenas brought about a more outspoken and direct form of political involvement. The veterans were mobilised against the government by the help of still powerful structural remains of the Tuđman era. However, while one might argue that the *branitelji* did contribute to the subsequent change in government through their massive opposition and protests, their “success” came at a heavy price. The direct political involvement of the *branitelji* contributed greatly to their public image being severely damaged, thus rendering the much needed reintegration to society even more difficult.

Finally, before the short conclusion, the fourth chapter will take a closer look on political initiatives emanating from *within* the veteran population *itself*, i.e. not provoked or realised by more or less external political players. A considerable part of these, I hope to prove, stem from the notion of “embodiment of ideology” which was discussed earlier, and thus from the different conceptions and understandings of the Homeland War, from which the

branitelji are politically, morally and discursively indivisible. The *branitelji* and their organisations, also on their own initiative, strived to combine ideological principles with their operation of kinds of charitable organisations, which were to defend the rights of the demobilised and isolated soldiers. The first role, however, slowed down or complicated the functioning of the second, which, again, went at the expense of the *branitelji* themselves. Moreover, it enabled “industrious” individuals to take advantage of the organisations and the “cause” of the *branitelji* to promote their own agendas. At last, this combination of political involvement, lack of adherence to the humanitarian ideal, and financial and power hungry exploitation by certain individuals resulted in schisms and divisions among the *branitelji* themselves, something which complicated their successful reintegration to society even further.

1. Method and Theory

1.1. Methodology and Assessment of Sources

The plethora of veteran's organizations in Croatia is, scientifically spoken, a poorly documented phenomenon. Surprisingly enough, there exists little academic literature on the subject even though these organisations have been continuously and widely discussed in Croatian media, often to a sensationalistic delight of journalists and politicians with a feel for populist rhetoric. It is remarkable how far between it currently is between articles and interviews that throw a favourable light on these organisations, which, after all, do represent highly important defenders of interests for a large segment of the Croatian public.

The theoretical orientation of this paper lies somewhere between political science, history and anthropology. Perhaps only very vague – and therefore perhaps unnecessary – notions like social/cultural studies capture its orientation. However, more precise is the fact that the notion of “discourse” is central to it. In this paper, “discourse” has come to mean the total universe of meanings, events, actions, thoughts etc. which surrounds and interplays with a given phenomenon. Central to the argument of this thesis is the notion of the public image of the *branitelji*. How was the image of the *branitelji* affected by the politicisation of their cause? And vice versa: How did the “image” of the *branitelji* influence political developments? Only by taking the entire discourse into consideration in this historical analysis can one find the answer to these questions. After all, “image”, in the form it appears here, is necessarily constructed and de-constructed discursively, as a collective and cultural dialogue between holder of this image and his/her adversary, who accepts or refuses the version of the image promoted by the holder.

If one is to understand this “discourse” in all its complexity, it follows that the approach must be holistic. In my quest to establish some sort of overview of the wide and many-sided discourse of the Croatian veterans I have therefore come to rely on a broad spectre of sources: Analytic articles, reports, statistics, laws and legislations, informants, and “study-trips”. However, newspaper articles constitute the main bulk of the material which forms the basis of the analysis of this paper. This has given me some headaches, I must admit. In Croatia, where the average citizen is much fonder of conspiracy theories and a lot more critical of both institutions of the state and the media than is the case here in Norway, I occasionally experienced the creeping sensation of not being taken seriously. “Newspapers!?! But they are all lies...” (“*Novine!?! Pa to je sve laž...*”), was a common reaction. My agreeing upon the need to stay highly critical to the media, but at the same time claiming that a lot can be deduced from lies and the way superficial content is presented, in combination with other sources, did not win over many of the more critically inclined. However, my belief has remained firm regarding newspaper articles functioning as my main bulk of sources. As already indicated, while this thesis aspires to write the “history” of the veterans’ organisations of the Homeland War, it has been established that this history is indelible from that of Croatia since independence itself. Yet while the “history” of Croatia since independence has at least to some extent been covered by high quality scientific analysis, the same “history” from the viewpoint of the *branitelji* has not. Therefore, while I deem newspaper articles to be extremely apt at giving strong indications as to the “colour, taste and sound” of the discourse surrounding and interplaying with the veterans and their organisations, I am also convinced that there simply are no other written sources available which allows one to map out this “history” in detail. By supplementing with other the other sources mentioned I have become sure that I have taken the necessary precautions to prevent errors and misinterpretation stemming from analysing newspaper articles.

The biggest Croatian newspapers have online archives which go back as far as 1999 or 2000. Consequently, information about the period from around the change of the millennium up until today I have primarily found in such online archives. This is not without methodical drawbacks, however. For instance, one of my main sources, the Split-based daily *Slobodna Dalmacija* – the most important newspaper of the region of Dalmatia – does not publish all the material of the printed edition; in fact only somewhere around 25% makes its way to the online edition. This danger of missing out on important information is something I have tried to counter by supplementing my information bank with articles of the printed edition, which I have obtained through the archives at University Library of Split (*Sveučilišna knjižnica u*

Splitu – SVKST). However, due to the strains on time and budget such deep dives into archives tend to entail, I have been forced to make priorities. Therefore, my search in this “physical” archive is less thorough for the later period than for the period from 92 to 00, since, after all, this archive is the only source of information I have for that early period. This I have tried to compensate for by also thoroughly searching for articles from other online editions of Croatian dailies; primarily Zagreb-based *Vjesnik* and to some extent *Jutarnji list*. I do feel confident that this method of supplying the online archives of *Slobodna Dalmacija* has been successful and that I have not missed out on important information. On the contrary, I believe I have gathered enough information for two more papers.

This splitting up in two periods, which I must stress is primarily a methodological partition, has another reason. The issue here is press freedom. There is reason to question the independency of most newspaper sources in the period of Tuđman’s presidency. *Vjesnik*, the main “political analysis” newspaper in Croatia, was undoubtedly supporting the former president and his party while in power. It also became increasingly clear during the first half of the following decade that *Vjesnik* continued to be clearly supportive of HDZ, yet to a varying degree. With regards to *Slobodna Dalmacija*, the limited press freedom of the Tuđman era also left its marks on the critical approach of the newspaper. Even if *Slobodna Dalmacija* perhaps was not as clearly supportive of Tuđman and HDZ as *Vjesnik*, several battles for the control of this newspaper took place in the nineties. In the immediate aftermath of Croatian independence, *Slobodna Dalmacija* published articles and satirical fanzines in cooperation with *Feral Tribune*, the latter which was to become the most important critical voice of Dalmatia, perhaps of the whole of Croatia, in the nineties. In February 1993, *Slobodna Dalmacija* embarked on a general strike for three days to mark its discontent with the lack of press freedom in Croatia. However, from this point on, the administration and editorial team of the newspaper was beginning to fall under the influence of president Tuđman and the HDZ, and during the reign of Editor Josip Jović⁸ from 2000 to 2001, its journalistic independency was only proverbial. However, quickly after he left his position in 2001, *Slobodna Dalmacija* returned to a more independent orientation and began a critical reassessment of its role during the Tuđman era. Today, sadly, *Slobodna Dalmacija* struggles

⁸ Josip Jović published an article serial ostensibly aimed at compromising newly elected President Mesić by way of the latter’s testimony for the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in the case against war time Yugoslav President Slobodan Milošević. In the article, Jović clearly displayed confidential knowledge. This led critics to believe that he was conspiring with still active branches of the HDZ structure within the army and intelligence services to promote the return to power of HDZ. Jović was later indicted by the ICTY for publishing the testimony of a protected witness. (“Josip Jović traži 43 000 eura odštete na temelju vrlo sumnjivog ugovora”. Nacional, 21.08.2002).

under another form of imposed control, this time of the financial sort. The tabloidization of *Slobodna Dalmacija* of the last couple of years has enraged many a faithful reader.

After this digression it is necessary to recall what this is all about, namely press freedom – or the lack of it – and what possible effect this might have had on this paper. On this important matter I have basically trusted my own sound critical judgement and independent historical and political knowledge of post-war Croatia to be the most important defensive wall against wrong conclusions based on politically flavoured information. In addition to this I have also included oppositional newspapers and magazines in my search for articles, such as the mentioned *Feral Tribune*, yet also *Novi List* and *Nacional*, which all are renowned in their own way for their independence and critical inclination towards the power structures of the country they operate in. I am quite certain that my method has given me an extremely detailed, yet precise – and most importantly unbiased – overview of the popular discourse of the veterans – an overview which forms the basis of analysis for my methodical approach.

Some words about statistics are required as well, as I initially had the idea of gathering some statistic material to use as a foundation for my arguments. This, however, proved to be a difficult task. After contacting such instances as the official Croatian Bureau of Statistics (*Hrvatski zavod za statistiku*), the Croatian National Archive (*Hrvatski državni arhiv*) as well as the Croatian Memorial Documentation Centre of the Homeland War (*Hrvatski memorijalno-dokumenatcijski centar Domovinskog rata*), all I got was suggestions that I contact the MOBMS, something which I had, naturally, tried on numerous occasions, to no avail. All my inquiries and requests – not only about statistics but on other information as well as possible interviews – have been met by an impenetrable wall of silence from this ministry. Therefore, I have come to rely on the relevant statistics which could be obtained through the mentioned Bureau of Statistics, as well as statistics published in the press. One obvious caveat regarding statistics published in the press is that some journalist or editor has decided which part of the information is relevant, and which is not, thereby switching the focus of the statistic fact to suit her or his needs. Such statistics convey information that has been tampered with. Given that “the secret language of statistics, so appealing in a fact-minded culture, is employed to sensationalize, inflate, confuse and oversimplify”, I have come to treat these statistical facts with great caution, paying heed to the fact that “without (...) readers

who know what [statistics] mean, the result can only be semantic nonsense”.⁹ I will therefore include any critical remarks when discussing these sources during the course of the analysis.

As has hopefully become increasingly apparent in the course of this introductory chapter, my main methodological tool is social and political analysis primarily based on newspaper articles. However, as mentioned, other methods have been applied as well, some of them not leaning on written sources. Most notably among these is, fieldwork, or active participation. Now any anthropologist with respect for his discipline would probably disagree violently with me on this matter, as the “rules” of ethnographic research quite clearly states that any fieldwork should last at least 5-6 uninterrupted months. I have taken several trips to Dalmatia during the years of conducting research for this thesis, yet all these trips have been limited to shorter periods, spanning from one week to two months at a time. Whether one is to call these trips “study-trips” rather than conventional “fieldwork” is in my opinion less important; what is certain is that these trips have taken the form of active participation to the best extent possible given the temporal and financial limitations. Thus I have taken part in informal talks, discussions, concerts and other gatherings organized by veterans’ organizations, commemorative events and public rituals such as Victory and Homeland Thanksgiving Day and Day of the Veterans, and the annual religious-cum-historical ritual and knight contest *Sinjska Alka*¹⁰, as well as discussing matters over with informants who are or are not connected to the veterans in any way. Perhaps the most revealing moments in the work on this thesis have come to me while sharing newspapers and discussing their contents with the other guests of smoke-filled roadside cafés of the Dalmatian countryside. In my opinion, this wide approach to what constitutes a popular discourse is vital to the holistic understanding of the phenomenon of the *branitelji* and its “history” which this thesis seeks to apply.

One final comment on something that could have become a challenge from the outset: My personal ties of descent to the area in question. I am going to be frank – in some respects having local knowledge has spared me a lot of time and frustration on some occasions. Still, I have taken great care not to exploit this advantage in such a way that it might lead to short-

⁹ Huff 1993 [1954]. p. 8.

¹⁰ The Alka is celebrated in August each year in the small town of Sinj in the Dalmatian hinterland. This contest of knights is dedicated to the heroic efforts of the *sinjani* of 1715, who, though severely outnumbered, allegedly repelled an ottoman onslaught on the town. The Alka also coincides with the celebration of the revelation of Virgin Mary of Sinj (*Gospa sinjska*), as she allegedly manifested herself to the citizens during the ottoman attack and inspired them to withstand. The complexity of aspects of this public ritual, combined with the general societal climate at the turn of the new millennium made it prone to politicisation, and so it became an arena of fierce nationalistic speeches and protests against various governments. The last few years have luckily brought normalisation also for the Alka, and it has by now more or less regained its solely cultural image.

cuts or quick solutions that might compromise the scientific standards of integrity that a postgraduate thesis should aspire to maintain. The question whether I have succeeded in keeping the necessary scientific “aloofness” from the phenomenon of study, since I am to such an extent involved, is a difficult one to answer unequivocally, since, obviously, the grey zones on this matter are substantial. However, active participation necessarily means compromising this aloofness, it necessarily must include involvement. Yet I have strictly excluded family members and personal friends from the research for this paper to achieve some kind of professional balance between involvement and “aloofness”. I am convinced that the extent to which I have succeeded in this will be reflected in the pages of this paper.

1.2. “We are *branitelji*, not veterans”: Conceptualizing the Object of Study

I turn now to a closer scrutiny of the veterans themselves, and the immediate and subtle context in which they find themselves, to form some sort of definitional exit point from which this thesis is to be read. The definition of mine which holds that Dalmatia belongs to the “Balkan” symbolical and cultural sphere puts me at odds with popular sentiment in Croatia, as the extremely loaded term “Balkan” has increasingly come to be associated with Croatia’s “dark past” under the yoke of “Yugo-communistic aggression”.¹¹ Croatia has in recent years been struggling hard to move away from such connotations, something of which the reactions of the media to the notion of certain western politicians that Croatia belongs to the region of the “Western Balkans” speak clearly of. However, to justify this move of mine in a way which is highly relevant to the theoretical groundwork of this thesis, and at the same time rather more specific and concrete than just my vague initial notion of Dalmatia belonging to a “cultural sphere”, I wish to direct the reader’s attention to the myth of the Balkan bandit – the *hajduk*.

As Wendy Bracewell has pointed out, the concept of the bandit or villain has a special normative ambiguity and myth-like quality in the Balkans. Since the popular uprisings against the Turks in the period of ottoman domination, the celebration of the *hajduci* in songs, epic tales and later even in school books has led to the cementing of the concept in the cultural memory of the peoples of the Balkans. Yet like all myths, and perhaps especially the case for Balkan-myths, the *hajduk* has come to evoke ambiguous connotations – depending on perspective – of struggle against oppression, thirst for liberty, and heroic masculinity or

¹¹ *Jugokomunistička agresija* is one of those “buzz-terms” that I encountered quite frequently when analysing the discourse surrounding the veterans. In this paper I have tried to pay attention to and use such expressions as I consider them to be quite revealing.

alternatively of lawlessness, primitivism, and violence”.¹² The myth of the *hajduk* originated in the intersection of the invention and manipulation by the people of the Balkans and the influence of early forms of western ideas of romantic nationalism, and has since been transformed and flexed to fit different needs of different times. Especially “national awakeners” were prone to take advantage of the *hajduk* myth and portrait the bandits as “precursors of national liberation, guerrilla fighters who set the stage for the national revolts; as consciousness-raisers, keeping alive the sense of a national identity; and even as state-builders”.¹³ President Tuđman, even if unwillingly or subconsciously, perhaps contributed to the reawakening of the *hajduk* connotations in collective memory when he allegedly recruited modern bandits from prisons all over the country to hastily establish a Croatian army in the beginning of the nineties.¹⁴ Certainly, the younger Tuđman had elaborated on the idea that the *hajduci* were indeed heroes, albeit in a rather different context as this was during the life of the second Yugoslavia.¹⁵ According to this view, the *hajduci* were an early sample of partisans, struggling for the people of the working class in their time-specific way.¹⁶ In the 1990s the context was new, yet the myth was still employable, especially since it had seeped into the collective memory of most Croats through the idealization of the *hajduk* by Tito’s communists.

With the construction of parallel nationalized versions of the *hajduk* myths in rhythm with the increasing rivalry between the two largest entities of Yugoslavia, Serbia and Croatia, a specific Croatian dilemma crystallized itself when having to balance an understanding of the *hajduk* as a Serb (as propagated by Serb geographer Jovan Cvijić) with the clear presence of *hajduk* and *uskok*¹⁷ myths of undisputedly Croatian regions. After all, “to be national heroes, bandits had to have a recognizable national character, belonging to one group and not to another”.¹⁸ The communists later struggled to counter this split over ownership of the *hajduk* myth by elevating the *hajduk* as the ideal member of the proletariat, sworn to the fulfilment of socialist ideals, thus exemplifying that regime’s struggle to shift the focus from the national to

¹² Bracewell 2003, p. 22.

¹³ Ibid., p. 24.

¹⁴ Đikić 2006. According to this source, Tuđman replied in the following manner when confronted by warnings from future president Mesić of the presence of criminals in the army: “Leave them alone, I’ll need more of the kind” (“Pusti ih, još će mi takvih trebati”).

¹⁵ Tuđman 1970.

¹⁶ Bracewell, op. cit., p. 31.

¹⁷ The *uskoci* were, similar to the *haduci*, organised brigands escaping, or even challenging, imperial control in certain areas of the (geographical) Western Balkans. Whereas the *hajduci* were a thorn in the eye of the ottomans, the *uskoci* were harassing the Venetians at sea during the time when the lion of St. Marc held its sway over Dalmatia. As pirates, they were an Adriatic, and thus – today – a Croatian, phenomenon (see Bracewell 1992).

¹⁸ Bracewell 2003, p. 27.

the political principles which were to keep Yugoslavia united. The discussion of to which degree this undertaking was successful does not belong here – it is sufficient to point to the notion that two different conceptions of the archetypical Robin Hood existed in the former Yugoslavia – one eastern and one western. This manifested itself in another concept of idealisation in addition to that of the *hajduk*, namely that of the peasant insurgent. Whereas the *hajduk* was the ideal character where the collective memory also included experiences of anti-Ottoman warfare, the myth of the peasant insurgent had its resonance in areas which had suffered under first and foremost the Hungarian nobility.¹⁹

Even if the eastern variant, the *hajduk* myth, may be less pronounced when one views Croatia as a whole, than is the case for Serbia or Herzegovina, it is quite clear in my opinion that anti-Ottoman warfare has not “faded from memory”²⁰ in Dalmatia, something which is testified by the strong presence of *hajduk* symbols (though they may be called something else nowadays) in the area. Accordingly, not only is the second biggest football club in Croatia called *Hajduk Split*, the roadside in the Dalmatian hinterland was until recently practically littered with cafés bearing the *hajduk* stamp in their names or logos. Moreover, the mentioned Sinjska Alka is a museum of *hajduk* symbolism. The struggle to eradicate *hajduk* symbols from Croatia has at best led to superficial results in Dalmatia. As I touched upon earlier, this also highlights the strong regional identity that exists within Dalmatia. Croatia is and is not part of the Balkans, yet Dalmatia is the region which in any case gravitates Croatia “back” – as many Croats would say today – towards the Balkans. Indeed, the “Dalmatian”, especially the rural one, is commonly viewed pejoratively as backwards and “Balkan” by his fellow Croats.²¹ Moreover, there are clearly – as the above discussion indicates – parallels to be drawn between the myth of the *hajduk* and the more recent myth of the *branitelj*; and therefore I believe that it will be advantageous for the initial conceptualization of the *branitelj* in this thesis to highlight these similarities. Surely it is tempting to argue that the *branitelj* represents a context-specific, contemporary – but most importantly a specifically Croatian – or perhaps rather Dalmatian – version of the *hajduk* myth, for in the discourse the *branitelj* spans “from the epitome of a hero, a paragon of masculinity, brave, honourable, and just, to the cruel, capricious personification of disorder and violence, not to mention (...) comic or

¹⁹ Žanić 1998 (b).

²⁰ Ibid., p. 4.

²¹ This pronounced regional split becomes especially highlighted during a different kind of regular public ritual in Croatia – the football matches between the two biggest teams in the Croatian league, Hajduk Split and Croatia Zagreb, which often lead to vandalism and rampaging at which the fans of the two teams compete to be the best.

deluded”.²² As the second Yugoslavia fell apart, the *hajduk* remained a powerful symbol of the Serbs, as they did not undergo the same drastic ideological change as Croatia did. The political imaginary of the Serbs remained – at least superficially – firmly framed by the same Marxist theories, which in the case of Yugoslavia were epitomized by the ideal proletarian, the *hajduk*. The Serbs did not have to reinvent the myth; they had to reinvent their enemies. On the contrary, as the new Croatian narrative was constructed in opposition to the Serb and Yugoslav, it became vitally important to reformulate this myth according to the new conditions, while at the same time keeping its essential content for the use of idealizing heroism and violent opposition to “empires of the East”. Most importantly, this reformulation had to avoid any overt association with the *hajduk* myth, as the *hajduk* was now considered a Serb. Thus the myth of the *branitelj* came into being.

Others have touched upon similar problems, for instance Reinhard Lauer who rather early drew the parallel between the *hajduk* myths and the war-crimes committed by Serbian paramilitary groups during the break-up of Yugoslavia.²³ In this line of argument “warfare is simply the continuation of epic poetry by other means”.²⁴ Žanić, in a different volume, argued similarly that the *hajduk* tradition influenced popular perception of “rotten apples” among the soldiers of their respective armies during the fall of Yugoslavia.²⁵ This point is taken even further by Vjeran Pavlaković who leans on Žanić to draw more clearly the parallels between the *hajduk* and the *branitelj* by discussing perhaps the most famous of the *branitelji*, General Ante Gotovina, as a political symbol whose aura of heroism was greatly enhanced by his success in remaining at large despite attempts by the ICTY and the Croatian government (in various degrees of wholeheartedness, it must be added) to capture him. The general can hence “be interpreted as a folk hero who defended the Croatian people first from an internal enemy (rebel Serbs) and then from an external one, the ICTY (...)”, additionally as a representation of the “anti-modern, anti-urban and anti-state mentality that resonates among the peoples of the Dalmatian hinterland, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Serbia, who have historically been willing to harbour outlaws since the days of the Ottoman occupation”.²⁶ Indeed, Ante Gotovina epitomizes the modern and particularly Croat version of the *hajduk* myth – the myth of the *branitelj*.

²² Bracewell, op. cit., p. 24.

²³ Lauer 1994.

²⁴ Bracewell, op. cit., p. 33.

²⁵ Žanić 1998 (a).

²⁶ Pavlaković (forthcoming) 2010.

Myths and symbols do unquestionably have a profound impact on the human way of arranging the world into manageable pieces of the jig-saw puzzle that reality is made up of, and it is in this way that the *hajduk* myth has rooted itself deeply in the collective memory of the people of Dalmatia. It is also in this way that the connotations that the symbolic *hajduk* revokes have become so powerful, as he epitomizes a whole range of collective experiences, ideals and values. Myths are surprisingly flexible and resilient, even if their survival depends on giving an impression of the opposite, and as such they are also prone to reflect subtle contemporary undercurrents of their “host-culture”. The conceptualization of the *branitelj* for which I argue here is a cluster of such reflections of contemporary Croatia, while at the same time it pays attention to the prism of tradition and cultural memory through which these reflections pass.

That the concept of the *branitelj* became a vital piece in the symbolic process of reinventing the Croatian state narrative becomes increasingly clear if one considers the use of the word itself in the popular discourse. Literary *defender*, the word *branitelj* has traditionally been used as a juridical term for the defender of the indicted, similar to the way the word is used in Norwegian (*forsvarer*). However, in line with the narrative of the Homeland War and of the rebirth of the Croatian state tradition, the *branitelj* is the potent actor which *defended*, and thus facilitated the rebirth of Croatia by unselfishly sacrificing on “the altar of the Fatherland”; and as such he is the most important persona in the recent drama of the Croatian people, to which all Croats owe their utmost gratitude and respect. This notion of defensive action also has a profound moral meaning attached to it, for it is difficult to disagree with the necessity and unavoidability of violence in acts of self defence – the only “legitimate” form of applied violence in the moral universe of modern democratic states. Indeed, the main argument of the most important veterans’ organizations in opposing the extradition of Croatian officers to the ICTY has been that it is “impossible” to commit war crimes in a defensive war.

Yet not only was the concept of the *branitelj* invented to fit the more recent events during the break-up of Yugoslavia; it was also projected backwards in history along with the new narrative. Both the new narrative and one of its most important parts – the *branitelj* – had to be incorporated into the new, official version of the Croatian past, which was dominated by the notion of a “thousand year long Croatian struggle for freedom”. As the reinventing – or rather readjusting – of such narratives is primarily a symbolic process, it is no wonder that it is reflected in public political rituals. Thus, for instance, in connection with Sinjska Alka in 1995, an old memorial plaque dedicated to the warriors who defended the area of Sinj against

the onslaught of the Turks in 1715 was renewed, and a commemorative event took place headed by the district prefect (*župan*) of Split-Dalmatia, Kruno Peronja (HDZ). The newly painted and washed plaque was from now on not only to represent the heroism of the warriors of 1715 – which were now called the *branitelji* from the Turks (*branitelji od Turaka*) – but also the *branitelji* of the Homeland War. Peronja, in his speech, directed the listeners attention to the similarities between the two “enemies from the east”, the Turks and the Serbs, but left no doubt that as in 1715, the *branitelji* were once again ready and competent to defend Croatia, even if the enemy had changed.²⁷

While certain points in Croatian history are lifted up and highlighted as examples of the long heroic and just struggle for Croatian statehood, others, who challenge the coherence or consistency of the new narrative, must necessarily be toned down, erased or reinterpreted. Thus the near past dominated by communist rule must be portrayed as a(nother) “dark age” for the Croats, especially so due to its temporal closeness and the fact that the number one enemy in the new narrative is the recent cohabitant, the Serb. It is therefore no wonder that the *branitelji* has often marked the difference of their organizations from that of the communist era, the SUBNOR. As a high ranking member of HVIDRA stated at a conference in 1996:

“if the government does not fulfil its duty, we will have to start functioning politically (...). We do not want to repeat the history from 50 years ago, nor do we want to be SUBNOR, so they’d better not force us to, as a last resort, start dealing with politics”.²⁸

The problem with such statements is that several organisations, HVIDRA included, did just the opposite, namely involved themselves deeply into politics and moral questions on society level, thereby becoming a continuation of, rather than a break with, the past. The leader of another important organisation, Branko Borković, aptly summed this up by stating that “the previous system left many trails in the consciousness of people”.²⁹ Like so many other aspects of Croatia’s move from communism to democracy – and perhaps also political and social transition in general – the changes were superficial, while the substance proved more resilient and slow to adopt changes. Revealing is also the reaction of Tomislav Merčep, one of the more politically involved veterans of the Croatian discourse, to the choice of name of the then

²⁷ “Spomenik braniteljima od Turaka”. Slobodna Dalmacija, 29.07.1995. This autumn (2009) a document was discovered in which, allegedly, Peronja orders the removal of monuments dedicated to the antifascist movement of Tito and his peers from the entire County of Split-Dalmatia (“Peronjin naputak: Uklonite neslavnu prošlost”, Slobodna Dalmacija, 02.10.2009).

²⁸ “Nema zločinaca među hrvatskim braniteljima”, Slobodna Dalmacija, 21.05.1996.

²⁹ “Dragovoljce su htjeli ‘uškopiti’”, Slobodna Dalmacija, 18.05.1994.

(in 1996) recently established Council for Veterans of War of the Homeland War and World War Two, headed by General Bobetko. Merčep was reportedly “irritated by the name, since veterans of war exist in America, while in Croatia there are only *branitelji* and volunteers (*dragovoljci*)”. Moreover, he stated that “if the destinies of the volunteers of the Homeland War are to be continued to be settled by partisan generals and their children, they will not fare well”.³⁰ This discussion highlights the fact that the political and social process of constructing a new narrative involves constructing new features of the concurring language. Thus it is obvious that the word *branitelj* is a new one in its current usage, emerging, as Croatia emerged, out of the setting of the former Yugoslavia. The use of the word *branitelj* is “safe” since it can not be confused with Serbian, as the right form there would be *branilac*, as well as to Yugoslavia, where a veteran was a *borac*.

One final set of theoretical reflections might take us closer to a tentative understanding of how the *branitelji* themselves are experiencing their place in the Croatian discourse – and ultimately also in Croatian society. Though it might seem outright impossible to analyze scientifically the subjective understanding of the veterans themselves, I wish, at least, to suggest some kind of vague sketch of this relation by leaning on the claims I have already posed. Consequently, by utilizing some of Victor Turner's phraseology I wish now to turn to what I argue is a prominent feature of the Croatian post-war discourse, and therefore also of the veterans, namely that of *liminality*.³¹ Turner leans on Arnold Van Gennep's characterization of important socio-cultural rituals of transition, so called *rites de passage*, which are especially exposed in small-scale societies.³² Such rituals, Gennep argues, are to be viewed in three distinct parts: separation, liminality (from *limen* which means *margin*), and re-aggregation. Whereas the first and last phase of ritual points to the withdrawal of a person or a group from and reintegration to structure, the central phase here – that of liminality – is characterized by the person's or group's “interstructural” positioning; in between, so to speak, the structural pillars of society. As he/she/they pass through “the intervening ‘liminal’ period the state of the ritual subject (the ‘passenger’) is ambiguous, he passes through a realm which has few or none of the attributes of the past or the coming state (...)”.³³ In this final aspect of my conceptualization of the *branitelj* I suggest that it might be fruitful as an analytical and conceptual tool to point to the similarities between the *branitelj*, and even Croatia itself, and the “passenger” in Turner's and Van Gennep's world of rituals. As Turner and Van Gennep

³⁰ “Lakrdijaši u udugama”. Slobodna Dalmacija 10.01.1996.

³¹ Turner 1970.

³² Van Gennep 1960.

³³ Turner, op. cit., p. 356.

among others have shown, “rites de passage are not confined to culturally defined life-crises but may accompany any change from one state to another, as when a whole tribe goes to war (...)”.³⁴ Further, “transitions between states”³⁵ is not only also descriptive of Croatia’s period of process when moving from communism to democracy, but also of the process of reintegration of the *branitelj*; from citizen to soldier, and back to citizen again. However, while the notion of being “betwixt and between” is arguably a common sensation among the veterans, one might speculate that this feeling of alienation, or suspension from structure, has been greatly enhanced by the fact that the structure they once left has been greatly transformed while the veterans themselves were “structurally invisible”. Moreover, while Croatia’s transition has adhered to a clear goal, that of the *branitelji* has for too long been characterized by a state of limbo which, in line with the major argument of this thesis, is largely caused by the inclination of politicians of viewing the veterans as voters who must be curtailed by empty ideological phrases, rather than offered effective and targeted assistance in the arduous task of returning to a life which has become strange and unknown to them. In this never ending state of liminality, the *branitelj* is “no longer classified and not yet classified”, he is “both living and dead”, he is neither soldier nor citizen – in short, his “condition is one of ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all the customary categories”.³⁶

1.3. Some Additional Theoretical Reflections

I move now from the conceptualization of the central object of this study over to the discussion of some other theoretical reflections which are relevant to my thesis. First and foremost, what this paper can not afford to overlook is the article by Sharon Fisher which I discovered half way through my work, and whose thesis is “dangerously” reminiscent of my own, as stated in the introduction.³⁷ Fisher writes in the introduction of her article that the veterans’ organizations “can be seen as more political than part of civil society, and [that] political activities have overshadowed their more humanitarian aims”, something which has brought “the veterans disrepute within certain segments of the population and among other parts of civil society [thereby] pushing them further to the edge of society”.³⁸ The similarities with my own thesis are quite obvious, so, in light of this, how can I justify this thesis?

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 358.

³⁷ Fisher 2003.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 76.

Firstly, Fisher's article of 19 pages leaves little scope for in-depth analysis and serves more as an overview of the general "history" of the veterans' organizations as part – or not part – of civil society from the beginning of the 1990's up until 2001. Not only do I tend to move deeper down under these events and view them reflexively along analysis of the discourse in general, I have also the advantage of surfacing at a later point in time as, I argue, the discourse involving the *branitelji* only got *really* interesting after 2001, when the political parties that were supported by most of the organisations had been ousted from government by Račans coalition. I claim that the original material, which I have patiently and painstakingly collected through the last two and a half years, will help me to construct an argument which will appear pronouncedly different from that of Fisher's, though my thesis is similar to hers.

Secondly, Fisher's article is published in a theme-specific volume of sociological theory focusing on the concept of civil society in transitional societies in Central and South East Europe. As Petr Kopecký states in the introductory chapter of this volume, the study wishes to include groups "that are often excluded from civil society on both normative and conceptual grounds" and thus move "beyond the relatively narrow sphere of 'pro-democratic' organisations" – hence the title, *Uncivil Society*?³⁹ Only this way, he argues, can one begin to consider the importance of "potentially vital ingredients of associational life and democratic politics, i.e. various forms of protest or, as it is frequently termed, contentious politics".⁴⁰ Interesting though they are (especially Kopecký's convincing reasoning on the influence of the dissidents of former Eastern Europe's understanding of the term civil society on its most usual and widespread definition), these theories are not relevant to the central argument here, though they will in some ways be part of the background reflections. My point here is that the form and content of Fisher's article, which are strained by the specific context the article appears in, makes it somewhat besides the point in this thesis – even though her thesis on the outset looks very similar to my own. More weight is placed on placing the veterans' organizations in a setting which is primarily focused on the phenomenon of civil society, something of which the fact that a short "history" of civil society in Croatia is included, speaks clearly of.

Thirdly, and now moving to a closer look at the article and the theoretical framework which surrounds it, there are some points here worthy of critique. Fisher argues quite rightly that HDZ, during the Tuđman era, worked hard on curbing the development of Croatian civil society by controlling the funding of various organisations and by adopting laws and

³⁹ Kopecký 2003, p. 2.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13

legislations which in practice complicated the activities of non-governmental organisations. Regarding the war veterans' organisations, HDZ's strategy was to establish close links with the leadership of some organisations to hinder open public opposition. After all, any opposition to the HDZ from the *branitelji* would seriously challenge the craved after impression that HDZ was the mind and the *branitelji* the hands behind the "creation" of Croatia. Given Fisher's thesis, which was reproduced above, and even if she briefly mentions that the veterans' organizations "have a divided nature that makes it difficult to characterise them as a single movement",⁴¹ my clear opinion is that too little weight is placed on the diversity of the members of the organisations. The organisations are portrayed more or less as united in theory and practice in a way which I find difficult to agree with after studying the material I have collected. Then again, I suppose this is unavoidable in an article of sociology which aims to study civil society *per se*, and not delve deeper into a specific segment of it. A more detailed and analytical view of the veterans' organizations themselves, on their own terms, is simply beyond the scope of Fisher's article. Perhaps this is also due to the fact that Fisher's article is limited in time, as I consent that it was really not until after 2001 that the complex diversity of viewpoints and the fault lines between the leadership and the members of the associations came to be fully displayed. After all, prior to this time any critique of the "official" viewpoint was treason. However, and more importantly in my opinion, among the reasons for the marginalisation of the *branitelji* in Croatian society is the fact that too little weight has been placed on conveying the fact that the hundreds of thousands of veterans represent as diverse a group as the population of Croatia itself. The media, certain political parties, and opportunists within the organizations themselves have contributed to – and even preferred – such an oversimplified depiction of the *branitelji* in the discourse. This is something which this paper aims to counter.

Moving on now to another study which is relevant to my thesis is Deborah Cohen's study of disabled veterans of the First World War.⁴² Writing about British and German disabled veterans comparatively, Cohen investigates the highly interesting paradox that while the Weimar-republic launched a complex and far-reaching state program of benefits and support to reintegrate the veterans into society after their experience of war, the veterans gradually grew increasingly antagonistic to the state and alienated from society. At the same

⁴¹ Fisher, op. cit., p. 76.

⁴² The title of this thesis, *A Land Fit for Heroes*, was partially inspired by Cohen's work. In the aftermath of World War One, then Prime Minister of Great Britain Lloyd George promised that his coalition government would make Britain "a fit land for heroes to live in". This promise was not fulfilled by the government, and the phrase came to represent disappointment and anger for the veterans.

time, while no such program existed in Britain, where the veterans were left to the mercy of citizens' ad hoc charity, the reconciliation and reintegration of the disabled veterans proved far more effective than in Germany.⁴³ Cohen states that "in Britain the reintegration of disabled veterans proceeded primarily through voluntary and philanthropic efforts", and that this "brought about a reconciliation between disabled veterans and those for whom they had suffered".⁴⁴

Yet it is when one compares the British situation with the German that the relevance becomes unmistakably apparent, as the German solution to the reintegration of the veterans is very similar to the Croatian solution, the way the latter is portrayed in this thesis. The Weimar republic granted the veterans immense privileges such as high pensions, not only to the veterans themselves but to their children and wives, and promised to find a job for everyone. Considering the fact that the Great Depression as well as the recent financial disaster of war was dominating the everyday life of the citizens of the republic, these efforts of the German state proved close to impossibly strenuous. By the end of the 1920's, Germany spent 20% of its state budget on war veterans' pensions, while Great Britain spent less than 7%. Yet the Weimar Republic planned their efforts to be fruitful not only in the obvious way of increasing the productivity of the state by involving masses of disabled citizens. As Cohen writes, "the regulation of charity became (...) a means to establish the new state's authority [and so it] sought to establish a monopoly over benevolence [as] unregulated philanthropy threatened the state's legitimacy".⁴⁵ In the similar vein, HDZ launched an extremely ambitious program of benefits for the Croatian veterans (which will be scrutinized later on in this paper) early on – in fact while the war was still far from formally over – despite an increasingly tight budget due to the destruction and effort of war as well as a large foreign debt gradually spiralling out of control. Further, as I will argue, HDZ also aspired to establish a monopoly over – or perhaps rather more precisely to depict itself as the only guarantor for – the veterans' welfare, by curbing non-governmental organizations and hindering them from reaching out to the veterans, convincing the public that the state was to take care of the veterans. As noted earlier, had the HDZ allowed for other options, they would possibly have facilitated a discursive space for oppositional critique which could have proven a threat to the coherence of the new, official Croatian narrative, to which the HDZ of the Tuđman era was inextricably bound. Only by constructing an image of itself as the great undisputed saviour of Croatia and the

⁴³ Cohen 2001.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5-7.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

veterans, and by taking great care to outwardly consent to the increasing demands of the veterans, while at the same time keeping non-governmental organisations under control, did the HDZ apparently manage to secure the support of the *branitelji*. In Croatia, as in Weimar Germany, the veterans became “the state’s favoured wards, [standing] in the centre of political life [while] politicians, centrist and extreme, carted them as a valuable constituency”.⁴⁶ As Ivan Grdešić has noted, when writing on the Croatian radical right, the electoral “cleavage lines [were] formed more along political and ideological values and opinions, very often rooted in historical collective memories or religious convictions”, rather than there being a “clear and strong socio-structural base”.⁴⁷ However, the HDZ managed to underline that what they propagated as the correct historical narrative – and hence the “official” ideology – included the solution to the more pragmatic political question of the veterans. The veterans were the greatest heroes in the Croatian narrative and should be treated accordingly.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 12.

⁴⁷ Grdešić 1999, p. 181.

2. A Game of Numbers: Emergence and Growth of the Veterans' organisations

2.1. Early Projections

As early as in 1992, while about one third of Croatian territory was still occupied by Serbian forces and state of war penetrated into every segment of society, the first veterans' organisations were founded. As the war in practice had come more or less to a standstill, President Tuđman announced the demobilization of 50% of all forces before 31 July that year, giving priority to those who held important positions and students, to help "get the country back on its feet". Initially, forecasts for the would-be total number of disabled veterans after the war had ended were relatively modest; the Secretariat of Health and Social Care of the municipality of Split reasoned that the total number (presumably taking into consideration that the war was still officially being fought) would probably be around 3-4000 for the whole of Croatia.⁴⁸ Zvonimir Goreta of the then recently founded Split-branch of the organization Croatian Military Disabled of the Homeland War (*Hrvatski vojni invalidi Domovinskog rata* – HVIDRA) estimated the current total number of disabled former soldiers in the area between Zadar and Dubrovnik to be around 1000, while the number of members of his organisation at the time was 90, though he projected that this number would probably increase.⁴⁹ By the first annual assembly of the Municipal branch of HVIDRA of Split in May 1993, the number of members had risen to 450.⁵⁰ That same month the first central annual assembly of HVIDRA, which was to become the single most influential of the veterans' organisations in the years to

⁴⁸ "Skrb o invalidima domovinskoga rata", *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 07.07.1992.

⁴⁹ "Ranjenici i invalidi ne mogu čekati!", *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 23.08.1992.

⁵⁰ "Bolji dani za invalide", *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 28.05.1993.

come, was held in Zagreb with several prominent HDZ-members present, among them Vladimir Šeks and Mate Granić. The newly elected leader, Mladen Jurković, himself also a member of HDZ, stated that HVIDRA had gathered 12 000 members and established 67 branches on county and municipality level throughout the country,⁵¹ a number which according to a later interview with Jurković in December that same year already had risen to 18 000.⁵²

Later that year, the first organisation which included non-disabled veterans in their ranks was established under the name of the Organisation of Croatian Veterans of the Homeland war (*Udruga hrvatskih veterana Domovinskog rata* – UHVDR). It is likely that this organisation, led by renowned general Martin Špegelj, and including other well-known generals such as Zvonimir Červenko and Janko Bobetko among its members, was initially envisaged as the “official” organisation of the *branitelji*, as President Tuđman was its foremost patron. UHVDR aspired to be an umbrella-organisation which included all veterans and their organisations, and the number of members was claimed to be close to a hundred thousand less than two months after its foundation.⁵³

The first year of the existence of these two main organisations of *branitelji* saw an explosive growth in their membership, while early projections on the total number of disabled as a result of fighting in the war had apparently proven far too modest. This can, of course, partly be explained by the general chaos resulting from the state of war, which made precise projections on just about anything extremely difficult. It is also an open question whether these projections included realistic figures for disability stemming from psychological causes, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).⁵⁴ Indeed, even the symptoms of PTSD occur with a certain delay, and the fact that in most societies – and perhaps especially in Croatian society – psychological problems are clouded in stigma and prejudice, probably contributed to further delay in the “registering” of the diagnosis. One must also bear in mind that the war was still not over, and that, in general, new injuries probably contributed slightly to the increase, even if the war had now moved into a low-intensity phase. Still, in such a scenario one would perhaps rather expect a slow but steady increase rather than an explosive one.

⁵¹ “Mladen Jurković na čelu Hvidre”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 03.05.1993.

⁵² “Invalidi rasprodaju dionice da – prežive”. *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 12.12.1993.

⁵³ “Za savez veterana”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 11.10.1993.

⁵⁴ In the case of Croatia, after 1.000 ex-combatants had been psychologically scrutinized, 19% were estimated to suffer from PTSD, while 20% were estimated to suffer from “some other form of psychic breakdown”, according to Split-based psychologist Mladen Mavar (“Svaki peti vojnik boluje od ‘vijetnamskog sindroma’”. *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 26.04.1996).

There are, however, some factors which may at least partly explain this massive recruiting. Regarding UVHDR, this organisation was to represent the interests of all veterans, not exclusively those with disabilities stemming from serving in the war. At the same time, however, some of the veterans' organisations were not exclusive, which meant that membership in one organisation did not necessarily exclude membership in another. For instance, a disabled *branitelj* could be member of both UHVDR and HVIDRA. However, in time, the possible problem of "double memberships" would disappear, as the number of *branitelji* would continue rising to such an extent that this explanation lost its plausibility. It is perhaps more realistic to speculate that both HVIDRA and UHVDR operated with some kind of "automatic" membership, i.e. that all disabled *branitelji* and *branitelji* respectively were automatically included as members in these organisations. After all, the aura of government promotion surrounding some of the organisations might easily be imagined as a resource which could be utilized to achieve such a feat.

Demobilisation of soldiers was a recurrent theme surfacing in the national press in 1995. In April, Minister of Defence Gojko Šušak announced the president's decision to demobilise 35 000 soldiers, something which was deemed executable the state of war and occupation notwithstanding.⁵⁵ Yet it was following the incredibly fast and efficient Operation Storm that the process of fundamental demobilisation and reorganising of the army began. Less than a week after the operation, the demobilisation of 70 000 soldiers was under way.⁵⁶ At this point, the *branitelji* moved from the inaccessible realm of military statistics to the far more open one of unemployment-statistics. Four months after *Oluja*, in January 96, one tenth of these ex-combatants were evidently living in the County of Split-Dalmatia; 5188 out of approximately 7000 *branitelji* were unemployed, and out of a total of 40 004 unemployed, the *branitelji* made out 13% – or 27% of all male unemployed in the county.⁵⁷ For Croatia as a whole, the total number of unemployed was 249 070 roughly at the same time⁵⁸, while in March, according to the Ministry of Work and Welfare (*Ministarstvo rada i socijalne skrbi*), there were 45 384 registered unemployed *branitelji*.⁵⁹ These numbers grew gradually throughout the subsequent years and reached new heights. In March 1997, one half of all

⁵⁵ "Demobilizacija 35 tisuća vojnika", *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 12.04.1995.

⁵⁶ According to Šušak, 8 days were planned for the operation: 4 days for the repossession of territory and 4 days for "cleansing the terrain". However, the operation was concluded within half that time ("Demobilizacija 70 tisuća vojnika". *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 08.08.1995).

⁵⁷ "Borci demobilizirani, poslodavci pasivni!". *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 18.01.1996.

⁵⁸ "Nezaposlenih oko 250 tisuća". *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 19.01.1996.

⁵⁹ "Razvojačenima nudimo 250 milijuna kuna!". *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 07.05.1995.

unemployed men in Split-Dalmatia were *branitelji*.⁶⁰ It is, of course, necessary to assess these statistical facts critically. Firstly, there are always large hidden numbers, perhaps especially so in societies where family structure is still tightly knit and unemployed males may be sustained through the pooling of family income. Secondly, also regarding family structure, the more patriarchal structure in the area promotes the man as the natural worker of the family. Thus the real options for women to enter the market of employment are reduced, while women are included in the statistics on the same level as men. Thirdly, no information is provided regarding how this statistic information is gathered, which opens the way for manipulation in either direction depending on the agenda of the publisher. Still, all these dubious elements aside, I believe that valuable information is possible to deduce from these statistics. As pieces, they fit nicely into the general pattern which clearly shows that the demobilisation of soldiers put an enormous pressure on unemployment rates, while at the same time there was no adequate system to counter this “wave” of unemployed young men. This led the *branitelji* to seek other solutions to their problems – problems which were addressed with the moral weight of collective sacrifice through the veterans’ organisations.

Early projections of the grand total number of *branitelji* thus ranged from 200 000 in the words of member of the governmental office for injured *branitelji*, Dr. Zvonko Knezović⁶¹, and 300 000 which was the official projection of UHVDR (see above), to 350 000 according to the secretary of the organization Croatian Knights (*Hrvatski vitezovi*), Velimir Milaković.⁶² Early projections of the grand total number of disabled ranged – or rather, grew – from 3-4000 to 18 000. These were the early projections. And they would in time prove by far too modest.

2.2. The Law of Rights of the Croatian *Branitelji* of the Homeland War⁶³

I turn now to a closer look at the most important features – for this thesis – of the Law of Rights of the Croatian *Branitelji* of the Homeland War (*Zakon o pravima hrvatskih branitelja iz Domovinskog rata*) itself, which is the legal document that regulates all the rights that the Croatian *branitelji* are entitled to. This is unavoidable, since, keeping in mind my thesis, the law was on a certain level instrumental in the politicisation of the veterans. The scope of

⁶⁰ “Bez posla 7026 branitelja”. *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 10.03.1997.

⁶¹ “Ne bole ih ratne rane, već – ratni profiteri”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 04.06.1994.

⁶² “Na ulici’ 45 tisuća ljudi”. *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 05.09.1996.

⁶³ “Zakon o pravima hrvatskih branitelja iz Domovinskog rata”, *Narodne novine*, issue 02/94. All citations in this section are taken from the text of the law, unless otherwise stated. The law is from here on referred to as the Law of Rights for the sake of simplicity. *Slobodna Dalmacija* also offered a short, “popular” overview of the most important features of the law, see “Branitelji i sva njihova prava”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 10.02.1994.

privileges it offered to the *branitelji* gave those who administered it a hold on those who aspired to be included by it. Yet, as we shall see, it is also justifiable to look at it from the other way around, since, as their numbers grew on a massive scale, the *branitelji* were able to exert pressure on the government to change the law to their advantage. Be that as it may, according to this thesis it is an undeniable fact that the attractiveness of the rights the law had to offer was one of the main contributing factors in the explosive growth of the number of *branitelji*.

The law was adopted in the Croatian parliament, *Sabor*, by the end of 1993, and was formally put into effect in the beginning of 1994. While the war had still not ended, the *branitelji*, especially those of HVIDRA⁶⁴, had succeeded in convincing the government to adopt most of their suggestions and wishes. “By this law the complete rights of disabled persons have been encircled” was Jurković’s immediate remark when the first version of the law was released in 1994.⁶⁵ Though demands for and actual increases of the rights it offered were abundant in the years to come – following constant demands from the *branitelji* and their organisations – it would certainly prove extremely difficult to make such changes as to reduce in any way this platform of rights founded by this law. This was to be experienced first hand by several politicians.

The most significant of the rights of the *branitelji* and/or their families⁶⁶ was of course the right to disabled and/or family pension. Accordingly, *branitelji* who became permanently disabled as a result of “protecting the Fatherland” were entitled to such pension following military regulations on pension and injury insurance. In the case of killed or missing *branitelji*, these rights were transferred to his or her family. The monthly payment according to the military insurance is not stated anywhere in the Law of Rights, probably because it fell within army jurisdiction and was therefore kept secret. The pure “disability” pension however, which was regulated by the latter of the two laws, is stated as amounting to the decent sum of 160% of the annual average payment of Croatia for disabled *branitelji*, or

⁶⁴ According to Slobodna Dalmacija, HVIDRA’s wishes and demands were reflected considerably in the new law (“Vlada prihvatila HVIDR-ine sugestije”, Slobodna Dalmacija, 17.01.1994). The organisation is even mentioned in articles 30 and 31, which strengthens the impression that HVIDRA was regarded as the “official” organisation of disabled veterans at the time.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Any family members (i.e. wife or husband, children, adopted children, stepchildren, parents, adopted parents and stepparents) of disabled, killed, missing or imprisoned *branitelji*, were also given rights according to the law. The internal order of priority between family members in realising these rights was to follow Croatian law of inheritance or to be agreed upon by those involved, adhering to principles of “interpersonal understanding”.

HRVI (*Hrvatski branitelj - ratni vojni invalid domovinskog rata*), of the first category.⁶⁷

Realistically, however, not much time passed before these financial privileges began to put strain on the state budget – already in 1996 some sources claimed that people entitled to full pensions received only half of it due to lack of state funds.⁶⁸ Also, regarding assistance of financial kind (or potentially so) the Law of Rights was to ensure for the *branitelji* the right to shares in the so called Croatian fund for privatisation/Croatian Homeland Fund, which was also to follow a system of priority in accordance with grade of disability and/or length of service. However, in reality, it is questionable whether the measures connected to shares had any beneficial effect at all. 45 or so years of socialism are likely to have contributed to there being little common knowledge about privatisation, stock exchange, and valuables “on paper”. Most of the shares of the *branitelji* were in fact sold for hilariously low prices to players on the newly created Croatian stock market, among them leaders of some of the veterans’ organisations.

Another important benefit was special privileges related to social security payments to the unemployed. At this point the often criticised distinction between ordinary citizens and the *branitelji* became more pronounced, as unemployment was a general problem in Croatia during these years, and not an exclusive problem of the *branitelji*. Namely, all *branitelji* were entitled to a 20% higher social security payment than regular job-seekers for a period ranging from 104 days for those who had spent less than 3 months to 486 days for those who had spent more than 10 months “defending the Fatherland”. This provided the job-seekers were registered as such no later than 3 months after their respective date of demobilisation.

A program for the employment of veterans was also set into motion, consisting of two parts. Firstly, *branitelji* were to be favoured by employers, since the law established that any private company with more than 30 employees should see to that at least 3% of these were *branitelji* or members of their families. A system of rewards was set up to speed up this process of reemployment; thus tax on these companies’ green figures was to be reduced by an amount corresponding to 3 times that of the pay check of the respective *branitelj*-employee. Employers were also to follow a rank of priority when hiring *branitelji*. Of highest priority were HRVI, followed by family members of killed *branitelji*, family members of missing or imprisoned *branitelji*, and finally, “ordinary” *branitelji* who had been demobilised and were

⁶⁷ Degree of disability was ordered in hierarchical categories according to which the level or number of rights were accredited, where “100% disabled with continuous need for care” and “20% disabled” were the top and bottom categories.

⁶⁸ “Stradalnicima do kraja godine 4669 stanova”, Slobodna Dalmacija, 05.09.1996.

unemployed.⁶⁹ The *branitelji* who had HRVI-status were, according to article 15, to be fully exempt from paying tax on their wages. However, though they sounded nice, it became increasingly apparent that these measures were not effective enough, as only about 10% of the 966 *branitelji* who returned to work in Split-Dalmatia County in 1995 did so thanks to these measures. It also seemed that employers were elegantly ignoring the law's demand of 3% *branitelji* in their staff, without having to face any consequences.⁷⁰

The second constituent part of the program for employment of the *branitelji* was based on the granting of loans to encourage self-employment, especially in the agricultural sector, offering the veterans affordable loans to buy equipment and other necessities to start their own businesses. The maximum amount of each loan was 92 500 kuna, and they were to be distributed and handled by the Croatian Bank for Renewal and Development (*Hrvatska banka za obnovu i razvitak* – HBOR).

However, the implementation of these measures, which was to safeguard arguably the most important process of reintegration of the *branitelji* – through work – was mainly a failure. In the first two years of existence of the mentioned program for employment of *branitelji*, only about 2 000 (out of approximately 45 000) unemployed *branitelji* passed through the system of the program.⁷¹ In 1996, however, the program was "re-launched" with the help of the media, which led to a massive increase in demands for the mentioned loans for self-employment. By autumn of the following year, after 3 657 loans had been granted (amounting to about 320 million kuna), the program had to be terminated as HBOR simply ran out of funds. 7 757 applications had thus to be refused.⁷² In 2004, more than 3 000 of the 3 657 loans actually granted before HBOR's cashbox was empty had to be refinanced with then Minister Jadranka Kosor guaranteeing for them, as the *branitelji* in question could not handle the repayment of the loans any longer.⁷³

One of the more controversial rights that this law established was that regarding residence. True, the demobilized *branitelji* and others had up until now had the privilege of carrying out undisturbed occupation of empty flats and houses that were property of the state, and which had mostly been confiscated from fleeing Serbs or former Generals of the Yugoslav Army (JNA). 70% of all property in possession of the state was to be earmarked for

⁶⁹ Level 2. and 3. of this rank of priority were merged by an amendment of 23rd May 1995. The distinction between families of killed *branitelji* and families of missing or imprisoned *branitelji* was no longer to be upheld according to this amendment, thus having consequences for other rights as well (Narodne novine, issue 36/95).

⁷⁰ "Borci demobilizirani, poslodavci pasivni", Slobodna Dalmacija, 18.01.1996.

⁷¹ "Iz rovova u biznis", Slobodna Dalmacija, 04.05.1996.

⁷² "HBOR za branitelje nema sredstava", Slobodna Dalmacija, 10.08.1997.

⁷³ "Ministrica urgira za 3000 branitelja koji ne mogu vraćari kredit", Vjesnik, 05.06.2004.

branitelji; yet primarily for those with the HRVI-status. Those with a disability rate of 100% as well as the families of killed *branitelji* were to be accommodated within 2 years, those of 90-70% as well as families of missing or imprisoned *branitelji* within 3 years, those of 60-50% within 4 years, and finally, those with a lower rate of disability were to receive the keys to their flats within a period of 5 years. However, this part of the law was to prove perhaps the most difficult to realise. The building of new flats and houses, as well as the readapting of older ones to fit the needs of disabled veterans, would lay serious strain on the state budget, as well as leading to several accusations of corruption and intransparent practices both in the tendering and building phases. Moreover, the constant breaking of promises from successive governments on this matter has led to horror stories in the media of veterans surviving the winter in their cars or under bridges, leading thereby to a giant amount of frustration and agitation among the *branitelji*. The fact that the State was actually legally bound by a paragraph in the law to fulfil this excessively ambitious promise bereaved the various governments – be they HDZ-led or not – of a lot of credibility. In 2005, only 931 of 15 874 waiting claims for flats were processed,⁷⁴ and as this paper was reaching its conclusive phases in autumn 2009, there were still veterans waiting to receive their keys.

Two benefits – or privileges, depending on viewpoint – were especially to cause envy among regular citizens. The first one of these was the right to vehicles. The law stated that HRVIs of 100% disability were to be provided with vehicles by the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Croatia (*Ministarsvo obrane Republike hrvatske – MORH*) to be used unconditionally. HRVIs of 70% or more were to be allowed to import cars without paying import taxes or customs.⁷⁵ By the first reformed Law of Rights of 1997, this right was expanded to all *branitelji*, as well as to their families. By October 1998, 74 432 approvals for importing cars had been given. According to Damir Kajin of the Democratic Sabor of Istria (*Istarski demokratski sabor – IDS*), the money the state lost on these cars could have opened up 15 to 20 thousand new places of work.⁷⁶ Though probably exaggerating, his line of reasoning is difficult to disagree with, given the economical situation his country found



⁷⁴ The Government of the Republic of Croatia 2006.

⁷⁵ Tax exemptions and reductions were also to apply to other fields, most importantly to the import of equipment necessary for the “dependent pursuit of economical participation”, and to the selling and buying of shares.

⁷⁶ “Rovovska bitka za branitelje”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 08.10.1998.

itself in at the time. In 2000, then Minister of *Branitelji* Ivica Pančić estimated that the number of imported cars had passed 130 000, on which the state had lost a potential income of about 400 million dollars.⁷⁷ The reform of the Law of Rights which took place during his mandate did to a greater extent limit the rights connected to car-imports, mostly by way of limiting the number of cars each *branitelj* was allowed to import. Though Pančić did succeed in bringing about a certain reduction in the scope of some of the privileges the *branitelji* enjoyed through the changes to the Law of Rights adopted during his mandate, he did not erase any of them completely, probably out of fear of massive protests.⁷⁸

The effect of provocation of the second of these privileges, though short-lived, was probably even greater. As a result of the new Law of Rights of the *Branitelji* adopted and implemented by the HDZ-led government in 2005, the children of *branitelji* were to be given priority in enrolment to high schools and universities, even at the cost of better qualified and better performing students. This specific paragraph of the new law was, however, erased by high court as soon as December 2006, as it came close to causing social upheaval among students in the larger cities of Croatia. Its short-life span does limit its importance, yet the fact that a law with such a paragraph was adopted does stand as an example of the often ill-timed and poorly thought through politics towards the *branitelji* which I argue HDZ was following. Instead of bridging the gap between the veterans and ordinary citizens, this measure – if not eventually overruled – would only have succeeded in ensuring that the gap would be inherited by future generations. A related point was also aptly put forward by rector of the University of Zagreb, Aleksa Bjeliš, when he lamented that this apparent interest in the education of the *branitelji* and their children had come ten years too late.⁷⁹

Even if a lot of weight in this thesis is put on the so-called “fake” veterans, who exploited the system and the law described here, it is vital to keep in mind that there existed

⁷⁷ “Branitelji su uvezli 130 tisuća automobila ukupne vrijednosti milijardu dolara”, Slobodna Dalmacija, 08.09.2000.

⁷⁸ The limiting of certain privileges became part of his confrontational tactics regarding the *branitelji*, which will be analysed more closely in one of the coming sections of this chapter. Suffice it to say here that the then acting president of HVIDRA, Damir Varaždinec, called the new law discriminating towards the *branitelji*, and stated that the law was an “insult” to the Homeland War. Interestingly, yet perhaps not as curious as one might first think since HVIDRA up until now had been involved in activities far from what is commonly reckoned within the scope of “civil society”, he lamented that his organization had not been involved in the making of the new law (“Novi zakon diskriminira hrvatske branitelje”, Slobodna Dalmacija, 09.03.2002). Judging by comments and statements surfacing in the discourse at the time, it was especially hard to swallow for many that the new Law of Rights of Pančić’s era brought about less legal differentiation between *branitelji* and veterans of World War II, the latter which were mainly Partisans. In typical fashion, Juraj Njavro of HDZ commented that “the Croatian *branitelji* who realised the thousand year old dream of Croatian independence must have a special place and special rights” (“Smanjivanje razlike u pravima između vojnih i civilnih invalida Domovinskog rata I NOB-a”, Vjesnik, 22.05.2003).

⁷⁹ “Upise djece branitelja trebalo je riješiti 1995”, Nacional, 22.12.2006.

and exist a great number of veterans with real sufferings and real grievances. In the early years of the organisations, the newspapers were full of stories of frustration and despair, with a clear undertone of sympathy with the veterans. “Waging war with the bureaucracy” became the buzz-phrase of these times. And indeed, even if the law looked nice on paper for many a veteran, it was the implementation of it which was one of its real Achilles heels. Firstly, it is obvious that the law, through its poor implementation, created a large, discontented and frustrated segment of the populace, whose very real grievances became a source of potential capital for those who wanted to gain political power from their “cause”. Secondly, the design of the law enabled more “industrious” and connected individuals to earn a great deal on the privileges it offered, while perhaps those who were most in need of the assistance the law originally intended to provide were not capable of realising their rights, thus increased the frustration further. This unfortunate combination, catalysed by some of the mentioned privileges of the law which clearly brought about envy and feelings of injustice among other citizens, increased the gap between the *branitelji* and others. Thirdly, and more related to the “essence” of the law, it failed in practice when it came to decreasing or eliminating this gap by facilitating the much-needed reintegration of *branitelji* to society. Instead of unconditionally offering the privileges that it did, the law should have been specifically designed to facilitate such reintegration *by way* of the privileges. The privileges became an end, rather than a means.⁸⁰ One grave fault of the law in this regard was that unemployment was soaring, while there existed no effective program to return the demobilized soldiers – disabled or not – to work, which is arguably the main arena for integration and contact in any society.⁸¹ Another grave fault was that the entire system of rights and benefits was administered by the state, not involving “real” non-governmental organisations and other citizen-founded initiatives, which clearly would have brought about points of close contact between veterans and ordinary citizens. Moreover, such an approach would quite clearly have proven far more effective when it came to finding and caring for those veterans who, perhaps too broken down to be able to apply for jobs *or* realise their lawful rights, were falling right through the system.⁸² These two faults deprived the *branitelji* of two of the potentially most

⁸⁰ As Dečak of UHVDR admitted: “It is a fact that there are about 45.000 Croatian *branitelji* registered with the unemployment offices. However, we have to be frank and admit that many of them do not want a job” (“Ima branitelja koji i ne žele posao”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 10.10.1997). See also Bošnjak 2005.

⁸¹ To illustrate this point with figures: As late as in 2005, when a monthly average of 26.769 *branitelji* were unemployed, 2.94 billion kuna was spent on disability compensation and pensions, while only roughly 3% of that, 105 million kuna, was spent on programs for employment of *branitelji*. The total expenses of the Law of Rights for that year amounted to 4.1 billion kuna (The Government of the Republic of Croatia, op. cit.).

⁸² This viewpoint was precisely conveyed to the then future minister of veterans Jadranka Kosor by a delegation of the World Federation of Veterans during a meeting with representatives of the *Sabor* in 1997. Kosor was at

important arenas for contact with other citizens and thus society. In total, I argue that this contributed greatly to an increasingly large, isolated and discontent social group evolving, which not only became a safe and untouchable haven for corruption and criminal acts, but also a controllable political force which would be catastrophic to overlook. It is likely that he was thinking in similar lines, the then former minister of finance Borislav Škegro (HDZ), when he reportedly said that the Law of Rights of the *Branitelji* is “possibly one of the worst that *Sabor* ever brought. It stimulates idleness, interest seeking, alcoholism and the use of drugs, instead of giving young people the chance to work, re-socialise, and progress”.⁸³

2.3. Vague Definitions and Early Indications of “Hyperinflation”

In the previous section, the privileges the Law of Rights offered to demobilised soldiers was launched as an explanation for the dramatic increase in the number of *branielji* in the post-war years. A closely related cause is the existence of almost as many understandings of the definitions of the Law of Rights as there existed *branielji*. If the mentioned benefits were the goal, then one kind of loophole through which this goal could be reached was the vague, and sometimes inexplicable, definitions of the law.

The law not only established who were entitled to privileges but also established the grounds for a hierarchy of priority between these groups. Accordingly, any person having served in OSRH or in the Ministry of Interior, i.e. the Police (*Ministarstvo unutarnjih poslova* – MUP) as well as any volunteer who had participated in the “defence of the sovereignty of the republic of Croatia” in an “organized manner” since 30th May 1990, and had this confirmed by MORH or MUP, was to be legally recognized as a *branielj*. The new and improved Law of Rights which entered force in the beginning of 1997, after the war had formally ended, stipulated that the latest date for possible participation was 30 June 1996, 10 months after Operation Storm took place. Željko Kurtov of the Croatian National Party (*Hrvatska narodna stranka* – HNS) rightly wondered in *Sabor* with “whom Croatia was at war with in 1990 and the beginning of 1991”⁸⁴, and could have asked the same question regarding the 10 months in 95 and 96 mentioned. He could also have asked about those who, gun in hand, defended their country on their own initiative before there was anything called “the sovereignty of Croatia”, and “organised” was still an empty phrase.

the time vice-president of the *Sabor* (“Potrebna nezavisna skrb o invalidima!”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 20.01.1997).

⁸³ Laušić 2000.

⁸⁴ “Sabor: Treba li Registar branitelja biti javni ili tajni document”, *Jutarnji List*, 27.06.2007.

Regarding who was to be legally defined as HRVI, the law refers to the Law on the Protection of Military and Civil Persons with Disabilities of War.⁸⁵ Accordingly, any person who has suffered 20% or more damage – including illness and poor health – to their organism, and to whom this damage was inflicted while he/she was performing tasks of defending the “sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of the Republic of Croatia from 17th August 1990 to the cessation of hostilities” was eligible for HRVI-status. Again, the problem seems to lie in real or constructed ambiguities regarding how long the “hostilities” lasted, as well as how broad the definition of “defensive” tasks really was meant to be.

An early and, with the gift of hindsight, very apt case in point of how the vague definitions of the law facilitated individual manipulation was offered by Dr. Marija Medvidović, a member of the board of directors of HVIDRA and contact person for members of the organisations with regards to health and medical issues. In an interview, Medvidović addresses the need to clearly distinguish injuries stemming from accidents unrelated to war as well as civilian injuries from those directly related to armed combat. This is made difficult by the fact that there existed, at the time, no official regulations or laws by which one could *precisely* define military disability. Everything was in the hands of various commissions which employed disparaging criteria independently of each other. Further, she stated that 60% of the members of the Split-branch of HVIDRA “got” their disability status based on diseases which they had already been suffering from prior to the war. Moreover, she pointed to the need to “distinguish between those who became disabled in the battle zone due to drunkenness or driving fast, and those who were injured on the front line, [since] because of them, other disabled and injured are not able to realize their rights”. Moreover, she stated that “HVIDRA will not have the authority and necessary “weight” if we don’t eliminate such cases”.⁸⁶ The clear-sightedness of Dr. Medvidović was perhaps not appreciated by everyone, as she disappeared completely from the discourse after this interview.

The broad timeframes the Law(s) operated with, as well as the many creative interpretations of the phrases “participating in the defence” and “organised manner” would in time, as we will see, prove difficult to swallow for many of those whose participation and contribution in the Homeland War was unquestionable, as the “hyperinflation of *branitelji*” intensified and became unmistakably apparent. These *branitelji* in time began promoting a tighter or more complex definition, by which the *branitelji* would be classified and receive benefits to a degree which corresponded with the length and importance of their service.

⁸⁵ Narodne novine, issue 33/92.

⁸⁶ “Zakon na štakama – invalidi bez posla”, Slobodna Dalmacija, 08.03.1994.

These “true” *branitelji* typically marked their aversion by refusing to accept distinctions which were, in their opinion, handed out in every direction. One such group, the “Vipers of Zadar”, spoke out against the “devaluation of distinctions” which was seen as “spreading moral erosion in society” through their “multiplying like mushrooms in the rain”.⁸⁷ Similarly, the Split-branch of UHVDR tried to introduce a system of gold, silver and bronze membership-cards, based on length of service and acclaims of heroism.⁸⁸

On the other side, the side from which the “true” *branitelji* wanted to distance themselves, were those who felt they had sacrificed substantially “on the altar of the Fatherland”, yet were bypassed by the definition. Thus a struggle began for them to become included by the law. These were, for instance, people who had served in operational headquarters, medical services, or the National Guard, who felt dismayed at not being found worthy of receiving the benefits which were enjoyed by war-reporters, radio-hosts, and even cooks, as they too had contributed to the “defence of the sovereignty of the republic of Croatia”. While the first group was fighting to secure their status, this latter group was fighting to hinder inflation to their status.

2.4. Struggling to Keep the Numbers Down

Unavoidably, the controversies surrounding the “inflation” of status necessarily had to develop into even bigger controversies, as the question of “fake” veterans became increasingly prevalent. As a consequence of the sheer number of veterans and thus scale of the alleged fraud, not to say the morally deplorable side to it, the issue had to gradually enter the limelight if the political discourse as the nineties waned and the new millennium dawned. “Fake” veterans were understood as those who had taken advantage of the unclear definitions of the law, or, worse, had taken to lies and bribery to achieve their statuses. In the beginning phase of this critical reassessment of the veterans of the Homeland war, the ones who spoke up were typically from their own ranks (for instance the mentioned Dr. Medvidović). As noted several times already, a critical approach to the veterans without at the same time questioning the legitimacy of the Homeland War had become impossible. Thus it was only the veterans themselves that, given their legitimacy deriving from the vital participation in the “creation of Croatia”, could begin this reassessment. Soon after, catalysed by political change, the politicians and the public would follow.

⁸⁷ “‘Poskoci’ ne žele u koš s ‘gnjizdicama’”. *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 14.10.1994.

⁸⁸ “Na dva dragovoljca – tri udruženja!?”. *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 21.10.1993.

Early on in the discursive lifespan of the issue of fake veterans, HVIDRA's Goretta was highly supportive of a revision of all disabled veterans, the great majority of whom were members of his organization. HVIDRA's estimate in August 1996 was that out of 18 900 disabled veterans of the Homeland War, 7 000 were fakes.⁸⁹ This puts them in line with Mladen Borković of the Organisation of Croatian *Branitelji*-volunteers of the Homeland War (*Udruga hrvatskih branitelja - dragovoljaca Domovinskog rata* – UHBDDR), who estimated the number of fake disabled veterans to 40 %, and – looking at the *branitelji* as a whole, regarded the unofficial estimates of between 300 000 and 500 000 a “catastrophically large number”.⁹⁰ However, contrary to these estimates, after a Commission for the Revision of Disability had been established and functioning for almost a year, out of 3054 reviewed cases, only 175, or 5,73%, were concluded to be cases of fake veterans.⁹¹ The Commission, notably, was led by prominent UHVDR and HDZ-member Červenko, and UHVDR was clearly critical of the suspicion of the veterans which was implied by the work of the commission as well as to the mentioned estimates of number of “fakes” by the leaders of HVIDRA. Although occasional incidents brought some attention to the case of “fake veterans”, little progress was being made towards uncovering the scale of things and prosecuting those who had received and granted statuses irregularly. The commission remained ostensibly unconvincing in its dedication, not even notably encouraged by such incidents as the arrest of several employees of the Commission for disability of the District office of the pensioners' insurance fund in Split in August 1998, who had allegedly sold statuses of disability to anyone with enough financial means. An interesting testimony regarding the apparent inertia of the commission was to be heard from Stjepan Adanić in March 2000. Adanić was at that time former assistant to the Minister of Defence, and claimed to have first-hand knowledge of the commission and its work. According to him, had not the commission been hindered in its work, it would have disclosed 15-20 % of investigated cases as fake, a number which more closely resembles the initial estimates made by HVIDRA. Moreover, while Červenko had blamed the eventual discontinuation of the commission by the end of 1998 on Generals Bobetko and Ante Gotovina, as well as HVIDRA's new leader, Marinko Liović, Adanić had an explanation which refined the picture even further:

⁸⁹ “Revizijom protiv lažnih invalida”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 28.08.1996, and “Treba izvršiti reviziju našega članstva”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 11.09.1996.

⁹⁰ “Naša su prava – nedorečena”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 27.12.1996.

⁹¹ “Istina o lažnim invalidima”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 14.10.1997.

“(…) amongst the leaders of the government of that time a political climate was created which resulted in the political decision to stop the revision, even if the arguments for its continuation were more than satisfactory. The wrong political decision was made, something which is seen right now.”⁹²

Interestingly, this explanation for the discontinuation of the commission’s work receives support – retrospectively and unintended, that is – from Marinko Liović, who in an interview in 1998 answered that HVIDRA had demanded an end to the commission’s work, a demand which was supported by members of the government.⁹³

The timing of Adanić’s testimony was no coincidence, as it took modern Croatia’s first real change of government to start addressing these issues seriously. The “Father” of the Croatian nation had by now passed away, and with him – it seemed – some of the aura of sanctity surrounding the Homeland War. Minister of Veterans of the new government, Ivica Pančić, started his mandate on a high note, and it was not long before he was engaged in a verbal and often theatrical full scale media war with the *branitelji*, which was to last throughout his mandate. Pančić, himself a *branitelj* and refugee from Vukovar, came from the ranks of new Prime Minister Ivica Račan’s own party, the Social Democratic Party (*Socijaldemokratska partija – SDP*). It is likely that his own background lent him some authority to speak more freely on the matters pertaining to the *branitelji* – at least in the eyes of his party-fellows. “Speak freely” is perhaps too soft a phrase, though. The chair in his office could hardly have been warm when he started accusing 30 generals, many of them members of the “inner circle” of the old elite, of fraud in achieving their statuses of disability. It seemed a great many of these had been injured in traffic accidents, yet, all of them claimed, while in service.⁹⁴ Pančić seemed determined to solve these cases, as well as restarting a massive revision of statuses to compensate for the obvious lack of coherent routines and criterions which had characterised the assignment of statuses thus far. The implications for those who had achieved their status under a different regime were obvious, and their reaction was furious. Moreover, Pančić put his hand in a wasp’s nest when halting almost all governmental support to HVIDRA⁹⁵, the most powerful of the veterans organisations, claiming corruption and shady business was going on, while openly attacking the leader of one of the main

⁹² “Revizija nisu stopirali Bobetko i Gotovina, nego sam vrh vlasti”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 22.03.2000.

⁹³ “Zastupnici sebe namiruju, a za branitelje novca nema!”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 08.03.1998.

⁹⁴ “Hrvatski generali – lažni invalidi?”, *Vjesnik*, 13.03.2000.

⁹⁵ HVIDRA went from 11 million kuna in governmental support in 1999 to 650 000 kuna in 2000, parallel to the change of government (“Nema novca dok HVIDRA ne prizna pravnu državu”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 05.04.2003).

Slavonic branches of the organization, Darko Beštek, for being a “fake”.⁹⁶ Yet perhaps his poorest move, speaking from a PR-viewpoint, was going after fake veterans among those who were diagnosed with PTSD. True, as mentioned, this way of achieving the wanted status was probably the easiest (for those cynical enough), and probably had attracted a number of fortune seekers.⁹⁷ However, the extremely weak position of those who actually did suffer from such a psychological condition warrants quite a lot more tact and manner than Pančić seemed to be in possession of on this matter.

At any rate, Minister Pančić’s full confrontation with the veterans unleashed a giant brouhaha in the media, something to which, however, the *branitelji* themselves also contributed substantially to by their patterns of reaction. Slobodna Dalmacija printed a reader’s letter composed by HVIDRA Split which in typical fashion viewed the revision as an insult to the “sanctity” of the Homeland war, while at the same time relating this to difficult contemporary as well as historical themes. This became the trademark of the extremely polarised discourse of the Račan period:

“A revision of the invalidity of our generals is demanded; after the generals, you’re next. Everything that took place related to the defence of Our Beautiful⁹⁸ must be portrayed as satanic and a dark age of our nation, and one should distance oneself from the struggle for a free Croatian nation, Croatian thoughts and Croatian ideas. (...) Our new government is competing to be the best (...) at defaming and portraying their little Croatian sons as war-profiteers, war-criminals (...). In the middle ages they had the inquisitions – the burning of witches. We have new times, the “revisions” and the Hague”.⁹⁹

One might justifiably pose the question if not Pančić’s tactics and timing in dealing with the *branitelji* contributed strongly to the polarisation of Croatian society at the time. The left versus the right, World War Two versus the Homeland War, Nationalism versus socialism; all these recurrent Croatian themes were suddenly at the forefront again. It was no secret that a considerable number of veterans were highly disconcerted by the results of the elections, which in many eyes had brought the “Yugocommunists” back to power in a country which had promised never to return to “leftist terror”. Opting for full on confrontation with the

⁹⁶ See “Ako se Pančić ne ispriča ili ne bude razriješen, Hvidra u četvrtak prosvjeduje”, Vjesnik, 27.06.2000, and “Pančić: U kolovozu ćemo potrošiti sav novac previđen za ovogodišnje vojne mirovine!”, Vjesnik, 27.07.2000.

⁹⁷ In one interview, Pančić claimed that of 33 000 disabled veterans, as many as 10 000 were diagnosed with PTSS, something which from his viewpoint was “unheard of” (“Neprijemljeno je da trećina od 33 000 invalida rata ima status na osnovi PTSP-a”, Slobodna Dalmacija, 09.02.2002).

⁹⁸ “Our Beautiful” (*lijepa naša*) are the two first words of the Croatian national anthem. It is also a patriotic way of referring to the country.

⁹⁹ “Od inkvizicije do – ‘revizije’” (letter to the editor signed by HVIDRA Split), Slobodna Dalmacija, 21.04.2000.

veterans, beginning right after the elections, the minister did contribute to souring the relationship between the new government and the *branitelji*, and thus he did contribute to increased political polarisation. However, one might argue that these themes mentioned above were bound to surface sooner or later, and that a “clearing of the air” is vital to any country aspiring to become a developed democracy. Still, the question remains why Pančić did not opt for a start more of the quiet sort, and then choose the timing and verbal ammunition for his battles a little more selectively. One answer to this question may be found in political pragmatism. The government he was member of came to power on the promise that they would rip up the rest of the HDZ elite, and embark on a complex reorganization of society which would bring back justice to the country. Therefore, one may argue, Pančić had to make such a “brave” move to contribute to establishing the legitimacy of the new government. If this is the case, then it is arguably another example of political abuse of the *branitelji*. Moreover, it is possible to argue that the holding back of funding for HVIDRA mentioned above was an attempt to influence the organisation and its work, thereby committing the sin of political manipulation of which it is HDZ that is the main perpetrator in this thesis.

Pragmatic and cynical or just overzealous and clumsy, Pančić’s official reason for accusing the veterans was economic. And on this matter his line of thought was easy to understand, as there existed little doubt that a revision was badly needed. The state budget was becoming under increasing strain from the massive – and still rising – number of entitlements to benefits and privileges that were handed out. Former soldiers who had served in the war were still streaming *en masse* to clinics and army archives to realise their entitlements, while, to deteriorate the situation even further, MORH was announcing profound reorganisation of the army, predicting that 10 000 more personnel would have to leave by 2002.¹⁰⁰ These facts were undoubtedly occupying the minister’s mind regarding long term prospects. When it comes to the short time prospects, the situation was becoming even more pressing. In an interview, Pančić claimed that 880 millions of the 1,2 billion kuna put aside for veterans’ pensions for the whole of 2000 had already been spent by the end of June, which meant that all the money for pensions would be spent by August that year. One does well to keep in mind that Croatia is a country whose program of social benefits occupied one third – or 14,5 billion kuna – of the state budget already in 1997.¹⁰¹ The state had – since

¹⁰⁰ “Ministarsvo obrane smanjit će u četiri godine broj zaposlenih za 10.000 i povećati djelotvornost”, Vjesnik 22.08.2000. A year later, the suggested number of personnel which were deemed superfluous had risen to 17.000 (“Ukupni višak u MORH-u 17.000 ljudi: do početka 2002 mirovina ili sporazumni raskid za 5000”, Vjesnik 11.08.2001).

¹⁰¹ “Socijalni program – trećina proračuna”, Slobodna Dalmacija, 15.01.1998.

the first adoption of the Law of Rights – been chronically short of means to fulfil the promises made to the *branitelji* and others. This at least partly explains its poor implementation, as was mentioned earlier. The number of *branitelji*, and the concurrent explosive growth in budget spending, had by now developed into an enormous weight for the state to carry.

Yet there were other obvious reasons why a fundamental revision was badly needed. In the same interview, Pančić criticised the Law of the *Branitelji* for having contributed to increasing social differentiation among the people in general, and among the *branitelji* especially. From the minister's viewpoint, a first important step to sort things out was to establish once and for all a final number of true veterans, and thereby – presumably – put the ongoing discussions to death.¹⁰² And, Pančić's political orientation notwithstanding, his assessment of the situation, and his suggestion for a remedy, clearly had direct and indirect support from a great number of individual veterans as well as several organisations, ranging from the considerable UHBDDR to more peripheral ones, like *Uzdanica 1990*¹⁰³. Like Pančić, they held the viewpoint that the “fake” veterans, many of them hiding behind the infallibility of the Homeland War, were seriously themselves the biggest contributors to the “criminalization” of the said war, and thus of the *branitelji*.

Indeed, Pančić did set his revision into motion. This was made possible by the changes to the Law of Rights, which were adopted in Sabor in autumn 2001. Thus, during 2002, more than 33 000 disabled veterans were to have their statuses reviewed to make sure they were in accordance with the guidelines of the new law. Each disabled veteran was to document his injury and service, as well as be examined by a commission of specialists in medicine and psychology. All disabled veterans diagnosed with PTSD were to complete a special written psychological test of American origin to establish whether they in fact were suffering from the disorder. As mentioned, this last feat was bound to create upheaval among the *branitelji*. It was massively opposed, yet on diverging grounds. One of the more understandable arguments was that it is unlikely that a person suffering from PTSD (and therefore, in practice, short concentration span) would be able to complete a written test lasting for several hours. Among

¹⁰² “Pančić: U kolovozu ćemo potrošiti sav novac previđen za ovogodišnje vojne mirovine!”, Vjesnik, 27.07.2000).

¹⁰³ This organisation, consisting of former members of the Lučko anti-terror unit, actually returned the financial assistance they were granted by the government for 2000 (110.000 kuna). According to an interview with the leader, Anto Jurendić, the reason for this was to show their discontent with what in their view was Pančić's habit of suspecting and discrediting all veterans' organisations: “Not all organisations are unfair. On the contrary, most of them are led by honourable and fair people, who were prepared to die for Croatia (...)”. In the same interview, Jurendić also claims that, right after the war, “fake” veterans were created with the knowledge and will of the government, as a way of reducing the number of unemployed and alleviating related tensions (“Ministar branitelja mora biti nestranačka osoba!”, Slobodna Dalmacija, 19.07.2000).

the more curious arguments against the test, however, was the one stemming from Branko Smrčak, president of the Organization for Croatian *Branitelji* Cured of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder of Šibenik-Knin County. According to Smrčak, it was impossible to use the test in Croatia since it stems from the USA, as “USA conducted expansionist warfare, while Croatia only defended itself.”¹⁰⁴ Some also expressed concern that answering truthfully on the questions in the test would prove incriminating and might lead to them being extradited to the ICTY. The last argument was in fact voiced by Pančić’s assistant, Blaženka Gogić, who had to leave her post as a result of the whole affair. Pančić, as usual, saw things from another angle. According to him, the test had been used in Croatia before, without any problems encountered, and the test under no circumstances could or would be used for incriminating purposes.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, he rhetorically asked how it was possible that a country like Israel only had 2 000 registered diagnosed veterans, while Croatia at the time had 10 000.¹⁰⁶ Pančić also pointed to the inconsistency that of these, 9 000 had kept their driving licenses and 3 000 their weapon licences, a “right” which HDZ had earlier defended. According to him, PTSD had become an instrument for those seeking to settle their personal social situation:

“A huge number of those who are being forced to leave the MoD are currently beleaguering psychiatric clinics (...). If they are experiencing stress then it is not stress caused by some experience from the war, but stress caused by them leaving the MORH (...). Apart from the 10 000 people who have already realised HRVI-status on such grounds, another 4 700 have filed claims (...).”¹⁰⁷

The necessity of such a complete revision was beyond any doubt. However, the fear it sparked among the “fakes”, and the humiliation and feeling of being suspected it gave rise to among “true” disabled veterans, produced considerable anger directed against the government. It is likely that this is one of the reasons why Pančić’s revision in the end came to nothing. The government he was part of was losing overall popularity quickly, even if certain positive results, such as a slight reduction of unemployment, both in general and among the *branitelji*, were being claimed. Among the main reasons of the loss of popularity, one should arguably note that Račan’s government had considerable remnants of the old HDZ-structure to wrestle with, both in *Sabor* and in the country’s other institutions. As a direct consequence of this, the government on many occasions came across as a lame duck,

¹⁰⁴ “Samo sam izrazila strepnje pojedinih branitelja zbog spornog testa na PTSP”, Vjesnik, 06.02.2003.

¹⁰⁵ “Pančić: Ako oboljeli od PTSP-a ne ispuni test, ništa ne gubi”, Vjesnik, 13.02.2003.

¹⁰⁶ “Pančić: Od PTSP-a je napravljen bauk”, Vjesnik, 16.04.2003.

¹⁰⁷ “Nedopustivo je da 3000 oboljenih od PTSP-a ima dozvolu za nošenje oružja”, Vjesnik, 03.06.2003.

especially in light of its initial lofty promises. It is highly likely that structures of the old elite, especially in MORH, were hindering Pančić and other ambitious ministers in the government from putting their plans into life. Pančić himself admitted this: “(...) the new law can not be put into action without [MORH’s] full support. Obstacles are being created in the preparation of its implementation by persons who, by all means, wish to obstruct the entire process.”¹⁰⁸ Combined with all this, the defeated HDZ of the last millennium was regrouping quickly in the background under its new leader Ivo Sanader, and it is highly probable that this spelt more pressure on Račans government. His “brave men” were about to lose both their self-declared war on injustice, as well as the trust of the impatient electorate.

Perhaps it was a desperate last-minute attempt to turn failed efforts into something positive, or perhaps just a dirty campaign move, as some claimed¹⁰⁹ (or both) which formed the underlying rationale for Pančić’s last controversial move as Minister in autumn 2003. Prime Minister Račan and the entire government stood behind Pančić’s decision to publicise the – until now – secret register of all *branitelji* who had received benefits of agreeable loans and flats/houses since 1998 (not the “complete” register of later times, as this would demand a lot of work and time to put together). Račan stated that the government was obliged to inform the public of how the taxpayers’ money was spent.¹¹⁰ And, indeed, several veterans’ organizations were openly supportive of the plans to publish the register, as many saw this as an excellent way to expose “fakes” and thereby regain some of the lost sympathy from the public, as well as counter “inflation” of their statuses. However, the whole affair gradually became shaped by frustration and perhaps even vengeance, so that Račan’s “noble” rationale of “informing the public” was soon to seem rather hollow. The timing also – once more – opened up for doubts as to what the true goal was, as this was taking place right before elections, when society was extremely politicised, even by Croatian standards. Having been

¹⁰⁸ “Pančić: Upravo oni koji najviše optužuju ovu vlast pridonijeli su najviše kriminalizaciji Domovinskog rata”, Vjesnik, 21.04.2002.

¹⁰⁹ As Vinko Brkan, functioning president of HVIDRA and HDZ member, retorcally asked; “What has he been doing for the last four years if he publishes the register now, 20 days before the elections?” (“Zbog ‘teatralne objave popisa branitelja’ HVIDRA podiže tužbu protiv ”Pančića”, Vjesnik, 02.11.2003). It should be noted that the leadership of HVIDRA did in fact file lawsuits against the minister due to his “publishing” the register. A year prior to the controversy mentioned here, another had appeared also involving HVIDRA and secret registers. The minor Osijek-based newspaper *Osječki dom* was about to publish a register of all disabled veterans of the Osijek-Baranja County in September 2002, when members of HVIDRA of that county physically blocked the printing house which was to print the disputed edition of the newspaper. The whole affair led to a lawsuit from the involved HVIDRA-member against the newspaper, which, interestingly, was refused by the local court on the grounds that public interest demanded publication of the list, and that the court could not see how publishing individual grades of disability can be shameful for anyone (“Hvidra izgubila spor s novinama”, Feral tribune, 29.12.2004).

¹¹⁰ “Vlada, a ne Pančić, objavljuje popis stanova i kredita dodijeljenih hrvatskim braniteljima”, Vjesnik, 29.08.2003.

blocked from exposing the proportions of fraud regarding the status of the *branitelji* by the political and juridical tricks of their opponents, who were in a symbiotic relationship with a large segment of the veteran population, it now seemed as if the government had decided that the time was ripe to rely on social control and a shocked electorate to reveal the scandal and expose those responsible for it. The underlying element of frustration of the act becomes even more probable as Pančić had, shortly before, received another of numerous death threats, yet this time it was directed at his family.¹¹¹ However, this attempt to publicise was to prove futile. After conferring with legal advisers and experts, it became clear that such a move could not be made by the government without any legal basis whatsoever. The legal stumbling block consisted of existing laws regarding the protection of personal privacy, which had to be overcome before publishing the register, to prevent the possibility of an unprecedented wave of lawsuits against the state.¹¹² The government, now in a hurry due to the pending elections, handed over a suggestion for an amendment to the Law of the Protection of Personal Information (*Zakon o zaštiti osobnih podataka*) to *Sabor* for express treatment on 18 September. The suggested amendment would make it possible to override existing laws if in the interest of the wider public.¹¹³ Unsurprisingly, the suggestion was not accepted in *Sabor*. The frustration and feeling of loss must have been strong for Pančić, as he in despair stated to the media that he would personally put up the register on internal information boards and on the internet. The whole end of the giant controversy was a small computer located outside Pančić's office open to everyone for the last 20 days of his office, which had the disputed register saved on its hard disc. The legal stumbling block remained unsolved, and was to become the major excuse for the following HDZ-led government to keep from publishing the controversial register.

2.5. The “Final” Number: End of the Controversies?

After a period of stagnation during the period of the Račan government, the number of *branitelji* was again to increase under the following government, of which the “new” HDZ was the spine. Immediately after assuming power, the new government took several steps to reverse measures introduced by the previous government, thereby reproducing their image as the only true protectors of the *branitelji* and their rights, an image which is highly likely to have won them a lot of votes. The controversial test to determine PTSD was annulled, and

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² “Vlada privremeneo odustala od objave popisa branitelja koji su dobili stan i kredit”, *Vjesnik*, 16.09.2003.

¹¹³ “Vlada će ipak objaviti popis branitelja koji su dobili stanove i kredite”, *Vjesnik*, 19.09.2003.

Pančić's computer was removed from the premises of the ministry. Finally, in March 2004, the entire controversial revision was officially abolished.¹¹⁴ It is tempting to speculate that this was a tactical move to appease the veterans' organisations on the issue of Croatian Generals extradited to the ICTY, which had caused extreme political turbulence during the period of the Račan government (see the following chapter). After all, the decision to extradite two Croatian "war heroes" and the decision to stop the revision were two of the first decisions the new HDZ-led government made. The political turnaround with regards to the *branitelji* was fittingly symbolised by Prime Minister Sanader and the new Minister of Family, Veterans and Intergenerational Solidarity, Jadranka Kosor¹¹⁵, through the theatrical return of Darko Beštek's prosthesis. As previously mentioned, Beštek was accused by Pančić for being a "fake", upon which Beštek, lacking one leg, gathered a group of journalists and went to Pančić's office to return his prosthesis, since he – in Beštek's line of reasoning – was not in need of it, according to the minister. This episode laid the grounds for a tear filled reunion between Beštek and his prosthesis, witnessed by all national media, in which Jadranka Kosor took the opportunity to introduce herself: "This is a symbolic act by which the new Croatian government sends a clear message that it will work to counter injustice and return the dignity of the Croatian *branitelji*". Subsequently, she announced that Beštek was to become one of her advisors on matters regarding the veterans,¹¹⁶ something which perhaps was no surprise to Beštek since his Osijek-branch of HVIDRA had openly supported Kosor, calling her the "ideal Minister of *branitelji*" even before she was assigned to the post.¹¹⁷ Once again, the times they seemed to be a-changing.

¹¹⁴ According to the new minister, Jadranka Kosor, the revision had so far solved 4 500 cases, of which 37% demanded annulment of the previous achieved status, which, in her eyes, was far too harsh ("Kosor: Vlada će predložiti ukidanje revizije statusa invalida Domovinskog rata", Vjesnik, 04.02.2004).

¹¹⁵ Jadranka Kosor became highly popular through her hosting the radio program *Dobar dan, ovdje hrvatski radio* (Good day, this is Croatian radio) which during the war was dedicated to helping refugees who called in and needed assistance with banal or more important matters, or just wanted to share their horrifying stories. She began her political career when she joined HDZ in 1995, while still hosting her program, and swore that she would soon return to the town she lived in before the war, Vukovar, and start broadcasting from there again ("Niti mi je što ponuđeno niti sam što očekivala", Slobodna Dalmacija, 10.11.1995). Today Jadranka Kosor is the acting prime minister of Croatia.

¹¹⁶ "Darku Bešteku vraćena proteza", Slobodna Dalmacija, 03.02.2004.

¹¹⁷ "Jadranka Kosor idealna za ministricu hrvatskih branitelja", Vjesnik, 28.11.2003.



The new minister, Jadranka Kosor, returning Darko Bešek's prosthesis.

Pictures taken from Slobodna Dalmacija online (<http://arhiv.slobodnadalmacija.hr/20040203/novosti04.asp>).

Even if one might argue that the period under Pančić was characterised by a lot of will and little momentum, and that his aspirations to uncover the scale of fraud with regards to the statuses were unsuccessful, at least his period saw an intensive rise in general awareness of the public and media. The Račan government did contribute to promote a societal climate where one could to a larger extent question “established truths”, even if perhaps the most difficult themes of the recent past were tacitly overlooked, out of fear of total breakdown in their public support. Regarding the *branitelji*, this meant that the issue had now been placed on the agenda, and that critical voices were increasingly surfacing. It is reasonable to assume that the pressure stemming from this fact was an important factor influencing Kosor to create a complete and final register of veterans, and thus trying to end the debate regarding the continuing increase in their numbers.¹¹⁸ It is probable that the new government's rationale behind this decision was that, since opening the register to the public could give rise to a scandal of unprecedented proportions, one should try to appease the increasing demands for publishing by giving the public the exact and final number of veterans who had participated in the war. It was a question of giving the people bread when they wanted circus, hoping that would end the debate.

And indeed, for some time after the new government stepped up, confusion and more or less accurate and probable estimates of the total number of Croatian *branitelji* did twist the course of the growing debate of the new millennium. The question was now *how many* they were, rather than *who* they were. After a few months had passed, in spring 2005, as the register was closing in on its completion, rumours went that the number would be 450 000. Several veterans' organizations commented that the number could not possibly be higher than 350 000, and that “housekeepers, cooks and servants” could not be regarded as *branitelji*.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ To bring about a true end to the increase of the number of *branitelji* would, however prove difficult, as the temporal window within which one had the possibility to put forward demands of veterans' pension was still not closed. To this day (2 November 2009), it is still possible to register as a *branitelj*.

¹¹⁹ “Broj branitelja neće biti obavljen ovaj tjedan”, Vjesnik, 29.03.2005.

However, the coming register was mainly positively viewed among the veterans, as its completion would bring simplification. They would now find everything they needed in one place, and not have their papers and files spread over several ministries' archives. Moreover, every person in the register would receive an ID-card, proving his/her being a *branitelj*.

In the middle of September 2005, the “final” number was at last published: 489 407 *branitelji* had defended Croatia between 5 August 1990 and 30 June 1996. 454 174 were taken from the database of MORH, while 60 141 from that of MUP. 24 908 *branitelji* were subtracted from the final number due to them being listed both in the register of MORH and MUP. Josip Đakić, the new leader of HVIDRA, was among the few who openly stated that the number was realistic, while most of the organizations in their reactions to the “final” number were more preoccupied with the aforementioned perceived necessity of dividing the *branitelji* into combatants and non-combatants.¹²⁰ And, a few months after, the veterans' organisations were once more to have their way. On 1 December, the number of 437 518 *branitelji-combatants* was publicized, while the rest of the initial number was *branitelji* in the field of “logistics”.¹²¹ However, this number was by no means “final” either, as the number of *branitelji* continued its steady increase of several thousand each year. The last version of the “final” number published before this paper was to be completed, in August 2009, was 499 315, meaning an increase of 9 908 new *branitelji* since 2005. The total number of disabled *branitelji* (HRVI), which we recall was alleged to be roughly 18 000 in 1993, had by November 2009 reportedly grown to 45 703.¹²² One blogger, with a view to the unfolding economic recession, commented the figure thus: “500 000 *branitelji*...a million pensioners...and each day work places are being shut down...you don't have to be a great economist to see where we will end”.¹²³

Soon after the “final” number had been made public, however, it became apparent that the public was not by any means satisfied with this. On the contrary, the general temperature of the discourse surrounding the *branitelji* rose several degrees as a result of the number, which the majority of the opinion found hopelessly inflated. The opposition, led by SDP, HNS, and the Croatian Social-liberal Party (*Hrvatska Socijalno-Liberalna Stranka – HSLS*), were not prepared to give the government coalition any rest on the issue, and knew well how to create more upheaval. In a session in *Sabor* in June 2007, which centred on whether the Register should be an official or secret document, several voices were heard doubting the

¹²⁰ “Za Hrvatsku se borilo 489 407 branitelja”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 15.09.2005.

¹²¹ “Ratovalo 437 518 branitelja”, *Vjesnik*, 01.12.2005.

¹²² “Invalidske mirovine prima 45 703 ratnih vojnih invalida”, *Novi List*, 02.11.2009.

¹²³ “U Četiri godine dobili 10 tisuća novih branitelja”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 16.08.2009.

criteria by which the *branitelji* had received their status. Zlatko Kramarić (HSL), looking back at the Homeland War, stated that “with half a million *branitelji* we would have pushed through to Vienna or Istanbul, depending on which way we turned”.¹²⁴ On the other side, a small in number (since by now, HDZ was the only party in *Sabor* which refused publication of the Register) but powerful chain of politicians and veterans’ organizations centred around HVIDRA, its leader and *Sabor*-representative for HDZ, Josip Đakić, and minister and now vice-president Jadranka Kosor, were insisting on the aforementioned juridical details of “personal privacy” which accordingly prevented official insight into the Register. This seems somewhat strange as, we recall, both HDZ and HVIDRA has on many occasions, mainly before 2000, openly admitted that “fake” disabled *branitelji* is a large problem in Croatia, and that a revision is badly needed. To refresh earlier mentioned facts, the leadership of HVIDRA officially estimated in 1996 that of almost 20 000 disabled veterans, 7 000 were “fake”,¹²⁵ and during a session in *Sabor* that same year, Jadranka Kosor acknowledged the scale and graveness of the problem of “fakes”.¹²⁶ Once again, the cause for this turnaround should be looked for in the ICTY-issue. As will be described in details in the next chapter, it was politically unavoidable to “make peace” with the veterans’ organisations on the issue, which, after all, had created numerous crises for the previous government. If the whole fraud was even close to the scale which was hinted at by critics and analysts, the veterans’ organisations, or more precisely, their leaders, probably accepted to lay low on the ICTY issue if the dirty closet cleanout that the revision might have become, did not materialise. The irony of it all was not lost on the oppositional weekly *Nacional*, which reported that the entire Register, which was kept from the Croatian public, was actually in the hands of the Austrian bank Erste Invest, which was administering the Fund of the Croatian *Branitelji* of the Homeland War and Members of their Families. Moreover, *Nacional* speculated that the financial consequences of the high and increasing number of *branitelji* might be a rise in annual related costs as a result of this from 4.8 billion kuna in 2007 to over 6 billion sometime in the near future.¹²⁷ Former minister Pančić stated that:

“People who did not spend a day at the front have received status as *branitelj*. The number of 489 000 is degrading real warriors, who, as a consequence, will receive a lot less financial means than they are entitled to.

¹²⁴ “Sabor: Treba li Registar branitelja biti javni ili tajni dokument”, *Jutarnji List*, 27.06.2007.

¹²⁵ See, for instance: “Revizijom protiv lažnih invalida”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 28.08.1996, “Stradalnicima do kraja godine 4 669 stanova”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 05.09.1996, and “Treba izvršiti reviziju našega članstva”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 11.09.1996.

¹²⁶ “Pohvale zakonu o pravima branitelja”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 13.12.1996.

¹²⁷ “Tajni podaci o braniteljima u rukama Austrijanaca”, *Nacional*, 29.04.2007.

Another problem lies in the politics of the current government, which is seeking to solve the problems of the *branitelji* by sending 35-year olds into retirement.”

The article was but one of many highly critical features directed at the government in relation to the way they were handling the questions of the *branitelji*, something which portended that this question would actually be one of the main issues of the election campaign of the local elections of 2007. It is highly questionable whether a new round of pre-electoral politicisation of the *branitelji* did them any good. The discourse was reaching its boiling point, with SDP and several other smaller parties supporting publication, while HDZ was against it. Again, the issue was the “dignity” of the *branitelj*, and therefore, the “dignity” of the Homeland war itself.¹²⁸ Yet, even if this probably temporarily caused more suspicion and agitation between the *branitelj* and the citizen, it is difficult to disagree that a complete opening up of the Register combined with a systematic withdrawal of all undeserved statuses in all probability would lead to an improvement of the image of the *branitelj*, as well as removing a lot of related tension from the discourse and society as a whole.

However, the actual development on the issue ends here. The last few years have witnessed, as noted, the continuation of the general increase in the numbers of *branitelji*, as well as the continuation of the politics of denying transparency regarding the Register of the *branitelji*. The HDZ-led government has instigated certain steps allegedly meant to disclose and counter the production of “fake” statuses, going after doctors and specialists who have been diagnosing veterans. This is interesting only because it implies that – once again – even HDZ admits that fraud has taken place. Overall, it is safe to say that these steps, better known under their operational names, “Dijagnoza 1” and “Dijagnoza 2”, gave the impression of being rather whimsically implemented, often in concurrence with the release of a new European Union progress report on corruption in the country, or heated public debates on the matter. Afterwards, the momentum was quickly lost, without one single “fake” *branitelj* ever being charged. Several organisations, all of which seem to be HDZ-loyal through their leaders, with HVIDRA up front, is highly supportive of the government policy of refusing publication and revision of the Register. The rationale for the refusal is aligned with that of Kosor and HDZ,

¹²⁸ For example, Željko Kurtov (HNS) at a press conference in Sabor stated that the fact that HDZ is hiding the Register from the public is the real reason for the destruction of the “dignity” of the *branitelji* and the Homeland War (“HNS diže ustavnu tužbu zbog Registra branitelja?”, Jutarnji List, 12.07.2007). Similarly, yet from the opposite stance: after the outcome of the elections of November that year had become clear, Đakić publicly congratulated his own party and Sanader with the victory, and stated that, for HVIDRA, it was “especially agreeable that the [political] force who brought back the dignity of the *branitelji* and their families (...) won (“Braniteljske udruge: HDZ vratio dostojanstvo braniteljima”, Jutarnji List, 26.11.2007).

namely that it will harm the right to privacy and general welfare of the veterans, and that only when all the organizations agree upon publication will it actually be able to take place. HDZ and Kosor continued their image-building as the saviours of the *branitelji*, refusing to “join the prosecution”.¹²⁹ Some, like Đakić, have even stated that publication will lead to new indictments from ICTY, and it therefore is not in the interest of the *branitelji*.¹³⁰ At the same time, however, it is vital to stress that a plethora of the veterans’ organisations of Croatia actually supports publication and revision. This has even led some organisations to announce their members’ backgrounds voluntarily. Even several local branches of HVIDRA (for instance HVIDRA Bjelovar), are clearly in opposition to their leaders on the matter, and support transparency.¹³¹ Even President Stjepan Mesić publicly described it as “probable” that the government was knowingly giving shelter to “fake” veterans by refusing to publicise the Register.¹³²

The path chosen by the government and the most politically influential – or influenced – organisations on this matter seems indeed to bring about a continuation of the air of intransigency and suspicion which to such an extent sours the relationship between the *branitelj* and the ordinary citizen. It also upholds the by now established and very frequently heard conception in Croatian society that HDZ has been overtly and knowingly abusing the sufferings of the *branitelj* to gain power and important allies, as well as financial benefits for its members.

¹²⁹ Jadranka Kosor cited from an interview with Vjesnik (“Na objavi Registra branitelja inzistiraju licemjeri”, Vjesnik, 02.04.2008).

¹³⁰ “Đakić: Branitelje štitimo od Haaga”, Slobodna Dalmacija, 11.03.2008.

¹³¹ In a public statement, HVIDRA Bjelovar claimed that Đakić has not consulted all the constituent branches of his organization before publicly expressing HVIDRA’s view on publication of the Register, and that HVIDRA Bjelovar, on the contrary, supports publication. The statement further reads: “Someone asked which one of the world’s armies ever made public their list of warriors? Well, maybe not one of them had any reason to (...). The members of the presidency of HVIDRA Bjelovar would be sincerely proud to have their names made public on that list” (HVIDRA Bjelovar, press release/public statement, 15.03.2008).

¹³² “Mesić: Neobjavlivanjem Registra Vlada vjerojatno štiti lažne branitelje”, Slobodna Dalmacija, 15.03.2008.

3. Veterans against the Government

3.1. Early Demonstrations

The previous chapter entails the claim that several of the veterans' organisations were profoundly influenced by HDZ through their leaders. This, however, does not mean that they have always tacitly accepted government policy on the *branitelji*. As it quickly became apparent that the Law of Rights, or its implementation, did not meet the demands of the veterans to a satisfactory extent, utterances of discontent and critique against the government who was administering the law were increasingly heard, albeit without any direct challenging of the government's mandate. Early leaders, like Jurković and Goreta, were highly visible in the discourse, calling for improvement and better implementation on behalf of their members, and there was not always much that did resemble a hidden cooperation except for the fact that several of the leaders of HVIDRA, UHVDR and other organisations were also members of HDZ and representing the party in *Sabor*. At the same time, however, there was no form of open conflict going on, as basically all critique and demands of the *branitelj* – some of them aired when the war was still officially being fought – were seemingly answered by consent and understanding by the policy makers, which at that time meant different people within the HDZ. Thus this period is perhaps best summarily described as one of cooperation and agreement between the veterans and the government, while at the same time there were numerous indications, vented through the media, that the veterans were not satisfied with their position in society and the implementation of the system of benefits which was made available to them on paper by the Law of Rights.

It was with the rise of Marinko Liović to the position as leader of HVIDRA in the first half of 1996 that things seemingly took a turn in the direction of open conflict, even if Liović, like all HVIDRA leaders have been, was a HDZ-member. Liović made himself noticed frequently in the discourse, for instance by “jokingly” delivering derogatory remarks about women, Serbs and Jews. According to one source, he stated that “the [ICTY] tribunal in The Hague was created by freemasons and Jews”.¹³³ It was, however, by calling for and taking part in the organisation of the first considerable “airing out” of the grievances of the *branitelji* at St. Mark’s Square in Zagreb on 15 September 1996, that Liović truly marked his entrance onto the political scene. The demonstrations appeared to be well planned, and the warnings – or threats – that preceded them were plentiful. As early as in July that year, Liović warned that demonstrations would take place unless HVIDRA’s demands for a better position for its members were fulfilled, and that possibly the demonstrations would mark the beginning of a hunger strike that would last until his organisation had achieved this goal. Further, he mentioned that the leading figures of HVIDRA were considering registering as political candidates for the next elections, while at the same time stressing that, in case this plan was realised, they would be independent candidates – “We don’t want to be anyone’s extended arm”.¹³⁴ The period in early autumn, with the demonstrations closing in, was marked by an increasingly agitated Liović and HVIDRA, who raised the temperature of the discourse by several degrees with harsh rhetoric, such as speaking of the “shame” of the government and calling for a “destruction of this bureaucracy”, while his colleague, Mario Filipi, stressed that the coming protests “were going to be remembered.”¹³⁵ In one interview, however, Liović somewhat moderated his frontal attack on the government, by calling then Minister of Defence Gojko Šušak, Vice President of Parliament Jadranka Kosor, and Vice President of the Government Ljerka Mintas-Hodak “exceptions”.¹³⁶

These “exceptions” gradually became part of an emerging pattern, as considerable behind-the-scenes mobilisation was taking place, thus bringing greater nuance to this initial picture of “veterans against the government”. Prior to the demonstrations, speculations run wide that Šušak was the real “master of puppets” behind HVIDRA’s thoroughly announced demonstrations, and that the real aim was to gain moving space for the extreme right fraction

¹³³ Laušić, op. cit.

¹³⁴ “HVIDRin štrajk glada?”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 01.07.1996.

¹³⁵ “Iznevjereni smo!”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 31.08.1996.

¹³⁶ “Načekali smo se!”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 08.09.1996.

of HDZ by removing Prime Minister Zlatko Mateša.¹³⁷ According to one source, Šušak “generously sponsored demonstrations against himself by paying for 50 buses and meals for the protesters. No one was amazed when a demonstration against the government turned into support for Gojko Šušak and the rightist fraction of HDZ”.¹³⁸ Others claimed that most of the demonstrators were actually employees of MORH.¹³⁹ Interestingly, President Tuđman’s behavioural pattern in the last days before the demonstrations did indeed seem to signalise that something was going on “behind the scenes”. In a meeting with the Zagreb branch of HVIDRA the day before the demonstration, he delivered a speech which – had one replaced the nationalist pretext with the socialist one – probably would have made Tito himself envious.¹⁴⁰ Tuđman directed the attention of the listeners towards conspiring internal and external “enemies of the state”, referring to a “Yugocommunicist residue” present in all political parties, which “by all means wish to destabilise the Croatian government” by way of “exploiting the problems of the disabled”.¹⁴¹ The demonstrations, which gathered around 4000 *branitelji*, yet very few “ordinary” citizens, despite calls for their participation, also saw verbal assurances from both Kosor and Šušak of the dedication of the president in solving the issues concerning the veterans, while putting the blame on unnamed bureaucrats.¹⁴²

This apparent absurdity of the power structure protesting against itself may be interpreted as a well directed stunt to divert the grievances of the *branitelji* away from the party in power, while perhaps at the same time facilitating internal shuffling within the party. As one analyst was later to somewhat harshly comment, “in the time of the Tuđman-Šušak governance there was no overt need for the politicisation of HVIDRA, since nationalistic radicalism was built into the foundations of national politics”.¹⁴³ Rather than a protest against the government, it was a case of clever manoeuvring by political forces on the highest level, yet with the vital assistance of the “insider” Marinko Liović, in what was the first prime example of political manipulation of the *branitelji* and their “cause”. As others have claimed, this “started a chain reaction, and other ministers reportedly rushed to pay compliments to the

¹³⁷ “Na Markov trg dolazi 3500 invalida”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 14.09.1996. Mateša was expected to the demonstrations, but did not show up.

¹³⁸ Laušić, op. cit.

¹³⁹ Fisher, op.cit., p.83.

¹⁴⁰ This point has been aptly described by Slaven Letica: “Titoism, sadly, did not die in the moment of death of Josip Broz Tito (...). Titoism died slowly, by degrees, for a long period from the 1980’s to the 1990’s. Moreover, in Croatia, many of the elements of “titoism” lived on within the scope of “tuđmanism” all the way up to the end of the century and the death of Dr. Franjo Tuđman, the last true admirer of the character and work of the illustrious marshal” (Letica 2007, p. 30).

¹⁴¹ “Braniteljima dvije milijarde kuna”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 15.09.1996.

¹⁴² “Dostojanstveno protiv lopova i birokracije”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 16.09.1996.

¹⁴³ Matijanić 2006.

veterans and to express support for their demands”.¹⁴⁴ However, while the events that culminated with the demonstration at St. Marc’s Square gave a clear impression of the power latent in the cause of the *branitelji*, one still lacked a “trigger” for the full release of its potentiality. This “trigger”, however, was to present itself as the new millennium dawned, and a new government grabbed power in Croatia. And with it came cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

3.2. The “Power” of the Organisations Reaches its Peak

The death of President Tudman, the “father of the Croatian nation”, in late fall 1999 left a waning HDZ with no “strong man” around who could muster badly needed support. An increasingly economically broken down and agitated public, mobilised by non-governmental organisations and an opposition with wind in their sails, meant the end of a long period of HDZ dominating Croatia. However, as we shall see in this subsection, the fact that HDZ, by far the largest and most influential right wing party, was too weak to remain in government, did not mean that right wing forces were not still to be reckoned with in politics and in society in general. As the new centre-left government made it clear that cooperation with the ICTY was the only way out of the increasingly isolated position in which Croatia found itself. This was largely caused by the previous government’s refusal to compromise the “sanctity” of the Homeland War through such cooperation. The right wing parties, with HDZ as the most powerful, were able to realise the full political potential of the “cause” of the *branitelji*. The aim was to topple the new government and regain political control over Croatia.

As was discussed in the previous chapter, the new government was perceived and portrayed by HDZ and other political opponents as the “other”, i.e. the “Yugocommunists”. HDZ and the entire narrative of the modern Croatian state, and thus the *branitelji*, as constructors of that state, were in opposition to them. However, as has been stressed several times, the veterans are not the homogenous group that politicians and the media like to portray them as, and there is little doubt that many of the smaller organisations as well as many individual members of the larger organisations were ready to give the new government a chance – if not out of sympathy with the perceived ideology of the new government, then perhaps out of disillusionment brought on by the previous one. Indeed, a considerable number of veterans are likely to have voted *against* HDZ at the elections. Even if the more nationalistically oriented were truly convinced that the politics of new government would

¹⁴⁴ Fisher, op.cit., ibid.

compromise the “dignity of the Homeland War”, it follows that there must have been other reasons and dynamics underlying what was to become the massive mobilisation of veterans on the ICTY issue. Firstly, the much elaborated “war” on the *branitelji* of the new Minister, Ivica Pančić, accompanied the ascent of the ICTY to the “front lines” of the discourse. His questioning the veracity of the status of a large number of veterans, as well as his decisive cut in funding to their organisations, is likely to have convinced a number of veterans that his government was really out to get them. Thus it is likely that there were veterans who sincerely believed that the ICTY was being used as an instrument against them. There were also those who became nervous by the governments promise to fight corruption – not only through the revision of statutes, but also by the thorough review of the organisations’ financial portfolios.¹⁴⁵ Those likely to be made nervous by this were also most likely in a high ranking position, which enabled them to mobilise the members of their respective organisations. These were probably underlying factors which contributed to the massive mobilisation of *branitelji* against the ICTY and the government.

Then, turning to the ICTY-issue itself, its “genius” as a mobilising factor was the fact that it appealed to veterans and ordinary citizens alike. For the *branitelji*, as has already been discussed extensively, the issue had a burning closeness to it, given their direct participation, or even: given the substantial *sacrifice* that they lay down in the name of their country. However, the appeal was also strong to many outside the segment of right wing hardliners, who had but a strong patriotic sympathy with their country, something not at all uncommon in a young state with a recent violent history. Scepticism stemming from direct experiences with international organisations and their representatives before, during and after the war, combined with the collective historical perception by Croats as being “a small country bullied by great powers”, led to an atmosphere where it was unacceptable that a foreign, “political” judiciary was to judge the acts of Croatian *branitelji*. The fact that ICTY in many ways pursued what has been perceived in Croatia as a policy of levelling guilt, first and foremost probably to prove its unbiased vantage point had quite the opposite effect in Croatia. Most of the worst perpetrators of the Serb “enemy” were still at large, while demands to Croatia were perceived as increasing, something which was taken as further proof by propagandists that an international anti-Croat conspiracy was in the brewing. Moreover, the connection between a much needed development of the rule of law and the adherence to international obligations were not obvious to everyone, following a long period of authoritarianism where the concept

¹⁴⁵ As will be discussed more at length in the next chapter, Liović himself was subjected to accusations of financial malversation by his own nominal members, fronted by leader of HVIDRA Rijeka, Tomislav Tomečić.

of rule of law was a rather hollow one.¹⁴⁶ An excerpt from a press release by UHBDDR serves as elaboration:

“The [ICTY] has from the beginning been a political instrument and an instrument for pressure of international powers with which one wishes to level guilt and hide the responsibility of Western powers for the crimes committed by Milošević (...). In the struggle for biological persistence, in a justified war the Croatian nation created its Homeland by blood. In the naivety of our politics we welcomed the establishment of the court in the Hague, believing that designers and executors of war crimes would be held responsible by it. Today, only Croats are in The Hague (...) Enough is enough! (...) don't force us to, now in 1999, continue what we started in 1990. Today, we are older, more experienced, less naïve while equally adamant in our struggle for Croatia – as well as a lot better armed.”¹⁴⁷

A survey from September 2002, when the controversies were at their peak, indicated that as much as 71% of the populace was against the indictments.¹⁴⁸ One may establish that, in the initial phases of the controversies regarding Croatia and the ICTY, there was some sort of merging of interests between the *branitelji* and popular opinion, though the latter was probably less zealous and vocal in their grievances – at least viewed over time. This brought the ICTY up as the ideal gathering point for anger directed at the new government, something which HDZ and other parties of the far right took advantage of.¹⁴⁹ Vital to the realisation of the full potential of the ICTY issue was the “collectivisation” of guilt, i.e. the promoting of the notion that the ICTY sentences and indictments were against the Croatian people, and not against individual perpetrators. By adopting this tactic, those who were bound to scream the loudest against the “criminalisation of the Homeland War” in fact became its biggest contributors.

The turbulent period of the new government had its prelude in the sentencing of General Tihomir Blaškić to 45 years in prison by the ICTY in March 2000. Massive outburst of street protests on the issue took place in front of the US Embassy in Zagreb, yet also in Herzegovina, in places like Mostar and Kiseljak, where local branches of organisations like UHDDR and HVIDRA were visited and encouraged by their central leaders.¹⁵⁰ The sentence was interpreted by many as the “criminalisation of the Croatian nation and all participants of

¹⁴⁶ Pavlaković 2008, p. 448-455.

¹⁴⁷ “Ni jedan branitelj više neće u Haag!”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 26.03.1999.

¹⁴⁸ Pavlaković, op. cit., p. 457.

¹⁴⁹ Ironically, the Constitutional Law for Cooperation of the Republic of Croatia with the ICTY was adopted in 1996, when HDZ was in (total) power in Croatia (Ibid., p. 451).

¹⁵⁰ Irony strikes again, as it was in fact Tuđman himself who had arranged for the transfer of Blaškić to the ICTY (Ibid., p. 452).

the Homeland War, and a political judgement of all Croats”¹⁵¹, and it brought about the first of several political crises on the issue. The new government now found itself between a rock and a hard place. Namely, international demands were impossible to disregard any longer, should Croatia be pulled out of isolation and economic underperformance. The nationalistic opposition and the veterans’ organisations, however, by playing the “collective judgement”-card, made it quite clear that they would not accept such cooperation, if it meant challenging the established truths about the Homeland War. To a wide extent, the veterans’ organisations actually, according to the interpretation of Sharon Fisher¹⁵², succeeded to establish and legally cement the “sanctity” of the Homeland War through the adoption of the Declaration of the Homeland War (*Deklaracija o Domovinskom ratu*) in *Sabor* in October 2000. However, by also introducing the principle of individual accountability and guilt, the Račan government managed to open some space for political manoeuvring on the ICTY issue, even if this principle was at the time a far cry from practically realisable, taking public opinion into consideration. Still, following Fisher to some extent, the adoption of the Declaration is indeed possible to interpret as an indication of the power of the veterans’ organisations, as it is obviously drafted under pressure from such groups, something which the wording of the document speaks clearly of.

However, as summer and the tourist season came closer, it became apparent that the protests were about to become more “complex”. Namely, alongside street protests, Liović and HVIDRA were reportedly preparing to sabotage the coming tourist season by methods which were to provoke strong public reactions. According to the weekly *Globus*, HVIDRA would dynamite bridges and other infrastructural weak spots to prevent tourists from successfully entering or travelling within the country. The part on using explosives was quickly disclaimed by Liović, who stated that what he really meant was that these spots, including entry points at the border, were to be blocked physically by the members of HVIDRA.¹⁵³ Yet details on method were hardly the point. The timing of these threats was extremely poor, as Croatia was in desperate need of the economic boost of a successful summer tourist season. According to one poll, close to 90% of all Croats disapproved of Liović’s threats.¹⁵⁴ Moreover, bearing in mind the previous chapter, these events were taking place parallel to the “war” on “fake”

¹⁵¹ “Drastična kazna generalu Blaškiću dovela novu hrvatsku vlast u prvu veliku kriznu situaciju”, *Vjesnik* 06.03.2000. In July 2004, Blaškić was acquitted on more than a dozen charges of ethnic cleansing, and his sentence reduced to 9 years. The decision of the ICTY led to outbursts of joy among Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

¹⁵² Fisher, op. cit., p. 91

¹⁵³ “Blokirat ćemo državne granice ako vlast ne pomogne braniteljima”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 05.05.2000.

¹⁵⁴ Fisher, op. cit., p. 90, citing Rašeta 2000 and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2000.

branitelji instigated by Minister Pančić, something which undeniably contributed to parallel negative PR for the veterans. Obviously quickly recognising the possible negative outcomes of his statements, and probably also pressed by members of his own organisation, who were by no means united behind him, Liović “apologised to the Croatian people”.¹⁵⁵ Yet the damage was probably already done. Even if the tourist season went by free of incidents, the early autumn saw the assassination of ICTY crown witness Milan Levar, something which once again brought back public fear of national terrorism and the destruction of Croatia’s reputation as a safe and friendly tourist destination. Though there is nothing to substantiate that veterans were involved, there undeniably was a clear anti-ICTY message underlying the militant-terroristic assassination, which brought about strong public aversion and horror. This aversion was also likely to strike the *branitelji* indirectly, as they were becoming more and more associated with quasi-militant methods in opposing the ICTY and the Račan government. Thus, while the self assurance underlying the threats of national sabotage was indicating that the realised power lying in the alignment between veterans and politics was about to reach its peak, these incidents were also anticipating what was to put an end to that power, namely the destruction of the popular image of the *branitelji*.

On 11 February 2001, the ancient city centre of the Dalmatian harbour town of Split, Croatia’s second largest, was filled to the brim with somewhere between 100 and 150 thousand agitated protesters. Furious slogans and emotional appeals resonated against the antique walls of roman emperor Diocletian’s palace, while old women and little children wept, shouting out their frustration with the government and the ICTY. The pretext for this enormous display of discontent was the indictment against General Mirko Norac for his alleged acts of war crimes during the Homeland War, and rumours about his impending extradition to The Hague.¹⁵⁶ This instigated massive protests all over the country, the one in Split being by far the largest.

“You will not judge the legends of the Homeland war! Mesić and Račan seem to want Croatia to kneel before the Serbs and beg for their forgiveness. (...) Judging Norac is judging Croatia’s freedom, and Norac’s freedom is Croatia’s freedom. As long as we, the creators of the country of Croatia, are alive, Norac will not be judged.”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ Slobodna Dalmacija, op. cit.

¹⁵⁶ The slogan of the protests, “We are all Mirko Norac”, aptly displays how the opponents of the ICTY were dependent upon countering the efforts of the ICTY and the government to individualise accountability and guilt. By “collectivising” the verdicts, the potential for broad mobilisation was increased.

¹⁵⁷ “Split: 150 tisuća puta ‘svi smo mi Mirko Norac’”. Slobodna Dalmacija, 12.02.2001.

These were the words of Mirko Čondić, disabled colonel of the Croatian Army and head of the organisation Central Headquarters for the Defence of the Dignity of the Homeland War (*Središnji stožer za zaštitu digniteta Domovinskog rata* – from now on referred to as the CHQ). Aroused by the energetic cheering of the crowd, he went on to call for the resignation of the new government and the arranging of early elections.¹⁵⁸ Of the speakers, representatives of veterans' organisations were among the fiercest, naming Račan and his government “traitors” and “communists”, as well as exclaiming poorly veiled threats to topple the government, since “all of Croatia's army is here”.¹⁵⁹ Not surprisingly, HDZ officials were well represented among the more active participants, most notably among them future Prime Minister Ivo Sanader, who demanded the resignation of the government, and stated that Mesić and Račan “do not have the moral right to accuse the legends of the Homeland war”.¹⁶⁰ This “moral right” Sanader himself presumably had, since he started his term in 2003 by extraditing two other “national heroes” to The Hague.

The CHQ, which was established at roughly the same time as the fall from power of HDZ, is perhaps best viewed as an umbrella organization encompassing various veterans' and other organisations, and bringing these in close contact with bureaucrats of MORH, army officers, profiled HDZ party members, and other right-oriented groups which had been part of the Tuđman elite. Occasional support was also mustered from, among others, high-ranking clergy of the Croatian Catholic Church and the football club Hajduk Split. Moreover, powerful HDZ-loyal groupings within the Croatian intelligence service (*Hrvatska izvještajna služba* – HIS), or better yet, remnants of Tuđman's secret police, the Service for the Protection of the Constitutional System (*Služba za zaštitu ustavnog poretka* – SZUP), were on occasions seen at sites of chaos and violence during Račan's mandate, seemingly directing and instructing bullies and vandals.¹⁶¹ In other words, the CHQ was nothing less than a broad right wing interest group with the main aim of bringing down the government, thereby regaining

¹⁵⁸ The organisers of the demonstrations had prepared a declaration, in which only two of the eleven points pertained to General Norac, while the rest were directed at the government and where basically demands for their resignation. This led representatives of the government to conclude that “Mirko Norac was used as a screen behind which the real goal of early elections and a redefining of the political scene in the republic of Croatia was hid” (ibid.).

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, op. cit. It is highly likely that such characters were involved also in the demonstrations and in the murder of Milan Levar, yet it is difficult to prove any direct link to the CHQ. Nevertheless, the alignment between former agents of secret services and the criminal underworld is a well-known phenomenon in the former communist countries of Europe. Many analysts and commentators have extended this broad chain of “interest-mergers” of Croatian right wing hardliners to include parts of the criminal underworld. Following a spectacular bank robbery in Split in 2008, Josip Đakić of HVIDRA was linked to the crime by way of Jozo Čerta, the man allegedly installed as leader of HVIDRA Kaštela by Đakić (“Kriminal kao tradicija”, Feral Tribune, 16.05.2008). Đakić himself has been under police investigation a number of times.

the influential positions of right wing hardliners in society.¹⁶² The *branitelji* were utilised as instruments to realise this aim. Yet it was those in the background who were “pulling the strings” that represented the true danger to the young democracy. The CHQ’s ability to effectively organise and coordinate actions like the demonstrations in Split, as well as the financial resources such “operations” demand, speaks volumes of what kind of alliance of power lurked underneath.¹⁶³ “Synchronisation rather than spontaneity”¹⁶⁴ was the trademark of actions involving the CHQ, and the sheer display of power that the demonstrations in Split was, has led many analysts to align themselves with politicians of the then government in speculating that the protests in Split were really a *coup d’ etat* in the brewing.¹⁶⁵ The democratically elected government, as well as, presumably, a large number of those who voted in favour of it, was severely shaken.

Yet it was by no means the last spectacular incident directed by the CHQ, even if the “success” of Split would prove difficult to repeat in the following months, and demonstrations and protests were arranged with varying luck and support. This varying degree of success, however, was a trademark of the actions of CHQ. For instance, as early as in November 2000, the CHQ arranged protests against the EU during a summit of “Western Balkan” states, strongly opposing the connotation between Croatia and the Balkans in this newly and “diplomatically” constructed region. In this, they were following HDZ closely, adopting their rhetoric in detail.¹⁶⁶ Perhaps Croatia had become so “European” over the last ten years that she had even adopted her prejudice, and thus the CHQ refused to be denoted with this “pejorative” term. A more likely explanation, however, is the understanding of the term in the specifically Croatian nationalist reason, which is more in the line of “Communism”, “Yugoslavia”, or even better, “Yugocommunism”. This is ever the more likely, as another one of the issues “bothering” the protesters was the presence at the summit of Yugoslav premier

¹⁶² As Željko Strize, president of the Kaštela branch of HVIDRA stated in an interview: “(...) during the mandate of Račan’s government I was the right hand of Mr. Mirko Čondić (...). With the change of government and the return of HDZ, a lot of the people who were leading the organisations who where part of that CHQ changed; they were really just part of it to exploit it” (“Neka se čuje i druga strana”, interview at the web-portal of the Municipality of Kaštela, 29.05.2007).

¹⁶³ For instance, at a demonstration in Zagreb in October 2001, 168 buses had been rented to bring protesters from Dalmatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, according to MUP (“Prosvjednici od vlade zatražili raspisivanje referenduma i opoziv tjeralice za generalom Gotovinom”, *Vjesnik*, 21.10.2001). Apart from nicely depicting the organisational and financial resources that the CHQ were in possession of, this also establishes the interesting fact that most veteran protesters in Croatia’s biggest city and capital, Zagreb, were actually shipped from Dalmatia.

¹⁶⁴ Plevnik 2000.

¹⁶⁵ Pavlaković, op. cit., p. 454.

¹⁶⁶ As the independent and rewarded Croatian journalist Drago Hedl has noted, the “Western Balkans” phrase was used by Tuđman to project to the public a scenery where European powers wanted to push Croatia back into a new Yugoslavia (Hedl 2001). Such propaganda served to gain domestic support for Tuđman’s defiance of international demands.

Vojislav Koštunica, “as long as he has not apologised for the aggression on Croatia”.¹⁶⁷ The demonstrations, despite the fierce rhetoric and attempts to mobilise protesters by promising free transport¹⁶⁸, was a failure, as only 500 protesters showed up.¹⁶⁹ Other demonstrations the CHQ was involved in, like the ones against the arrival of ICTY investigators in Knin to exhume alleged victims of Croatian war crimes, were also moderately successful, attracting only a few hundred protesters even in this war torn city of the Dalmatian hinterland.



Demonstrations in Zagreb, 20.10.2001. Picture taken from the front page of Vjesnik, 21.10.2001

Parallel to the events in Knin, however, another large demonstration took place in Split, attracting some 20 000 demonstrators, this time against the government’s alleged removal of HDZ-loyal journalists and editors in the management of Slobodna Dalmacija. The attempt at wringing this one time star among Yugoslav newspapers from the control of the remnants of the “Tuđman elite” provoked furious reactions, and the demonstrations must be termed a “success” measured against the aim of the CHQ. However, this demonstration portended a sharp downwards turn in the standards of behaviour of the demonstrators, as

¹⁶⁷ “Nećemo u ralje novog Balkana”, Slobodna Dalmacija, 23.10.2000.

¹⁶⁸ Protesters mobilising from Dalmatia were promised free train tickets from Split to Zagreb (“U Zagreb sa stijegom”, Slobodna Dalmacija, 23.10.2000).

¹⁶⁹ Fisher, op. cit., ibid.

slogans as “Račan you thief!” and the popular “Mesić you Gypsy!” were frequently heard among other more generally unfavourable comments on the mentioned politicians’ mothers.¹⁷⁰ Such slogans and behaviour was to contribute to turning the public against the CHQ and therefore the *branitelji*, especially as the rhetoric reached a new, unprecedented bottom in 2002, when grave threats became mixed with the foul language.

After Split, another two successful actions followed: The demonstrations at Ban Jelačić’s square in Zagreb in October 2001 as well as the barricading of the home of the ICTY-indicted General Janko Bobetko a year after. The first attracted some 13-14 000 protesters, mainly from Dalmatia, something which at any rate must have been a disappointment to the organisers, as they were projecting a “repetition of Split” in the days preceding the protests.¹⁷¹ Again, there was no attempt at hiding the fact that the goal of the demonstrations was early elections, as this was both stated by Čondić¹⁷² and appeared among the “demands” of the CHQ, which were read out loud during the protests. Among other “demands” were the withdrawal of the arrest order on General Gotovina and the reversing of the implementation of the new Law of Rights of the *Branitelji*, which had been formulated anew by Pančić and the government.

Then, as demands were put forward by the ICTY to extradite Bobetko in September 2002, his house in Zagreb was symbolically surrounded by CHQ-mobilised generals, representatives of HDZ and veterans organizations for more than a month, who together vowed to “defend him” against this government which “only meets the conditions of Carla del Ponte and putrid Europe, like the communists who were once the vassals of Belgrade”. Among those present were Jadranka Kosor, Vladimir Šeks (member of HDZ and UHDDR), General Ljubo Ćesić Rojs (HDZ), as well as Ante Kotromanović, famous for his fierce anti-government speech at the Sinjska Alka of 2001.¹⁷³ This was perhaps the last of the successful actions of the CHQ and the veterans – from their point of view, as it found a new way of depicting the solidarity and persistence with which the veterans “were looking after each other”. Meanwhile, the government was beginning to show increasing signs of ICTY-fatigue, and had started to drag its feet on the new indictments, like the one against Bobetko, something which was taken as another proof of the “success” of the CHQ.

With the events described here, the inherit power in the “cause” of the *branitelji* was realised and displayed to the maximum. The government was struggling hard from one ICTY-

¹⁷⁰ “Prosvjednici u Splitu vrijeđali Mesića, Račana i Radoša”, Vjesnik 07.05.2001.

¹⁷¹ Karlović-Sabolić 2001.

¹⁷² “Nitko ne može manipulirati hrvatskim braniteljima”, Dom i Svijet no. 356, 15.10.2001.

¹⁷³ “Ivan Bobetko: Ni ja niti moji suborci nećemo to mirno gledati”. Vjesnik 20.09.2002.

related crisis to another, spending all the energy saved for the battle against corruption and the “cleaning out” of the HDZ influence which to such an extent dominated society. Yet, as it has hopefully become clear, these events also laid the premises for what was to be the diminishing of the image of the *branitelji*. The public, who initially to some extent followed the critique against ICTY, were becoming increasingly tired of organised chaos, insults and hate speech against politicians they themselves had elected for office. The tactic of “collectivisation” that the anti-ICTY movement was utilising had another dimension to it as well, namely the claim of its most vocal perpetrators to be representing “the voice of the Croatian nation and all citizens of Croatia”¹⁷⁴ when calling for the resignation of the government, selectively forgetting that it was placed there by the people. The moral support that the *branitelji* had initially enjoyed on the ICTY-issue was becoming seriously over-stretched by the fact that it was utilised to protests against a wide array of ideologically “tainted” issues, not all of which were very important to the average citizen. Alongside the government, the public were also beginning to struggle under ICTY-fatigue. A few unfortunate events were about to incur the failing support of the public giving rise to an outright lack of patience with the organisations of the *branitelji*.

3.3. The Second “Log Revolution”

On March 24 2003, a crowd of about 500 had gathered outside the court in Rijeka to await the sentence of the trial against the “Gospić Group”, of which General Mirko Norac was part, for alleged war crimes committed during operations Flash (*Bljesak*) and Storm. His colleagues from the Alka Society of Sinj had allegedly for several days arranged gatherings for the awaiting of the acquitted general, generously sponsored by the Mayor of Sinj Mate Jukić (HDZ).¹⁷⁵ However, as news of the sentence of Norac to 12 years in prison spread through the crowd like a Dalmatian forest fire, the crowd allegedly so convinced of his innocence quickly broke down into frustration, and “through their tears (...) sang “hey Ivica and Stipe, the black crows will eat you”, while the members of the Alka Society were wiping away their tears with the Croatian flag”.¹⁷⁶ Subsequently, the protesters, headed by Čondić, boarded a number of buses and headed for the main town of Norac’s home district, Sinj, where nightfall saw 1 500-2 000 protesters blocking the main road to Zagreb, which at that time ran right through the centre of town. Many ordinary citizens of Sinj reportedly joined the *branitelji* in marking their

¹⁷⁴ “Prosvjednici od vlade zatražili raspisivanje referenduma i opoziv tjeralice za generalom Gotovinom”, Vjesnik, 21.10.2001.

¹⁷⁵ Matijanić 2003.

¹⁷⁶ “Branitelji i alkari blokirali Sud, većih izgređa nije bilo”, Vjesnik, 25.03.2003.

aversion with the sentence and expressing solidarity with Norac. Similar actions were coordinated in nearby Trilj, as well as in Kaštela, where the airport of Split is located.¹⁷⁷ It seemed that the method Liović had “introduced” as a possible measure in 2000, was now being put into effect by his successor, Damir Varaždinec¹⁷⁸, alongside Čondić’s CHQ and other veterans’ organisations. This time, the organisers among the *branitelji* had obviously disregarded the negative signals Liović had received three years earlier, and vowed to keep up their efforts continuously by announcing new actions in the coming days.

However, the day after only saw around 30 protesters in the Sinj area, who were not enough to block the road successfully.¹⁷⁹ A similar action in Split on the same day was also only moderately successful; 40 protesters attempted twice to stage a blockade, but had to give up when they, with the police present, realised their faltering support, which obviously had not been helped by visible promotional material in large areas of the town.¹⁸⁰ Yet the worst was still to come. At a protest meeting in Trilj on March 26, Dražen Pavlović, leader of HVIDRA Sinj, delivered his infamous speech in which he wished “that Račan and Mesić would soon join Đinđić for breakfast”. Zoran Đinđić, the former Serbian premier, had recently been assassinated in Belgrade by forces of the underworld in cooperation with political opponents, and Pavlović’s statement was interpreted as nothing less than a direct death threat and call for assassination of Croatia’s prime minister and president. Even Varaždinec and Čondić, neither of whom seemed to have really understood the power of the emotions they were trying to control, seemed “shocked” by Pavlović’s speech. Račan, however, was not. His reaction was to point to the contradictory reasons for the protests; after all, Norac had been tried in Croatia and not extradited to The Hague, and the demonstrators were really attacking their own court, even if the proceedings were not even completed as the sentence was to be appealed to the supreme court.¹⁸¹

Then, the day after Pavlović’s speech, a nation wide campaign of roadblocks was initialised by CHQ and HVIDRA. The specific connotations such campaigns have in the Croatian “collective memory” have to some extent been discussed, yet one vital aspect still deserves to be mentioned. Using roadblocks was the method by which the Serbian rebels of

¹⁷⁷ “U Sinju sve više prosvjednika” and “U Kaštelima blokirana magistrala”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 25.03.2003.

¹⁷⁸ Varaždinec, however, was not a novice when it comes to such operations; in September 2002 he led the crowd of HVIDRA members who, as previously mentioned, physically blocked the printing of the local newspaper *Osiječki Dom* after it had become known that it was about to publish the names and statuses of a number of veterans in the area, mostly fellow members of their organisation.

¹⁷⁹ “HVIDRA najavljuje blokadu svih državnih cesta u četvrtak”, *Vjesnik*, 26.03.2003.

¹⁸⁰ “Kratka blokada kod turske kule”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 26.03.2003.

¹⁸¹ “Čelnik sinsjke HVIDR-e zaželio Račanu i Mesiću ‘brzi doručak s Đinđićem’, premijer se ne boji prijetnji”, *Vjesnik*, 27.03.2003.

the Krajina “cut off” this region from the rest of Croatia in 1990, which marked the beginning of the events which culminated in the Homeland War. The Serb rebels chopped down trees and used the logs to block roads, thereby leading to the start of the war in Croatia being remembered as the “Log Revolution (*Balvan revolucija*)”. This, I argue, is a vital component in the understanding of what constituted the “turning point” of the general support of the actions of the *branitelji*, as well as the catalyst in the destruction of their popular image. The road blocks, Pavlović’s threats, the insults directed at the democratically elected government, and TV images of thousands of protesters, interplayed with each other to create a threatening atmosphere resonating with dark memories.

This had a strongly alienating effect on the way the public related to the *branitelji*. This fact was by now beginning to dawn on several prominent members of HVIDRA and other participating organisations, who were now listening to signals from the public as well as a number of their own members. They started to show open opposition to such actions, which led to internal discord, especially in HVIDRA. Indeed, even Norac himself, it was rumoured, was opposing the actions which were being implemented in his name. Several local branches of HVIDRA failed to mobilise their own members, and the number of less than 2 000 HVIDRA-members participating in the nation wide campaign is by no means impressive, given the 33 000 members of this organisation at the time.¹⁸² The protesters were becoming marginal, even among “their own”.

In the following days, the frenetic manoeuvring in the media of Varaždinec and Čondić consolidated the impression that they were aware of the detrimental effects that their “loss of control” over the protests had led to. Varaždinec “apologised” for the roadblocks to the citizens, but refused to take any blame for Pavlović’s ill-timed threat¹⁸³, while Čondić claimed to have been deliberately misinterpreted by the media, who according to him were acting on orders from President Mesić and Prime Minister Račan. He therefore announced lawsuits against – among other – both the president and the prime minister, for “threats, spreading of misinformation, misleading the public, and libel directed at the CHQ”. Moreover, Čondić corrected that the real reasons for the protests had not been the “sentence” of Norac, but the fact that the court was subjected to pressure from the government.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸² “Odbacujemo Račanove i Lučinove ocjene, a ispričavamo se građanima”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 29.03.2003.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ “Prošlotjedni prosvjedi nisu usmjereni protiv presude generalu Mirku Norcu”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 31.03.2003 and “Čondić: Tužit ću Račana, Mesića, Lučina i HTV zbog prijetnji i kleveta”, *Vjesnik*, 31.03.2003.

3.4. The “Quiet” Return to Power of the HDZ

In the background, as ever, political manoeuvring was taking place. The “cause” of the *branitelji*, parallel to it losing its popular support and understanding, was about to be pushed further into the margins of the political spectre of Croatia. As HDZ under Sanader was undergoing what was ostensibly a change towards a more moderate, “European” stance, the party gradually developed the need to distance itself from the extreme turn the actions of the veterans’ organisations had taken, especially as a return to power was imminent. Though the mobilisation of the veterans against the government was supported by several parties of the right, HDZ had gained the most, since it was the largest, most popular, and most powerful party with nationalistic credibility. Even if the political “reorientation” of HDZ necessarily had to lead to a more pronounced political split between, as well as within, the various organisations, HDZ remained in control over organisations like HVIDRA and UHVDR. Thus, Sanader and his fellow party members had secured themselves a powerful base of support both among the veterans and among ordinary citizens, while pushing the other organisations to seek support further to the right, from parties like Croatian True Revival (*Hrvatski istinski preporod* – HIP) and the Croatian Party of Rights (*Hrvatska stranka prava* – HSP).

As mentioned, Sanader and HDZ, who initially had “fiercely” opposed the extradition of Croats to the ICTY, started his term by sending two suspects, Mladen Markač and Ivan Čermak, to The Hague. This time, however, there were no protests, except from certain spontaneous outbursts of insults from the more radical elements of the Croatian political landscape. The confirmation of Norac’s sentence for war crimes in the Croatian Supreme Court, which was made public in June 2006, did cause some turbulence, but this was again primarily stemming from marginal sources to the far right, as well as less politically influential and organised veterans’ organisations, and was never threatening to cause any serious problems for the government.¹⁸⁵ The overall “tone” of the most influential – or influenced – organisations, most notably HVIDRA and UHVDR, was remarkably different than it had been only a year earlier. Dečak of UHVDR, for instance, stated that “the problems can only be solved at the table and within the national institutions”.¹⁸⁶ In a strange paradox,

¹⁸⁵ In relation to the upholding of the sentence of Norac, Čondić, who had now taken over the position as gathering point for the *branitelji* of the political far right, and thus was in opposition to the HDZ, was asked by a reporter whether he remembered the protests in Split, when Sanader had stood shoulder to shoulder with him in defence of Norac. Čondić replied: “I remember the protests; the question is whether the prime minister remembers them. Let him look 200 000 protesters on the waterfront of Split in the eyes if he can!” (“Čondić: Neka Sanader pogleda u oči 200 tisuća ljudi s Rive”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 26.06.2004.

¹⁸⁶ “Braniteljima prosvjedi i pobuna ne padaju na pamet”, *Vjesnik*, 05.03.2005. This article is rather interesting as it is overtly positively inclined towards the *branitelji* and struggles hard to counter what at the time was becoming an established fact, namely that serious internal divisions of the organisations were becoming

HVIDRA of the County of Vukovar-Srijem even threatened to march out to stop a group of protesting workers who were threatening to block the roads leading into Vukovar, as such actions “bring back black memories of 1990”.¹⁸⁷ The circle of paradox was complete when the most profiled of Croatian generals by far, indeed, the “saintly embodiment of Croatia’s struggle for freedom”¹⁸⁸, Ante Gotovina, was arrested on the Canary Islands in 2005 with the help of the government of Sanader. In December, the new leader of HVIDRA, Josip Đakić, announced that “peaceful demonstrations in support” of Gotovina would take place in the municipalities and counties where HVIDRA was present. However, he refused to give support to HVIDRA Split in the planning of their demonstration, again at the waterfront in the centre of the city, as he “found it impossible to participate on the same gathering as those who call the government treacherous”. A minor incident of blocking a road close to Zadar was, according to Đakić, similar to the “Log Revolution”, a statement which provoked negative reactions amongst his own members present.¹⁸⁹

How is one to interpret this remarkable turnaround in the relation between the largest veterans’ organisations and the government? The apparent irony or self contradiction of this turnaround may for a large part be explained by clever political pragmatism. One reason was of course that this time the opposition agreed on the matter, unlike in the period of Račan’s government, and did not put an effort in mobilising popular upheaval on the issue. Moreover, the fact that HDZ was a party with “nationalist credentials” stemming from its role in the “(re)-birth” of Croatia, perhaps made it easier for the same party to extradite “national heroes” without being perceived as traitors as its governmental predecessors had been.¹⁹⁰ However, recalling the previous chapter, I claim as highly likely that substantial amount of turmoil was avoided by way of striking a deal with the organisations, the essence of which – one can imagine – was that HDZ asked for peace on the ICTY issue in return for promising not to dig too deep into the financial dealings of the organisations, as well as the way the statuses of its members had been achieved.

It may be established that the issue of the ICTY, and the consequences of its dominating the discourse and consuming most of the government’s energy, did contribute considerably to facilitate the return of HDZ to power. The government of Račan had spent all

impossible to overlook. After HDZ returned to power in 2003, Vjesnik became gradually (again) became pronouncedly pro-government, in many instances serving as its voice. In the presidential campaign of 2004-2005, Vjesnik was extremely supportive of Jadranka Kosor who was running against sitting President Mesić.

¹⁸⁷ “HVIDRA: Ne isključujemo uporabu silu bude li potrebno spriječiti prosvjede”, Vjesnik, 06.10.2004.

¹⁸⁸ Pavlaković, op. cit., p. 463.

¹⁸⁹ “HVIDRA najavila mirne prosvjede”, Nacional, 09.12.2005. Internal divisions in the organisations will be more closely analysed in the next chapter.

¹⁹⁰ Pavlaković, op. cit., p. 461.

its energy on the ICTY-related crises, not being able to handle issues of real importance to the citizens, like corruption and a weak economy, thus paving the way for the return of HDZ. It follows that the *branitelji* were important players. This is not, however, to say that the *branitelji* and their organisations were the sole perpetrators in bringing back HDZ to power; rather a whole range of factors interplayed to this end: a reforming HDZ, an impatient and war-tired electorate, a weak economy, a divided far right wing, and so on. Yet whereas these were factors with more indirect influence on the course of events, the *branitelji* in the collective sense, and their organisations, were the most *directly active* in trying to bring about a change in government, even though they for a large part acted on cues cleverly provided by others. This was even openly bragged about by some leaders of local branches of HVIDRA, like Željko Strize of HVIDRA Kaštela, who stated that “HVIDRA played the decisive role in the ousting of the previous government”.¹⁹¹ Andrija Hebrang of HDZ, when asked by national television why the veterans were not protesting the extradition of Gotovina like they had on other occasions, reportedly answered that this time, “they have the government of their liking”.¹⁹²

3.5. From Demonstrators to Desperados

Yet under the collective category of the “protesting *branitelji*” favoured by the politically involved, a large number of individual *branitelji* who were not as loud or influential as their leaders were included. Attitudes and political orientation was directly or indirectly ascribed to them through the actions and statements of their leaders, something to which the *branitelji* themselves did not always approve of. This raising awareness of being politically manipulated became especially apparent as the popular image of the *branitelji* was coming under serious strain parallel to the unfolding of events. It seems that those who were “pulling the strings” in the background of the turmoil of 2000-2003 overrated the dedication and support of a large number of the *branitelji* as well as the public. However, now that a “moderate” HDZ was back in power, the need to distance itself from its “radical” past presented itself, thereby providing an escape route for those who had been “pulling the strings”. By its political “reorientation”, and the peace subsequently made with more radical forces within the party itself, HDZ escaped the mainstream negative reactions on the blending of politics and veterans. It was the *branitelji* who took the punch, through being left with reduced political

¹⁹¹ “Braniteljima vratiti stečena prava”, Slobodna Dalmacija, 21.02.2004.

¹⁹² “Pašalić i Čondić: Hrvatska vlada počinila je veleizdaju”, Vjesnik, 11.03.2004.

influence, a number of social and personal difficulties still unaddressed, and a drastically reduced public sympathy for these difficulties.

As exemplified in the introduction, the popular image of the *branitelji* has undergone drastic changes in the 17 years that have passed since the first organisations were established. It is possible to view this change as passing through three phases of the “history” of the *branitelji*, which is reflected, even partially constructed, through three concurrent phases in the way that Croatian media has related to them. This is not to say that the media has “controlled” and “used” their image as they have pleased; rather, by adopting a discursive approach, it is possible to view this as a process in which the media has influenced and has been influenced on how it perceives the image of the *branitelji*. The media is conveyor of popular sentiment, while also being influenced by the same popular sentiment.

In the first period, from 1992 up until the takeover of Račan’s government, the main weight was placed on the grievances of the veterans, with a clear sympathetic inclination towards *their* stance. Even the occasional sensational “desperado”, meaning a *branitelj* “loosing” control and consorting to criminal acts to gain attention for his problems, was reported with a clear sympathy for he who in such cases was perceived as the victim, namely the perpetrator *branitelj*, who was “at war with the bureaucracy”. The second period was completely dominated by the protests and efforts to oppose a great deal of the Račan government’s politics, something which stole all energy and attention from the *real* grievances of the veterans, many of which were still living under extremely difficult economic and social conditions. From a clear tendency of publishing reports and articles on the individual *branitelj*, a “collectivisation” of the whole issue now took place, meaning that the individual was no longer reaching out in the same way as before. The third period to some extent overlapped the previous two, and saw a gradual emergence as a distinct phase. The media was becoming far more critical in their treatment of the *branitelji*, while still utilising the “collective” analytical angle, seemingly only rarely shifting to the individual, except for when “desperados” or “loose cannons” delivered statements or performed ill-timed actions which stimulated inclinations towards sensationalism of journalists squeezed between their own integrity and their editor’s demands for profitability.

The political manipulation of the *branitelji* was directly the destruction of their popular image, which is a recurrent theme in this thesis. The media were part conveyors, part influencing this process. However, the real stimulators of this process was beyond any doubt those who knowingly took advantage of the “cause” of the *branitelji*, the initial sympathy they enjoyed, as well as their sheer numbers, to project them as a collective and homogenous

political force which could determine the political path and thus the future of Croatia by utilising extra-governmental, and therefore principally undemocratic methods.

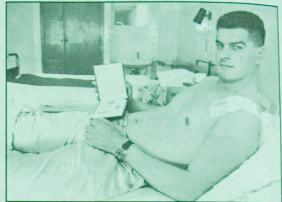
**NEPRAVEDNO SMO
ZABORAVLJENI**

NAKON SAMORANJAVANJA PRED ZGRADOM MORH-a U ZAGREBU EDO ALJINVIĆ APO, INVALID DOMOVINSKOG RATA, U BOLNICI JE ZAPOČEO ŠTRAJK GLAVU TE OGORČENO UKAZUJE NA SVOJE I PROBLEME SVOJIH SUBORACA:

**O NAMA VIŠE NITKO
NE BRINE!**

■ Invalide Domovinskog rata nitko više ne sluša. Pusti ih se svako toliko da se požale, zatim se to kroz drugo uho pusti i sve se zaboravi... Dak se daje oprost četnicima, o nama se ne skrbi, jer očito više nismo bitni za neke buduće izbore ■ Zalosno je da, primjerice, amputirac u Splitu ima 1800 kuna mirovine, dok netko kome je slušni aparat stajao u uhu i prije rata zasluži pet puta veću mirovinu

Edo Aljinović Apo u zagrebačkoj Traumatološkoj bolnici osam i po dana glavu pritisao je uz zid i ljekove
Sveinac: B. KOKIJEVIĆ



Two examples of typical headlines to be found from the first period, of which common sympathy towards the “cause” of the *branitelji* is the main characteristic: “We are unjustifiably forgotten”, Slobodna Dalmacija, 15.08.1995; and “Nobody care about us any longer”, Slobodna Dalmacija, 05.05.1998. The latter case involved the self injuring of the depicted *branitelj* in front of the MORH-buliding in Zagreb. Symbolic actions such as these gradually became more frequent and violent during the years.

NAČEKALI SMO SE!

**NE USVOJE LI SE NAŠI ZAHTJEVI,
PROSVJEDOVAT ĆEMO KAO I HVIDRA**

The second period is characterised by the gradual emergence of a far more threatening tone. The first demonstration at St. Marc’s Square in Zagreb in 1996 brought by a recognition of the potential striking power inherit in the “cause” of the *branitelji* by veterans, politicians and citizens alike: “We are through with waiting!”, Slobodna Dalmacija, 08.09.1996; and “If our demands are not met, we will demonstrate like HVIDRA”, Slobodna Dalmacija, 11.10.1996.

**Branitelji
i(li) milijunaši**

LAŽNI INVALIDI Udruge HRVI nakon presude u Osijeku:
**Provjeriti sve slučajeve
osuđenih u ‘Dijagnozi’**

The third and – as of yet – final period is mainly characterised by the increasingly critical viewpoint from which the *branitelji* are seen. The antagonism and poor communication between the veterans and the rest of the population which manifested itself during the Račan period – and which was intensified by political manipulation by external factors as well as some aspects of the internal dynamics of the organisations: “Veterans and/or millionaires”, Slobodna Dalmacija, 01.08.2009; and “Fake disables – Organisations of HRVI’s after the sentences in Rijeka: Revise all sentenced cases of ‘Dijagnoza’”, Večernji List, 13.12.2008. So far, only a few doctors and psychiatrists, and not a single *branitelj*, have been sentenced in relation to the aforementioned “Dijagnoza”-operations.

4. Internal Dynamics of the Organisations: Power, Money and Humanitarianism

4.1. The “Embodiment of Ideology” Revisited: A Moral Force

On 5 August 2009, I was participating in the celebrations of the Day of Victory and Homeland Thanksgiving, which is also Day of the *Branitelji* (*Dan pobjede i Domovinske zahvalnosti/Dan hrvatskih branitelja*), in Knin, “capital” of the *Krajina* region of the Dalmatian hinterland. I had been invited to join two of my *branielj*-informants and their friends and families for the celebrations, which started early in the morning, at eight o’ clock, with the tolling of church bells symbolising the entry of Croatian forces into Knin on that very day, fourteen years earlier. After that, the *branielji* who had gathered for the occasion came marching through the town centre, orchestras playing, and banners and flags of the various brigades waving in the already blazing sun. According to one of my informants, “Milan”, the number of *branielji* participating was greatly reduced this year, following a media-conveyed call for boycott from several organisations, who were dissatisfied with the government’s policy towards them as well as the commonly met opinion that the politicians were receiving more focus in the programme of the celebrations than the veterans themselves.¹⁹³ A large number of *branielji* had thus decided to participate in a parallel,

¹⁹³ Rade Lasić, leader of the smaller Organisation of Veterans of the 4th Brigade of the Croatian National Guard (*Udruga veterana 4. brigade ZNG-a*), displayed closeness to the argumentation of this thesis when he, in an interview relating to the Day of the *Branitelji* 2009, pointed his finger at the most important current grievances of the *branielji*. The large number of organisations with undeclared number of members, and their “operational goals not being working for people, yet rather for personal interests”, was put forward as creating major difficulties for the *branielji*. Moreover, Lasić attacked the ministry responsible for the veterans (MOBMS) for operating secretly and non-transparent, thus “throwing a shadow of doubt on their work, which leads to lack of trust in those for which that ministry exists (...) Our ministry has a few organisation which it is favouring to the cost of all other *branielji*. In this manner, the organisations of Josip Đakić [HVIDRA], Đuro Dečak [UHVDR],

“unofficial” gathering in Čavoglave, a small village not far from Knin. In stark contrast to the celebration in Knin, which had the form of an “official” one, being frequented by government representatives, politicians and bishops of the Croatian Church, the gathering in Čavoglave was to be more of a people’s feast with free concerts held by famous “patriotic” singers such as Marko Perković Thompson and Mate Bulić.¹⁹⁴ This is not to say that music and public feast were not characteristic of the celebrations in Knin as well; while President Mesić and now Prime Minister Kosor held their speeches at the city stadium two blocks away, the main street of the town quickly became filled up with *branitelji* and their families, who were in a festive mood indeed, dancing, singing and playing joyful music, while swinging glasses with wine and *rakija*.

Even if true joy was the emotion dominating the celebrations in Knin on that day, the troubles of the past and present were never far beneath the surface. Some of the darker elements were, in the genuine Balkan way, tackled with humour, like the *branitelj* I met who’s t-shirt had the print: “Sorry! PTSD!”. An elderly gentleman, wearing all-black *Ustaša*¹⁹⁵ iconography, answered my questions politely and with a sympathetic smile on his face. Yet the day after, when having distanced myself adequately to the experience of the celebrations, two different, but closely connected incidents stood out in my memory most vividly. Firstly, at one point during the day as we were walking towards the stadium, “Milan” spoke out loudly against the current government, claiming that it had “sold” the *branitelji* for the sake of their own, personal interests. “Milan’s” brother reacted sharply on this, saying that his brother should spare such comments for the private sphere, and not yell them out aloud on the streets on a day of pride and joy such as this, whereupon “Milan” answered that he had “bled for this town and this country”, and had the right to say what he wanted about whatever or whoever he wanted – “especially in this town where we re-raised the Croatian flag”. The second incident I noticed was a conversation between a young police officer and a *branitelj* as

and Tomislav Merčep [UHDDR] have for years been rewarded in sums of millions (...)” (“Branitelji i(li) milijunaši”, Slobodna Dalmacija, 01.08.2009). Among other, more superficial reasons for the boycott was the notion that the *branitelji* were forced to follow the “official” programme, wearing the same white t-shirts and being directed and organised into smaller groups by the awaiting police. This may be interpreted as an “official fear” of displays of discontent or protest (“Predstavnici braniteljskih udruga ljuti na organizatore proslave Dana pobjede”, Slobodna Dalmacija, 04.08.2009).

¹⁹⁴ According to Slobodna Dalmacija, more than 100 000 people took part in the celebrations in Čavoglave, which, based on my own rough estimates must be ten times as many as those celebrating in Knin during that day. Thompson opened the celebrations and his concert by stating that “Čavoglave is definitely not the place for politicians and politics, nor is this their day (...)” (“Euforija u Čavoglavama”, Slobodna Dalmacija, 06.08.2009).

¹⁹⁵ The *ustaje* were the protagonists of the Croatian fascist movement which originated in the thirties and reached its height with the establishment of the Nazi puppet state NDH (*Nezavisna država hrvatske*) under Ante Pavelić during World War Two. Mass murder and terror against Serbs, Jews and Partisans were among its main characteristics.

the latter was parking his car outside what was the approved area for parking. The young officer, who must have been a child at the time of the Homeland War, tried politely to explain to the *branitelj* that he could not park there, especially on a day like this, when the potential for infrastructural chaos was looming. To this the *branitelj* in the car snapped: “Who are you to tell me where to park my car? Where were you in 1991?”

In the introduction of this thesis, as well as through the following chapters, the concept of the *branitelji* embodying the ideology of the Croatia of the 90’s was established and elaborated upon. Through their participation in the Homeland war, which represented the culmination of the central myth of the “thousand year dream of Croatian statehood”, the *branitelji* became central actors in the ideology of the Tuđman-regime, which was based on this charter myth. As the morally superior goal of independence became the paradigm by which any act within that ideological system was measured against, it follows that the *branitelji*, who were the most directly active in achieving this goal, had become as infallible as the Homeland War and itself. It was this moral force, stemming from the ideological weight placed on their participation in the Homeland War by the Tuđman regime, which by some was seen as truly the most valuable privilege of the *branitelji*.

How this privilege sometimes manifested itself practically was described by the anecdote above. Yet it was also put to use on a far larger scale; indeed the motivational force behind the demonstrations of the previous chapter, and the calls for the resignation of the Račan government must at least be traced in part back to the same phenomenon. Those seeking to utilise this moral force for political purposes simply had to set it up against the symbolic “other”, who threatened to question the whole perceived ideological fundament the Homeland War represented, as well as the status of those who had sacrificed the most to realise this ideology – in other words, against the “criminalisation” of the Homeland War, as the popular phrase went. However, initiatives also came from within the *branitelji* segment itself for the practical utilisation of this moral force. In some respects, they became the guardians of the ideology, and therefore the specific narrative, which lent them their moral force. This not only implicated a strong inclination towards fighting against any other conception of history than the one contained within their ideology, but also towards attempting to judge and influence the present and the future to make it more in line with the ideological fundament of the Homeland War.

This is reflected in, and perhaps even better explained by, some of the statutes and said goals of the organisations. As Marko Džaja of the League of Volunteers in the Homeland War of the City of Split (*Liga dragovoljaca Domovinskog rata grada Splita*) stated in an

interview, “first and foremost, [our aim] is to promote the fundamental ideas and goals of the Homeland War” and that his organisation was for people “who because of their pure Croatian hearts went to war”, thereby earning the right to a “moral force and the exclusive right to point their finger at anybody and direct everyone’s attention towards injustice”.¹⁹⁶ Similarly, Neno Boban of the Split branch of UHDDR described his organisation as “(...) a latent moral and ethical force which, in time, will represent an imperative behaviour, will discuss every question, and demand the settling of all scores (...)”.¹⁹⁷

Sometimes, this ideological engagement was reflected in mere indignation over conceptions of the recent past which diverged from the one propagated by the, at the time, dominating ideology. Vice President of HVIDRA, Petar Prša, reacted in a revealing manner when a group of members of his organisation were visiting the Dalmatian island of Vis for a recreational vacation, and were not met with the “due respect”:

[Some inhabitants of Vis] are chasing away the injured with impious provocations, like for instance, by listening to Radio Knin¹⁹⁸ in the restaurant, while the waiter decorates himself with the emblem of Socialist Yugoslavia. It is like pouring salt into the wounds of the injured. And when the person doing this is your fellow Croat, for whom you lost your leg or arm, you can imagine how the wound burns!¹⁹⁹

At other times, however, the “moral force” of the *branitelji* was translated into political activism which more or less consciously aimed at consolidating the new narrative. This, among other, entailed an element of censorship. Thus the Omiš branch of UHDDR in 1994 took to the streets and started physically removing statues, memorial placards and other artefacts which marked the public sphere of the city with its 50 or so years of communist past, because they “insult our patriotic feelings”. The city council had already agreed upon the removal of a large part of the mentioned “public memorabilia”, yet the decision had not materialised into action quickly enough for the members of UHDDR, who did not want to “allow anyone to uphold and cultivate the memory of such a black period of the Croatian nation (...)”.²⁰⁰ One of the items removed was a placard containing the names of 66 local Partisans killed in World War II. This was analogous to removing from history the fact that a large number of Dalmatians were among Tito’s Partisans, and families of the “*branitelji* of the previous epoch” reacted as strongly as they dared, given the tense societal climate at the

¹⁹⁶ “Dragovoljci bez dlake na jeziku”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 21.07.1993.

¹⁹⁷ “Hrabri i čestiti napustit će Merčepa”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 15.05.1994.

¹⁹⁸ Knin was at the time “capital” of the Serbian para-state *Republika Srpska Krajina*.

¹⁹⁹ “Invalidi su na Visu – Nepoželjni!”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 27.07.1993.

²⁰⁰ “Uklonjena obilježja jugokomunizma”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 05.09.1994.

time.²⁰¹ The specific conflicting perceptions surrounding the *branitelji* versus Partisans-discussion were to be a recurrent theme of the discourse in the years to come. When veterans of World War Two – meaning mostly former Partisans who claimed to have been discriminated against during the Tuđman regime – were granted a 40% raise in their pensions during Minister Pančić’s mandate, this was termed “immoral” and “injurious” by spokespersons of several organisations.²⁰²

The issue of *branitelji* versus partisans also connected to a broader reassessment of the past, more specifically World War Two and the parallel civil war raging in large areas of what was to become the “second Yugoslavia”, which in the newly established narrative was portrayed as the entrance into the “dark ages” of Croatia. The redrawing of the image of the losing forces of that war, the *Ustaše*, into the true, “moral” winners, was only a small step away and a natural consequence of the negating of Tito and his Partisans, as well as their political system summed up by the Yugoslavian concept. Indeed, for many nationalists, the NDH was seen as the first manifestation of a modern, independent Croatian state and thus as something solely positive, as the realisation of a Croatian state was seen as the ultimate goal for which all means were justified. It is against this backdrop one has to view some of the actions of the *branitelji* which were inspired by the perceived “moral force”. For instance, in 2004, a homemade memorial placard romanticising the *Ustaša*-movement was placed outside the municipality building of Otok, a small village right outside of Sinj, in the dark of night.²⁰³ The police suspected that members of veterans’ organisations were among the perpetrators.²⁰⁴ More explicit manifestations were recorded in Zadar on the day of the “December martyrs”²⁰⁵, when members of various organisations paraded the streets of the city in black *Ustaša* uniforms, waving the flag of NDH²⁰⁶ and posters of Gotovina and Ante Pavelić. The parading “troops” were addressed by member of the city council, Davor Aras (HDZ), who nevertheless was criticised by his own party members for getting involved in such events.²⁰⁷

Yet such actions and statements, though extreme, were relatively harmless compared to some of the more dangerous forms of activism that *branitelji* were involved in. In what can

²⁰¹ “Mi smo Omiški ponos – zato smo morali srušiti ploče”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 09.09.1994.

²⁰² “Partizanske invalidnine ‘ranjavaju’ branitelje!”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 08.06.2000.

²⁰³ Otok also happens to be home village of General Mirko Norac.

²⁰⁴ “Policija sumnjiči i neke članove braniteljskih udruga”, *Vjesnik*, 21.09.2004.

²⁰⁵ On 5 December 1918, a disputed number of Croats protesting the entry of Croatia into the Kingdom of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs were killed by Serb forces on Ban Jelačić’s Square in Zagreb.

²⁰⁶ NDH was also the name of one of the organisations participating in the “march”; the Independent Volunteers of Croatia (*Nezavisni dragovoljci hrvatske*). The parallelism is probably not coincidental.

²⁰⁷ “U crnim odorima nosili slike Pavelića i Gotovine”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 07.12.2004, and “S ustaškim znakovljem i Pavelićom slikom prošli središtem Zadra, Vlada osudila izgred”, *Vjesnik*, 07.12.2004.

be seen as a tasteless interpretation of the “moral force” lent to the *branitelji* by ideology, the leader of HVIDRA Vir, Željko Bonato, attempted publicly to downplay the horrific act of three drunken local youngsters beating a Serb returnee to death in Vir in 2000. Bonato claimed in the media that the victim had been member of a Serbian paramilitary unit, thus clearly coming across as apologetic towards the murder. Bonato’s claim was refuted by all official instances, something which at any rate, as one analyst commented, is beside the point.²⁰⁸ To the backdrop belongs the fact that in Croatia, at the time, what must be termed a dangerous way of thinking was developing, stemming from the increasingly popular notion that war crimes committed in self defensive war were morally justifiable. Perhaps even more disturbing in light of this is the story of Croatian Serb Nikola Smolić, himself a *branitelj* who actively took part in the Homeland War on the Croatian side, only to return to his village in the Šibenik area allegedly to find his grandparents brutally murdered by his “colleagues” in the Croatian army during Operation Storm. According to Smolić, his grandparents were also maltreated and beaten up frequently during the period of Serb occupation, due to their grandson fighting on the “wrong” side. As the murderers were arrested, the leader of HVIDRA Šibenik, according to Smolić, protected the arrested *branitelji* by giving false testimonies claiming that the near-blind and immobile elderly couple were firing at the suspected soldiers with machine guns. Smolić was disgusted and dismayed by veterans’ organisations, which “through their statements *a priori* protect the people who have committed such acts of bestiality”.²⁰⁹ Smolić’s testimony was publicised through the media seven years after the crimes had been committed, still awaiting justice for his grandparents.

In many ways, however, it was more banal, though in essence no less politically extreme actions that perhaps contributed the most to the quickly rising public scepticism towards the organisations and thus, unfortunately, their members. The defending of murder was an infrequent, if immensely grave, phenomenon. The violent reactions over apparent banalities on an almost daily basis are what contributed the most to the *branitelji* activists devaluating their own importance as a “moral force” in society. For instance, in 2004, a group of veterans’ organisations publicly demanded to have the grass surrounding a new monument to their honour in Makarska removed, when it was rumoured that the soil and grass had been delivered by a company from Banja Luka in Republika Srpska, the Serb entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina.²¹⁰ Similarly, Željko Strize of HVIDRA Kaštela attacked the administration of

²⁰⁸ Marijačić 2000.

²⁰⁹ Krile 2002.

²¹⁰ “Branitelji iz Makarske: Uklonite srpsku travu s našeg spomenika”, Vjesnik, 13.08.2004.

the County of Split-Dalmatia and of the Municipality of Kaštela when it became known that Serbian bulls had participated in a bull-fighting competition in the area. The leader of the event, Mate Radanović, probably reflected the mainstream reaction to such a critique when stating that they “were really not interested in the nationality of the bulls”.²¹¹ In another, even more unfortunate move, Strize and his organisation made numerous efforts to prevent Bosnian singer Halid Bešlić from headlining a humanitarian concert which was to provide disabled children of Kaštela with money to buy important equipment. As the sociologist Dražen Lalić commented, HVIDRA was operating as a “cultural inquisition”, determining what type of music could be listened to and not, while at the same time revealing an inherent hypocrisy of such actions, as one “often can see cars with flags of the Black Legion displayed out of which Ceca roars”.²¹²

Such “activism” as described above served to create a gap of mutual contempt and alienation between the *branitelji* and ordinary citizens, a gap which in the end proved detrimental for the majority of individual *branitelji* who were in desperate need to find recognition and approval among the rest of society. Not to say the least, by taking the role as “inquisitors”, the *branitelji* in question, who were most often high ranking members of their organisations, contributed themselves to keeping open “their own” – so to speak – wounds of war. Not to mention the wounds of the ordinary citizens, most of whom also had very real and direct experiences of the Homeland War. The *branitelji* acted as constant reminders not only of the war, but also of the period of tight, unquestionable government control of the Tuđman regime. Moreover, the concept of “criminalisation of the Homeland War”, which had some resonance to ordinary citizens on such issues as the ICTY, was subjected to serious inflation by its utilisation in the critique of issues of no importance to the average Croat. Not only was the critique stemming from the “moral force” of the *branitelji* gradually becoming bereaved of any content to most citizens, it was also in many cases, following the previous chapter, seen as a critique of the larger part of the population itself. The notion that “the *branitelj* knows best” was not only provocative when the organisations were working to remove the government which had been elected by a majority of citizens, but also when trying to rewrite considerable parts of recent history to which a large number of citizens, perhaps especially in Dalmatia given the region’s specific history, had a positive relation to, or at least not an undisputedly negative relation to.

²¹¹ “Srpski bikovi ne smiju u Kaštela”, Slobodna Dalmacija, 21.05.2008.

²¹² Matijanić 2006. The Black Legion was a feared Ustaša legion, while Ceca is the most renowned Serbian “turbofolk” singer and the widow of the assassinated Serb war criminal suspect, Željko “Arkan” Raznatović.

Recalling the previous chapter then, the picture would be incomplete if only the political manipulation by outside forces were to be given place in this thesis. As has hopefully become clear during this subsection, there were also political initiatives emanating from *within* the *branitelji* segment of the population which had negative effects on the image and thus the position of the *branitelji* in Croatian society. Although these more vaguely defined initiatives made the *branitelji* more susceptible to manipulation, and thus were often channelled into concrete political aims by outside forces, a considerable amount of energy stemming from the “moral force” described above was also directly translated into political activism on their own account. Therefore, it makes little sense to speak of most of the veterans’ organisations mentioned in this thesis as apolitical organisations. Not only were they, as the previous chapter described, exploited for political means by “outsiders” belonging to political elites and groupings of the Croatian right, they were also implicitly defined as political by their leaders and spokespersons who, on their own initiative, meddled in political affairs ranging from ideological debates on the outcome of World War Two as well as more pragmatic political support provided for General Gotovina and other “national heroes” suspected by the ICTY. Moreover, organisations like HVIDRA had an administrative structure resembling that of political parties, with leaders, central committees, and even their own form of internal legal system defended by their Tribune of Honour (*sud časti*). From this vantage point, which, I argue, already defines the organisations as political, even if this view was not shared by the leaders of the organisations judging from their constant reminding of their “apolitical” nature, it was a small step to actual political involvement. Thus, instead of viewing external political factors as the sole perpetrators of the manipulation of the *branitelji*, such internal activists as described in this subsection must take their part of the blame for the increasingly deep gap between *branitelj* and citizen.

4.2. Humanitarian Organisations of Personal Interest?

Having established that the veterans’ organisations themselves definitely were political in nature, it is worth reflecting upon the way the organisations were portrayed to most of their members, as there is a wide gap between that face of these organisations, and the way they actually operated or functioned. To most members, and also the public, at least to begin with, HVIDRA and other organisations, like UHVDR and UHDDR, were perceived more as humanitarian organisations who aimed at defending the rights of the demobilised, disabled and marginalised veterans of the Homeland War. Yet as time progressed, and the meddling of the organisations into various ideological and political projects of more or less democratic

character became increasingly apparent, a clear discrepancy presented itself between what the organisations were initially advertised as, and what they actually were. This discrepancy provided a loophole for “industrious” individuals, often among the highest ranking members and leaders of the organisations, which enabled them to exploit “their” organisations and their positions within them to promote their personal agendas.

Some of these agendas have been discussed, as for instance those of the leaders of HVIDRA, UHVDR and other organisations, who were simultaneously representing HDZ and other parties, thus, it must be said, pursuing their own political goals. Indeed, small cliques of HDZ-friendly *branitelji* have tried to intervene also on the local level, trying to remove or pressure local power structures, such as those in Sinj or Opuzen.²¹³ Yet the political involvement of various leader-figures among the *branitelji* has been discussed extensively. What has not, however, is the way the organisations have been used as the private firms of certain leaders. Several presidents of HVIDRA, like Mladen Jurković, Marinko Liović and Josip Đakić, have been accused of financial malversation in the organisation they have acted as leaders of, as well as in the dealings of some of the firms which HVIDRA has established, such as Krilnik and Hvidra d.o.o. operating in Split.²¹⁴ Jurković was publicly criticized for “shady” dealings with the share of the mentioned Croatian Homeland Fund, which was established to ensure long-term economic participation for disabled *branitelji*. In 2004, several media announced that the entire fund, amounting to 38 million kuna, had “disappeared” during Jurković’s time as leader of the organisation.²¹⁵ Jurković was in fact simultaneously chairman of the Croatian Homeland Fund itself, and it is suspected by some that his dealings connected to the privatisation of *Tisak*, Croatia’s biggest tobacco and newspaper chain was the “hole” through which the millions trickled.²¹⁶ Though the “disappearance” of the money was a serious loss for all HVIDRA members, no one within that organisation ever determinedly raised the question of Jurković’s mingling of roles and possible corruption.

Liović also faced accusations, yet these were primarily voiced from within his own organisation. At a central meeting in 1999, representatives of HVIDRA Zagreb attacked their

²¹³ In both instances, local *branitelji*, in Sinj representing HVIDRA, while representing UHDDR in Opuzen, tried to bring about intervention from central HDZ-instances to have the local administration changed or removed. See “HVIDRA osvaja dionice i ‘obara’ gradonačelnika”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 14.12.1994, and “Opuzen: Dragovoljci u ratu protiv čelnika”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 16.10.1995.

²¹⁴ These firms were ostensibly established to provide work for unemployed veterans, yet have developed into decent undertakings when measuring income. Alleged shady deals made by these firms and their co-operators have been investigated on several occasions, yet nothing substantial has come out of these investigations.

²¹⁵ “Država morala platiti dividendu za dionice”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 07.04.2004.

²¹⁶ Matijanić, op. cit.

own leaders for disregarding the “criminal operating” of several branches of their organisations on municipality and county level, and demanded to know why a considerable amount of the financial means of HVIDRA was blocked by the bank administering the organisation’s funds.²¹⁷ However, Liović, as usual, was more preoccupied with discussing the then possible extradition of *branitelji* to the Hague, a trend which Tomislav Tomečić of HVIDRA Rijeka later described as deliberate attempts to “turn the attention away from the real problems of [HVIDRA] by inventing enemies of HVIDRA and the *branitelji* (...)”.²¹⁸ A year prior to the critique of the representatives of HVIDRA Zagreb, the entire delegation of HVIDRA Rijeka, led by Tomečić, left a similar central meeting after Tomečić had – on behalf of the 800 members he represented – pointed to the millions of kuna of government support that had vanished somewhere on the path between the leaders of HVIDRA and their members, and demanded to see valid documentation on how and where the financial means had been spent. According to Tomečić, he and his members were obstructed in arguing their case before the central committee of HVIDRA on several occasions. Interestingly, he also stated that the criminal behaviour of certain HVIDRA-members had to end, as the Croatian public were about to turn against the *branitelji*, “since they receive millions of kuna yet are never satisfied”.²¹⁹ Critique also came from one of the original founders of HVIDRA in 1992, Ante Čarapović, who claimed that the 2001 election of the new president of HVIDRA, Damir Varaždinec, was staged by some of the members of the central committee to safeguard them against a possible investigation of HVIDRA’s financial affairs.²²⁰

Another character, known for his allegedly “undemocratic” methods in leading the considerable UHDDR, is the “Napoleon of Vukovar”, Tomislav Merčep. His own position within the organisation has been safeguarded by several “re-elections” which have been immersed in controversies and claims of foul play, something which, as we shall see, has led to schisms within UHDDR. Merčep has been subject to accusations of financial fraud within his organisation, while also on several occasions openly using the organisation as an instrument for realising his own political ambitions. Yet perhaps the best example on how the juggling of membership of HDZ and HVIDRA was translated into real political and financial power is the case of Vinko Brkan. In 2008, he combined the positions as the leader of HDZ Trogir, vice-mayor of Trogir, member of the council of the County of Split-Dalmatia, president of the Football Club Trogir, vice-president of the Women’s Handball Club of

²¹⁷ “Nećemo dopustiti izručenje hrvatskih branitelja Haagu!”, Slobodna Dalmacija, 30.01.1999.

²¹⁸ “Vrijeme varalica je prošlo!”, Slobodna Dalmacija, 07.03.2000.

²¹⁹ “Gdje je nestao novac za ratne invalide?”, Slobodna Dalmacija, 18.01.1998.

²²⁰ “Glasovalo 160 izaslanika, a prebrojana 174 listića!”, Slobodna Dalmacija, 17.12.2001.

Trogir, and finally, president of HVIDRA Trogir.²²¹ Apart from reflecting the total control which HDZ still enjoys in some areas on the local level, this “industrious multitasking” also raises questions about how the various positions affect each other, and, not to say the least, what scope of manipulation the combining of them opens up for. Accusations of financial malversation against the HDZ-led administration are abundant, the most recent involving Brkan himself is the indebting of Football Club Trogir of about 3,6 million kuna without any documentation whatsoever on where the money has been spent. According to some sources, it has been established that the football club was used for extensive money laundering, while Brkan has resigned his post in the club and remained silent.²²²

The vaguely defined agendas of the organisations, as well as the privileged positions the most profiled members enjoyed, opened up the possibility for this group to take advantage of their positions and thereby the organisations themselves, to gain economically and politically. Of course, as usual, the losing part was the larger part of the members of these organisations; those who needed the organisations to function humanitarily on their behalf and not as personal interest organisations for their leaders, who paid but lip service to the humanitarian ideal. These conflicting perceptions on the essential meaning of the organisations between the bottom and top segments of the members bereaved the in many respects just “cause” of the *branitelji* of a lot of public sympathy. Ordinary citizens, who were gradually becoming fed up with the high level of corruption in society and the lack of genuine political will to confront it, came to view the organisations as smokescreens for criminal activity. After all, it was the scandalous dealings of the leaders of the organisations that gradually took the front pages – and thus the public focus – away from the despairing, marginalised veterans of previous times. However, it was the latter group, who often did not have any other means of addressing their often existential problems than through their organisations, which became the biggest losers, as the different priorities of the leaders of the organisations stole away momentum and energy from the work of reintegrating these *branitelji* to society. Perhaps no wonder then, that Ante Prkačin, himself among the leaders of one of the more “low key” organisations, the Union of Croatian Defensive Forces (*Zajednica hrvatskih obrambenih snaga - ZHOS*), called the leadership of certain organisations “mafiosos, freeloaders and blackmailers of a kind the world has not yet seen. They have

²²¹ “Trogirska vlast kontrolira radio, televiziju, novine i internet portal”, Slobodna Dalmacija, 25.02.2008. For a shorter period in 2003, Brkan was also president of the entire HVIDRA “federation”.

²²² “Vinko Brkan Trogiru ostavio milijunski dug bez pisanog traga”, Slobodna Dalmacija, 01.08.2009.

grabbed control over the organisations of the *branitelji* which they use for private means.”²²³ Božo Drmić, who in 2005 led a group of veterans who broke away from HVIDRA and established their own organisation, expressed it in even simpler terms: “Regarding the veterans’ organisations, most of them do not exist. What exist are their presidencies, which duly spend the taxpayers’ money”.²²⁴

4.3. Internal Divisions

It remains clear that it never made sense to refer to the organisations as anything but political in nature. The consequence of this, I argue, that the organisations, contrary to their own expressed wishes and aims, could not possibly be united to a common force from the start. After all, the *branitelji* segment of the populace was, in normal times, not the politically homogenous group that certain politicians and leaders struggled to portray them as. What united the *branitelji* was their social position, not their political orientation. Therefore, the only way for the organisations to remain truly “apolitical” and united in their work would have been to focus solely on humanitarian efforts. As this failed, however, the *branitelji* became internally divided, something which added more difficulties on their path of reintegration to society. The political orientation of the organisations – openly admitted or not – in combination with the overriding priority being given to the personal ambitions of several of their most important members, contributed to there evolving a dividing, rather than unifying force within the organisations. This force was greatly enhanced by external political manipulation, which not only caused quarrels but also the acknowledgement of having been exploited by politicians and leaders alike. However, it must be stated that the internal divisions were just as much a result of the various destructive factors as contributing to the destruction themselves, thus nicely depicting the dynamics in the vicious circle of increasing failure of the organisations, measured against the humanitarian ideal initially cultivated.

A closer look at the early period of Merčep’s UHDDR may highlight some of the destructive dynamics of the interfacing of moral force, personal ambition and external manipulation which this chapter in general, and this subsection especially, is concerned with. UHDDR was at the time among the most powerful veterans’ organisations; some analysts, encouraged by Merčep who early on realised the power inherit in the sheer number of *branitelji*, estimated its membership to close to 300 000²²⁵, but this number is likely to have

²²³ Borković 2004.

²²⁴ “HVIDRA je politička ispostava HDZ-a”, Nacional, 08.03.2005.

²²⁵ Borković, op. cit.

been inflated. Merčep never did any efforts to hide his personal political ambitions, which were undoubtedly inspired and stimulated by having such a powerful organisation backing him up. The fact that Merčep viewed UHDDR as instrumental to his personal ambitions did, however, bring about serious schism within the organisation. It all started on the second annual assembly, or *sabor*, in Zagreb in the beginning of 1994, when roughly half of the members of the different county and municipality level branches left the meeting in a display of protest against the way the “*sabor* was prepared, organised and led”. In the name of the boycotters, Neno Boban, leader of the County of Split-Dalmatia branch of UHDDR, denied the legitimacy of all decisions made during the *sabor*, since it had been “obstructed by the most vulgar populist and Bolshevik methods”. Boban went on to accuse Merčep of being the organiser of the chaos which, according to several sources, was intended as a smokescreen behind which the election of Merčep as president took place by unauthorised – and highly undemocratic – methods. The combination of strategically distributed non-functional microphones, crowds applauding and whistling whenever anyone outside of the Merčep clique tried to grab the word, as well as scores of unidentified participants with questionable rights to vote casting ballots, all together took the shape of a small, internal coup. The secretary of the Makarska branch, Pero Šimić, was supported by several other high ranking members of UHDDR when stating that this was an obvious attempt at exploiting the organisation for a specific political option as well as the realisation of personal political ambitions.²²⁶ It was obvious that Šimić was referring to Merčep and HDZ, of which Vladimir Šeks, Juraj Njavro, Ivić Pašalić,²²⁷ and other high ranking members were observed at the meeting in the immediate proximity of the disputed leader, following them having been accepted as members of UHDDR two days prior to the meeting and election of the organisation’s presidency.²²⁸

In the aftermath of the meeting, according to Boban, 16 out of 21 branches of the organisation delivered formal complaints and demanded that the *sabor* was proclaimed invalid, and that a new election of the organisation’s presidency had to take place. Their protests were to no avail, with the consequence that the break-away organisation UHBDDR was established, with Branko “young hawk” Borković as president. A year after, UHBDDR itself was subject of a second schism, when Zvonimir Trusić broke away and established “his”

²²⁶ “Merčep mi je isključio mikrofon!”, Slobodna Dalmacija, 02.03.1994.

²²⁷ Together representing the core of the extreme right fraction of HDZ at the time. Merčep later broke with HDZ to establish his own party, the Croatian Folk Party (*Hrvatska pučka stranka* – HPS), which belongs to the far right segment of the Croatian political landscape. Though his name came up in several investigations on possible war crimes committed by Croats, Merčep was never formally accused.

²²⁸ “Merčep nije predsjednik!”, Slobodna Dalmacija, 24.03.1994.

Independent Volunteers of Croatia (*Nezavisni dragovoljci Hrvatske – NDH*). The reasons for this second schism were probably numerous, yet the fact that Trusić had established his own political party, the Croatian People's Movement (*Hrvatski narodni pokret – HNP*), was seen as problematic to the leaders of UHBDDR, which, at the time at least, seemed genuinely against any mingling of politics and veterans.²²⁹ The media also speculated that a personal conflict with Borković, on top of the one with Merčep, had been one of the triggering factors, something which was not denied by Trusić. NDH also seemed more bent on the adoption of the notion of a hierarchy among the *branitelji*, thus reserving a membership in NDH for “the elite” only.²³⁰ Thus the early schism(s) of UHDDR became a premonition for the years to come, combining several of the factors with dividing effect on the veterans: personal ambition, political manipulation, and, following the “hyperinflation” of statuses, the question of an hierarchical order among the *branitelji* based on level of “sacrifice”.²³¹

As the Račan government took office in 2000, the added factors of the “war on *branitelji*” or revision of statuses of Minister Pančić combined with more outright external political manipulation and the “going against the government” became a complex cocktail of factors of pressure on the already fragile unity of the veterans. Even prideful celebrations of their heroic efforts during the Homeland War became clouded by the insistence of powerful segments within the organisations on using such opportunities to mark political aversion or loyalty. It must indeed have been a discomfiting paradox to the *branitelji* who had defended Šibenik when the ten year jubilee celebrating their united efforts was marred by divisions. HVIDRA and the CHQ led the boycotters of the official celebrations, apparently due to President Mesić's presence, and organised their own, parallel celebrations, while the members of – among other organisations – UHVDR stuck to the official programme. Some speculated that the aversion against President Mesić was but a smokescreen for internal power struggles within HDZ, which manifested themselves among segments of differing loyalty within HVIDRA, the CHQ and UHVDR.²³² The most important in this case, however, is that – as has already been mentioned in relation to the “second log-revolution” – divisions between as

²²⁹ Neno Boban excluded the possibility of Trusić becoming president of UHBDDR due to his political ambitions (“Hrabri i čestiti napustit će Merčepa”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 14.05.1994).

²³⁰ “NDH nitko neće rasturiti”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 07.07.1995.

²³¹ Divisions and quarrels with serious results, such as violence and even murder, did take place within several organisations. Strize of HVIDRA Kaštela attacked a fellow member over what was most probably conflicting political orientations, while the then president of HVIDRA Split, Andrija Bartulić, was shot to death in autumn 2004 by a member of his organisation following a quarrel over parking fees in a garage administered by HVIDRA (see “Obračun u HVIDR-i”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 10.04.2001 and “Bartulićev život izvan opasnosti (sic!)”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 12.10.2004).

²³² Blažević 2001.

well as within the organisations were becoming visible parallel to the *branitelji* becoming increasingly at odds with public opinion, and the functioning and activities of the organisations were moved further from the humanitarian sphere than ever. Meanwhile, as the divisions were becoming more pronounced and visible to the public through the media, they themselves contributed to the emergence of the general impression that the veterans' organisations were nothing but political interest groups. This reduced their legitimacy in the eyes of the ordinary citizens, consequently contributing to the destruction of the image of the *branitelji*.

Yet, interestingly, it was not until the return of HDZ to power and the extradition of General Gotovina to the Hague that schisms of a similar magnitude to that affecting Merčep's UHDDR became a reality. The secret "charter of understanding" between HDZ and its most loyal organisations, of which, I argue, the ceasing of revision of statuses was exchanged for peace on the ICTY-issue was the backbone, was not put into effect without costs. After all, it was the leaders of these organisations, with their central structures in Zagreb behind them, which were cooperating with HDZ *on behalf of* the organisations. The internal fault lines between, the leaders and central body of organisations such as HVIDRA on the one hand, and their local branches and members on the other hand, manifested themselves clearly as it became apparent that HDZ was not going to pursue its oppositional politics of refusing cooperation with the ICTY now that they were in government. The anti-ICTY sentiment was very real to many of the local branches, as well as a considerable part of the total members of the involved organisations and not just something that could be used to gain political points to the advantage of certain parties. As it gradually dawned upon the more genuinely dedicated protesters that their efforts had been in vain, or worse yet, that their message had been deliberately exploited for other means, widespread internal discontent and frustration became a strong divisive factor among the *branitelji*.

Regarding HDZ and HVIDRA, the key moment was the election of Josip Đakić to the post as HVIDRA's first man. This powerful parliamentarian representative of HDZ, who also had the necessary high-ranking military background from the Homeland War, became the centre of the interface between HDZ and HVIDRA, a role which his opponents in the quest for the presidency, Miodrag Demo and Stjepan Sučić, probably would not have performed equally to the taste of HDZ.²³³ Đakić's first important task was to repeat *ad nauseum* in the media and elsewhere that there was no such thing as internal divisions within HVIDRA, and

²³³ "Josip Đakić novi šef HVIDR-e?", Feral Tribune, 06.05.2004.

that HVIDRA did not support the policy of the government on the issue, even if several spokesmen of the government claimed the opposite.²³⁴ Moreover, contradicting Đakić even further, the convention “The Truth about the Homeland War”, held by the end of February 2005 under the auspices of UHDDR and HVIDRA of the Counties of Zadar and Split-Dalmatia, was concluded with the announcement that Croatian veterans should go up against the government on the Gotovina issue. According to some sources, a large number of members representing the various branches of HVIDRA were demanding the resignation of the organisation’s central leadership.²³⁵ The manoeuvring between his own members, his political orientation and position, as well as the HDZ leadership, must have been a complicated one indeed, especially as a major schism appeared within his organisation thereby making his claims of unity seem even more absurd. Retired Colonel Bozo Drmić, former soldier of the legendary 2nd brigade called “Thunder”, led the initiative to establish a breakaway organisation consisting of discontent HVIDRA members. According to some sources, he had considerable support at least weighed in credibility and legendary status, if the support measured in numbers was more undefined as of yet.²³⁶ Drmić explained that the thought of a new HVIDRA was not new, but that the Gotovina affair had made it crystallise, and that his organisation was to practice a strict apolitical attitude while making sure that a comprehensive revision of statutes was implemented.²³⁷ It is probably not too far-fetched to speculate that the suppressed discontent within the *branitelji* population at this critical moment of staking out Croatia’s future political path, both domestically and internationally, made HDZ nervous. After all, according to a well informed source, the HDZ leaders were “not used to having organisations presenting themselves on the scene of the *branitelji* which they did not found or do not completely control”.²³⁸

Yet it is necessary to refute not only the claims of unity put forward by Đakić and other prominent members of HVIDRA and other organisations, but also the claim of many critical journalists and politicians of the opposition, who took as proof of the unquestionable loyalty of the *branitelji* towards the new government that they remained pacified during the controversies surrounding the arrest and extradition of Gotovina to the Hague. As has hopefully become clear, the *branitelji* were not the united “pacified” collective such

²³⁴ See for instance “HVIDRA: ne podupiremo Vladinu haašku politiku”, Slobodna Dalmacija, 01.03.2005.

²³⁵ Šoštarić 2005. Strize of HVIDRA Kaštela claimed that as many as 90% of all HVIDRA members were dissatisfied with Đakić, and that there was “no disunity within HVIDRA, only between the leadership and the members” (“Strize traži Đakićevu ostavku”, Slobodna Dalmacija, 15.03.2005).

²³⁶ Šoštarić, op. cit.

²³⁷ “HVIDRA je političa ispostava HDZ-a”, Nacional, 08.03.2005.

²³⁸ Đakić 2005.

argumentation seems to imply. Rather, the frustration and discontent this time gradually – as the initial shock wore off – turned towards the direction of their leaders and political allies, who had cynically betrayed the *branitelji* and their “cause”. However, this time the protests took the form of internal showdowns and chaotic and often misguided critique, as there was no overarching structure which could organise and direct the anger of the veterans. For only by employing the vast and powerful network of the “old elite”, which still was HDZ’s greatest asset, could such a diverse group as the *branitelji* be united and organised to pursue one specific goal. Sadly, the goal of successful reintegration to society was never allowed to become such a united front.

HDZ’s political “reorientation” from isolationist to integrationist, in which cooperation with the ICTY was the central marker, resulted in a widespread feeling of anger among the *branitelji* due to the manipulation and perceived deception by HDZ, which, after all, had come to power partially as a result of their anti-ICTY stance. Many veterans went to seek other political alternatives further to the right, which, however, were fractioned and small and thus of no real political weight, at least when compared to HDZ. Others tried to take back the control of the “cause” of the *branitelji* by registering own parties, thus opting for open and full fledged political involvement as parties instead of the poorly hidden political activity of many of the “humanitarian” organisations. The Croatian Party of *Branitelji* (*Hrvatska stranka branitelja* – HSB) was established as early as in 2001, and was, policy-wise, clearly opposing HVIDRA and other organisations which were deemed instruments in the hands of politicians. In an interview, the leader of HSB, Željko Galeković, even claimed that the seeds to the many divisions among the *branitelji* were sown on purpose by the wartime political leadership, as every battalion or troop was encouraged to establish their own organisation to ensure that the veterans’ would be controllable by the old recipe of *divida et impera*.²³⁹ In summer 2008 the rumour ran that General Gotovina and singer Thompson were to be the front men in another example of an open political initiative from the *branitelji*, the so called Assembly of *Branitelji*. This, however, apparently took on the form of wish making by *branitelji* and journalists hungry for sensation rather than any serious attempt at forming a political party.²⁴⁰ More serious, yet ostensibly enjoying little support, were the efforts of former leader of the CHQ, Mirko Čondić, who was among the most vocal critics of HDZ’s “new direction”. The arrest and extradition of Gotovina inspired the retired colonel to contemplate creating a new political option. The party, according to Čondić, would even have

²³⁹ “Prevaranti su dobili činove i plaće”, Slobodna Dalmacija, 09.09.2003.

²⁴⁰ “Thompson nam je bio ‘okidač’ da se udružimo”, Jutarnji List, 01.09.2008.

a “military wing” which should deal with, among other things, the “betrayal” of the *branitelji* of the new, HDZ-led government. Čondić also promised to file law suits against “all politicians who took advantage of the *branitelji* on their way to power”.²⁴¹ However, none of the three initiatives mentioned here managed to gain any political importance.

Simultaneously, the political *and* social importance of the veterans’ organisations was diminishing rapidly by the end of the controversies surrounding General Gotovina’s arrest and extradition, leaving behind them an essentially broken reputation of the *branitelji* in the eyes of the general public.

The Homeland War, and the place given to it in the narrative promoted by the Tuđman regime, was treated by many of the leaders of the organisations as a vantage point for ideological and political formulation of acts. Yet what the “fundamental goals and ideas of the Homeland War”, as mentioned by Džaja in the previous subsection, exactly was, was subject to diverging interpretations. Thus, while both the “self inflicted” and the external manipulative politicisation of the *branitelji* contributed to the destruction of their popular image, the politicisation in itself led to the various organisations being divided among them as well as, in time, internally. This caused further difficulties for the *branitelji* and their path back to society. Schisms and quarrels had the detrimental result of leading the focus of the organisations away from their “real”, humanitarian goal of defending the rights of the *branitelji* and facilitating their quick reintegration to society.

Yet, as discussed, the question remains whether this was the true goal at all of the organisations from the beginning. The analysis of the actions of certain leaders, which was the theme of the previous subsection of this chapter, shows that personal ambition, on many occasions whether political or material, was allowed to override any other considerations. Thus this, to some extent, justifies accusations that the organisations were run as personal interest organisations. Vital to *this* subsection, however, is that this contributed further to increasing disunity among the *branitelji* thereby, in effect, hampering the reintegration of the veterans to society when the organisation should ideally have been the greatest promoter and facilitator of reintegration efforts. Failing to promote a single, clear focus on humanitarian efforts created the potential for disunity among the *branitelji*, something which resulted in there being at least 30-35 organisations on national level, which paradoxically had very similar statutes and operational aims while at the same time being completely irreconcilable.

²⁴¹ “Vojno krilo bavit će se pitanjima MUP-a, MORH-a i branitelja”, Slobodna Dalmacija, 01.03.2005.

5. Conclusion

The Croatian veteran of the Homeland War, the *branitelj*, emerged from the horrifying war for independence which ravaged Croatia from 1991 to 1995. The success and glory of the effective retake of occupied Croatian territory by way of Operations Storm and Lightning became the success and glory of the *branitelj*, effectively melting together the heroism of his actions and sacrifice with the purity and infallibility which in most cultures the phenomenon of birth is associated with – so also the birth of a nation. In the ideological theatre which was partly invented by the wartime ruling elite, first and foremost by the “father of the modern Croatian nation” Franjo Tuđman, the *branitelj* was the main actor. However, while the prospect of war, chaos and “rebirth” arguably necessitated an ideological concept which served as promoter and facilitator of coherence and endurance through patriotism, the concept was also used for other, far less noble causes. Patriotism spilled over into destructive nationalism, which was used to justify Croatian aggression in a foreign country, as well as denial in the face of accusations of war crimes committed during the acclaimed military operations. This reduced international sympathy and effectively paved the way for post-war isolation. Arguably more serious for Croatia in the long term, however, was the abuse of the ideology and the isolation by the elite and its closest supporters as a smokescreen, under which they gained extensive personal privileges of status, power and money.

Unfortunately, this darker side of the ideology was also inherited and personified by the *branitelj*, sometimes actively and deservedly; yet in most cases passively and unjust. The strong focus on collectiveness as a sharp defensive line against the Other of the new narrative had the effect of rendering it difficult for the individual *branitelj* to escape his image, as this

gradually fell apart in the eyes of the citizen. Indeed, it was the official, state sponsored efforts to portray the *branitelji* as an infallible, solely positive force that contributed in the greatest sense to this “collectivisation”. Sadly, as the public gradually became aware of and eventually dared to address the errors and injustice of the wartime regime, the singular *branitelj*, no longer discernible from the plural *branitelji*, stood to take the strike. The duality of the image of the *branitelj* – as both hero and villain – comes into interplay with the ambiguity of another popular conception of the collective memory, namely the tendency to view criminal acts and war time endeavours as heroic defiance of law and death, as exemplified by the ambiguous *hajduk* myth. However, the *branitelj*, as a marginal character, being not soldier (any longer) and not citizen (yet), is subject to ambiguity and dualism on a far more severe scale than the brigands of Ottoman times. The horrifying experiences of war, manifest in physical or psychic scars (or both), marks the *branitelj* first and foremost as a victim.

The privileges and status that were made available to the *branitelji* after the war took the form of mere compensation, rather than a means to promote the two way process which any form of integration truly is. The *branitelji* were not stimulated to seek reintegration to society, while the citizens were not inspired to receive their heroes with open arms. The fact that most *branitelji* – in time – became well provided for materially, is not to be confused with the reintegration being successful. Slowly, a gap of alienation, mistrust and fear was allowed to develop between *branitelj* and citizen, a gap which rendered a successful reintegration – viewed from both sides – impossible. Instead of realising the immeasurable positive potential of the *branitelj*, as a young, experienced and dedicated member of society, the policy of the successive governments led to the opposite; the *branitelji* came to be viewed as an unpredictable and ungrateful lot – much the same way many *branitelji* in time came to view the nation for which they had fought.

Thus, the question this thesis has aspired to provide an answer to is: How did this come about? Firstly, the dramatic increase in the number of *branitelji* – both disabled and not – from a few thousand to half a million led to an overstretching of the sympathy and heroic acclaim the *branitelj* enjoyed in the public. Parallel to continuous reports and testimonies of alleged extensive fraud and of the often uncritical criterions by which the statuses were “handed out” to people who never held a weapon, this increase led to widespread suspicion and erosion of the hero status of the *branitelji* – a so called “hyperinflation” of status. Their eventual large number, combined with the fact that they were organised into powerful organisations of interest, led to the *branitelji* being viewed as a group rather than as individuals, a group which hid swindlers who tried to steal a share of the “debt” of the nation

to their heroes. The fact that the governments who were most active in were insinuating on the right to secrecy for the groups contributed to there being cast an even greater shadow of doubt over the *branitelji* as well as on the motivation of the governments themselves. The government of President Tuđman – and, later, the government constituted by the remnants of the political elite of Tuđman’s government – monopolised not only the program for caring for the *branitelji*; they also to a large extent had the power to decide who were to be considered a *branitelj* and who not, just as they during the war had decided who should become generals and heroes, and who not.

The second reason, closely related to the first, as to why the reintegration failed is to be found within the Law of Rights of the Croatian *Branitelji*. The Law must partly be viewed as instrumental to the government; not solely as a system of awards for political loyalty, but also as a means to pacify possible discontent within the large and well armed segment of the population that the *branitelji* constituted. From “below”, the law was also viewed as instrumental; realising the rights it stipulated became a way out of unemployment and the general economic uncertainty which characterised the post-war society for the ordinary citizen. The vague definitions, corruption, and poor control of the demanded documentation led to a massive assault of “*branitelji*” on the Law. Instead of becoming a motivation for *branitelji* seeking to become regular citizens, the Law became a motivation for citizens seeking to realise status as *branitelj*.

Yet the biggest fault lies in the way the law was utilised. Instead of using the benefits and privileges as a temporary inspiration and facilitator for the *branitelj* to seek a quick return to society, the Law provided unconditional material benefits allowing the former soldiers to sustain their existence in the margins of a society which they found themselves ever further alienated from. Also, the constant changes to the Law as well as to the institutional structures which were supposed to enact it made its implementation a long lasting and difficult process, thereby creating a lot of frustration among *branitelji* waiting to have their rights realised. Frustration was further increased by the sometimes appalling discrepancies between apparently well situated veterans flashing imported cars and symbols of political power, while other *branitelji*, too run down to be able to fight for their share of the privileges, were brought to the border of extinction by sufferings and trauma which remained unaddressed by the various governments’ efforts to care for them. Few citizen led initiatives to alleviate the sufferings of the most needing *branitelji* were founded; after all the government had pledged to help, and the apparent material well being of many *branitelji* was taken as proof of success.

In many ways then, the law actually increased the gap between the *branitelj* and the ordinary citizen.

Gradually, as the societal climate warmed up partially due to the political change brought by the Račan administration, it became possible for others than those with unquestionable war time credentials to openly question the way the issue of the reintegration of the *branitelji* was progressing. However, the new government – pressured between its own promises to root out the corruption and lawlessness of the former government and the threat of instability still powerful remnants of that government represented – seemed somewhat overeager to confront the *branitelj* segment of the population. The frontal attack on the most powerful *branitelji* – who, after all, had large organisations to back them up – contributed to an increasingly heated and polarised debate on major issues dominating Croatian society at the time, a debate that did little to bring about reconciliation between the *branitelji* and those for whom they had suffered. Though perhaps not a reason for the failed reintegration in itself, the failure of the Račan government to set the record straight did not improve the situation either. Importantly, however, many “independent” veterans’ organisations saw the pressing need to clear up in their ranks, and supported the Račan government’s effort to disclose the dimensions of the fraud, the existence of which had by now become an established fact in the eyes of most citizens.

In this way, the legacy of the Račan administration was important. The issue was put on the agenda, and it has remained there since. In the eyes of the citizens, the constant use of the “protection of privacy”-rationale to keep from publishing the disputed register, and thus put an end to the controversies, has only cemented the notion that HDZ is trying to prevent the disclosure of an unprecedented scandal, in which that party plays the central role. Moreover, the effective abolition of any measures to remove the rights of “fake” veterans, parallel to the ever increasing number of *branitelji*, has come at a huge cost in financial resources. Today, as the number of *branitelji* is passing 500 000 and that of disabled *branitelji* 45 000, Croatia is trying hard to cope with a perilously large foreign debt while also suffering under a strangling economic recession. In recent months, critical voices among the *branitelji* have been heard speaking out against the government, the latter which has requested the *branitelji* to accept reduced pensions as an act of patriotism while it is continuing to grant large sums in funding to the organisations known as HDZ-friendly. Moreover, as this thesis was sent to the printing press, the *Sabor* was discussing the closing of the still open timeframe within which one may realise status as *branitelj* of the Homeland War, a war which officially

ended almost a decade and half ago. That is a beginning, but it is hardly enough to solve the problem. On this issue, one does right to expect further controversies and heated debate.

The gradual growth of frustration and increasing sense of alienation combined with the fact that several of the most powerful organisations were subject to political meddling through their leaders, paved the way for the more explicit political involvement of the *branitelji* during the period under which the Račan administration was holding office. This leads us into the third major reason for the failed reintegration of the Croatian *branitelji* which this thesis argues in favour of. The demonstrations at St. Marc's Square in Zagreb in September 96, which were the result of cooperation between the more hawkish members of HDZ, fronted by then Minister of Defence Gojko Šušak, and the leaders of HVIDRA and possibly also other organisations, were the first true manifestation of the potential power implicit in the "cause" of the *branitelji*. However, it was not until roughly three and a half years later, when Croatia's right wing forces found they were unable to accept the fact that they had been ousted from government by a sharp turn against them in popular opinion, the necessity of realising this power presented itself. The releasing trigger became the issue of cooperation with the ICTY, which was an unavoidable political move if Croatia was to be pulled out of the increasingly destructive international isolation which was the legacy of the Tuđman era. The aptness of the issue, in the view of those seeking to bring down the government, was the broad public support and the fierce emotions it spurred in a war ravaged population who followed their leaders claim to have been acting in self defence, thereby removing all potential guilt from their shoulders. However, the question remains how much actual control it was possible to exert over the veterans' organisations, even for those who ostensibly held the loyalty of their leaders. As these leaders became dangerously self-assured by the power which their organisations apparently were in possession of, various activist operations began sending the wrong signal to the public, which alongside the government was coming to view the organisations as a considerable internal security threat. This disturbing fact was epitomized by the demonstrations in support of General Mirko Norac on the Split waterfront in January 2001, which represents the ultimate peak of the power of the "cause" of the *branitelji*. The numerous attempts at bringing down the democratically elected government through mobilisation on a wide array themes of varying importance to the public, combined with the threats, insults and fear-spreading rhetoric, led to the beginning of the destruction of the popular image of the *branitelji*, and thus the undermining of a vital part of the ability of their "cause" to muster support. This was detrimental, as what should have been the most important part of that "cause", namely to care for suffering veterans and re-include them into society,

was rendered a lot more difficult after this further loss of sympathy. Moreover, the protests and activism during the time of the Račan government put the political strings pulling the organisations on display, thereby contributing to the establishment in popular opinion of the veterans' organisations as political instruments of the country's right wing forces.

However, the mobilisation of the organisations did prove successful in reinstalling the popular version of the Croatian right, the HDZ into power. After all, the government of Račan had spent all its energy on alleviating tensions and crises which by and large were created or released by its political opponents, the latter which used the veterans' organisations to do the "dirty work". The fact that the newly elected HDZ-led government started its term by extraditing two "war heroes" to the Hague, as well as its involvement in the arrest of the greatest Croatian "hero" of them all, General Ante Gotovina, was not only amazing due to the ostensible irony and hypocrisy of it all, but also due to the peaceful acceptance of these actions by the most influential veterans' organisations. However, as the initial shock waned it became apparent that it was just a question of political pragmatism, thereby confirming the widespread perception that many organisations and *branitelji* – consciously or not – had acted as HDZ's extended arm.

Yet one should refrain from viewing this political manipulation as solely propagated by external factors. In many ways, the ostensible political viewpoints of those who managed to capitalise on the "cause" of the *branitelji* resonated deeply with segments of the *branitelji* populace, who perceived their much acclaimed role in the realisation of the "thousand year old dream of Croatian statehood" as a source of pride and moral power. This was perhaps, in the eyes of some veterans, their biggest asset, and it was utilised as discursive weapons against any phenomenon, person or event which could be taken as conflicting with the nationalistic ideology which had forged the young Croatian state. However, by the constant self declaration of their moral infallibility on issues which were difficult to see as in any way connected to the war, which at any rate most citizens now wished to view as a closed chapter, the *branitelji* in the eyes of many a citizen functioned as some sort of inquisition, upsetting the feelings of many who did not adhere to the strict, yet often inconsistent nationalist ideology which had dominated Croatia for such a long period. Thus the politicisation of the "cause" of the *branitelji* was also brought about actively by parts of the *branitelji* population itself, the representatives of which on their own initiative used their organisations as political rather than humanitarian instruments. This was the fourth contributing factor to the failed reintegration of the *branitelji*.

Another, closely related reason, was precisely this gap between the initial “humanitarian” face and the emerging political face of the organisations, which to some extent served as a loophole for various “industrious” persons, who saw it fit to promote their own political and financial power through their influential positions in the organisations; positions which were often combined with other political and professional roles in a way that may at best be termed unsound. This bereaved the *branitelji* further of much needed public support, while at the same time it stole away both money, time and momentum which should have been invested in facilitating the return of the *branitelji* to society.

A final factor contributing to the destruction of the popular image of the *branitelj*, thereby also complicating their successful reintegration even further, were the internal divisions of the organisations that came as a result of the abuse of the “cause” of the *branitelji*. By allowing politics, power and money to overshadow the most important rationale of the existence of the organisations – the humanitarian ideal – seeds of potential discord were sown. As it became clear to the diverse majority of “regular” members of the organisations, for whom they existed in the first place, that certain individuals and political parties and groups were capitalising on their “cause”, a certain amount of upheaval was created, resulting in the overall loss of influence and internal support of the organisations and their leaders. This process was greatly catalysed by the parallel loss of public sympathy, the reasons for which were also becoming clearer to the *branitelji* themselves. Yet it was the arrest and extradition of General Gotovina to the ICTY that caused the most severe divisions within the more influential organisations, as the organisations had to take the punch of the political turnaround of the HDZ on the issue orchestrated by the new Prime Minister Ivo Sanader, a turnaround which proved impossible for the organisations to follow. Thus, with the loss of power and credibility following the Gotovina-affair, which had publicly and explicitly displayed that many of the veterans’ organisations were nothing but political tools, the final blow to the process of reintegration to society, was delivered. Even today, internal division are still characterising the *branitelji* and their organisations; HVIDRA of the municipality of Zadar has recently (November 2009) broke loose from the central organisational structure with more local branches expected to follow.

The end of the Homeland War never meant that the “rebirth” of the Croatian state was a closed chapter. Rather, the war was only part of the job. However, as the reconstruction of Croatia started and her people held the blocks of which their bright future was to be built in their hands, those who had long claimed to be Croatia’s biggest supporters failed to join in. Instead of realising the positive potential of the patriotism of the nation and making use of it

now that it was needed the most, they instead exploited it to realise their personal agendas. This was indeed the “criminalisation of the Homeland War”, which was such a favoured phrase by these “patriots”. And in the wake of the “criminalisation of the Homeland War” the “destruction of the dignity of the *branitelji*” followed closely.

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