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**ACCOUNTABILITY AND THE CROATIAN MEDIA IN THE  
PROCESS OF RECONCILIATION**

**Two Case Studies**

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## SECTION I

### Introduction

Various human rights groups and organizations<sup>1</sup> have cautioned that the past year-and-a-half has seen an upsurge in ethnically motivated incidents in Croatia. According to the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, they “also incited defamatory media reporting of minorities, laced with nationalistic undertones and reaching its highest level since 1996”.<sup>2</sup> Following on from that observation, this paper considers two Croatian mainstream dailies - *Vecernji list* and *Jutarnji list* - using sample articles and commentaries to assess their professional standards and practice when reporting on events linked to ethnic Serbs and the 1990s war. It also looks at the mechanisms of media accountability active in the Croatian market, analyzing their influence and evaluating how they cope with forms of expression which incite intolerance.

The media outlets selected, *Vecernji list* and *Jutarnji list*, are the two most important newspapers among the sixteen Croatian dailies (seven national) in terms of readership and influence. Although there are no reliable figures on the total circulation of the papers, it is estimated that they sell up to 150,000 and 120,000 copies respectively, in a country with a population of 4.5 million.<sup>3</sup> The incidents that made up the sample and were used as a test for media professionalism were all high-profile cases that captured public attention, provoked reactions from state officials and, in general, constituted a good test of fair and unbiased reporting. Assessing the pervading rhetoric directed towards ethnic Serbs in the chosen articles, the paper explores what instruments the respective media outlets utilize to promote impartiality and prevent unethical coverage and how well those instruments function in practice (testing them through selected events), and considers whether supplementary tools are needed to prevent irresponsible reporting from becoming a serious challenge to the normalization process in the region.

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<sup>1</sup> International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights – Intervention to the 2006 OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting; Working Session 14 – Tolerance and Non-discrimination II: National Minorities, 11 October 2006: “Harassment and violence against members of minorities has increased in 2005 and 2006, which means that the attitude toward minorities has deteriorated in these two years, for the first time since 1996. [...] Since the local elections in 2005, the nationalistic attitudes towards minorities have deteriorated in part due to the coverage that oppose the inclusion of representatives of Serbs in some local governments.”

<sup>2</sup> International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, “Human Rights in the OSCE Region: Europe, Central Asia and North America, Report 2006 (Events of 2005)”;

[http://www.ihf-hr.org/documents/doc\\_summary.php?sec\\_id=58&d\\_id=4255](http://www.ihf-hr.org/documents/doc_summary.php?sec_id=58&d_id=4255)

<sup>3</sup> IREX, Media Sustainability Index 2005; [http://www.irex.org/programs/MSI\\_EUR/2005/MSI05-Croatia.pdf](http://www.irex.org/programs/MSI_EUR/2005/MSI05-Croatia.pdf)

This study is an attempt to draw attention to the need to attach greater importance to safeguarding tolerance. Accordingly it offers reflections on quality control and ethics awareness in support of the concept that self-regulation plays an important role in enabling journalists to become more mindful of their responsibilities towards universal values, such as the rejection of hatred and discrimination. It explores the good practice proposals advocated by media experts and watchdog organizations that could lead to a more systematic and serious approach to media professionalism in Croatia. Given the 1990s conflict and the legacy and level of hatred it involved, good practice dictates that, when delicate topics within the reconciliation process are to be dealt with, there should be an assurance that unbalanced messages will never become acceptable and some signals that the ethical standards by which professional and biased or non-objective media are clearly distinguished are always in place.

### **The Legacy of the Past**

Many previous studies have shown that during the 1990s the media in the Balkans significantly contributed to the development of an atmosphere of intolerance by generating hatred and using a whole arsenal of unfair coverage and that media warfare preceded the actual mayhem in the former Yugoslavia<sup>4</sup>. More than a decade later, a change can be discerned in both the role of the media and the understanding of the profession of journalism in Croatia. A positive trend towards greater media freedom began following the 2000 parliamentary elections when, after a decade of Franjo Tudjman's authoritarian rule, a pro-Western centre-left coalition came to power.<sup>5</sup> Tudjman was the first president of independent Croatia; he led the country throughout the violent years that marked the disintegration of former Yugoslavia and the collapse of socialism. Tudjman and his party, the Croatian Democratic Union (Croatian acronym - HDZ), controlled almost every aspect of life in a country devastated by a brutal conflict that left thousands of dead and hundreds of thousands displaced. His hard-line ethnic politics eventually drove the country into isolation at the end of the 1990s, which was duly reflected in the media as well. Editorial independence was restricted while the ruling elite imposed its own agenda and priorities, aiming to mould public

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<sup>4</sup> Monroe E. Price & Mark Thompson, "Forging Peace – Intervention, Human Rights and the Management of Media Space", Edinburgh University Press 2002

<sup>5</sup> OSCE, 2006 Review: Report on Croatia's progress in meeting international commitments since 2001.

opinion in the desired direction. “The regime didn’t allow for any ambiguity. One was either a supporter of the nation or a traitor.”<sup>6</sup> Pursuing patterns of behaviour inherited from the old socialist regime, in which ideological rivals were persecuted, the media contributed to the creation of an atmosphere of fear in society with the constant labelling of enemies based on a national criterion.<sup>7</sup>

A tragedy for the Croatian media was that the country’s transition was not a genuine progression from a one-party monopoly to multiparty democracy. Instead, domination by the Communist Party was simply replaced by domination by a nationalist party (HDZ), using the same totalitarian instruments of control. In spite of the diversity of the press, the public was exposed to the single ruling group and its ideology.<sup>8</sup> The same pattern was applied in the other former Yugoslav republics, notably Serbia, where Slobodan Milošević used his power to silence the free media and prevent the voices of those who opposed the war being heard. The media were exploited to fan the flames of war; they were enlisted in a campaign of ethnic stereotyping, promoting a culture of intolerance and the fabrication of news aimed at stirring ethnic and religious hatred.<sup>9</sup>

The situation did not immediately change after the war since conflicts never really end when the shooting stops. But slowly the media did set aside the verbal combat in which they had engaged. Examining the process, Gordana Vilovic, a media analyst, identified three stages of ethically dubious reporting in Croatian media:<sup>10</sup>

- 1) 1990- 1997 Genuine hate speech phase with the consent of the government;

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<sup>6</sup> David Bruce MacDonald, *Balkan Holocausts? Serbian and Croatian victim-centred propaganda and the war in Yugoslavia*, Manchester University Press, 2002; page 260.

<sup>7</sup> Sonja Tomovic, “Hate Speech in the media – Visible Relaxation of Ethnic Tension”, MediaOnline, [www.mediaonline.ba](http://www.mediaonline.ba); June 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Kemal Kurspahic, *Prime Time Crime: Balkan Media in War and Peace*, United States Institute of Peace Press, Washington D.C. 2003.

<sup>9</sup> Dubravka Ugresic, “The Culture of Lies: Antipolitical Essays”, 1998; as cited by K.Kurspahic’s “Prime Time Crime: Balkan Media in War and Peace”: “[...] Serbian newspapers were full of horrifying stories about ‘necklaces of Serbian children’s fingers’ worn by the Croat ‘Usthas’, of the ‘genocide’ that the Croats were again preparing to carry out against innocent Serbs. The Serbian media propaganda orchestrated by Serbian authorities finally achieved what it had sought: a reaction in the Croatian media. And when the Croatian media also filled with tales of ‘necklaces’ of Croatian children’s fingers’ worn round the necks of Serbian ‘cut-throats’, the preparations were laid for war.”

<sup>10</sup> Gordana Vilovic, Program Coordinator for the International Center of Education of Journalists in Opatija/Zagreb and Lecturer in Journalism Ethics at the Faculty of Political Science Journalism Studies, “Hate Speech in the Croatian Media: Lack Of Journalistic Sensibility To Sensitive Issues”, *Southeast European Media Journal*, [www.mediaonline.ba](http://www.mediaonline.ba): “(...) excess situations especially in post-conflict, troubled areas such as Vukovar, show that journalists and editors (ab)use ethnic background. (...) There are instances of politically incorrect speech in sporadic cases when media treat minority groups in a wrong, stereotyped way.”

- 2) 1997-2000 Soft hate speech stage; the number of articles used to promote prejudices fell and the government no longer explicitly supported hostility and intolerance;
- 3) 2000 – onwards: sophisticated intolerance; hate speech has faded away, to be replaced by sporadic politically incorrect speech or stereotypes.

A study about media reporting in the former Yugoslavia, done by the Igman Initiative<sup>11</sup>, revealed that the neighbouring countries still tend to be dealt with in a negative and superficial manner and that the editorial policy remains “under the strong impression of the logic and philosophy of disintegration of former Yugoslavia.”<sup>12</sup> The study also pointed to lack of articles about a joint future through European integration although “all countries in the region want European Union membership.”

## **SECTION II**

### **Regulations & Mechanisms to Prevent Hate Speech**

A change in the region’s political paradigm and a new ideological framework in post-Tudjman Croatia<sup>13</sup> influenced the transformation and rhetoric of the media as well as the pertinent legislation, especially after Western governments linked progress in media reform to the prospects for Croatia’s integration in the Euro-Atlantic structures. Media laws were modelled according on Western practice and nowadays a legal framework for prohibiting advocacy of violence - which includes the Constitution, the Media Law and the Penal Code - echoes the basic ideas encapsulated in the related international treaties Croatia ratified and had been legally obliged to comply with: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)<sup>14</sup> and the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms

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<sup>11</sup> The Igman Initiative is a union of non-governmental organizations from former Yugoslavia dedicated to a promotion of a reconciliation process in the region. The union promotes and facilitates local and regional dialogue in the fields of politics, economy and culture. One of its projects is the aforementioned research on “Media Reporting on Neighbouring Countries – Bosnia, Croatia and Serbia 2006”

<sup>12</sup> The Igman Initiative, “Media Reporting on Neighbouring Countries – Bosnia, Croatia and Serbia 2006”, as quoted in “Hate Speech Deepens Old Divisions”, by Vesna Peric Zimonjic, InterPress Service News Agency, 28 June 2006

<sup>13</sup> Tudjman died on 10 Dec 1999

<sup>14</sup> Croatia approved it in October 1992 CHECK

(ECHR).<sup>15</sup> The Constitution specifically stipulates that “any call for or incitement to war, or resort to violence, national, racial or religious hatred, or any form of intolerance shall be prohibited and punishable by law.”<sup>16</sup> The Law on the Media (2004) includes a detailed account of freedom of expression and such restrictions of it that aim to protect the rights of others, and the Penal Code introduces the definition of hate crime, describing it as any and every crime motivated by hatred of the victim arising from the latter’s origin or characteristics, including race, gender, sexual orientation, language, religion, national or social origin.<sup>17</sup> The aforementioned regulations are essentially variations of Article 20 of the ICCPR<sup>18</sup> and Articles 10 and 14 of the ECHR.<sup>19</sup>

Alongside with a set of laws, as a control instrument and a traditional policy for insuring fair conduct and good service, there is the idea of enlightened self-interest since some of the Croatian media and journalists’ associations are implementing mechanisms which fall within the category of self-regulation or ‘media accountability systems’ (MAS). According to Claude-Jean Bertrand,<sup>20</sup> the concept of MAS involves quality control and consists of “non-State means of making the media responsible towards the public.”<sup>21</sup> MAS come in around forty different forms, some of which are internal to the media industry and function within it (correction box, for instance, which counters one traditional shortcoming of the press); others are external (journalism reviews, non-profit research projects, etc.); certain MAS require the cooperation of the media and the public (for example, letters to the editor). For Croatia’s print media the most important MAS include professional associations (The Croatian Journalists’

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<sup>15</sup> Croatia became its party in 1997 CHECK

<sup>16</sup> The Constitution of the Republic of Croatia, Article 39.

<sup>17</sup> Amendments to the Penal Code, June 2006; introduces paragraph 36 to article 89: “Hate crime is any crime recognized by this Law, motivated by hatred against someone’s race, skin colour, gender, sexual orientation, language, religion, political or other beliefs, national or social origin, property, birth, education, social status, age, health status and other characteristics.”

<sup>18</sup> ICCPR Article 20: (1) Any propaganda for war shall be prohibited by law. (2) Any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discriminations, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law.

<sup>19</sup> ECHR , Article 10: “Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers [...] The exercise of these freedoms, since it carries with it duties and responsibilities, may be subject to such formalities, conditions, restrictions or penalties as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society, in the interests of national security, territorial integrity or public safety, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, for the protection of the reputation or rights of others, for preventing the disclosure of information received in confidence, or for maintaining the authority and impartiality of the judiciary.” Article 14: “The enjoyment of the rights and freedoms set forth in this Convention shall be secured without discrimination on any ground such as sex, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth or other status.”

<sup>20</sup> Claude-Jean Bertrand is emeritus professor at the French Press Institute at the University of Paris.

<sup>21</sup> Claude-Jean Bertrand, ‘Media ethics & accountability systems’, New Brunswick, N.J. : London: Transatction Publishers, 2000.



Association and its disciplinary committee, the Council of Honour), various types of written documents such as codes of ethics or letters to the editor, and independent foundations committed to freedom of speech that at the same time act as media watchdogs and are devoted to criticism of distortions in news coverage.

### **Croatian Journalists' Association**

The umbrella organization for media professionals, the Croatian Journalists' Association (Croatian acronym HND), has had an active role in drafting media legislation in Croatia. HND is an affiliate of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ). It has 3,286 members (2,957 fully-fledged, 263 trainees and 66 associates),<sup>22</sup> meaning that it represents almost 90 percent of the active journalists in Croatia.

Its Code of Ethics is binding even for journalists who are not members of the HND and its protection and implementation falls within the remit of HND's Council of Honour. The Code observes the Statutes and documents of the IFJ and the Council of Europe on freedom of expression and human rights, including those involved in combating intolerance and the derogatory stereotypical depiction of members of different communities. However, in terms of its actual wording, the provision relating to discrimination does not address prejudices based on ethnicity. It enjoins journalists to do their utmost to avoid "publishing pejorative comments based on someone's race, skin colour, religion, sex, sexual orientation, as well as remarks on someone's physical or mental disability or illness unless such information is of relevance to the public interest."<sup>23</sup> A more precise formulation that would include being alert to the danger of discrimination based on national and social origins is therefore recommended. HND's Council of Honour receives around 100 complaints per year. As regards *Vecernji list* and *Jutarnji list*, it received 25 and 22 complaints respectively over the period January 2004 to October 2005, which is the highest rate among Croatia's dailies<sup>24</sup> (none of the requests related to hate speech or the events considered in the present paper's case studies). Around two-thirds of the complaints against *Vecernji list* were deemed

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<sup>22</sup> HND's Membership Commission statistics published in *Novinar* monthly in December 2006.

<sup>23</sup> HND Code of Ethics, Article 19.

<sup>24</sup> HND, Council of Honour's Report accessible on: <http://www.hnd.hr/novost.php?id=1211>.

unfounded as were fifty percent of those against *Jutarnji list*. The fact that these papers received the highest number of complaints can be explained in part by their having the highest circulation, in part by the reach and the breadth of their distribution, and in general by the influence they enjoy on the media market.

The most common breaches of the Code relate to the obligation to publish only “truthful, balanced and verified information”;<sup>25</sup> to “protect privacy from unjustified or sensational exposures” and “respect the presumption of innocence in court proceedings;”<sup>26</sup> and to observe the “ethics of public expression and the culture of dialogue, other people’s dignity and integrity in commentaries and polemics”.<sup>27</sup> The Council of Honour imposes moral sanctions against journalists who are in breach of professional standards (a caveat against unfair practices) or, in cases of grave violations of the Code of Ethics and HND’s Statute, it can rule to expel a member from the HND.

### **Vecernji list’s Ombudsman and Code of Practice**

*Vecernji list* is the only Croatian daily with an in-house ombudsman, a Readers’ Editor and its own Code of Ethics - these ‘media accountability systems’ are a recent development for this newspaper.<sup>28</sup> The acceptance of the idea that a print medium that holds others to be accountable should itself be accountable to its readership has not yet been confirmed in Croatia by the institution of independent internal ombudsmen whose job would include increasing the bond of trust between papers and their readers.

*Vecernji list’s* Code - posted also on its website - positively bristles with reassuring terms like respect for the truth, independence, and fairness but - as this research finds – high-minded promises are not always respected in practice. Its guidelines about professional conduct include an anti-discriminatory provision that prohibits publishing “persons’ ethnic or racial background, skin colour, religious denomination, sexual orientation or any physical or

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<sup>25</sup> HND Code of Ethics, Article 4.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., Article 16.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., Article 7.

<sup>28</sup> The Readers’ Editor was instituted in May 2006 and the Code of Ethics in September 2006.

mental illness or handicap unless it is important to the story.”<sup>29</sup> It also requires journalists to cooperate with the Readers’ Editor, to check the ombudsman’s ‘Open Door’ column on a regular basis as well as the daily rubric for ‘Corrections and explanations’.<sup>30</sup>

The Readers’ Editor operates outside the management structure of the paper’s newsroom and has a weekly column in which questions can be raised about the paper’s coverage and where readers’ comments, which can be sent in by fax, post, email or telephone, can be addressed. Over the second half of 2006, the language of reporting and inaccuracies in individual articles were the main subjects dealt with by the Readers’ Editor’s, although the ombudsman had also addressed certain ethical dilemmas, including – relevant to this research – abuse of ethnicity in Serb-related stories.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the Readers’ Editor condemned the headline ‘Serbs’ return blocked account’ over an article reporting the financial difficulties of a fire brigade following a court ruling that allowed former Serb employees to return to their jobs. The report appeared to imply that the obligation to compensate the Serb employees’ for their income lost during their absence thwarted the brigade’s plans to acquire new equipment and thus, indirectly, impaired the fire-fighters’ performance. The Readers’ Editor criticised this line as a misconception based on unfair assumptions. The second instance to meet with the ombudsman’s disapproval concerned an article headlined ‘Cut-throats strolling in Dalj’, which insisted that Serbs allegedly guilty of war crimes against Croats were still at large and leading normal lives in the village of Dalj.<sup>32</sup> The Readers’ Editor pointed out that the report was biased, lacked balance and impartiality and fell short of professional standards.

*Vecernji list* has also established its Honour Council with experienced editorial staff as its members to review queries received from readers and to provide written answers to their comments, questions and complaints.

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<sup>29</sup> *Vecernji list*, Code of Ethics, Part II, provision 14.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, provision 26.

<sup>31</sup> *Vecernji list*, 26 July 2006, Readers’ Editor column: “Rashness and haste could lead to inappropriate terminology”, by Ružica Cigler.

<sup>32</sup> Dalj is a village in war-affected Osijek-Baranja County in Eastern Croatia.

## **Letters to the Editor/Comments**

Both *Vecernji list* and *Jutarnji list* have readers' letters pages in their print editions and both allow for comments to be posted on their websites so that stories and reports can receive immediate feedback. They offer users' registration via an e-mail address and password, allowing readers to submit material for publication in various areas including Talk Boards, Corrections, Story Suggestions and many more. Although the papers stipulate that messages submitted must not contain any offensive or obscene language, in practice this is not always respected, which can result in spates of rude, insulting and derogatory on-line comments.

## **Media Watchdogs**

Besides the various international organizations for which analyzing the media in Croatia is part of their continuous global watchdog mission (for example, Reporters Without Borders, Freedom House, IREX), there are several other sources in the country committed to chronicling media abuse, in the context of the promotion and protection of human rights. The most active of these is the Council for Media of the Croatian Helsinki Committee for Human Rights. It responds to complaints and criticism in cases of such infringements of people's rights as invasions of privacy or the publication of illegal, false or incomplete information. The Council also protects journalists if their right to freedom of expression is violated by the action of proprietors or executives in their media houses.

Since 1996, the country's media have been monitored by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Mission to Croatia. Although the Mission closed its Public Affairs and Media Unit at the end of 2006, following the conclusion that Croatian media operated under the guidelines of international agreements and that domestic legislation guaranteed freedom of expression, the OSCE has continued to pursue its remit in observing developments in the sector, particularly in the context of media ethics and such delicate subjects as minority rights and the 1990s war.

## **SECTION III**

### **Selected Events and Press Coverage**

In this section, two incidents will be considered for analysis. The paper examined the way they were reported over the ten days following each event, that being the usual attention span of the media after the initial sensation (thereafter interest in stories wanes rapidly).

#### **1) Attacks on Serb returnees' houses (July 2006)**

Four houses belonging to ethnic Serb returnees were stoned and fire was set to vegetation around them in the village of Biljani Donji, near Zadar (the region which was occupied by Serb rebels during the 90s conflict and is considered a Croatian nationalist stronghold). Media referred to the fact that during the war rebel-Serb forces killed dozens of civilians in the area and that crimes remained largely unpunished, pointing that it might account for the continuing tensions in the area.

#### **2) Young Serbs attacked Croatian policemen (April 2006)**

A fist fight in a bar snowballed into a clash between police officers and several guests. The incident happened in Donji Lapac, a majority-Serb municipality and the four troublemakers who attacked the policemen were all ethnic Serbs.

### **Biljani Donji**

The day after the attack, Jutarnji list ran a large photo on the front page and headline saying "*Four Croats demolished houses of the returnees - Serbs attacked*" setting the identity labels from the beginning (Croats v Serbs). The story was published on pages 2 and 3 and the report told basics about what happened and how the incident developed, relying on attacked returnees' statements. The paper quoted ethnic Serb Svetozar Skoric, mentioning, among other things, that he had already been attacked five times over three years since his return to Biljani Donji. The same man was quoted in Vecernji list

Vecernji list, 26 July 2006, page 4: “(...) ‘when I came to the window to see what was happening I heard four men. They were cursing at me from the dark and they were shouting: Come outside, you motherf... chetniks!<sup>33</sup> Go away!’, Skoric says...”

Both papers pointed out the fact that that was the same returnee to whose home Croatia’s PM paid a visit, in 2004 in a gesture intended to show that the hard feelings many harbored toward minority Serbs after the country’s bloody war of independence were gone.

In Vecernji list, stories connected to the Biljani Donji incident held the front page three times over the monitored period (26 July, 28 July, 1 August). The first day the headline read “*Night of horror in Biljani Donji: stones and torches for Serbs*” and the paper referred to the incident as “*the largest-scaled attack on the returnees in Zadar County so far.*” Jutarnji list featured the story on the front page twice (26 July, 27 July).

The first few days of coverage of the incident both papers went with hard news reports explaining, among other things, accusations brought against the offenders, publishing comments and condemnation coming from the officials: Minister of Interior Affairs and Government’s spokesman, Delegation of the European Commission to Croatia, President of the Republic and Serbian national minority’s parliamentary representative (Milorad Pupovac). The latter, opposed to the President of the Republic, bluntly labelled the incident as hate crime:

Jutarnji list, 26 July, page 3, Milorad Pupovac: “*Things should be named for what they are. This is a hate crime and it should be punished as such. (...) Zadar<sup>34</sup> hinterland must not be a black Croatian hole. The situation there is worse than in Kosovo.*”

Stjepan Mesic persisted in referring to the incident as hooliganism inflamed by too much alcohol and he stated that the incident was “*the attack on officially acknowledged politics of coexistence and of providing safe conditions for the return of all those who fled the country during the war.*” (Jutarnji list, 26 July, page 3)

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<sup>33</sup> Chetniks were Serb nationalist guerrilla forces during the Second World War; the term also stands for ultra-nationalist Serb paramilitary forces in the 1990s war in the former Yugoslavia. It is an ethnic slur from Croatian perspective.

<sup>34</sup> The centre of the Zadar county and the wider northern Dalmatian region; located on the Adriatic coast.

Vecernji list, July 27, page3, Stjepan Mesic: *“It wasn’t about nationalism; it was about hooligans who wanted to force you to leave your houses so that they can get hold of them in some weird transactions. This was pure robbery, a plunder. (...) They [the offenders] didn’t attack you [Serbs] rather they threw stones on Croatia.”*

Both dailies gave more or less similar details when providing the answers about who did what, where, when and how. However, in Vecernji list the interpretation of the answer to the why-question was from day one influenced by the importance attached to offenders’ war-trauma experiences. The first day the paper had sidebar titled *“War scars: who attacked Serb returnees in Biljani Donji?”* and then headline saying: *“Attackers from Skabrnja<sup>35</sup> – victims of war”*. The daily explained that the perpetrators lost close family members in the 1990s war.

Vecernji list, 26 July, page 4: *“Denis Zilic’s mother died after being hit in a grenade attack and he watched her bleeding to death in agony. Ljubo Basic lost a brother, a Croatian soldier, whereas one of Zoran Bilaver’s brothers ended handicapped, losing his leg, and the other is dealing with the PTSD [pos-ttraumatic stress disorder].”*

Commentaries that initially had appeared in Vecernji list, calling for an extra effort in promoting the culture of tolerance and condemning any form of violence, were replaced with observations that fed upon nurturing grievances and constant reminiscences on the past.

Vecernji list, July 27, Deana Knezevic: *Unmasked: ‘Devastating Teething Troubles’*: *“Old people from Biljani Donji might not have been thrown stones at if the ruling elite has more often and openly spoken about the unacceptability of national hatred. (...) If they are left unattended, these teething troubles of democracy could eventually grow into a chronic disease and indeed this is not what the political leadership or majority of public would aim for.”*

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<sup>35</sup> Skabrnja is a village in northern Dalmatia. When the Yugoslav Army and the Serbian paramilitary units attacked and took over Skabrnja in 1991 they massacred more than 40 residents, among them women, children and the elderly. It was the greatest massacre of civilians carried out in the war of independence in just one day. A total of 86 civilians and defenders of Skabrnja were killed during the occupation of Skabrnja in the 1990s.

Vecernji list, July 31, Tihomir Dujmovic: Times of Absurdity: *'Another defamation of Oluja'*<sup>36</sup>: *"It is totally unacceptable when Milorad Pupovac*<sup>37</sup> *compares the situation in Zadar hinterland to Kosovo. To make this remark during the time when the international community is discussing the status of Kosovo and contemplating about all the compensations it should offer to Serbs, is a true political poker from Pupovac's side. The man who is a professional politician should always choose his words carefully and he should not qualify war atrocities that had happened in Skabrnja as a mere tragedy. Because this was not some kind of a traffic accident, it was an unpunished Serb fascism's crime."*

The author then continues to conclude that ethnic incidents and their following comments were happening on purpose at that specific time to cast a shadow on military operation Oluja: *"(...) these and other incidents that have happened should be observed with a notion that they have occurred on the eve of celebration of the Oluja and that they are designed as the latest defamation of the Oluja!"*

The war-scars that Vecernji list mentioned the first day have slowly become almost central aspect of the story, dominating reports and generating a patriotic air around the incident. In fact, the attention of both dailies has twisted, moving from the attack itself to Skabrnja's residents' protest and anger.

Jutarnji list, July 29, page 9: *"As participants and sufferers of what has been happening, we have expected that those who have done evil in our legal state of Croatia will be punished for what they had done. But it has never happened. The disappointment of those who have been tyrannized grew stronger and it was suppressed deeper and deeper in their souls. Although we are not psychologists, we know that all what had been accumulating had to come out at certain point. Provocations are an additional trigger for it. And these very last days we have been experiencing provocations to which our fellow residents answered inappropriately but, bearing in mind what we have said earlier, we can understand their despair and their reaction", Skabrnja's residents' statement said, adding that they could not*

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<sup>36</sup> Croatian Army's operation (Operation 'Storm') conducted in August 1995 which led to a crush of the self-proclaimed Krajina Serb Republic. It ended more than four years of Serb control in an area that accounted for about a quarter of Croatia's territory but it was also accompanied by the exodus of nearly 200,000 Serbs and alleged killings of hundreds of Serb civilians.

<sup>37</sup> Vice-president of the Independent Democratic Serbian Party (Croatian acronym SDSS); parliamentary representative of the Serb minority.



*accept the fact that 'two stones thrown at returnees' can be equalized with 86 innocent people killed Skabrnja's inhabitants."*

Progressively, along with the offenders and the returnees, the residents have become the third major player in the story or even its most important part. They insisted that no Serbs were ever held responsible for the Skabrnja's massacre and that Serbs who have returned to Biljani Donji after the war kept provoking the locals.

*Vecernji list, July 29, page 3: "Skabrnja's resident yesterday threatened with casualties if their fellow inhabitants were not to be released from custody. 'Svetozar Skoric celebrated when Skabrnja fell [into Serb's rebels's hand in 1991] and now he acts as he didn't have any idea what had been happening. Sonja Kranjc whose brother was [Ratko] Mladic's<sup>38</sup> driver is a major provocateur. [President] Mesic has never visited Skabrnja and he flew immediately to Biljani because of the two thrown stones. There could be no forgiveness without a sincere repents', Zlatko Bilaver said."*

The same accusations were published in Jutarnji list, July 28, article headlined "*Skabrnja residents: We are constantly dealing with provocations coming from Biljani*".

While it is perfectly normal for the press to look at the all aspects of the story, taking into account as many viewpoints as it is necessary, insisting on war recollections in this case resulted in the fact that Serb returnees have gradually been turned from victims into villains. The reporting failed in balancing strong sentiments from Skabrnja residents and their accusations with the voices of those who were being maligned. With an exception of a solitary statement from the attacked Skoric that appeared on the second day of incident's coverage in Vecernji list, the papers did not try to present returnees' side of the story or provide any in-depth reports.

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<sup>38</sup>A career officer in the Yugoslav People's Army (Croatian acronym JNA) who in 1991 led the operation against Croatian forces at Knin. He was appointed a commander of the Main Staff of the Serb army during the Bosnian war from 1992 to 1995. Mladic is one of the world's most wanted fugitives, indicted by the UN war crimes tribunal in The Hague (ICTY) on charges of genocide and other crimes against humanity, including the massacre of at least 7,500 Muslim men and boys from the town of Srebrenica in 1995. Along with Radovan Karadzic, he came to symbolize the Serb campaign of ethnic cleansing of Croats and Muslims.

Vecernji list, July 27, page 3: *“I don’t know why these people attacked me because I have more friends in Skabrnja than in this village. No one from my family was in chetniks and I can’t understand why they are doing this, Skoric said.”*

Voices of reason were presented in commentaries that criticized or countered the content and the message of articles. For instance in Jutarnji list, July 29 (in a special weekend supplement called Magazin) when author, Davor Butkovic, cautioned that attack in Biljani Donji should be perceived not only as the act of drunk racists but also as the statement of *“hatred that part of Croats still harbour against all Serbs.”*

Jutarnji list, July 29, page 27: *“Evidence is provided in comments posted on online edition of Jutarnji list. Reports from Biljani Donji have been the most commented articles on our web for two days. By administrative error on our part, these comments were full of offensive, extreme chauvinistic and anti-Serb messages, and we apologize for that mistake. Although it is obvious that anonymous web comments should not be interpreted as a particularly convincing indicator of public mood, yet because they are so numerous, they should not be completely ignored.”*

The author’s remarks obviously were not welcomed in part of Jutarnji list’s online community since his commentary was followed by personal insults on his account. A person with a user name Kocar called Butkovic *“a neo-fascist provocateur”* (posted July 29, at 19:28) and Vulgaris concluded *“we don’t have to put up with Butkovic’s brain-washing (who knows if he is sober, anyway, after tasting all kinds of wine-hogwash and opiate).”*

Both users continued to target Serbs’ community with insults and hate speech: *“As far as I’m concerned, Croatia’s biggest success in 1990s was that it managed to get rid of the Serbs.”* (Kocar, posted on August 4, 12:38)

The (limited) MAS systems available were, however, engaged: other comments showed that not all readers were ready to tolerate abusive language. A user named Matitjahu, commenting on chauvinistic messages on Jutarnji online:

*“(…) this is by no means the first such case. Has Jutarnji’s web site become a message board for anti-Semites, haters and unscrupulous revisionists? According to general terms and conditions for using Jutarnji.hr site, and users’ responsibilities section (…) it is forbidden to publish, forward and exchange content that is not in line with Croatian and*

*international legislation; that is insulting, vulgar, threatening, racist or chauvinistic or harmful in any other way.” (Matitjahu, posted on July 30, 8:58)*

Matitjahu continues then by asking if hate messages reflect Jutarnji list’s editorial view since they have been allowed and tolerated for months: *“If I decide to sue anyone, it will be Jutarnji list online because of the disturbing, racist, vulgar, threatening, insulting, and in many ways harmful content of its site.” (Matitjahu, posted on July 30, 8:58)*

Among those who have criticized media coverage of the Biljani Donji incident was Jutarnji list’s columnist, Ivan Zvonimir Cicak, saying it has caused *“a storm, lots of misunderstandings and even more media lies. (...) The impression one gets based on certain media’s coverage is that four innocent Croats were punished because of arrogant and provocative behaviour of Serb returnees.” (Jutarnji list, August 4, a special weekend supplement of the daily called Magazin, page 35)*

Cicak continues by challenging Skabrnja’s residents’ claims that no Serbs have been properly punished for the atrocities committed in that village in the 90s, citing the names of the 18 persons tried for the Skabrnja scime. He also reminds that 59 persons were found guilty for war crimes committed in Zadar area, 66 in Sibenik, 67 in Split and 56 in Gospic. In addition, Cicak draws attention to incidents involving enraged Croats and the Serb national flag and warns that it is unacceptable to connect everything that is Serbian with chetniks.<sup>39</sup>

Jutarnji list, August 4, a special weekend supplement of the daily called Magazin, page 35: *“It is extremely interesting to follow passionate and hostile attempts to criminalise the flying of the traditional Serbian flag (...). Every placing of the flag, such was the case in Benkovac recently, is addressed with the claim it is a chetnik’s flag.”*

Unlike Jutarnji list which used commentaries, Vecernji list tried to counterbalance one-sided coverage with an interview done with Serbs’ parliamentary representative. But it was only on the tenth day of the incident’s coverage.

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<sup>39</sup> The incident happened in Donji Karin near the town of Benkovac: residents reported they had seen the disputed flag, which symbolized Serb rebellion during the 90s and the chetnik movement, put out flying on an orthodox church. Serb representatives claimed it was a religious flag flying because of a church holiday.

Vecernji list, August 4, page 8-9, interview with Milorad Pupovac who said: *“People have to be told that punishment comes from the state and not from the individuals. People have to be made to understand that an attack on someone’s home is an attack on someone’s life. Nevertheless, I believe that what has happened in Biljani Donji is a culmination. I am prepared to do everything I can to boost a reconciliation process in that [Zadar] area.*

*Q: Skabrnja inhabitants say they haven’t heard words of regret for war crimes and that [Serb] returnees provoke them continuously. It seems as if they think they have a right to revenge.*

*A: True, but they don’t have that right. They are not aware of the fact that state mechanisms are dealing with Skabrnja crimes. They should be told that Slobodan Milosevic<sup>40</sup>, Milan Martić<sup>41</sup>, Ratko Mladic were accused of war crimes committed in Skabrnja. They should be told that around 20 local Serbs have been sentenced to 20 years each for what had happened in Skabrnja. The 400-year prison sentence was pronounced for Skabrnja crimes.”*

Overall, common problems in the Jutarnji list and Vecernji list’s coverage of the Biljani Donji incident could be summed up to as a lack of balance when it comes to dealing with Skabrnja residents’ grievances. The bitter and traumatic experience of the 1990s still makes war-related stories a delicate topic; it often influences journalists’ approach and their focus. Thus, in this case, the papers focused overwhelmingly on the accusations about war-crimes that allegedly have never been punished, on alleged Serb returnees’ irritations whereas alternative views were marginalized. There was nearly a total absence of any reporting about Serb returnees’ difficulties for instance and in general a deficiency of different news angles that would have introduced a more comprehensive picture to readers. That feature was far more noticeable and present in Vecernji list’s coverage of another incident considered in this study: Donji Lapac, where the Serb minority was portrayed as an “internal enemy”.

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<sup>40</sup> Former Yugoslav President, indicted by the Hague-based UN war crimes tribunal on charges of atrocities carried out in Kosovo in 1999, crimes against humanity committed in Croatia between 1991 and 1992, and - most serious - genocide in Bosnia between 1992 and 1995. He was arrested in 2001 and put on trial a year later. Milosevic died of a heart attack in his cell in the detention centre at The Hague in March 2006.

<sup>41</sup> Milan Martić held a number of high-level political positions in the self-declared breakaway Krajina Serb Republic, covering about one-third of Croatian territory, after Croatia declared independence from Yugoslavia in 1991. He is on trial at the UN Tribunal in The Hague, charged with murder of hundreds of non-Serbs, as well as the expulsion of many thousands of others in a bid to create areas that would be dominated by ethnic Serbs. He is also accused of having ordered indiscriminate missile attacks on the centre of the Croatian capital, Zagreb, in 1995.

## Donji Lapac

In Vecernji list the story took up the front page for five days. From the beginning, the ethnicity of the offenders was highlighted in both papers through headlines and subheads, though Jutarnji list insisted less on it than Vecernji list.

Vecernji list, 18 April, front page: *“Bloody intervention – Policemen beaten by Serbs in Donji Lapac”*

Jutarnji list, 18 April, page 2: *“Young Serbs beat up three policemen”*

Vecernji list presented a clash as a security threat to all Croats in Donji Lapac. Using the headings that suggested the police had no control of situation in the community the paper added to a crisis, fuelling the tensions and feelings of anxiety.

Vecernji list, 19 April, front page: *“Attack on policemen suspected premeditated; Riots in Donji Lapac: Zagreb sending reinforcement – Lika<sup>42</sup> police seeking help”*.

It was not just that the headline was inappropriately sensationalist and leapt to conclusion, it was also completely inaccurate, misinterpreting and contradicting the unambiguous Interior Ministry’ spokesman’s statement, quoted later in the article.

Vecernji list, 19 April, page 3: *“Ministry of Interior confirmed that additional forces will be sent to Donji Lapac since the General Police Directorate wants to reintroduce traffic police division that was abolished during the earlier reform process. ‘That means the number of police officers in the field will be increased, their work and interventions more efficient’, Zlatko Mehun, Ministry of Interior’s spokesman confirmed stressing that the Ministry’s decision was not linked to the current [Donji Lapac] incident that was, according to him, being politicized.”*

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<sup>42</sup> Lika is a region in the continental Croatia. Administratively part of Lika-Senj county. Donji Lapac is one of its municipalities.

The practice of misleading headlines that do not match their articles continued throughout the coverage of the story.

Vecernji list, 20 April, page 7: *“Attack on police – Tensions still high in Donji Lapac: Beats the police up wearing Zvezda kit<sup>43</sup>”*

In this case, yet again it contradicted the statement quoted later in the article in which one of the Serb offenders explained how he ended up wearing Zvezda kit in detention.

Vecernji list, 20 April, page 7: *“Yesterday, in front of Vecernji lists’ reporters, one of the Delije, Dragi Kosanovic, changed into his Crvena Zvezda kit that he wore in Gospić’s police station. He claimed he was forced to put it on. ‘The policemen deliberately provoked the incident. We didn’t give them a beating’, Dragi Kosanovic (...) maintained.”*

The article contained no evidence or gave anyone else’s account that would counter the offender’s claims about the Zvezda kit, yet the headline attached to it had no question mark to signal reservation or uncertainty. Choosing misleading and sensationalist titles means leaving many readers who just skim headlines with an inaccurate impression of the issue.

Furthermore, in this context it meant implying that not only did the offender disregard the authorities when he had attacked the policemen but also that his anti-social behaviour was coupled with Serb-nationalism symbolized by the Zvezda kit. That insinuation nourished a negative portrayal and a myth of ethnic Serbs as disloyal citizens who allegedly would never accept independent Croatian state.

In Jutarnji list, the tone of the report was less sensationalistic.

Jutarnji list, 18 April, page 2: *“It is the most violent clash to date between the police and civilians with inter-ethnic factor attached to it that took place in the eastern Lika’s municipality with a Serbian majority. The bloodshed had been avoided only because the policemen managed to keep cool heads and not use their weapons.”*

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<sup>43</sup> Crvena Zvezda (Red Star) is a football club from Belgrade, Serbia. In former Yugoslavia, the team was a bitter rival of Zagreb’s Dinamo. Their matches were often scenes of violent clashes between fans: ‘Delije’ of Zvezda and ‘Bad Blue Boys’ of Dinamo.

Highlighted next to the main story, the paper quoted an elderly Serb community resident who wondered how *“the Croats and Serbs who waged war against each other [in the 90s] could now drink coffee together whereas young generation who doesn’t have a clue what happened ends imprisoned after too much alcohol and Ceca and Thompson<sup>44</sup> on Easter night.”*

The same somewhat reconciliatory tone recurred in a highlighted pull-out quote that read *“Djukic<sup>45</sup>: Coexistence still possible”*.

Jutarnji list, 18 April, page 2: *“Milan Djukic, the president of the Donji Lapac municipality council, said that Easter ethnic fight between Serbs and Croats would not harm future coexistence of two groups.”*

In Vecernji list the café incident was presented as in line with the existing tense ethnic relations in the municipality, as something that could have been expected.

Vecernji list, 19 April, page 3: *“The attack on police has deepened the tensions between locals. (...) Both Croats and Serbs assert that inter-ethnic relations could only deteriorate given the lack of trust between them.”*

Vecernji list, 20 April, page 7: *“(…) Father Nediljko Knezovic of Gospic diocese says that one of the reasons (...) for inter-ethnic tensions is the attitude of international humanitarian organizations towards Croats. ‘Serbs receive help from Lutherans and Adra<sup>46</sup> whereas Croats get nothing. That is racism and a division and conflict time-bomb!’ father Nediljko Knezovic tells us.”*

During the coverage of the incident Vecernji list had continuously insisted on portraying a rift between Serbs and Croats and feeding the fear campaign. Thus it published uncorroborated speculations about conspiracy behind the incident; alleged planned

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<sup>44</sup> Serbian and Croatian folk singers often connected to strong nationalistic behaviour. Thompson is declared Croatian hard-line right-wing supporter whose fans display strong national sentiments.

<sup>45</sup> The president of the Serbian People's Party (Croatian acronym SNS).

<sup>46</sup> The Adventist Development and Relief Agency – ADRA – is a non-governmental relief organization established by the Seventh-Day Adventist Church.

provocations aimed specifically against the Donji Lapac police; predictions about new clashes during the coming World Cup.

Vecernji list, 19 April, page 3: *“Speaking under the condition of anonymity some of them [Donji Lapac police officers] told us they had reason to believe the scene at the café was engineered so that the policemen could be ambushed and beaten. Local officials in Donji Lapac denied the claims.”*

Vecernji list, 20 April, page 7: *“Inter-ethnic tensions in Donji Lapac (...) have not calmed down. Scarce Croats who number 300 compared to around 3,000 Serbs say they are not safe after the Serbs battered the policemen.”*

Vecernji list, 20 April, page 7: *“They [four Serb offenders] have stressed that new incidents are a possibility that should be expected during the World Championship because all Serbs from Donji Lapac will support Serbia’s team [not Croatia’s].”*

In Jutarnji list the intensity of the coverage of the Donji Lapac incident was only a fraction of that in Vecernji list. Whereas Vecernji reported extensively on the story over a week, Jutarnji in the same period ran only two articles. The fact can be considered an indicator of the relevance attributed to ethnicity by the respective newspapers. Vecernji list kept dwelling on the Serb origin of the offenders, using those wrongdoers as a metaphor for allegedly disloyal Serb minority. Jutarnji on the other hand brought out the fact that permanent hostility between Serbs and Croats might not have roots in war-related hatred but in dire economic situation. The paper ran a story pointing at the unemployment and the lack of perspective as the main reasons for existing inter-ethnic problems in Donji Lapac

Jutarnji list, 19 April, page 40: *“(..) ‘There are several reasons for what is happening in Lapac. People are frustrated because of unemployment, especially the young ones who then raise their hands to policemen when they get a ticket for traffic violation. The good thing is that outside their duty, policemen are working a lot on promoting reconciliation. They are more often getting married to our girls. But that’s what makes our boys jealous’, Zeljko Obradovic, a local SDSS<sup>47</sup> politician and a caterer concluded. (...) ‘They [Serbs and Croats]*

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<sup>47</sup> Independent Democratic Serbian Party (Croatian acronym SDSS); has three representatives in the Croatian Parliament (*Hrvatski Sabor*)



*don't like each other not because of their religion but because they are unemployed and have no faith in the future', says Nada Tisma, the owner of Trocadero bar in front of which three policemen were beaten up by several young Serbs, on Easter night."*

The author refers to Donji Lapac as "*the waste land, the outlying region*" in which humiliating police officers is becoming "*a fairly frequent phenomenon.*"

Jutarnji list, 19 April, page 40: "(...) *'I know that policemen were beaten up three months ago by the Croats, and yesterday Serbs tore apart their uniforms. (...) It is not easy for them [policemen] because if they get attacked they have to wait for the reinforcement to arrive from 100 kilometres distant city of Gospic. When help finally comes, our boys are already sobered up', says a young depressed and lethargic Serb returnee whilst drinking his pint in a pub in the center of Donji Lapac and observing police cars that 70 Lapac officers use for patrolling the streets.*"

In Vecernji list, the concentration on ethnic tensions that allegedly were simmering and growing peaked in the report headlined "*Fear of Serbs – Croats want to evacuate Donji Lapac and move to Gracac*<sup>48</sup>; *All Croats will mass departure D. Lapac*". The story, printed five days following the incident, speculated about supposed Croats' exodus to Gracac because of security reasons, based on hearsay, without a single piece of evidence, apart from anecdotal, to support it.

Vecernji list, 22 April, page 8: "(...) *'After the attack on the policemen Croats are in fear for what will happen to them. There used to be 900 Croats living in Donji Lapac but nowadays that number has dropped to only 300. And there are 3,000 Serbs. (...) The acquaintance of mine told me he was ready to leave the house in Donji Lapac that APN*<sup>49</sup> *gave him and to pay a 30,000 kuna fine if that's what it takes to move to Gracac because around 3,000 Croats live there. Although the [Gracac] council is in the hands of the SDSS at least the number of Croats and Serbs is the same. Allegedly, around 300 Croats are considering leaving Donji Lapac and moving to Gracac. We shall inform the government about the developments", Toni Marcic, HDZ's*<sup>50</sup> *Gracac's councillor told us.*"

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<sup>48</sup> Gracac is a small town in the southern part of Lika region, administratively part of the Zadar county.

<sup>49</sup> Croatian state-run Agency for Legal Transactions and Mediation in Real Estate

<sup>50</sup> The Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) is a ruling party in the country.

Unfounded speculations about threatened aggression by the Serbs continued with a claim that even in Gracac the situation is deteriorating for Croats who purportedly live in an anxiety, “worried about their jobs and in fear of all ethnic Croat executives getting sacked.” The overemphasis added fuel to the fire by creating the impression that Croats were intentionally discriminated against.

Vecernji list, 22 April, page 8: “Yesterday leader of the SDSS Gracac branch Dragan Rodic was appointed a new director of Gracac municipal services, following his predecessor Croat Zvonimir Dijak’s dismissal. Dijak is convinced he was replaced because he’s a Croat.”

By suggesting that Croats were being victimized by Serbs the report gave an added incentive and justification for revenge to the mistreated group.

This was then echoed and amplified in a commentary by Tihomir Dujmovic, ‘Times of Absurdity’ where the author subjected the readers to repeated diatribes against Serb minority. His discourse was offensive and his remarks encouraged hostility toward Serbs.

Vecernji list, 24 April, Tihomir Dujmovic - Times of Absurdity: ‘*Bed Coalescence*’: “Lapac-alike incidents are intended to provoke reaction from Croatian side, preferably incident-ridden, as a pretext in an allegedly impossible situation in which Serbs can finally ask for what has been truly at their hearts: a political autonomy within Croatia. Just as Europe hasn’t given up with putting pressure on Croatia following Gotovina’s<sup>51</sup> arrest, ethnic Serbs within Croatia – regardless of the restitution of their property and all their rights - will not have stopped until they fulfill the Z4 plan<sup>52</sup>. It is happening because things went wrong since the day one: a peace without an affirmation of justice, a crime without a punishment. These have all contributed to humiliation in Lapac”.

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<sup>51</sup> Croatian general accused by the UN Hague-based tribunal over the death of about 150 Serb civilians during a Croatian offensive the Storm (*Oluja*) in 1995. He went into hiding in 2001 and became one of the ICTY’s most wanted fugitives. The Croatian government’s failure to catch him had hampered the country’s entry talks with the European Union. He was finally arrested in December 2005 and his trial is due to begin in May 2007. Many Croats still see Gotovina as a national hero and he enjoys wide public support.

<sup>52</sup>One among many international community’s unsuccessful diplomatic initiatives that tried to deal with the disintegration of former Yugoslavia and the wars that followed it. The ‘Z4 plan’ envisaged more autonomy for the Croatian Serbs, offering breakaway Krajina region its own president, parliament and police in exchange for Serbian recognition of independent Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The proposal was rejected by Serbs who insisted on secession from Croatia.

The commentary is full of inflammatory speech and could be interpreted as the material that uses reminiscences of war time persecutions, recollections of previous atrocities and powerful memories in order to suggest pre-emptive self-defensive measures and galvanize ethnic Croats to retaliate. To this writer, the commentary presents what could be identified as one of the indicators of conflict in the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) Special Report on Use and Abuse of Media in Vulnerable Societies.<sup>53</sup>

Dujmovic continues: *“The picture coming from Lapac is full of grave symbols, of grotesque and humiliation; it is a price of a politics that insisted on burying its head in the sand. Because these [Donji Lapac] policemen would not run away unchivalrously has not the war of independence been criminalized and turned into a middle name for evildoing; have not the Croatian generals<sup>54</sup> been accused of shelling not justified by military necessity; if we weren’t living in a world in which Croats have to answer for crimes committed, for instance, in Gospic or Pakracka Poljana, whereas almost no one from the Serb side had served time for the preceding war crimes in the very same Gospic and Pakrac. The policemen would not have fled if we were not living in a reality in which ethnic Serbs who have returned to Croatia wholesale since the aggression have not been asked: ‘What did you do in the war, father?’ (...) Since however we live in Croatia which has demonstrated that crimes and acts of aggression against it might not necessarily finish prosecuted, we have reached this moment of historical shame in Lapac, after which – as we hear – Croats might collectively leave the place.”*

The failings in terms of good journalistic practice can be seen in the fact that the author’s story is incorrect on several fronts: Serbs have not returned to Croatia on a massive scale<sup>55</sup> and the argument that war crimes committed by Serb paramilitary forces have largely

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<sup>53</sup> United States Institute of Peace, Special Report No. 110, October 2003: Use and Abuse of Media in Vulnerable Societies. The paper analyzes “clues to conflict” that can be used for identification of the societies particularly vulnerable to media abuse. These clues are divided into two categories: “structural indicators” (include media variety and plurality and the legal environment) and “content indicators” (include material designed to create fear or a sense of inevitability and resignation).

<sup>54</sup> Along with general Ante Gotovina, two other Croatian generals – Ivan Cermak and Mladen Markac - are indicted by the The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague over war and crimes against humanity.

<sup>55</sup> Amnesty International, Report 2006 Croatia: “At least 300,000 Croatian Serbs were displaced by the 1991-95 conflict, of whom approximately 120,000 were officially registered as having returned home.” See also Human Rights Watch, World Report 2007 Croatia: <http://hrw.org/englishwr2k7/docs/2007/01/11/croati14774.htm>

not been prosecuted is also dubious.<sup>56</sup> The essence of his argument is insistence on “us-and-them” dichotomy. His grave accusations and allegations of threatened aggression by the Serbs have left many gates open for inciting violent resentment among the Vecernji list readers.

*“We remain silent about the injustice that no one had and, as it seems, never will, answer for numerous rapes, arsons, and harassments of Croats. Namely, we are sitting on a time bomb: on the one hand all these frustrations on the Croatian side, on the other Serbian latent hatred against the Croatian state and parallel mutual unspeakable distrust.”*

The coverage of the Donji Lapac incident in Vecernji list was far from professional in terms of fairness and impartiality. The articles bristled with misleading information about the exodus of Croats and the alleged discrimination against them, thus creating a pervasive sense of fear and insecurity. The information was neither weighed nor thoroughly tested, resulting in the offensive, biased output which constructed a justification for the idea that Croats must act first before Serbs have the opportunity to do something aggressive.

Some of VL’s readers pointed to the fact that playing up the ethnicity smeared the coverage of the incident. Their emails were printed in the Forum section (page 16) in forms of short comments. The feedback showed that not all readers are happy to accept sensationalistic unbalanced media output and that they are willing to react, to point at downsides of such a coverage.

Vecernji list, 20 April, Forum section, ‘Have your say’ – Attack on police, page 16: *“Every attack is the same: The war is behind us. Courts should be left to do theirs and we the little people in Our Beautiful Homeland<sup>57</sup> following our state officials’ example should understand that each attack on police is the same, no matter if the perpetrator is a Croat, Bosniak or a Serb; because we are all citizens of Our Beautiful Homeland and we all condemn assaults on*

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<sup>56</sup> Human Rights Watch, World Report 2007, Croatia: “In a welcome development, the courts took up several important cases during 2006 involving war crimes against Serbs. But Serbs still form the vast majority of those prosecuted and convicted on war crimes charges in Croatian courts, a disproportion so large that it suggests that bias was a factor. Monitoring of war crimes cases by the OSCE mission demonstrates an inconsistent approach toward Croat and Serb defendants in relation to indictment, prosecution, conviction, and sentencing.”

<sup>57</sup> “Our Beautiful Homeland” is the name of the Croatian anthem (“Lijepa naša domovino”); the term is often used as a synonym for Croatia.

*the police which protect both us and the safety of our children.” (Posted by Ivan Koren, Ivan.Koren@public.srce.hr)*

*“I condemn both the assault and newspapers: It is terrible and uncivilized as are the reports titled ‘Serb beats Croat’ and alike. Therefore, I would advise you not to manipulate us, your readers any longer. Beat a policeman? Horrible and highly reprehensible!” (Posted by Dragan Biblija, dragan.biblija@porezna-uprava.hr)*

## **SECTION IV**

### **The Question of Ethics**

The cases analyzed revealed both poor journalistic ethics and how the propensity to emphasise ethnic divisions sells newspapers.<sup>58</sup> Fairness, impartiality and balance proved hard to sustain, especially in *Vecernji list*, in which a large part of the coverage of the Donji Lapac incident was highly controversial. The rather long list of journalistic ‘no-goods’ which can be discerned includes misleading, out-of-context and inaccurate headlines that led to distorted opinions; uncorroborated information and unsubstantiated stories rife with rumours, which had a damaging impact on the reputation of the Serb minority; double standards - holding Croats to one set of criteria while using a different yardstick for the Serbs. Thus Serb offenders in Donji Lapac were referred to as merely drunken hooligans disloyal to Croatia, whereas the Croats who were actually responsible for the crime in Biljani Donji were portrayed in greater depth as having been tragically led astray, victims of the war and PTSD.

*Vecernji list’s* follow-up of the Donji Lapac incident was dominated by a campaign of fear, the reports focussing on the history of local ethnic animosity and overemphasizing grievances. Furthermore, one of the paper’s leading commentators abused his position as columnist to grant himself *carte blanche* to make inflammatory remarks. He portrayed Serbs as a threat to Croatia’s hard-fought independence and suggested that renewed tensions would

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<sup>58</sup> That remark relates primarily to coverage of the Donji Lapac incident in *Vecernji list*.

be inevitable, making the point that ‘they rebelled before, they will do it again’. This message provides a rationale for reprisals, because fear drives hostility. It also insinuates the inescapability of conflict, and once people start to take that idea at face value they are more inclined to resort to violence. Though the commentator’s intentions may have not necessarily been malicious, in terms of wilfully manipulating his readers to steer society towards conflict, that does not mitigate the pernicious effect of his remarks. His viewpoint is badly biased, skewed by stereotypes and unfair characterization of Serbs as a stigmatized group. This misconception forms the lens through which he views all issues.

The gap between sensationalist journalism that does sell papers and the apparently clear provisions in law and media regulation is plain to see. Such coverage is problematic in relation to the Constitutional stipulation that prohibits “any form of intolerance”.<sup>59</sup> It challenges several provisions of the Croatian Journalists’ Association’s (HND) Code of Ethics: it disregards the “general principles of the profession”;<sup>60</sup> it runs counter to the ethics of public expression and the culture of dialogue,<sup>61</sup> as well as the journalist’s duty to express “truthful, balanced and verified information”.<sup>62</sup> It ignores the rules enshrined in the ICCPR which prohibit any advocacy of national hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination and hostility.<sup>63</sup> It also contravenes the principles enclosed in the documents of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) that condemn calumny and unfounded accusations as grave professional offences and require the media not to facilitate discrimination based on national origins.<sup>64</sup> The mechanisms of media accountability to implement those provisions either failed or were not available, or the readership did not engage with them. According to the material available during this research, despite the numerous violations of ethics, there were no formal complaints filed, so the Croatian

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<sup>59</sup> The Constitution specifically stipulates that “any call for or incitement to war, or resort to violence, national, racial or religious hatred, or any form of intolerance shall be prohibited and punishable by law.”

<sup>60</sup> Croatian Journalists’ Association’s (HND) Code of Ethics, Article 1

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. Article 7: “In reporting and particularly in commentaries and polemical texts, a journalist is obliged to respect the ethics of public expression and the culture of dialogue, and to respect the dignity and integrity of the person he polemizes with.”

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., Article 4

<sup>63</sup> ICCPR Article 20(2): “Any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law.”

<sup>64</sup> IFJ Declaration of Principles on the Conduct of Journalists, Article 7: “A journalist shall be alert to the danger of discrimination being furthered by the media, and shall do his utmost to avoid facilitating such discrimination based on, among other things, race, sex, sexual orientation, language, religion, political or other opinions, and national and social origins.”

Article 8: “The journalist shall regard as grave professional misconduct the following: plagiarism; malicious misinterpretation; calumny; libel; slander; unfounded accusations; acceptance of a bribe in any form in consideration of either publication or suppression.”

Journalists' Association's Council of Honour did not discuss the coverage. Nor were there any condemnations from media watchdog organizations.

In the context of accountability systems, however, this type of reporting did provoke some displeased reactions from citizens who duly offered their feedback in the form of letters to the editor and postings on the website message boards. The readers thus expressed their discontent with *Jutarnji list's* tolerance of offensive anti-Serb messages in the comments posted on its online edition after the Biljani Donji episode, and they also objected to *Vecernji list's* abuse of ethnicity in the coverage of the Donji Lapac incident. That incident preceded *Vecernji list's* establishment of its Readers' Editor and the introduction of its own Code of Ethics; there is, then, no means of knowing whether such controversial reporting would have resulted in condemnations had these systems been functioning at the time when the coverage occurred.

However, certain subsequent events suggest that the influence of the Readers' Editor has yet to assert itself in achieving concrete results in terms of greater fairness in the coverage of Serb-related topics. For example, less than a week following the Readers' Editor's criticism of biased reports that could have a damaging effect on Serb minority,<sup>65</sup> *Vecernji list* ran a controversial lead story under the screaming headline: "*Chetnik*<sup>66</sup> *sniper shoots in Zagreb*".<sup>67</sup> It concerned a member of Serbia's national team who was then competing at the World Shooting Championship. Claims about the alleged chetnik turned out to be unconfirmed and were eventually denied by the police. In response to the newspaper's sensationalist approach the OSCE Mission to Croatia condemned the coverage as "inappropriate, disturbing and contrary to any form of journalistic professionalism" in a "state that advocates the rule of law and reconciliation."<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Discussed in Section II, page 7; *Vecernji list*, 26 July 2006, Readers' Editor column: "Rashness and haste could lead to inappropriate terminology", by Ružica Cigler

<sup>66</sup> Chetniks were Serb nationalist guerrilla forces during the Second World War; the term also stands for ultra-nationalist Serb paramilitary forces in the 1990s war in the former Yugoslavia. It is an ethnic slur from a Croatian perspective.

<sup>67</sup> *Vecernji list*, 31 July 2006.

<sup>68</sup> OSCE Mission to Croatia, Public Statement issued on 1<sup>st</sup> August 2006: "In the article published on page 4 a person indicated with his full identity is labelled as a Chetnik and responsible for war crimes only on the basis of accusations from one source. This despite the contrary declaration of the spokesman of the Ministry of the Interior (...) However, one cannot help but feel that the manner in which the text was placed the day before and its messages had the aim to cause disturbance and confusion for the readers. We deem inappropriate such tones and allegations for a media working in a State which advocates for the rule of law and reconciliation."

It would appear that neither professionals nor the public have yet become accustomed to the idea of using systems of accountability as tools for quality control; this explains in part why these mechanisms still work in an unsatisfactory manner. If, however, their existence were better publicised so as to gain in visibility and prominence, their responses would also enjoy greater publicity and consequently, in the longer term, they would be able to push the press in the direction of greater self-discipline and encourage the profession to take more responsibility for the quality of its output. Indeed, when the NGO, Article 19<sup>69</sup>, explored the lessons on how experiences of self-regulatory mechanisms in established democracies can be translated into the reality of South-East Europe, one of their recommendations was to advertise their existence on a regular basis in order to reach out to the public.<sup>70</sup> Of course, as Article 19 argued, in a society with a sound concept of public interest, media accountability instruments have a higher chance of functioning properly, but the meaning of public interest has yet to be clarified in the region.

## **SECTION V**

### **Conclusion**

This snapshot analysis based on two case studies has revealed the extent of unprofessional behaviour and some serious weaknesses of existing accountability mechanisms in the coverage of events that touch upon present and past ethnic tensions. The fact that, unlike the situation that obtained in the 1990s, nowadays abuse in the media tends to be confined to sporadic, individual cases and subtle forms of incorrect formulation rather than direct inflammatory discourse should none the less be tolerated or accepted as “benign”; nor should the old, persistent stereotypes or patterns of “us-and-them thinking” upon which certain media outlets still feed, if only for narrow commercial interests and particularly in reporting on ethnically motivated incidents involving the Serb minority. Although a distortion of journalistic values is definitely no longer politically orchestrated from above, we see that –

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<sup>69</sup> ARTICLE 19 is a human rights organisation that monitors threats to free expression around the globe and produces legal analysis and critiques of national media laws.

<sup>70</sup> ARTICLE 19 and the International Federation of Journalists, “Freedom and Accountability - Conference on Media Self-regulation in South-East Europe”, Sarajevo 28-29 June 2005



rooted in poor public responsibility, perhaps lack of appropriate training coupled with an obsession with the commercial objectives of circulation – in the long run this may lead to a deepening mistrust between two ethnic groups, especially in war-affected regions.

In the pursuit of higher sales, newspapers easily slip into the kind of sensationalism that can undoubtedly contribute to breeding a climate of fear and tension. While this practice may not seriously affect mature democracies, in which it may be confined to a sector of the media, it is apt to cause considerable damage in a war-traumatized society. If indeed, as this paper has pointed out using the examples of media coverage of events linked to ethnic Serbs, newspapers with a deep readership penetration as *Vecernji list* are relaxed about conveying biased, ambiguous messages, then this type of reporting raises an issue of concern in relation to inflicting serious negative effects on the ongoing reconciliation process in the country.

The examples addressed in this paper indicate that incidents do occur despite the existence of a regulatory framework that follows international standards, strengthened with specific provisions aimed at preventing proclamations of hostility in the media as well as the presence of some mechanisms of media accountability. In other words, although the legal and regulatory environment is in place aided by mechanisms to tackle the problem, these do not appear to be fully functional in practice. Some accountability instruments are a very recent development. The mechanisms may not be well publicised for the public to be aware of what purposes they serve, and therefore take proper advantage of the possibility to use them. Being new developments in the media, they lack visibility and therefore cannot be used to challenge unprofessional or unethical reporting.

On the basis of the analysis of a controversial coverage of incidents in which the ethnicity of the participants became the most important element in the reporting (ethnic Serbs), this study offers some policy recommendations to improve the quality of reporting. The suggestions focus on ways to enhance the accountability to the readership of the media in Croatia. Action should be taken in the following areas:

- 1) The existence of a variety of mechanisms of accountability may enhance effectiveness and the implementation of rules of journalistic ethics. Thus, along with readers' letters pages,

codes of ethics, and ombudspersons (either in-house or “shared” by a number of newspapers), other instruments seem useful<sup>71</sup>:

a) Use of accuracy and fairness questionnaires that can be published for all readers to fill out, or otherwise mailed periodically to people who have been mentioned in the newspapers asking them if they have noticed any factual mistakes or signs of bias. This may increase the costs of running a media outlet but an improved relationship with the readers may increase circulation

b) Programmes of ethical coaching which would provide guidance for the newly hired journalists in newsrooms; dialogues with users in form of meetings between professionals and citizens that can take place in press clubs or, more convenient and common nowadays, in form of discussion boards on media websites. An abundance of overlapping mechanisms could serve as a buffer against a vacuum in the market which otherwise – if left unchecked – could become a fertile ground for low quality journalism.

2) Campaigns within the readership. There is no tradition of holding the media to account within Croatian society, but if well informed about the availability of mechanisms, the public may become increasingly ready to react. The readers’ interventions cited in this study<sup>72</sup> support the view that there is a demand for better journalism. At least some members of the public were prepared to raise the bar on their expectations of media accountability. Although their voice is still feeble, if properly encouraged it may serve as an additional incentive for media outlets to change direction in their coverage of ethnicity and improve their output. In addition, once the idea and the objectives of self-regulation become known by a wider audience, the community will become more engaged in an open-minded dialogue about how the media carry out their duties of professional and balanced reporting. It will then presumably also become more able to recognise distorted reports from good journalism, providing help in maintaining higher ethical standards. The market will demand it.

3) The creation of a Media Council, the structural principle of which is a tripartite composition, inclusion of media owners, practitioners as well as citizens’ representatives may

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<sup>71</sup> These are all different examples of self-regulation and non-governmental tools used to insure socially responsible media as mentioned in Claude-Jean Bertrand’s “Media ethics & accountability systems”, New Brunswick, N.J. : London: Transaction Publishers, 2000

<sup>72</sup> See pages 12, 13, 21.

also be helpful. At the time of writing of this report, Croatia did not have a functioning autonomous, national and self-regulatory media accountability institution such as an independent press council. Media experts and practitioners, representatives of publishers and journalists' associations and unions, however, did adopt a declaration agreeing to set up a Media Council both to counteract irresponsible reporting by establishing a successful avenue for registering and adjudicating complaints by media users and to defend press freedom by promoting independence from commercial pressure.<sup>73</sup> The Council, it is expected, will adopt that code of ethics and then monitor compliance. The development of the media market may make owners more interested in pursuing socially valuable interests in addition to simple commercial success. If necessary, the Media Council will also impose moral sanctions upon the violators in norm-infringement cases - an important role in light of the fact that to date only recourse for breaches of ethics has been the court or the HND Council of Honour. One of the main advantages of sector-wide regulation, as explained by experts, is that the system is more comprehensive and therefore has greater legitimacy. Although this proactive initiative enjoys support of the key media players, other experiences in the region suggest it will take time for a council that applies moral sanctions to become rooted and operate effectively in a society used to function on fines and punishment regulations.

4) Promoting communication between media practitioners at all levels and civil society actors on the subject of ethics as a vehicle for enhancing media quality. Also, the encouraging of media monitoring and analysis performed by non-commercial researchers and think-tanks which would identify issues of concern and provide advice about better practice. These are civil society initiatives that may successfully obtain support from the international donor community and which could help in improving the environment in which the Croatian media operate.

5) Encouraging discussions between media representatives from the Serbian and Croatian side in order to neutralize ethnic biases and to raise awareness of international standards in journalism. Again, these are ideas that Croatian civil society could take up and seek international support for carrying them out.

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<sup>73</sup> The decision to establish the Croatian Media Council was formally adopted by the Croatian Journalists' Association on October 29, 2006; next step should be the approval of the Croatian Association of Newspaper Publishers (HUNI).

6) Lastly, the importance of continuous training and education of journalists, editors and managers should not be disregarded because it allows them to improve their competence in a special field, to excel in the observation of events, notice omissions committed by the media and evaluate their effects in a society and to rethink the responsibilities attached to reporting.

In the context of a country that less than fifteen years ago had been in the middle of a bitter war of independence it is not unreasonable to ask the media to exert a higher level of responsibility towards their community. It is important because ethnic tensions are ubiquitous in war-affected areas where people still dwell on the past and also because incendiary media actors in Croatia in the 1990s were part of a complex maze of political and institutional fractures within a society that led to the severe human rights violations. Although the attitude of the media with regard to promoting an anti-discrimination policy towards the Serbian minority has been slowly changing, editorial policy has yet to demonstrate a sustained commitment to promote tolerance, quality and prejudice-free environment. This is important in terms of images that journalists paint with their words. To quote Claude-Jean Bertrand, “media produce effects (...) by supplying information, by choosing what events, what people are worth noting. (...) Undoubtedly, media set the agenda for society. As the common phrase goes, they cannot dictate what to think, but what to think about.”<sup>74</sup> Thus, if coexistence and a joint future continue to be defined as unimportant areas which accordingly have low news value then a concept of reconciliation will remain vulnerable to distortions. This study is an attempt to highlight that problem as well as to address some of the challenges that the Croatian media face when reporting about events linked to ethnic Serbs and the 1990s war. Considering that the present research was conducted on a small sample, the results are preliminary, hence an additional work towards improving the quality of reporting and fight intolerance is needed. The paper highlighted flaws and failures not merely to criticize the coverage or to chart bad practices but to caution and remind us that a collapse in professional standards poses a serious threat to the difficult and lengthy process of overcoming the traumatic experiences of a terrible war still not too distant in the past.

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<sup>74</sup> Claude-Jean Bertrand, ‘Media ethics & accountability systems’, New Brunswick, N.J. : London: Transaction Publishers, 2000