Recontextualizing Traumatic Pasts:  
Croatian Justification of War Crimes in Bosnia-Herzegovina  

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Introduction

There has been much interest among scholars from a variety of disciplines in the question of how countries recover from episodes of mass violence (Fletcher and Weinstein, 2002, p. 574). Reconciliation occupies a special place in globally circulating human rights literature, and it is especially used in discussions about top-down impositions of peace-agreements (Wilson, 2001, p. 97). The majority of researchers that analyze the after-wars peace-processes in former Yugoslavia agree that the Dayton Peace Agreement was imposed by the International community, while especially promoted and advocated by the USA (For example: Bilandzic, 2006; Galtung, 2002; Kurspahic, 2003; Lampe, 1996; MacDonald, 2002; Samary, 1995; Woodward, 1995). The Agreement has not only laid the foundations for creating a troublesome “non-peace and non-war” situation but has also failed to solve the essential national and religious antagonisms in Bosnia. In particular, scholars argue that one of the main conditions of peace-building and peace-keeping processes is the ability to reconcile, and further, to acknowledge war crimes committed by one’s own military. If the Croatian public has by now acknowledged the war crimes against the Serbs in Croatia, it has also defined them as war crimes committed by individual perpetrators (Kajzer, 2006, p. 4).

However, in the case of the crimes committed by the Croatian Army against Bosniak civilians during the war in 1992-1995, there is still no political formal acknowledgement of Croatia’s responsibility in these massacres that took place in Bosnia. That comes in spite of the clear evidence of the Croatian army’s crimes that was put forward by International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in The Hague, and further acknowledged by Croatian historians themselves (eg. Bilandzic, 2006; Kurspahic, 2003). In July 2006, the opinion polls showed that the Croatian public was split over this issue: 41 percent of Croats believed that the Croatian Army committed war crimes in the Bosnian war, while 59 percent argued that Croatia was not involved in the Bosnian war at all (Kajzer, 2006, p. 4).

Because the Croatian mainstream media have played an important role in spreading nationalistic propaganda (Thompson, 1995; Skopljanac Brunner et al., 2000) and continue to play a role in the reproduction of nationalisms (Erjavec & Volcic, 2006), our intention here is not to present yet another study of media’s negligence of war crimes, but to go further and focus on how news producers of leading media themselves, i.e. Croatian journalists, talk about the war crimes in Bosnia-Herzegovina and in that whether and how they reproduce nationalisms. We have focused on journalists here because it is generally recognized that they are critical components in the construction of national discourses about identity, and history. In the summer and fall of 2006 we conducted in-depth interviews with Croatian journalists in order to find out how they deal with traumatic events of the past, i.e. the war crimes.

The goal of this paper is to show how Croatian journalists borrow and appropriate different global discourses to justify and legitimate Croatian army’s war crimes of Bosniaks civilians. We unpack and analyze how journalists employ, borrow and appropriate different current global discourses to make sense out of Croatian nationalistic discourse and war crimes in Bosnia-Herzegovina. We draw on Fairclough’s theory of recontextualization which is understood here as not only a representation of social events but as the appropriation of discourse. Thus, we try to uncover recontextualization strategies used by the informants to legitimize and justify a specific ideology (in our case, the nationalistic ideology of ‘Greater Croatia’) and specific practice (in our case, war crimes against the Bosniaks).

The political-historical context of the former Yugoslavia

According to its ‘engineers’ the state of Yugoslavia that was created after the World War II promised to go beyond the contradictions of nationalism and ethnic grouping. It was a political engineering project and based on the common memory of the struggle against the Nazi regime in the region. Thus, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) was created by six different republics, and ‘Titoism’ was founded on the assumption that economic and political homogenization would lead to the creation of a workers’ state (Woodward, 1995). During the 1980s, after the death of its president Josip Broz Tito in 1980, the suppressed nationalisms conquered the social spheres. Both major ethnic groups, Serbs and Croats, claimed to have been the victims of a continued persecution of the other, who, they claimed, dominated the SFRY.
The question as to what extent the idea of a former Yugoslav identity was accepted by country’s populace during the period of 1945-1991 remains. One answer can be found in surveys on the expression of Yugoslav and national belonging. In BiH a mixture of three ethnic groups – 43.7 percent Muslim, 31.3 percent Serb, 17.3 percent Croat, 7.7 percent ‘Yugoslav’ and ‘Other’ (Statistics Bulletin, 1991) – was particularly vulnerable to the nationalistic tensions in the region. The pressure mounted on Bosnian Serbs and Croats to follow the ‘sacred nation cause’ as Belgrade called for ‘all Serbs in a single state’ and Zagreb promoted Tudjman’s Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) as the “planetary party of all Croats” (MacDonald, 2002, p. 123). During BiH’s first free, multi-party elections in November 1990 three nationalistic parties won but started to be immediately engaged in endless nationalistic quarrels.

On June 25, 1991 Croatia and Slovenia declared independence. Two days later, the war began in Slovenia when the Yugoslav People’s Army (JNA), which became a Serbian army under Milosevic’s direct command, attempted to forcibly prevent Slovenia’s independence. In Croatia, Serb irregulars instigated violent clashes with Croatian paramilitary forces, followed once more by an intervention of JNA. As the fighting spread from Croatian Eastern Slavonia to Krajina and in April 1992 to BiH, it was clear that Europe was witnessing its first major military conflict since the Second World War. Generally, the former Yugoslav wars were a consequence of competing rights for national self-determinations in areas of nationally-mixed population. In this sense, we understand all nationalisms in the lands of former Yugoslavia as equally dangerous and destructive (Volcic, 2006).

Serbs and Croats alike were exploiting their own pasts in order to present themselves as the victims. However, political elites in both states agreed on one issue – BiH – and on the question as of how to divide the Bosnian territory. “Ironically, while a brutal Serbo-Croatian war raged, the two sides had reached a mutual understanding on plans to carve up ‘Serbian’ and ‘Croatian’ territories in BiH during the Milosevic-Tudjman talks in the spring of 1991” (Kurspahic, 2003, p. 97).

Importantly, both sides alike have committed war crimes, which included ‘ethnic cleansing’ (using terror to force people from the villages where their families had lived centuries), establishment of concentration camps’ (where victims were beaten, tortured, raped and often killed), destruction of physical property (including destruction of approximately 1, 4000 mosques), and numerous massacres of civilian population (250,000 deaths) (Samar, 1995; Woodward, 1995; Lampe, 1996). “Tudjman and the Croatian armed forces supported the Bosnian Croats against the Bosnian Serbs, then a few months later also against Bosniaks” (Razsa and Lindstrom, 2004, p. 633) and “some of the most gruesome scenes of the Serbs campaign of ‘ethnic cleansing’ were played in ‘Croats’ territories,’ with the massacre of more than a hundred Bosniak civilians in Ahmici village in Central Bosnia on April 16, 1993, and with Bosniaks from Mostar, Capljina, and Stolac herded to concentration camps in Heliodrom, Dretelj” (Kurspahic, 2003, p. 128) and elsewhere (e.g. Vitez and Vareš) later in 1993 (Dijvjak, 2001, p. 136). And in both countries, the mainstream representations positioned Bosniaks as little more than an invented and artificial nation with no historical claims to the BiH territory. For Croats and Serbs alike, the Muslims were the harbingers of a dangerous Islamic conspiracy, poised to take over the Balkans and the Western Europe (MacDonald, 2002, p. 9).

Serbian and Croatian leaders both argued that Bosniaks were fallen members of their own nation, who had been forced to abandon their true identity after Ottoman invasion. Military leaders argued that they were simply ‘liberating’ parts of their ethnic homeland that had long been submerged under foreign rule, while ‘freeing’ Muslims from their artificial attachments (ibid., p. 222).

In February 1994, the Clinton Administration issued an ultimatum to the Croatian government: either it removes its regular armed forces from BiH and renounces its ideas of a Croatian state within BiH or it faces a complete isolation. That very same year, the Croats and Bosniaks signed a non-aggression and common federation treaty in Washington, D.C. (Silber and Little, 1995, p. 353). On December 14, 1995, following over three years of bloody conflict, the Dayton Peace Agreement brought an end to the Bosnian war. While claiming its objective to be reconciliation, democracy, and ethnic pluralism, the Agreement, in the eyes of its critics, legalized the ethnic partition between Bosnian Serbs, Bosnian Croats, and Bosniaks. Bosnia-Herzegovina was divided into two entities: the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina (with 51 percent of the territory) inhabited mostly by Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats, and the Republic of Serbia (with 49 percent of the territory) populated almost exclusively by Bosnian Serbs. Furthermore, the Agreement separated the Federation of BiH into ten ethnically distinct cantons with very little intermixing between the two ethnic groups. Although fighting ceased in 1995, the conflict is not entirely resolved. Ethnic fragmentation and ‘uncertain transitions’ from socialism to democracy have contributed to the country’s current situation of economic, social, and political suspension (Verdery & Burawoy, 1999, p. 188). Today, eleven years after the last military struggles in BiH, the international control over military forces is still present and it is the international community which imposes controls and negotiates the peace in BiH. Furthermore, there are still
conflicting visions of the BiH future. In 2005, Croatia began the EU accession negotiations; Serbia is due to start them when it arrests and surrenders the war crime suspect Ratko Mladić to the ICTY.

**Discourse Analysis Approach**

In this study, we expand Fairclough’s definition of recontextualization as a representation of social events. Recontextualization is understood here as the appropriation of discourse. In this case for instance, we refer to recontextualization relations between the ‘global’ scale and the national/local scale and between the present and the past. We analyze how specific discourse about the war crimes is decontextualized and recontextualized, and thus gains new meanings. It is important to note here that local appropriation of the global political discourses occurs in accordance with local ideology, and in that way becomes a glocal discourse. In this case, the Croatian journalists’ discourse about war crimes in BiH is based on the dominant nationalist ideology. Thus, we try to present an example of a study that uncovers recontextualization used by the informants to legitimize and justify war crimes.

In her recent study, Wodak (2006, p. 136) identifies numerous strategies employed by the visitors of the German *Wehrmacht* exhibition that focused on the war crimes committed by German soldiers and their dealing with the traumatic past. These are: a) denying that war crimes happened at all, b) negating the context itself (refusals to deal with the issue at all; claiming ignorance and victim-hood of oneself), c) using strategy of scientific rationalization, d) creating ‘positive self-representation’, e) attempting to understand, and f) justifying or denying the war crimes: relativizing (‘Every war is horrible.’), providing a (pseudo-) rational causal explanation (‘the Other forced us.’), the army was responsible (‘I only did my duty.’), acknowledging the crimes, but attributing them to other units. We focus on strategies of justification and legitimization discourses of war crimes, because our main target group are those who do not deny that war crimes were committed. We want to go beyond the before-mentioned general justification strategies, and analyse what kind of discourses were employed by our informants. The linguistic analysis of the in-depth interviews was performed on four ‘levels’: analysis of the macro-proposition, linguistic strategies, choice of keywords, and representation of social actors.

The semantics of discourse deals with meanings in terms of ‘propositions’ (Brown and Yule, 1983). A proposition is a conceptual structure, which consists of a predicate and one or more arguments. Brown and Yule argue that a propositional analysis is problematic, since no specific means have been provided to reduce the semantic representation of propositions. Furthermore, various interpretations of one text are possible. Yet, according to Van Dijk (1988), propositions are the smallest independent constructs of language and thought, typically expressed by a single sentence or clause. On the basis of propositions, Van Dijk (1980, 1988) introduces the analysis of thematic organization of the news. This hierarchical structure consists of (macro-) propositions that define the most important or relevant pieces of information in the text. Semantic macrostructure is derived from local meanings of words by macro-rules, such as deletion, generalization and construction. Such rules have omitted irrelevant details, connecting the essence on a higher level into abstract meanings or constructing different meaning constituents in higher-level events or social concepts. The thematic organization is directly connected with the discourse schemata or the so-called superstructures (Van Dijk, 1980). In this study, a proposition is defined as an ‘idea unit’ in the form of a single sentence, several sentences, a paragraph or whole story. A proposition is a unit only for the convenience of comparison. The analysis of a type of macro-semantics, which deals with global meanings and enables the description of the meanings of in-depth interview, will be presented.

The most important or relevant piece of information in the interview will be defined using the abovementioned macro-rules. This is a rather subjective process on the part of the researcher. However, since only a single researcher has made the definition, it is assumed that news discourse is on a basis of equal comparison and contrast. We intend to find the propositions, which are conveyed, or are missing, in interviews about the same phenomenon, i.e. the war crimes.

The analysis presented below focuses on the notion of ‘linguistic strategy’, which is identified in terms of “planned social (in our case, discursive) activities, of the political or socio-psychological aims or functions of these activities, and of (linguistic) means designed to help realise these aims” (Wodak et al., 2003, p. 34). For example, according to Wodak (2006, p. 136), a justification of one’s activities during war (e.g. ‘doing one’s duty’) is a linguistic strategy that serves the purpose of upholding one’s self-image and presenting oneself favourably to an audience. Strategies are in turn realized by particular linguistic means, for example giving one’s own group a particular name (and another to ‘other’ group), using comparative adjectives, and so on.

In the analyzed transcripts, one of the main functions of social representation of the actors serves as an affirmation of the ideology by contrasting it to the opposing ideology. It is precisely for these reasons that we consider Hall’s ‘discourse of difference’ as the most effective method to think through binary positions. Hall (1989) understands ‘discourses of difference’ (p. 913) as those that make a distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Any group,
to be identified as a group, must be differentiated from the Others – internally and externally. Any kind of identity, as Hall further suggests, is primarily defined as a difference from the Others. The fact that the meanings of ‘us’ and ‘them’, implying identification with and differentiation from, are not ontologically given, but ideologically constructed becomes even clearer through linguistic analysis. Still, because it appears so natural, this ‘us’ and ‘them’ dichotomy is rarely questioned. Yet, these are the concepts that have the greatest power as they “go without saying because they come without saying” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 67). The construction of identity is a process of differentiation, a description of one’s own group and a differentiation from the others (Wodak, 1996). This means that the identities of social actors in the texts are mostly constructed and defined as members of groups, and the emphasis is placed on representing the Others as different, deviant or even as a threat.

We analyzed the choice of keywords of the informants and compared them with groups of typical keywords. It is widely accepted that the choice of the words used by elites is by no means arbitrary. This particular choice is not only the journalists’ own creation, but has something to do with their own society. Trew (1979) and Teo (2000) in their studies of lexical choice and ideologies concluded that all perceptions which are embodied in lexicalization, involve ideologies.

**Croatian (patriotic and nationalistic) journalism**

As for the case in Croatia, during the 1990s there was a dominant professional ideology of a so-called “patriotic journalism” (Curgus, 1999, p. 128). The characteristic of Croatian mainstream journalism at the time was a “blood-and-soil” superiority, “my-country-right-or-wrong” version an “us-versus-them” mentality (in all the former Yugoslav states, a similar “nationalization” of media took place). An important phenomenon was then the nationalization and popularization of the public sphere, where the public became subordinated to the national dimension. Media systems were centralized and information about important political events was distributed according to the principle of national loyalty. Nationalistic journalism expressed obedience to authority; it established loyalty towards state power and the nationalistic elite, conforming to conventions and the dominant common sense, and remained loyal to the mainstream nationalistic principle (Billig, 1995). For example, articles were full of “glorious history” to substantiate the myth of the historical superiority of the Croatian nation in relation to the others and forge the sense of nationalism and patriotism (Thompson, 1995; Skopljanac Brunner et al., 2000). Croatian reporters in mainstream media represented the Serbs and the Bosniaks as the unacceptable “others”, as the nation of an alien culture and civilization (Zakosek, 1999). They did not report or inform; their sole function was to validate the politics of the governing party (ibid.).

The analysis of mainstream Croatian and Serbian journalism in 2005 has showed how both of them reproduce a particular kind of nationalism, albeit a more hidden one (Erjavec & Volcic 2006). They both also share the portrayal of the Bosniaks that continue to be represented as “the other” in the mainstream media.

Again, the media and journalists have played an essential part in the imagination of national communities, and the creation of a national culture, identity and difference would have been impossible without the contribution of print, and broadcast media. Many scholars (Anderson, 1983) have explored the important role of the mass media in the historical development of national cultures and identities. Media and cultural production have a key role here in contesting the memory, and reconstituting national, religious, gender, ethnic identities and differences. In that, what are some of the current political pressures that Croatian media face? Are the media today controlled and “encouraged” to publish “politically correct” information? If during the 1990s, while employing nationalistic journalism, the state media were heavily censored and celebrated by the governmental party, today, the situation is more complicated. The political pressure was replaced by advertising pressure that pretends that it is apolitical. Because of the political nature of Croatian media privatization in the 1990s, journalists and mainstream media continue to be obedient to and reproducers of an elite nationalistic ideology. At the same time, their journalistic practice and their efforts also represent ‘mainstream nationalism’. Thus, the journalists are indeed both, creators (of journalism) and created (by the governing parties), at the same time.

**Data Collection**

Our research design included 25 problem-centered, qualitative interviews with Croatian journalists aged 24-50. Informants were asked to give their understanding of the role of Croatia during the wars in BiH and especially to reflect upon the responsibility of Croatia for war crimes against Bosniaks (1992-1995). We asked them to share their arguments and opinions on who the key agents were in this war and about the characteristics of those agents. For our research analysis, these 25 journalists were carefully chosen as representing the main national, mainstream journalism voices. These journalists work for media that more or less support the official governmental policies, and
have the largest circulations among the non-tabloid media (Malovic, 2004, p. 128-131): from daily newspapers Vecernji list (5), and Slobodna dalmacija (5); and from national radio and television Hrvatski radio (5), Hrvatska televizija (5), and five journalists from the national news agency Hina, a key information source for the majority of the media. “Given, that the largest media owner is the Government, there can be no doubts about the political affiliation of the leading media in Croatia” (Malovic, 2004, p. 135). Today’s Croatian government, lead by (HDZ, Hrvaska Demokratska Zajednica), is a right wing oriented, and expresses moderate nationalistic tensions that don’t allow for acknowledgement of war crimes committed by the Croatian Army against Bosniak civilians during the war in 1992-1995.

None of the interviewed journalists had participated in the wars in the former Yugoslavia (1991-1995). The empirical data for this article then are based on in-depth, semi-structured individual interviews conducted in different regions of Croatia in the summer and fall of 2006. All interviews were conducted in the Croatian language by both researchers. Although the interviews contained specific questions, the interviewees’ responses sometimes called for improvisation. The interviews were transcribed verbatim by both researchers and were analyzed in terms of recurring narratives and themes. We used this research technique in order to gather data on our informants’ perceptions beyond the official declaration of leaders, or as reported in the media, and thus to offer more in-depth information on their perceptions than surveys would generally reveal. To ensure the respondents’ anonymity, we labelled our informants by using letters.

Croatian War Crime Discourses

The informants do not deny that war crimes were committed. Therefore we focus on strategies of justification and legitimization discourses of war crimes. Analysed transcripts of in-depth interviews show four recontextualization strategies, divided into four sub-chapters. Our attempt to discuss them in isolation as ideal types is solely for the convenience of the analysis. Informants use the strategies of justification of war crimes while appropriating Bush’s ‘war on terrorism’, ‘Israel-Hezbollah discourse’ ‘Eurocentric discourse’ and ‘neo-liberal discourse’.

1. We had to fight against Islamic terrorism

The comparison of the propositions of the in-depth interviews’ transcripts enables us to discover that the proposition, ‘We had to fight against Islamic terrorism’, is adopted by more than a half of all the interviews (13). Croatian journalists have not just used the strategy of relativizing, with which they would enumerate crimes of other nations, or use clichés that relativize the past (‘Every war is horrible.’) (Wodak, 2006, p. 137), but have appropriated G. W. Bush’s ‘war on terrorism’ discourse according to their own political-historical context without regret. Most of the research on G.W. Bush’s discourse after September 11 (e.g. Chomsky, 2001; Johnson, 2002; Kellner, 2002, 2003, 2005a, 2005b; Woodward, 2002; Bailey & Chermak, 2003; Graham et al., 2004; Höijer et al., 2004; Ottosen, 2004) agrees that the discourse contains the following elements: the war has been proclaimed between good and evil; the evil Other is Islamic terrorism, personified by bin Laden; and the West has to unite in a war against terrorism to defend its civilization and its freedom. By recontextualizing Bush’s discourse into the former Yugoslav context the journalists were drawing an analogy between the war against Bosniaks and the USA war against terrorism to make sense of and legitimize and justify the Croatian war against Muslims in BiH and massacres of Bosniak civilians. For example, here is a typical statement:

**Interviewer:** How would you reflect upon the war crimes committed by the Croatian armed forces against the Bosniaks in BiH?

**Informant M:** I think that Croatia had to fight against Islamic terrorists like America or the West do.

**Interviewer:** Were the Bosniaks who were killed, terrorists?

**Informant M:** Well, yes, it is well-known that most of the Bosniaks are Islamic fundamentalists.

Journalists use the same binary opposition as Bush regarding two groups: ‘us’ (‘good = the terrorists’ victims/Croats’) versus ‘them’ (‘evil = Islamic terrorists/Bosniaks’). They associate themselves with ‘the terrorists’ victims’, i.e. victims of war in BiH and completely identify with the Croatian political leadership and army (indicated through frequent use of ‘we’, what ‘we had to fight’, while describing how terrorism in BiH ‘forced’ the Croatian army to attack BiH). ‘The Other’ is portrayed as Muslims in general, Muslims in BiH, Islamic terrorists, Mujahedin fighters and Al-Qaida. Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks) are equated with Islamic terrorists. Thus, the journalists reproduce Bush’s binary discourse except in that they appropriate it according to their own political-
historical context: while they position themselves as the good ones, and ‘the victims’ of their own ‘local’ Muslim perpetrators, at the same time they accuse them of being connected with ‘global’ Islamic terrorists. The statements employed in this kind of argumentation rely on common-sense language such as ‘everybody knows’ or ‘we all know’ to further naturalize this polarization. Our journalists also use the modal verb ‘have to’ to suggest that Croats had no other choice than to defend themselves and kill Bosniaks. Journalists name BiH as ‘the Balkan base of terrorism’ and the war against Bosniaks as a ‘war on terrorism’. For example:

Al Qaeda cells were established in Bosnia and Herzegovina at the beginning of the 1990s, and their creator is Ayman Az Zawahiri . . . Let me explain . . . Bosniaks answered Zawahiri’s calls and started to organize bases of terrorism in which the plans for attacking the Western countries were being plotted. BiH was the Balkan base of terrorism. When the Croats went to war in Bosnia, they went to war against terrorism. (Informant V)

The Bush Administration’s ‘war on terrorism’ includes many essentialist stereotypes about Islam and violent Muslims (see Karim, 2002). Similarly, most of our journalists recycle these stereotypes of Muslims as terrorists. Overall, this stereotypical image is explained by global political factor, but it relies on essentialist and simplistic biological evidence: ‘terrorism is in the Muslims’ blood’: “You should understand . . . everybody knows that the Muslims are terrorists . . . It is in their blood” (Informant J).

2. Killing Bosniak civilians was a necessary evil just like in Lebanon

A similar justification strategy, i.e. a comparison between one’s own politics and military with others, exists in a different, more contemporary case of global conflicts. It is still primarily a terrorism discourse, nevertheless, some journalists did not compare the Croatian-Bosnian war with the US was on terror. Instead they drew an analogy with the Israel-Hezbollah conflict and claimed that ‘killing Bosniak civilians was a necessary evil just like . . . what’s going on in Lebanon today’. The journalists used the same binary opposition as the Israeli government regarding the two groups: ‘us’ (‘good=terrorists’ victims/Croats’) versus ‘them’ (‘evil=terrorists/Islamic terrorists’). They were explicit about equating the ‘Croatian Army’ with the ‘Israeli Army’ and ‘Hezbollah’ with ‘Islamic terrorists’. They borrowed an ‘Israeli discourse’ (Zizek, 2006) which they appropriated according to their own political-historical context to make sense of and legitimize and justify the Croatian war against Muslims in BiH and the massacre of Bosniak civilians.

According to Zizek, an ‘Israeli discourse’ during the last Lebanon war features a belief that civilian casualties are ‘a necessary evil’, i.e. death of innocent Lebanese civilians is a fair price to pay for attacks against Hezbollah (Zizek, 2006, p. 36). Journalists similarly justified the killings by arguing that Bosniak civilians had been ruthlessly manipulated by Islamic terrorists. The latter had, according to our informants, set their bases and placed their weapons in populated areas, although they had known that any attack from Croatian armed forces on their bases would have led to heavy casualties among innocent civilians. For example:

**Interviewer:** What is your opinion on the war crimes committed by the Croatian armed forces against the Bosniaks in BiH?

**Informant O:** I regret civilian casualties, but dead Bosniak civilians were a necessary evil in that war.

**Interviewer:** Can you elaborate this point?

**Informant O:** Well, the problem was that they were manipulated by the terrorists, who hide themselves among civilians and were shooting from civilian positions . . . and our people could not destroy Islamic terrorists and avoid civilian casualties at the same time.

**Interviewer:** Why had the Croatian Army not stopped attacking the Bosniaks?

**Journalists O:** Look . . . there is a similar case in Lebanon these days. The Israeli military has not stopped the attacks just because Hezbollah set its bases and weapons amid Lebanese civilians. Besides, Bosniaks and Lebanese are not real civilians; they protect and support Islamic terrorists. The Croats would never do it.

This example, as with the case of an Israeli discourse (ibid.), also demonstrates that there is a differentiation of civilians between ‘completely innocent Croatian (Israeli) civilians’ and ‘not real Bosniak (Lebanese) civilians’ who support Islamic terrorists. In contrast to the recontextualization of the ‘war on terrorism’, the recontextualization of an ‘Israeli discourse’ includes regret and a clear distinction between terrorists and Bosniak civilians.
3. We had to defend Europe against Islam

Another justification strategy was the duty to fight for Europe. Our informants claimed that ‘they probably had to kill Bosniaks to defend Europe against Islam’. They not only “seek to provide a (pseudo-)rational causal explanation for the war crimes” (Wodak, 2006, p. 137), but they appropriate the ‘European discourse’ to their own political-historical context to make sense of and legitimate and justify the Croatian war against Muslims in BiH and massacres of Bosniaks civilians. Most of the research on ‘European discourse’ (e.g. Wintle, 1996; Punctcher Riekmann, 1997; Mastnak, 1998; Tismaneanu, 1998; Musolf et al., 2001; Spohn & Triandafyllidou, 2003) agree that Eurocentric discourse contains the following elements: obsessive repetition of the word ‘Europe’, ‘European’ without explanation as to what this attribute actually means; anything that is of any value is ‘European’ (e.g. European trends, way of life, culture, civilization, quality, values, prosperity, dynamics) and at the same time, all things that are obsolete, problematic, violent and all that is out, stand for the other side – the Balkans, the East, the communist past, the Muslims and so on; and the terms ‘European Union’ and ‘Europe’ are frequently used interchangeable. Thus, Europe has become a magic formula, a moral concept, a synonym of the new meaning. Journalists also used the modal verb ‘have to’ to connote the meaning that Croatians had no other choice but to kill Bosniaks in order to protect Europe. An example from the interview makes this point:

**Interviewer**: Why did the Croatian Army kill Bosniaks during the war?
**Informant L**: In a way… we had to fight to defend Europe.

**Interviewer**: Against what?
**Informant L**: We prevented a creation of an Islamic state in Europe.

The journalists conveyed the image of Croatia protecting the West from the barbarous East, with the Muslims trying to set up an Islamic State and invade Europe, in a manner reminiscent of the Ottoman invasion. The journalists also compared the Bosniaks to ‘Turkish occupiers’. They accused the Bosniaks of trying to take over the Balkans and Europe. The picture of Croatia standing on the border between East and West was a powerful image. For example: “Muslim’s leaders had plans to make Sarajevo a European Islamic capital, housing some 15 million European Muslims. We had to prevent this” (Informant S).

The journalists represented Bosniaks or BiH as non-European and with that implicitly include its own nation and nation-state as belonging to Europe. For example:

The Muslim government was transforming Bosnia and Herzegovina into the first Islamic republic of Europe. We had to prevent it, because Islam has never been a part of Europe . . . . It is obvious, that Muslims in BiH were in Europe’s way because it did not react.

The journalists reduced all Muslims to a monolithic and irrationally violent ‘Other’, and recycled Western stereotypes (see Karim, 1997; Said, 1978, 1997) about Muslims and Islam. Karim (1997), in particular, argues that violence, lust, and barbarism seem be the primary western images associated with ‘Islam’ and he cautions against drawing hurried conclusions about the nature of Islam. Bosniaks become framed as having a different way of life than the Croats and other Europeans. The journalists blame the Bosniaks in general for trying to transform and change ‘our European way of life.’ They use the words ‘Muslims’, ‘Bosniaks’, ‘Turkish occupiers’ synonymously, just as ‘Croats’ is interchangeable with ‘Europeans’. By using a strategy of cultural differentiation journalists also sought to construct a meaning that exists as a homogeneous one, expressing a bounded and unified European cultural way of life, while simultaneously denying any structural discrepancies between them and other Europeans. The journalists regularly used the notion of ‘our’ Europe/our European way of life/world in order to include themselves and their Croatian imagined community in the European ‘we’-group.

- Muslims tried to bring their Islamic habits here, and change our European way of life. (Informant U)
- Bosniaks are known for their regression, orientalism, corporeality, intimacy, and for being rural, uncivil, uncivilized, and funny. (Informant F)
- They do not share the European manners. (Journalists L)
- They do not share common European values. (Journalists P)
- They do not have free speech, democracy or freedom of religion. (Informant H)
- They do not listen to Western music and favour Arab-sounding music. (Informant K)
The journalists emphasized cultural differences grounded in the cultural Otherness of Muslims (including a way of life, habits, customs and manners). Many scholars (Barker, 1981; Balibar & Wallerstein, 1991; Miles, 1994) define this kind of a cultural differentiation as ‘differentialist racism’, ‘cultural racism’, or ‘culturalist racism’. Journalists represented their own religion as a peaceful one. On the other hand, Islam is portrayed as aggressive and violent. For example, “From Bosnia, peace-loving Catholics were being expelled … Islamists were trying hard to create and violently push for Muslim laws within Christian Europe” (Informant P).

4. We had to defend our property and market

Lastly, journalists recontextualized neo-liberal discourse and argued that ‘they had to defend their property and market’. Most of the research on neo-liberal discourse (e.g. Boreus, 1997; Fairclough, 2000a, 2000b; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2001; Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Tickell & Peck, 2006) agree that this discourse includes a narrative of progress: the ‘globalised’ world offers unprecedented opportunities for ‘growth’ through intensified ‘competition’, ‘privatisation’, ‘financial and labour market deregulation’, ‘trade liberalisation’, but require unfettered ‘free trade’ and the dismantling of ‘state bureaucracy’ and ‘unaffordable welfare programmers’, ‘flexibility of labour’, ‘transparency’, ‘modernization’ and so forth. Here is a statement from one of the interviews:

**Interviewer:** What is your opinion on the war crimes committed by the Croatian armed forces against the Bosniaks in BiH?

**Informant E:** Let me explain. . . . Well . . . in the former Yugoslavia, the Croatian economy invested too much in BiH to stand still whilst Bosniaks were stealing its property. . . . Indeed, we had to defend our property and market.

**Interviewer:** Why did the Croatian Army kill Bosniaks?

**Informant E:** They were extremists, idlers, who wanted to live on other people’s account . . . after all they were against the reforms of the entire social system. They wanted to live forever in Communism and to retain their privileges. We, the Croats, literally supported them; all our tourism revenues were meant and have gone for the undeveloped. And then they wanted to take away our property and keep it for themselves. It is obvious that Bosniaks are against progress. The modern world is about privatisation, financial and labour market deregulation, trade liberalisation, welfare cutbacks, the knowledge-based economy, integration into global processes, etc., and not to invest into projects that one knows beforehand they will be unprofitable on behalf of social peace, protection of idlers, and collective responsibility. Indeed, it is primarily about individual responsibility for one’s own work, which Bosniaks lack.

This example shows how journalists used neo-liberal discourse and appropriated it according to their political-historical context to make sense of, legitimize and justify the Croatian war against Bosniaks in BiH and the massacres of Bosniak civilians. They used an economic argument: ‘we had to defend our property and market’ to justify and legitimate war against Bosniaks and massacres of Bosniaks civilians. They used neo-liberal phrases including ‘privatisation’, ‘financial and labour market deregulation’, ‘trade liberalisation’, ‘welfare cutbacks’, ‘the knowledge-based economy’, ‘integration into global processes’ to present Croatia as a part of the economically developing capitalist world in contrast to all Bosniaks, who are undeveloped, lazy, exploiters, individually irresponsible, and extremists, and who still adore Communism. The journalists emphasize that neo-liberal development is inevitable in a modern world which requires that Croatia’s development is based on the neo-liberal positions. This view was expressed with the phrase ‘the modern world requires that we’ and a lack of responsible social agents. Even in this case, the journalists used a modal verb ‘to have to’ to connote a meaning that Croatians had no choice but to kill Bosniaks. Thus, they used a neo-liberal discourse and represented neo-liberalism as a social inevitability to justify Croatian war crimes committed in BiH.

Discussion and Conclusion

Interviewed journalists used and borrowed from four extended (global) discourses to justify and legitimize the war against Bosniaks and massacres of Bosniaks civilians. What is particularly interesting here is that they did not resort to an old (and in the former Yugoslavia popularly accepted) justification that massacres of Bosniaks had been committed by more or less crazy individuals, political renegades, criminals, or bandits. The journalists accepted that the aforementioned had been planned by the Croatian government, however, they justified and legitimized it by appropriating already established (globally circulated) discourses, such as ‘war on terrorism’, ‘European’ and neo-liberal discourses. They are also aligned with the Croatian political leadership and army (indicated through frequent
use of ‘we’, what ‘we had to fight’, while describing how Bosniaks ‘forced’ the Croatian army to attack BiH). Although some interviewees regretted that war crimes had been committed, they also argued that they had been inevitable. In that, the hybrid forms of historical and contemporary discourses incorporated global culture into the local context.

Research on post-conflict reconstruction is still in its infancy. The main question that the existing literature explores is ‘What conditions might make possible reconciliation after violent conflict?’ (Borneman, 2002, p. 281). This literature suggests that the post-conflict period should be analyzed in its glocal spatio-temporal context that is marked by despair and hope, loss and compensation, and past and future alike.

As long as the dominant discourse of journalists is one of justification of crimes, we suggest, one cannot expect the deconstruction of extreme nationalism and a long-term peace on the soil of the former Yugoslavia; a younger generation in contrast to the older one justifies the established nationalism and war crimes with appropriation of the current global discourses.

The research also shows a transformation of the prevailing Croatian discourses in the last ten to fifteen years. For example, despite the country’s troublesome relationship with the US administration the prevailing Croatian discourse has been transformed after 9/11 to demonstrate a shared commonality of interests with its one-time assailant. Another example of a radical change in discourse is in terms of attitudes towards Europe. Croatian intellectuals and mainstream media of the early 1990s labelled Europe ‘a whore’, a synonym for morally and emotionally corrupt (more in Buden, 2002). Today, Europe and European-ness are presented as a magical formula, and a moral concept. A change from Communist to neo-liberalism, however, demonstrates the most rapid ideological and social leap.

The discourse of the journalists’ above was not original. First, it replicates a mainstream media discourse on this topic (Erjavec & Volcic, 2006), and second, it draws on contemporary images of terrorism, Eurocentrism, neo-liberalism and the historical and contemporary understandings of Croatian’s place in the global world. After all, one needs to stress the role of larger political, economic and ideological forces in the appropriation and (re)production of a specific meaning. Furthermore, the imagining of nations through the construction of discourses of belonging is a place-based process. For example, different countries are often represented as Western in a process of democratization and Europeanization while attempting to emphasize their modern, liberal, democratic nature. Discourses of place in Croatia involve a rewritten version of global, national and local histories that reject or contest the past. However, one needs to understand the current attempts to revise history in all parts of Europe – and all these attempts coincide with a much more radical revisionism of the Second World War period. Clearly, the issue of dealing with the past is not peculiar to Croatia, but to the political, social and cultural frustrations which accompanied for example German unification and these exacerbated the confrontation between German and non-German (foreigners) views of cultural identity and citizenship (see Habermas, 1994; Wodak, 2006).

We argue here that what one sees globally is the ongoing appropriation of this discourse within local contexts. In that, the Croatian journalists’ discourse is not the only case. Different nations are increasingly deploying the terms of a particular type of discursive exclusion – exclusion based on belonging to the ‘war on terror’. In Russia, for example, the discourse on the “war on Chechen terrorists” was recontextualized in the context of the presidential election (Tishkov, 2004). In Serbia, the discourse of terrorism, with which popular consciousness is assailed, similarly deflects attention away from a critical examination of the past (Erjavec & Volcic 2006). The research in Central and Eastern Europe similarly shows how paranoid nationalistic discourses become part of more mainstream discourses – and how they continue to be organized around similar binary oppositions. For example, Erjavec points out that the Slovene elites also appropriated and deployed the ‘war on terrorism’ discourse during the process of EU and NATO integration – (re)joining Europe – so as to re-imagine their own Slovene identity as belonging to ‘the right’, Western side of the European collective imagination (Erjavec, 2002). Similar strategies are enlisted by Croatian political elites when they construct an image of their own European identity on the basis of differentiating it from the Serbs who are portrayed as unable to understand Western Catholic civilization, since they belong to the Orthodox collective spirit (Buden, 2002; Zizek, 1997). The Croatian attempt to differentiate itself from Serbs is reinforced by a call for the creation of a ‘defensive wall of Catholicity’ (while the Serbs see themselves as a ‘bulwark of Christianity’). Thus, all those elites use a discursive strategy of orientalism (Said, 1978), which Bakic-Hayden (1995) defined as “a subjective practice by which all ethnic groups define the ‘Other’ as ‘East’ of them” (p. 919). A struggle among Slovene, Croatian and Serb elites to define the prevailing meaning of 9/11 represents an ongoing attempt to shape a specific sense of belonging to a ‘civilized, European/Christian/Catholic’ world, and to frame the meaning of being a ‘Slovenian’, a ‘Croatian’ or a ‘Serb’ and thus the boundaries of ‘acceptable’ Sloveneness, Croatian-ness, Serbian-ness. Importantly, these socially constructed entities create cohesion through discourses that invoke common cultural codes and experiences. So, at one level of analysis, the degree of internal
differentiation of one entity (nation, culture) becomes insignificant compared to the degree of difference that exists in relation to another entity. Internal differences are glossed over in the face of a common enemy.

To conclude, Adorno (1986) writes extensively on the issue of reconciliation and argues that it is not possible to create a sense of ending for as long as the past lives in the present in the form of objective conditions (e.g., National Socialism and Fascism). He is mostly concerned with the ways in which the guilty need to come to terms with their own past behaviour. He suggests that wishing to turn the page and wipe the past from memory is extremely dangerous because ‘the past that one wishes to evade is still so intensely alive’ (Adorno, 1986, p. 115). On the basis of the above research, we argue that for solid peace-building and peace-keeping processes in the former Yugoslav context, the main public opinion protagonists – i.e. journalists – have to acknowledge war crimes committed by the Croatian army in forming a public sphere. The acknowledgement of crimes is a precondition for peace journalism and a broader social process of reconciliation.

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End Notes

1 A member of the Muslim ethnic national community is called a Bosnjak (Bosniak) as distinct from Bosanac (Bosnian), which refers to a citizen of Bosnia in general.

2 Nationalistic discourse here generally denotes those practices that create the objects of which they speak of. We define nationalistic discourse here as all those discursive practices and articulations that on the first level of an identity creation advocate a superiority of belonging to a nation. We understand national identity as involving both, self-awareness of the group and awareness of outside and inside ‘Others’ from which the nation wants to differentiate itself. Nation looks both inward, in order to unify itself, and outward, to divide itself from others. These socially constructed entities that nations are create cohesive identities through exclusionary nationalistic discourses that invoke common and unified cultural codes and experiences.

3 Tadzjman publicly admitted to the existence of Croatian ‘collection centres’, which house, by 1993, an estimated 20,000 inmates in the territory Herceg-Bosna (MacDonald, 2002, p. 241).

4 Both researchers come from the region of former Yugoslavia and they both speak and read Serbian and Croatian languages. There were no significant problems with the translations.

References


