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Local Media and the Long-term Conflict Transformation: Eastern Slavonia 25 Years since UNTAES¹

*Mirko Savković**

Abstract: 1996-1998 United Nation's UNTAES transitional administration, deployed for 2 years in Eastern Slavonia (Croatia), is often described as one of the most successful UN peace efforts. Now, 25 years since it was deployed, we are revisiting the region to investigate the long-term developments as they are evident in the writing of local media. This empirical research focuses on the long-term post-conflict cooperative or divisive narratives in local Croat and Serb media in the town of Vukovar, the centre of the region. While some progress was achieved in the media's commitment to *peace journalism*, we were still able to observe deeply entrenched long-lasting inter-communal mistrust, accusations and readiness of political elites to abuse delicate divisions. This discovery raises the important question of just how far does the successful and exemplary peacekeeping mission or administration goes in the context of developed local institutions, and to what extent previous patterns nevertheless remain in place.

Keywords: transitional administration, long-term post-conflict, Vukovar, UNTAES, media and peacebuilding, local institutions

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This paper is Dedicated to my late grandmother Rosa. Once she lost her Yugoslav citizenship, she lived and died in Eastern Slavonia as an undocumented and stateless individual unable to ever again see her beloved Bosnia.

Introduction

Despite the noticeable academic acknowledgment of the need to research long-term effects of peacebuilding, there is simultaneously a recognizable lack of it. Original empirical research dealing with the local outcomes in the long post-mission perspective is absent. Important obstacle remains the fact that as time progress it is exponentially more challenging to distinguish to what extent certain historical peacebuilding efforts are to be considered the main determinant of either positive or negative local developments. This is particularly challenging in the context of developed pre-mission local institutions, many of which exist and change before, during and after the mission, with media being one of them. It is also unclear where to draw a universally applicable line between immediate fragile post-conflict contexts and the long-term success or acute failure. We can hardly objectively determine the universally applicable number of years in determining at what point to draw the line. Diverse local circumstances would make such an effort hopeless if not even ludicrous. However, the inability to draw a clear line arguably prevented much-needed research.

This research represents a limited effort to address those concerns by empirically analysing a case study of Eastern Slavonia in which local and international context allow the relatively easy and sound determination of the long-term context line. It analyses to what extent expected peacebuilding outcomes and values are present in narratives of local media production in the region which was historically successfully governed by the United Nations. Christoph Spurk notes how media played a destructive role in many conflicts yet he at the same time recognizes how media can also play a crucial constructive role in peacebuilding (2002). The research, therefore, uses media change (or rather lack of it) as a starting point for critical reflection on peacebuilding outcomes expectations strongly based on intrinsic characteristics of any given mission. By selection of representative case study of Eastern Slavonia (a region in eastern Croatia) research argues that obstacles to successful liberal peacebuilding efforts may go beyond material concerns of limited resources, staff or inadequate planning intrinsic to the peacebuilding effort itself. It seems that the existence of developed local institutions may undermine in part or potentially even in full even the most exemplary planned, supported and implemented missions. The UNTAES which is widely regarded as an exemplary case was in this line unable to overcome existing local media structures and to initiate the development of *Peace Journalism* in Eastern Slavonia.

Research focuses on the long-term local effects of the United Nations transitional administrations. In a transitional administration mission, the

UN undertakes administrative, governmental and legal functions over a certain territory turned into an effective protectorate. Research selects the case study of Eastern Slavonia, first and understudied among the three UN transitional administrations initiated in the second half of the 1990's. Eastern Slavonia is a predominantly semi-rural multicultural borderland region along the Danube River in eastern Croatia where the Croatian War of Independence started and where it ultimately ended in a peaceful transition. This region enjoyed developed local institutions in the period prior to the beginning of the War and many of them remained in place throughout it. In addition, the 1996-1998 UNTAES administration over the region is regularly described in the literature as one of the most successful missions in the UN's history. After the initial literature review and conflict background we will begin with a methodological presentation, research results and its analysis followed in the end by reflective discussion.

1. Theoretical Framework

The end of the Cold War and the proliferation of the UN's involvement in peacekeeping and peacebuilding brought about a similar rise in interest in academia for the topic of peace operations in post-conflict societies. Barma (2017, 12) underlines the fact that in the period from 1987 to 1994 the annual peacekeeping budget of the UN increased from 230 million to 3.6 billion US-\$. During that period, a niche of academic interest developed around the topic of transitional administrations. Those are missions with executive governing powers which are due to their all-encompassing nature called the '*Rolls Royce of conflict management strategies*' (Caplan 2005, as cited in Bellamy; Williams 2010, 255). Chesterman divides transitional administrations into five categories: 1) facilitating independence at the end of colonization, 2) temporary administration facilitating transition, 3) temporary administration prior to elections, 4) interim administration without an explicit end date and 5) de facto administration of the ungoverned territory (2005, 57).

The UNTAES mission in Eastern Slavonia is the exemplary case of the second category of transitional authorities facilitating the transition. UNTAES does not enjoy similar academic attention like subsequent missions in East Timor and Kosovo. The fact that the UNTAES was immediately followed by more complex, politically more complicated and longer missions in both East Timor and Kosovo partially explains this gap in attention span. Still awareness of Eastern Slavonia's legitimizing function in the aftermath of Bosnia and Rwanda may make it more interesting and an effort worth pursuing. Boothby argues that due to the fact that the UNTAES was a small

mission both temporally and geographically, while at the same time well equipped and with NATO eye behind it, UNTAES become something of a 'proving ground for ideas, methods, and procedures' (2004, 37).

Despite all of it, research notices that the UNTAES mission in Eastern Slavonia is a neglected case in general and comparative literature on transitional authorities compared to other cases. Barma explained her decision not to include the mission with the fact that societies exposed to the intervention were already used to developed public institutions prior to the conflict (2017, 34). This may potentially limit the long-term effects of the mission on governed territory and population and as such is of central interest to this research. At the same time, Barma recognizes the need for analysis of local perspectives after the end of the mission '*as long into the aftermath of intervention as possible*' (Barma 2017, 62). She also states that despite relatively advanced institutions in excluded cases governance strategy was comparable thus opening a way for building upon her work (Barma 2017, 34).

2. Conflict Background

Conflict in Eastern Slavonia was an integral part of the Yugoslav Wars. Inter-ethnic tensions within Croatia were influenced by the surprising victory of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) at the 1990 elections (which in turn reacted to federal level Serbian nationalism). Compared to Krajina, the early stages of the conflict in Eastern Slavonia came relatively late. The first road barricades appeared in Eastern Slavonia about seven months after Krajina just to be removed once the local leader was released from Croatian prison (Hayball 2015, 341). Demographically, it was the only region under rebellion without a Serb ethnic majority yet it was the only one directly bordering Serbia. The entire population of the region at the time of the 1991 Census was 193,513 (Živić 2003, 67). Serbs were not even the relative majority of the total population in Eastern Slavonia with Croats constituting 44.5% and Serbs 34.9% of the total population (Hayball 2015, 333). Other smaller communities are Hungarians, Slovaks, Ukrainians, Pannonian Rysins, and historically Germans, Jews, Turks, Vlachs, Yugoslavs and others...

Before the war, Eastern Slavonia was perceived as the stronghold of the ruling League of Communists of Croatia (SKH) (Hayball 2015, 333). The town of Vukovar, centre of the region, was the host of the Second Congress of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia in 1920 just before its work was forbidden by the government of the inter-war Kingdom (Atlagić 1985, 71). As such, the town enjoyed the privileged status of an industrialized centre in socialist

years. Town's demographic characteristics mirrored the diversity present in the region.

Serbian community was opposed to the idea of the breakup of multi-ethnic Yugoslavia due to security dilemma arising from not that distant World War II. The total number of ethnic Serbs systematically murdered by the Croatian fascist Ustashe regime during World War II remains unknown, but estimates suggest that it was between 320,000 and 340,000 (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum). Events in Eastern Slavonia were primarily fuelled by the abuse of perceived insecurity among local communities by Belgrade and Zagreb political elites. Local clashes, forced disappearances and geographic separation of communities culminated in what is known as the Battle of Vukovar. What can be described as indigenous or grassroots conflict prevention efforts (symbolized by heroic efforts of the assassinated police chief Josip Reihl-Kir) were ultimately ineffective.

In February 1992, the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) was established as an interim arrangement for Croatia preventing the further escalation of the war (Peacekeeping.un.org 1996). 13,000 UNPROFOR peacekeeping troops were sent to the country after the early stages of the conflict left 10,000 victims (Cohen; Moens 2011, 87). UNPROFOR mandate in Croatia was separated into four operational zones or sectors with Eastern Slavonia being the Sector East (Vuković 2018, 484). In March of 1993 forces on the ground in Eastern Slavonia were 873 strong Russian Battalion (RUSBAT), 687 Belgian and Luxemburg Battalion (BELBAT), 13 military observers and 73 other members of staff (Vuković 2018, 489).

In the summer of 1994, rapture between Belgrade and Pale lead to internal division in the self-proclaimed Republic of Serbian Krajina in which Krajina proper aligned itself with Pale and Eastern Slavonia with Belgrade (Barić 2011, 394). In May 1995, Croatian forces recaptured geographically separated Western Slavonia in Operation Flash pushing Krajina and Republika Srpska to announce unification (Barić 2011, 395). Eastern Slavonia refused this idea claiming that it will deepen the crisis and undermine Belgrade's efforts to end the War in Bosnia (Barić 2011, 395).

In March 1995, a new UN mission was established under the name United Nations Confidence Restoration Operation in Croatia (UNCRO), once again as the traditional peacekeeping mission without robust character (Miškulin 2015, 8). This was the period that witnessed the last effort to resolve conflict among communities in Croatia diplomatically. This effort revolved around what was called the *Z-4 Plan* drafted by the representatives of the UN, USA, Russia and EU. Group, which gave its name to the plan, was known as the Zagreb Four talks and the US ambassador Peter Galbraith played a decisive role in its drafting (Bing 2015, 489). Plan implied deep constitutional changes

in the territorial organization of Croatia giving Serbs in Krajina substantial autonomy (Bing 2015, 490-491). Even this plan was rejected by hardliners in Knin (Bing 2015, 494). The role of Serbian president Milošević is subject of debate up to the present day with some analysts claiming that Milošević was fearful of the Z-4 precedence for Kosovo (Arbutina 2010; Bing 2007, 393). The Z-4 plan did not envisage special status for Eastern Slavonia except for 2 years transitional period.

This refusal led Croatia to undertake *Operation Storm* against Krajina in August of 1995, the biggest military operation in Europe since the end of World War II in which Croatian troops had the asymmetric advantage (McLaughlin 2015). Through Operation Storm Croatia's government established control over the Sectors North and South. Sector East, i.e. Eastern Slavonia, remained the only part outside of its control. Croatian military victory was spoiled by serious human rights violations, war crimes and expulsion of the civilian population which immediately led to the cancelation of trade talks with the EU and postponed the country's membership in the Council of Europe (Bing 2007, 396).

Americans, who up to that point supported the military operation, were themselves disappointed by its humanitarian consequences. While the US supported the reintegration of territory by force, they opposed what they perceived as ethnic cleansing. This policy of expulsion and prevention of return led to a deep diplomatic crisis between Zagreb and Washington (Bing 2008, 345). US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright strongly insisted on the right of return, on the future multi-ethnic character of Eastern Slavonia, while the United States called upon the Council of Europe to suspend Croatian membership until the country start to respect human rights (Bing 2008, 351-353).

After Operation Storm, the international community wanted to prevent the spread of similar conflict to Eastern Slavonia (Barić 2011, 397). Their effort was motivated by fear of wider escalation and repetition of previous human rights violations seen in Bosnia and the rest of Croatia. On 22 August 1995, the leader of the European Community Monitor Mission (ECMM) Fernando Sanchez Rau visited Eastern Slavonia to investigate the possibility of negotiations with the Croatian Government (Barić 2011, 397). It was important to establish contact with local representatives from the region which may then engage in negotiations. US President Bill Clinton urged Croatia not to attack Eastern Slavonia at least as long as peace talks on Bosnia are being held in Dayton which opened some space for diplomacy (Bellamy 1995).

Three international representatives were directly involved in efforts to reach the *Erdut Agreement* (Basic Agreement 1995). Those were once again

the US Ambassador to Croatia Peter Galbraith, UN representative Thorvald Stoltenberg, and the president of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Geert Ahrens (Holjevac Tuković 2015, 620). The *Erdut Agreement*, which called upon the UN to establish its transitional administration in Eastern Slavonia, was signed in the village of Erdut on 12 November 1995 (Basic Agreement). Compared to *Z-4 Plan Erdut Agreement* was a short document with 14 points and it was signed by Milan Milanović, Head of Serb Negotiating Delegation and Hrvoje Šarinić, Head of Croatian Government Delegation, and witnessed by Peter Galbraith and Thorvald Stoltenberg (Basic Agreement). The *Erdut Agreement* was reached on the margins of international efforts to ensure peace in Bosnia at the Dayton Peace Conference. Croatian good will in Dayton was conditioned on the successful reintegration of Eastern Slavonia.

Declassified Department of State Paper on the UNTAES provides an insight into how the mission was modelled on the UNTAC experience in Cambodia where the UN's administration while comprehensive was not expected to administer every specific aspect of daily life (Department of State Paper re Eastern Slavonia Transitional Administration 1995). The Transitional Administrator was still expected to hold a position of ultimate arbiter and authority yet it acknowledged the existence of relatively developed local institutions.

Once established on the ground in 1996, UNTAES started with its first activities on the organization of governance in the region. Transitional Administration established 20 inter-ethnic Joint Implementation Committees (JICs) in which two sides worked together on issues of public services, administration, police, human rights, education etc. and were answering directly to UNTAES (Large 1999, 571). Those implementation committees ensured that the local population may contribute to the decision-making process while at the same time it was easier for the UN to inform the population of its decisions. Mission's Administrator Jacques-Paul Klein was of opinion that the mission has received the necessary resources and personnel to accomplish its mandate (Klein 2003, p. 205). The robust nature of the mission was made clear both to the local Serb population and authorities and to the Croatian Government and population to the extent that it was in itself preventing any direct resistance (Boothby 2004, 39). Complimentary simple statistical analysis done for this research shows that the crisis in Eastern Slavonia received highly disproportional per-capita resources compared to the other two comprehensive missions in Kosovo and East Timor. In terms of territory area of Eastern Slavonia is approximately 2,600 km², Kosovo is 10,887 km² and East Timor 14,870 km² (Živić 2003; The World Bank Data. (n.d.)). At the time of maximum monthly deployment,

there were 5,378 soldiers in Eastern Slavonia which means that there were 2.07 soldiers per square kilometre or 1 soldier per 36 inhabitants of the region. This number is calculated based on the 1991 Census which put the entire population of the region at 193,513 individuals while the UN's estimate for 1995 was that there are between 120,000 and 150,000 inhabitants (Bing 2008, 342). If we are to imagine a mission of similar characteristics in for example Trentino-Alto Adige it would have 28,597 mission's staff deployed based on the 2011 population or 28,189 based on territory (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica 2015). In comparison to the UNTAES, in the case of Kosovo maximum per capita deployment was 1 per 369 inhabitants or 0.44 per square kilometre and in East Timor it was 1 per 88 inhabitants or 0.67 per square kilometre (Global Policy Forum 1. (n.d.); Global Policy Forum 2. (n.d.)). Small area, clearly defined political outcomes and proximity to global centre facilitated the deployment of the UNTAES mission and made it relatively straightforward while commitment to preserving the model after Rwanda and Bosnia motivated contributing states.

Following this general overview of the conflict and the UNTAES mission, we will now *travel through time* to reach the point distant enough from the conflict to be called the long-term context. This research was faced with the conceptual challenge of how to define a long-term post-conflict context in which to analyse the consequences of the UN's transitional administration. Need to understand the long-term evolution of the local narratives related to various conflicts is regularly stated in the discipline's literature yet efforts to analyse them are less common. Part of the problem certainly is in the short attention span given to each crisis leading to what Roland Paris calls a 'cult of relevance' (2001, as cited in Barma, 2017, 20). Definition of the long-term context is for our purposes relevant to the point at which we can research it in the Eastern Slavonian context. We, therefore, use a bit of interdisciplinary help from the area studies of post-Cold-War East Europe. Inductively, a future researcher may analyse case-specific characteristics and develop a generalizable definition applicable more broadly.

At the end of the Cold War countries of East Bloc and Non-aligned Yugoslavia entered into what is known as the Transition. Characteristics of transitional societies are the transformation of a centrally planned or market socialist economy into a market one. The conclusion of the process of the enlargement of the European Union may be considered as the endpoint of transition at which countries are exiting the phase of intensive economic and institutional changes and direct asymmetric external involvement. In the case of Southeast Europe, this process was initiated with what is called the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP). This leads to the conclusion that the formal exceptional stage at which local political elites in Eastern Slavonia

were exposed to open and institutionalized external governing, monitoring and coercion was finished at the time of the Croatian EU membership in 2013. At that point in time, Croatia as a country was deemed compliant with all of the so-called Copenhagen Criteria and ready to become a full-fledged member of the EU. From this point on, research conceptualize local *long-term effects* as those that are tractable in the post-2013 period. Local narratives and interpretations of what in Foucaultian terms may be called 'history of the present' are analysed to the extent that they are referential to UNTAES experience in the period after 2013.

3. Methods

In this research, we completed content analysis of the digitally available Post-EU membership issues of the local newspapers from the town of Vukovar. We identified the two local publications most closely associated with both majority Croat (*Vukovarske novine*) and minority Serb (*Izvor*) communities. Other local publications which may be published occasionally or by certain special interest groups were not analysed. This selection may lead us to some bias on the judgment of how prominent place topics of our interest may have in all of the local publications on average. Two selected publications differ in their penetration of the local market with *Izvor* being limited mostly to free distribution within the community and minority institutions.

Digitally available issues of *Vukovarske novine* and *Izvor* were analysed in this research to understand how experiences of UNTAES transitional administration shaped perceptions among the political actors in the region. The first notable finding was that there was a surprising and near-complete absence of any significant coverage of the UNTAES experience. Media play a prominent role in the creation of public discourse, as they are the cornerstone of popular culture capable of deep influence on social institutions (Altheide, Schneider 2013, 75). Korson argues that decision-making elites use domestic media to present their own opinions, therefore, turning media into *de facto* mediators of both their constructive and disruptive peacekeeping policies (2015, 355-357). Ross Howard underlines the fact that media have an innate potential to contribute to conflict resolution by contributing to changing disputants' perceptions of each other (Howard et al. 2015). Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung develops the concept of *Peace Journalism* (opposed to *violence journalism*) primarily focused on conflict transformation via 'journalism of attachment' to all (not only 'our') actual and potential victims (Galtung 2003).

This research is conducted via qualitative content analysis of local newspapers in the period since 2013 Croatia's EU membership. The working hypothesis was that local newspapers will provide insight into perceptions, attitudes and forms of communication among local political actors in the region. The category of 'political actors' was deliberately defined in a partially ambiguous and open way to enable inclusion not only of institutional decision-makers, but of notable civil society pressure and interest groups such as war veterans and non-governmental organizations. Limited space of public life (Vukovar is a rather small town) enabled us to keep track of all the collected data. The same fact removed the need for the usage of any highly complex software data analysis tools.

Qualitatively, media in Eastern Slavonia are often dependent on public or politically aligned private funding for their operational costs that potentially makes them an attractive mouthpiece for local political elites and their wishes. Two media sources were analysed in a systematic fashion and those are Croatian language newspaper *Vukovarske novine* and Serbian language *Izvor*. Both Croatian and Serbian languages are simply standardized varieties of pluricentric Serbo-Croatian language and both varieties are mutually intelligible (often locally undistinguishable) in their spoken form. An ordinary native speaker cannot easily differentiate the nationality of a resident of Eastern Slavonia based only on their autochthonous accent. *Vukovarske novine* are published in shared Gaj's Latin alphabet making them fully intelligible to both communities. While Serbian standard language uses both Gaj's Latin and Serbian Cyrillic alphabet (two alphabets have perfect one-to-one congruence), *Izvor* magazine is published in Cyrillic alphabet making it challenging or inaccessible to Croat readership. While this insistence on Cyrillic is not present in Serb media at the national level in Croatia, this fact in itself provided interesting evidence on the insistence on cultural difference or specificity. Both analysed newspapers are published in the town of Vukovar. Vukovar is the largest settlement in Eastern Slavonia and a characteristically multi-ethnic town. Many other settlements in Eastern Slavonia are predominantly ethnically homogenous with Croat, Serb, and Hungarian or Pannonian Rusyn majority. More importantly, most of them do not have independent local media production. Audio-visual production of local radio stations and TV studios from Eastern Slavonia was not analysed due to the inaccessibility of their digital archives for the purposes of this research.

Croatian language *Vukovarske novine* is a biweekly publication published since 1992, after the Serbian forces took control over the town. The biweekly was initially published in exile on the territory under the control of the Croatian Government. *Vukovarske novine* is the official newspaper of the

City of Vukovar and as such, they are nominally targeted at the entire population, yet in this case, they are analysed as representative of narratives of Croat political elites. Serbian language newspaper *Izvor* is published by the Joint Council of Municipalities (ZVO), an elected consultative *sui generis* body representing Serbs in Eastern Slavonia. Its incomplete archive is not digitally available for the entire period of Croatian EU membership.

Vukovarske novine was initially analysed from the beginning of the Croatian EU membership up to issue number 677 on 25 January 2019. The archive of the newspaper is published on the Croatian language website of the radio station *Hrvatski radio Vukovar*. *Izvor*, published by the Joint Council of Municipalities, was initially analysed from its issue 158 on 4 January 2017 up to issue 217 on 8 May 2019 making it in total 59 of more recent issues or 27.17% of all issues of the newspaper up to that date. There was a certain disparity on periods initially analysed in this research dependent on the availability of the resources in digital form. Therefore, additional analysis was focused on the period of newspaper overlap. Explicitly on the period starting on 4 January 2017 and ending on 25 January 2019.

In that period, 51 issues (158-209) of *Izvor* and 51 issues (626-677) of *Vukovarske novine* were published. In the period analysed, there was in total 205 articles in *Vukovarske novine* dealing with war commemoration or war veterans 21 of which ended up on the front page. As such, this was the most prominent topic in the newspaper. The interpretation of the war presented a clear black and white image without space for peace journalism oriented to the Serb community. Additional 14 articles addressed post-war reconstruction, 4 of which were published on the front page. Only 3 articles primarily dealt with the UNTAES reintegration period none of which was published on the cover page. Serbia or the Serb community were directly criticized (as a primary topic) in 9 articles, one of which was published on the front page. In 10 articles members of a Serb community, mostly official representative were the primary conversation counterpart. Only 7 articles addressed directly or indirectly the World War II period 3 of which were clearly revisionist in nature with one in 642 issue going as far as to provide space for a claim that World War II *Za dom spremni*, Ustaša equivalent of the Nazi salute *Sieg heil*, is legitimate.

In the period analysed, there were in total 29 articles in *Izvor* dealing with war commemoration or war veterans 4 of which ended up on the front page. Many of them challenged the dominant narrative in *Vukovarske novine* and insisted that Serbs were victims as well. Additional 20 articles addressed post-war reconstruction or return, 4 of which were published on the front page. Only 2 articles primarily dealt with the UNTAES reintegration period with one published on the cover page. Other articles came close to addressing the

topic as they dealt with the history of Serb minority institutions established in 1997. Croatian state authorities or leaders were directly criticized (as a primary topic) in 22 articles, 4 of which were published on the front page. There was not a single interview with local Croat representatives published in the newspaper. Our interpretation is that local Croat stakeholders do not see *Izvor* as one attractive media source or audience which they want to address. 58 articles in *Izvor* addressed directly or indirectly the World War II period 11 of which were published on the front page. As such, it was the most prominent topic analysed and it was often focused on the World War II commemorations and criticism of right-wing historical revisionism.

Statistical tables of the primary topics in newspapers' articles

VUKOVARSKÉ NOVINE	Number of articles	Articles on the front page
Croatian War of Independence	205	21
Post-war reconstruction/return	14	4
UNTAES	3	0
Criticism of the other side	9	1
Voice by another side	10	0
World War II	7	0

IZVOR	Number of articles	Articles on the front page
Croatian War of Independence	29	4
Post-war reconstruction/return	20	4
UNTAES	2	1
Criticism of the other side	22	4
Voice by another side	0	0
World War II	58	11

The initial analysis provided an insight that most of the topics of interest are reoccurring and centered around annual anniversary dates. This

anniversary-centred approach led us to a conclusion that despite tension and disagreements on interpretations, the War is narratively positioned in the past. Past which requires commemoration and commitment if it is to remain relevant in the present. That is why local media insisted on topics that they wanted to regularly remind their readers about. Arguably, excessive reference to the war today is primarily the result of the intended achievement of political advantages which political elites can gain from antagonistically instrumentalizing it. In addition, antagonistic style and animosity seen in newspaper articles may in part be of a theatrical nature where it is perceived as an adequate style for a certain commemorative special occasion of increased emotional tension.

There are some shared topics that are interpreted quite differently in Croatian and Serbian sources. The newspaper provides narratives with direct but not primary reference to UNTAES, challenge to international actors and divisive narratives on minority rights and history, especially on the War in Croatia and World War II. Those historical topics are not directly referential to UNTAES yet they are representative of inter-communal divisions some of which led to the original conflict and which UNTAES failed to overcome via trust-building.

The extent to which the UN was successful in the creation of conditions in which perceptions, attitudes and forms of communication were transformed is a measurement of the success of the mission itself. More precisely, in the long-term post-conflict context it is the major measurement of the achievement of liberal peace in Eastern Slavonia. To this respect, direct references, inclusive liberal narratives and narratives on divisive topics were selected and analysed.

Potential evidence of hostile coexistence without open clashes would be perceived as a partial failure to achieve liberal peace goals. Deeply divisive rhetoric and narratives are therefore a form of a challenge to the fulfilment of the long-term UNTAES goals. While there is no physical separation of communities, the central town of Vukovar is still functioning as a socially divided city. The argument is that continued conflict potential is still present despite the fact that at first sight system is functioning peacefully on a daily basis. If there is no continual effort to build functional multicultural coexistence in Eastern Slavonia any future instability in the wider regional or global systems may lead to its resurfacing in the local context.

We, therefore, followed how local political actors initiate, use or answer to any escalation of antagonism and confrontation among communities. We analysed how those tensions and verbal outbursts may be tools in the hands of local or international political actors enabling them to increase their power by sacrificing peaceful coexistence. There may be political leaders

who may benefit from negative developments in Eastern Slavonia. The best insight into their activities is provided in the local media.

4. Findings

In this research, we identified major narratives around which both majority and minority community media in the town of Vukovar deal with their shared conflictual and UNTAES transitional past. The research concluded that two media sources approach the conflict and UNTAES experience by primarily focussing on different aspects of the story. At the same time, both media sources represent their stories as a form of fictional inter-communal dialogue. This is a dialogue in which resignation is implied or expressed over the predominant views in the other community. In this, they easily miss the point that two communities do not share an interest in the same topics. Therefore, their focus is in practice more often than not a one-sided story in which two media sources are focused on issues that are understudied in their counterpart. On the positive note, it may imply that there may be more agreement on topics of interest than it may seem from fictionalized dialogue style in media. At least, there may be wider space for common understanding if there is additional effort to listen to the other side. This in practice means that if actually asked, many Serbs may agree with Croats on issues of missing individuals and war crimes, while many Croats may have much more sympathetic views on minority rights and equal access than one may assume by reading *Vukovarske novine* or *Izvor*. This opens space for various state and non-state actors to do more on the promotion of direct inter-communal dialogue and cooperation.

On a negative note, the fact that there is no common interest and space for dialogue for issues that are of primary importance for another community reaffirms earlier conclusions about Vukovar as a divided and communitarian town. In this respect, nationalist policies were successful in undermining other forms of societal diversity and distinctions and today ethnicity is the primary identifier in social interactions.

While ethnic diversity is one of the primary elements of Vukovar's and Eastern Slavonia's multiculturalism, there is also intra-communal multiculturalism and cross-ethnic intersections. They include class status, regional origin, gender and personal characteristics or worldviews. There is no additional need to elaborate on self-evident cross-ethnic intersections based on class status or gender equality concerns. Regional origin refers here to intersections between the so-called autochthonous Croat, Serb and other communities who live in the region for generations and numerous 20th and

21st century Serb and Croat communities from Bosnia, Dalmatia or elsewhere. Personal characteristics include shared concerns of people with disabilities, people with disabilities from war, LGBT individuals, young or old citizens etc. while shared worldviews distinguish citizens based on their political, art and professional preferences. Recognition and emancipation of each one of these would contribute to multiculturalism in Vukovar and in the rest of the region. Insistence on ethnicity prevents these developments. Disproportional space which local media provide for ethnic identity and concerns further exacerbates the issue and removes space for peace journalism. To some extent, this research makes the same intentional mistake by focusing on ethnic concerns. While confrontational inter-communal relations are of primary concern, this research recognizes the need for future research of intercommunal cooperation.

One of the topics shared by both the *Vukovarske novine* and *Izvor* is the attitude towards the full implementation of minority rights in Vukovar and the rest of Eastern Slavonia. Respect for the highest internationally recognized minority rights was one of the major provisions of the Erdut Agreement, which provided the foundation for the UNTAES administration of the region. Yet again local media focus is different in which for *Izvor* this is the primary topic of concern, while for *Vukovarske novine* it is a clearly secondary one. While *Vukovarske novine* insists that preconditions for the full implementation of all legally guaranteed collective minority rights still do not exist, *Izvor* accuses both local and national authorities of dishonest unwillingness to respect their earlier commitments. In *Vukovarske novine* we do not see direct principal opposition to minority rights (many of them already implemented in Vukovar) yet we regularly can read calls for additional flexibility and calls to postpone implementation of still unconsumed rights (notably official bilingualism) for some unspecified date in the future. *Vukovarske novine*, therefore, imply that minority rights should be conditioned by the dominant group and that they do not automatically belong to a minority community. The postponement narrative condition respect of minority rights with significant improvement of intercommunal relations and understanding which can hardly be achieved if the minority does not feel recognized and protected. In *Vukovarske novine* narrative, this imagined improvement would happen once the local Serb community accepts its collective responsibility and collectively proves its loyalty to the state in a way that is not required from other citizens. There is failure or unwillingness to understand that respect of minority rights is one of preconditions for improved inter-communal relations and not something which will come after the relations are already improved.

Vukovarske novine link the issue of minority rights to the unresolved destiny of Croat victims of the war. In this, they claim that it cannot be just to grant minority community full enjoyment of its cultural rights as long as there are still unresolved issues from the war. In this, they assume that it is up to the majority to grant rights to minorities and that those rights do not simply belong to the minority community. In this line, perceived failure to punish supposed criminals is seen as an obstacle to accepting the achievements of peaceful reintegration. One representative example of this is a statement by the Vukovar's Deputy Mayor who said that truth on missing persons is 'a precondition of the normal coexistence' (author's translation) alleging that local Serbs do know the truth on missing individuals but are unwilling to tell it (Vuleta 24 November 2017,14). At the same time, it is improbable that those two communities will ever have the same interpretation of the war or that every single issue from that period will be resolved even if everyone accepts the painful facts from the past.

In their texts, *Vukovarske novine* tries narratively to link minority policies of public recognition and visibility with experiences of war. This is particularly present in issues from 2013 with titles such as 'The smell of Beirut: 1991 Cyrillic on Tanks, 2013 Cyrillic by Law' (*Vukovarske novine* 6 September 2013). Unfortunately, corresponding *Izvor's* articles were not available in digital format in this period.

In the period of overlapping availability, *Vukovarske novine* provided a platform for explicit challenges to the outcomes of the UNTAES mission with the publication of the following statement by Tomislav Josić, prominent war veteran and one of the leaders of anti-Cyrillic demonstrations sad to the newspaper:

'I wish Vukovar was liberated through the military action, yet others decided to peacefully reintegrate it guided by their own reasons. Vukovar would be a happier and more peaceful town if it was liberated by military...' (Paun 27 January 2017, 2).

One is to keep in mind the context in which earlier military operations against Serb separatists in 1995 (operations Flash and Storm) led to a humanitarian crisis and massive expulsion of the local Serb population in Krajina. While Croatian intervention was widely perceived as legitimate, its humanitarian consequences led Zagreb to estrangement with the United States and European partners. They also motivated Washington to insist on a peaceful resolution of the situation in Eastern Slavonia. Earlier mentioned comment, therefore, is necessarily interpreted as a rejection of inter-ethnic diversity and inter-communal bargaining and power-sharing in Eastern Slavonia. On the other hand, the Serb community's *Izvor* newspaper is more

positive towards the UNTAES experience. Local Serb political leader from the nearby Erdut Municipality gave the following statement:

‘It was here where the agreement that stopped the war was signed. Killing and everything that was ugly was turned into something much better. The UNTAES mission was completed in 1998 and since then the municipality of Erdut lives a life that is completely different’ (Jaćimović-Ivan 21 November 2018, 2-3).

While there was initial unwillingness and suspicion in the Serb community in the region over the UNTAES, it seems that today it is much more positive about the UNTAES experiences. Regrets are expressed only about incomplete implementation or perceived dishonest implementation of what was agreed in the post-UNTAES period.

At the same time, *Izvor* challenges *Vukovarske novine* narrative by the claim that local Serbs are also victims of war and by calls to internationalization and international commitments to minority rights in Eastern Slavonia. In this respect, *Izvor* shows a willingness to engage in dialogue over the deeply emotional issue which is of focal interest for the Croatian community. It tries to subvert the narrative in which Croats are the only victims in the town and Serbs can be nothing else but aggressors. Yet, *Izvor* does not deal extensively with the war crimes which Serbian paramilitaries actually committed in Vukovar. While *Vukovarske novine* extensively dealt with those crimes, *Izvor* missed the opportunity to help the local Serb community to clearly condemn the crimes from a certain liberal and humanistic point. This omission leaves the space entirely for *Vukovarske novine* to provide nationalist or strongly patriotic interpretation of the events.

5. Limitations

As we already mentioned, the fact that there was no organized and structured dialogue between the two communities leaves the space for further investigation and practical work with ordinary citizens. It may be relevant for future sociological researchers of peacebuilding practice to investigate directly what are the attitudes of ordinary citizens in Eastern Slavonia towards both illiberal and liberal elite’s narratives. Our assumption is that citizens may have certain reservations towards both, but that each community may clearly prefer liberal ones. This potentially makes liberal narratives not just better for peace, but actually more legitimate. Yet, at this point, this is no more than a hypothesis that may be tested in the future.

Another point to keep in mind is that the experience of EU membership was often combined with the re-emergence of populist and nationalist

politics. This dynamic may have played important role in Eastern Slavonia as well so future research may find that some of the challenges to UNTAES liberal peace may not exist anymore. Yet, the nationalist revival at the level of Croatia mostly was retracted after the failure of the Cabinet of Tihomir Orešković and the more recent re-election failure of the ex-president Kolinda Grabar Kitarović. National level political elites are now well integrated and socialized in European structures and institutions and they are not anymore a part of the populist Central European challenge to Brussels. This however did not lead to similar changes in Vukovar where both communities elected local representatives more nationalist and less willing to compromise than those at the national level.

6. Conclusion

In this empirical research of the local media in the town of Vukovar in Eastern Slavonia, we discovered that even in the long-term aftermath of the conflict and successful UN transitional administration we can still observe long-lasting inter-communal mistrust, accusations and readiness of political elites to abuse delicate divisions. This discovery raises the important question of just how far does the successful and exemplary peacekeeping administration goes if administered society already has developed a set of formal institutions which exist prior, during and after the mission. It seems that in the context of developed local societal (*Gesellschaft*) institutions even the most successfully planned, run and completed mission may achieve only some of its objectives. If the peacebuilding efforts are more successful in the context of underdeveloped institutions one may read our findings as an argument for critical scholarship thesis on neo-colonial tendencies of peacebuilding. In this sense, peacebuilding is close to state-building and societal construction based on the hegemonic models. If society is already complex and familiar with many of those models, even some exemplary mission may paradoxically be unsuccessful in the transmission of its ideology.

If a society with a developed set of institutions may easily reject (some) liberal peacebuilding proposals, we may ask ourselves for which kind of society the model is developed and best suited? One may argue that the model will work better if there is a clear lack of societal institutions and if the intervening peacebuilders can start from scratch as close as possible. After all, despite all insistence on the local ownership, if this local ownership is not limited to traditional communal (*Gemeinschaft*) institutions seems to create troubles in the implementation of successful missions and in the achievement of their long-term objectives.

This is once again visible in our findings from Eastern Slavonia. It seems that there is widespread agreement in the literature that everything was done right in Eastern Slavonia. The UNTAES' mandate was clear, timeframe defined, outcomes determined, resources and commitment provided, yet beyond the clear success of the avoidance of the direct conflict renewal, the intercommunal rapprochement and trust seem not to be in sight. Local media in Eastern Slavonia are quite deliberately ignorant of the UNTAES experience and to a significant extent stuck in the logic of mistrust and latent confrontation. Instead, to help in the achievement of UNTAES' goals, comparatively developed local institutions and media limited the outcomes of the mission. Some of the major points of division which led to the original war in 1990' are still present in daily discourse and arguably increasingly important and volatile. Unresolved traumas from World War II capable of triggering security dilemma are still one of the central points of disagreement and mutual accusations between communities. Unresolved issues from the last war at the same time represent a huge obstacle in genuine reconciliation leading to what Boothby calls and we can second as an 'uncomfortable multi-ethnic society' (2004, 50).

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