

## ВИШЕ ОД ЗАЈЕДНИЧКОГ НАРАТИВА ПРОШЛОСТИ: ОДВОЈЕНЕ И ИНТЕГРИСАНЕ ШКОЛЕ У ИСТОЧНОЈ СЛАВОНИЈИ

### ДЕО 2

#### УНАКРСНО ПОРЕЂЕЊЕ

#### – ЗВАНИЧНИ И ПОЈЕДИНАЧНИ НАРАТИВИ ИЗ ПРОШЛОСТИ

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## BEYOND JOINT NARRATIVE OF THE PAST: SEGREGATED AND INTEGRATED SCHOOLS IN EASTERN SLAVONIA

### PART 2

#### CROSS-COMPARISON

#### – OFFICIAL AND INDIVIDUAL NARRATIVES OF THE PAST

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### ABSTRACT

#### Key words:

history, narratives,  
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Educational systems in post-conflict societies often serve as loci where historical narratives of different groups clash and cause contention. The issue of which or whose version of the past is taught in schools may become, for different communities, a question of their cultural and social survival. Eastern Slavonia serves as a case study to explore how the youths in segregated and integrated schools have been affected by the master historical narratives of the 1990s' war in Croatia and how this translates into their views of the Self and the Other. It particularly focuses on the official narratives as presented in history textbooks and their interplay with the individual historical narratives of school youths in Eastern Slavonia, Croatia. The findings of the study show that history is relevant to participants' present lives while production and reproduction of history are not only the purview of historians and elites, but it also happens at the grassroots. Individual narratives about recent history show dissent from official narratives, which is evident in the questioning of the in-group's responsibility for the wrongs committed against the relevant Other. The purpose of this study is to learn from the grassroots about the ways of dealing with the legacy of contentious past, and how this local knowledge can be used to promote interethnic understanding and tolerance

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as well as prevention of future violence. This study aims to contribute to the furthering of conflict resolution capacities through a better understanding of key dynamics of memorialization and reception of historical narratives at the communal level.

### САЖЕТАК

#### Кључне речи:

историја,  
наративи, сећање,  
образовање, млади,  
конфликт,  
Источна Славонија

Образовни системи у постконфликтним друштвима често служе као места где се наративи различитих група сукобљавају и узрокују конфликт. Питање о томе која се или чија верзија прошлости учи у школама може постати за различите заједнице питање њиховог културног и социјалног опстанка. Источна Славонија је фокус овог рада кроз коју ће се истражити утицај историјских мастер наратива о рату из деведесетих у Хрватској на младе у одвојеним и интегрисаним школама и какав је утицај тих наратива на њихово виђење себе и других. Ова студија такође истражује званичне наративе из уџбеника историје и њихов утицај на појединачне историјске наративе младих у Источној Славонији. Добијени налази показују да је историја битна за животе учесника истраживања, док креирање и репродукција историје није само делокруг историчара и елита него и појединаца у најширим слојевима друштва. Наративи појединаца о скорој историји показују неслагања са званичним наративима, што се види у испитивању одговорности за недела које је једна група починила другој групи. Циљ студије је да се сазна како се обични људи суочавају са наслеђем конфликтне прошлости и како се то локално знање може користити за промоцију међуетничког разумевања и толеранције, као и за превенцију насиља у будућности. Ова студија тежи да допринесе усавршавању стратегија за решавање конфликта кроз боље разумевање кључне динамике меморијализације и пријема историјских наратива на нивоу заједница.

Let us begin the comparison between the official and individual narratives of the recent war with the focus on how the themes of *in-group reconciliation*, *victimhood*, *aggression*, and *nation building sites of memory* from the textbooks are operationalized and reconstructed at the grassroots' level. Students' narratives only partially echo official narratives of the past presented in the history textbooks. History textbooks are relevant testimonies of the official narratives of the past as well as loci where the state's ideological and political axes converge. How people position themselves to the official narrative indicates individual and collective choices that have become what can be called a living memory – a memory that is often determined by individuals' present condition and their orientation towards the future.

For in-group reconciliation to take place, the key is the discourse that positions different factions within a framework of victimhood. Positioning *us* as victims or rightful defenders of a just cause, and placing *Them* on the opposite side as vicious, illegitimate aggressors resonates clearly in the narratives of students of Croatian ethnicity in the segregated model. A clear parallel between the individual and the official discourses can be seen in phrases, such as: *just war; we fought for our freedom; we were defending our homeland; they attacked us; they were the aggressors and not us*. The theme of victimhood is closely connected to the theme of patriotism that functions in individual narratives to bond the in-group at the expense of the out-group. The interplay of victimhood and patriotism creates dichotomous realities

for the subjects, clearly delineating differences between *us* and *them*, which function as enablers of in-group coherence and bonding based on differentiation from the other. The theme of patriotism is more prevalent in the narratives of Croat students, particularly in the segregated model.

The meanings of patriotism in the individual narratives converge on many aspects with the meanings underpinning the theme of in-group reconciliation in the textbooks. The meanings related to in-group reconciliation function not only as a tool for the reconciliation of the two factions or two ideologies, partisan/communist and ustasha/right wing nationalist that have caused a constant rift among Croats from the period of the Second World War. Rather, those meanings have become a connecting tissue of a newly emerging nation that reinvented itself through a powerful narrative coined by the elites that transcended past deficiencies and glories and created a new set of values based on morality and legitimacy of past action. The meanings of patriotism and in-group reconciliation operate within a system of collective enterprise towards achieving freedom, liberation, and national emancipation.

The themes of patriotism, victimhood, and in-group reconciliation serve to operationalize morality and legitimacy of past action of the state. Those themes reflect aspirations towards acquiring the status of unquestionable, mythical, deeply ingrained dogmas in the national consciousness. However, although these themes clearly resonate in the narratives of Croat students in both models, we can also trace the themes of economic uncertainty and disillusionment in the narratives of students of both ethnicities, which are a consequence of the contradiction of the actual and expected. Patriotic ideals of freedom, belonging to a nation and the promise of a better future as presented in official textbooks' narratives are, often juxtaposed to the actual lack of opportunities, unemployment, and social stagnation, particularly in the integrated model. Specifically, discourses of trauma, economic uncertainty, and post-traumatic stress disorder are

closely tied to the themes of victimhood and patriotism that in a certain way also counter the function of in-group reconciliation in the history textbooks, which is based on legitimacy and morality of past action.

In the segregated model, the official narrative resonates more in the narratives of Croat student participants. A statement such as "...we fought a liberating war, and aggression was done against us..." clearly echo the prevalent theme from the official narrative of 'us' as defenders/victims and 'them' as aggressors. However, even in the segregated model there is dissonance between the actual and expected, which usually emerges in conjunction with particular events from recent history such as the trials in The Hague or the death of President Tadjman. Statements such as "...General Gotovina's trial is ironic. He is a hero and not a criminal..."; "...We fought for our freedom. I don't see how this could have happened..."; or "...the most important event from recent history is the death of our first president Franjo Tadjman because after that everything went downhill...", all indicate contradictions between the actual and expected in students' narratives.

The economic uncertainty and dissonance between the actual and expected is very much a part of the Serb students' narratives when they reflect on recent history. They describe their present living conditions as a direct consequence of the war and dissolution of Yugoslavia. These conditions are manifested as the limited and obstructed access to employment as well as political and cultural underrepresentation. The theme of human rights and justice that occurs in the narratives of both Serb and Croat students stands in contrast to the narratives of in-group reconciliation, victimhood, and aggression in the textbooks. Such disconnection is not surprising since the students do have their own counter-narratives of the recent past.

The nation building or patriotic narratives, as such, imply a clear distinction between right and wrong, *us* as moral, legitimate and *others* as immoral, lacking and illegitimate. Such structural simplicity can be traced not only

in the Croatian nation-building discourse but also in Serbian counter-patriotic narratives. While the explicit structure of the story differs, the same deep latent narrative structure in both types of discourses – nation-building/patriotic and counter-patriotic – depicts the ancient struggle between good and evil. The elements of such narratives include protagonists that are on opposite sides, a challenge that the good have to overcome after facing many obstacles, and the victory of good over evil. Below are examples of core storylines of the Croatian patriotic nation-building discourse and the Serb counter discourse traced in students' narratives.

**Table 2. Patriotic and counter-patriotic storylines in narratives of Croat and Serb students**

Croat patriotic/nation-building narrative	Serb counter-patriotic narrative
We have always wanted our independent state, but our dreams were always frustrated by the others.	We wanted to stay in Yugoslavia where we felt safer and where our rights could be protected. The Yugoslav army was protecting the borders of Yugoslavia.
They started the aggression against us. Milosevic sent his troops to attack and kill us.	They started to arm themselves, kill and dismiss our people. Everything they did reminded us of 1941. Serbia came to our defense.
We fought bravely, lost many of our soldiers and won even though the other side was better armed and was more numerous.	When troops from Serbia withdrew, we were left without protection and betrayed – our people were killed, exiled and destroyed.
We have our independent state and are looking forward to a better future for European integration.	We have lost our rights, benefits – we are citizens of the second order.

Narratives around the human rights and justice offset both Croat patriotic and Serb counter-patriotic narratives while standing at odds with the themes of in-group reconciliation, victimhood, and aggression. They appear simultaneously in student narratives regardless of ethnicity, although they are slightly more prevalent in the integrated model and with Serb participants. Human rights and justice narratives are related to respondents' inquiry into the accountability and responsibility of their respective in-groups for acts perpetrated against the out-groups in the recent war. Participants from both ethnic groups tend to use

similar logic, phrases, and metaphors to reflect on their in-groups' accountability for actions taken during and after the war. This suggests that such discourses may provide entry points for complexity and curiosity that may lead to the transformation of entrenched positions and dichotomous, contentious narratives through learning, attentiveness and openness to the existence of an alternative, more inclusive story.

**Table 3. Human rights and justice storylines in narratives of Croat and Serb students**

Human rights and justice narrative	
Croats	Serbs
I don't believe that Croatian generals are all heroes and Serbs are killers.	Both Croatian and Serb generals were called to answer in the Hague for what they did.
This war was not only a defensive war.	We can see through events related to the Hague Tribunal that all sides are unwilling to cooperate; they are unwilling to accept responsibility.
There are many questions that our leaders cannot give answers to because they are part of the old establishment. They do not want to accept responsibility.	Why was the process of capturing the fugitives so long?

Narratives around the human rights and justice theme occur mostly in the integrated model and among Serb respondents. However, the significance of such narratives should not be measured only by the quantity, but also by their very occurrence. For example, there are a number of Croat students that dissent from the mainstream patriotic, nation building narrative and challenge it, which points to the ability of individuals to recognize that crimes have been perpetrated against the relevant Others. This shows critical thinking and dissent as well as the individual agency that take the individual out of his/her safety zone. Movement across ethnic lines, willingly losing part of the self and embarking into the unknown is often a necessary ingredient of emerging peace.

The representations of Homeland/Civil War, as well as the Second World War, play an important role in the textbooks not only in framing in-group political reconciliation but also in legitimizing and delegitimizing certain positions towards events of the recent war of the

1990s as well as delineating roles of *us* as victims and *them* as aggressors. The representations of the Homeland/Civil War as well as the Second World War in students' narratives are not merely learned or repeated, but there are also other issues and themes attached to them. The importance of being a victim is the key for legitimizing one's narrative and position and we can trace the victimhood storylines in narratives of students in both ethnicities. For many of the Serb student participants, the Second World War is deeply interconnected with the recent war in Croatia. The tragedy of Serbs in Croatia in the recent war is an extension of their plight from the Second World War and the symbolic function of *lieu de memoire* has unprecedented value as a testament of this suffering. The connectivity across decades between large scale ethnic cleansing of Serbs from Croatia in Operations Storm and Lightning in 1998 and the plight of Serbs symbolized most vociferously in the sites of memory such as Jasenovac and Stara Gradiška, reinforce the continuation of unmourned suffering and victimhood that stretches through time. The importance of victimhood is relevant for both ethnicities, regardless of war outcomes and despite current conditions or future plans. The narrative of victimhood is connected to a value-belief system of nations that seem to be far more important for the respondents than turbulences of the present day.

## DISCUSSION

In contrast to the textbooks' simplistic and mostly dichotomous narratives, individual narratives are not as simple as they may appear to be at a first glance. First, there is a discrepancy in both groups' understanding of the past since their memories are closely connected to their present living conditions as well as their orientations toward the future. Moreover, there is a potential for an alternative story that transcends ethnonational rift. The common ground in the individual narratives of both groups is a certain degree of awareness and reflection about the consequences of war, which is exemplified in the theme of economic

uncertainty that points to the dissonance between the actual and expected.

An important theme of human rights and justice, which is related to respondents' inquiry into the accountability and responsibility of their respective in-groups for acts perpetrated against the out-group in the recent war, is another point of agreement between respondents of the two groups. Both groups, regardless of educational model, speak of this theme using similar phrases, metaphors, and syntactic structures as they relate them to the recent war. This theme is even more important because, in many instances, the respondents are surprised about how its verbalization leads to personal reflection about the meaning of violence and aggression. This is not to say that the participants have undergone a transformation, but one can claim that those were instances of personal insights for both the respondents and the researcher creating a platform on which to build alternative narratives of inclusivity, reconciliation, and common purpose while appreciating their acknowledged ethnic, religious and other differences.

Historical narratives promoted through educational systems tend to be centripetal, monochromatic and intended to bring together and unify a community [35, 36]. However, the realities on the ground show that once the official historical narratives 'touch the ground', they tend to have a life of their own and are multiplied through centrifugal forces that stem from experiences that individuals are exposed to in a certain relational context. Such complexity that emerges at the individual level is often invisible or disregarded, but it is by paying attention to these multiple voices that we can actually trace solutions for the current negative peace. Historical narratives often serve as a catalyst for the emergence of current underlying problems affecting the community, such as economic uncertainty, unemployment, and dissonance between the expected and actual, exclusion, nationalism and structural violence. What the findings show is that we need to scratch the surface of problems that are seemingly related to the topic of contentious

history, that the ground zero for our views of history is our present, and that multiple voices at the individual and interpersonal levels must be properly recognized.

When societies are shattered by war, lives are lost and people try to find ways to deal with the past. Under such circumstances, the need to reconceptualize others and themselves in relation to what happened in the past becomes paramount. This study shows that the function of history, which is intended to foster a compliant citizen with a sense of belonging to a particular group and order, is *out of sync* with processes on the ground. At the communal level, we can see a different positioning in relation to the official historical narrative that takes us into the realm of unexplored and relevant clues about the workings of history in the real world.

The majority of participants in this study belonging to both groups, regardless of the model of schooling, emphasized the relevance of history for their present life. However, the relevance was not necessarily seen as positive. Quite the contrary; there is a rejection of history in the segregated model that students of both ethnicities see as a tool for creating interethnic divisions. Historical narratives, for Serb students, seem to be a vehicle for positioning them as outsiders, excluded and marginalized. Croat students tend to connect recent history to their difficult economic circumstances and social immobility. Students' positioning in relation to the recent past is co-produced within communities, in schools, and at home. This is not a mono-directional and linear process, but rather a multidirectional, complex and often unpredictable one.

The findings also show that production and reproduction of history are not only the purview of historians and elites. This process also happens at the grassroots. The strong sense of frustration with regards to the past and dealing with the past in the segregated model shows participants' desire to reclaim their agency in the face of narratives that engender oppressive practices. What they actually reject is consent and participation in practices that generate renewed tensions, radicalization and ethnic divisions that are part of their every-day reality.

The findings highlight students' capacity to think critically even when faced with constraining circumstances. Although this is not a major trend in both models, occurring more in the integrated model, the emergence of critical thinking shows that the possibilities for positive peace and true reconciliation do exist, but are left untapped due either to the lack of awareness or intentional disregard. It appears that the interactive patterns in the integrated model are more conducive to the development of critical thinking among students.

The issue of appropriation [37] or, as some other authors call it, reception [38] of history, has not been widely researched. In this study, an appropriated historical narrative is not seen as a deep-seeded part or an attribute of an individual's identity, but rather as a socially and communally mediated form that is in constant flux. Wertsch has found that individuals can appropriate constructs of official history while at the same time believing in alternative and dissenting versions of the past [37]. What is necessary is to go beyond acknowledging that the appropriation of a historical narrative is diverse and complex, towards exploring points where those narratives converge and diverge. For example, the findings of this study suggest that such converging points in the individual narratives of both groups are related to a certain degree of awareness and reflection about the consequences of war, which is exemplified in the theme of economic uncertainty that emphasizes the dissonance between the actual and expected.

Another point of convergence in the narratives of both groups and in both models is human rights and justice, which is related to respondents' inquiry into the accountability and responsibility of their respective in-groups for acts perpetrated against the out-group in the recent war. Both groups, regardless of educational model, speak of this theme using similar phrases, metaphors, and syntactic structures as they relate them to the recent war. Such points where participants of both ethnicities, regardless of the schooling model, express similar views and concerns that dissent from the official discourses,

enable the researcher to imagine a platform on which to build alternative narratives, or practical recommendations, around topics that truly matter to the participants.

Human rights and justice discourses show participants' critical examination of the responsibility of their respective in-groups for acts perpetrated against the out-groups in the recent war. Participants of both ethnicities tend to use similar logic, phrases, and metaphors to reflect on their in-groups' accountability for actions taken during and after the war. Clearly departing from monochromatic official narratives, the existence of human rights and justice discourses in individual narratives suggests that they are not only much more complex but that the possibility of creating a shared reality already exists on the ground. Such a dissent from the official discourse shows that the participants' views of recent history are closely linked to their dire present conditions as well as future expectations. It also shows a certain degree of awareness and reflection about the consequences of war.

## CONCLUSIONS

History education has been seen as a tool for the formation of the informed, critical and accountable citizen [39]. However, the humanizing function of history in situations where humanity has been wounded, destroyed and almost lost, as often happens in war, is a category not widely explored and put in context. History is inevitable, whether we talk about the history that we experience directly or distant history that is transmitted to us via books, narratives, and other media. Realizing our place in the historical continuum raises our awareness of belonging to a common humanity.

The ability to control the concept of truth, in our case historical truth, carries with it the ability to shape the view of reality and to influence legitimacy, power relations and the future itself. In this context, we must admit that people often see fragmented reality and pieces of truth, while the 'official truth' is being controlled from above. If the context in question is one in which a group has lost the

ability to interact with the structure in the way in which it feels it ought, then we are dealing with a situation in which such deprivation and frustration increase the propensity to violence. The resistance of minority members in complying and interacting with the structure, its rules and practices – be it education system, history classes or historical narratives – can be an indication of a serious dysfunction within a system that may result in conflict. We do not see such dysfunction only with the minority group that has found itself in a disadvantaged position, but also with students belonging to the majority group whose expectations were thwarted as a consequence of the past actions of their forefathers.

Change comes when contradictions in behavior become visible at the intersections of agency and structure, i.e. when practical consciousness that informs everyday routine is being questioned. That is exactly what we discover in students' narratives when they question the responsibility of their in-groups for the atrocities committed during the war. They show resistance to various social practices and behaviors, and in that way, they produce and reproduce social structures in an ever-evolving process. In other words, a society can be seen as a system in which a pattern of narratives and actions between agents is sustained over time while structure represents the medium through which those narratives and actions are transmitted, and which enables or constrains them through time.

Interestingly, findings of this study show that participants' positioning and orientations towards the present and future trigger processes of inquiry into the officially accepted historical narratives. By exploring the resonance of historical narratives and identifying "enabling and disabling patterns and assumptions which run across the system, we can develop mutual understanding, providing a framework within which evidence, which is often discounted, can be brought within the boundaries of the inquiry" [40]. By acknowledging the confines of official stories about the recent past within traditional educational systems, we can stimulate new ideas and practices emerging from

the communities themselves that are taking responsibility seriously.

Going back to the individual and his or her capacity to act and think as an agent of positive change requires a change in thinking about local communities as passive and marginal. By identifying points of divergence from the official narrative and convergence in narratives between two ethnic groups, we are actually *re-politicizing* the grassroots – the local – by uncovering their agency.

Common ideas across ethnic divides with the potential for generating a movement exist

at the local level. They are, in a way, a response to the state structures' inability to address the needs and frustrations at the grassroots. They also signal to the local institutions working with communities for peace that spaces for collaborative learning have yet to be established. Learning history in post-violent conflict contexts requires the involvement of the communities that will supplement the state promoted curricula and programs with learning how to interact with the Other.

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