

Chapter in the volume *Ruling By Other Means: State Mobilized Movements* (2020), Edited by Grzegorz Ekiert, Harvard University, Massachusetts, Elizabeth J. Perry, Harvard University, Massachusetts, Xiaojun Yan, University of Hong Kong, published by Cambridge University Press

10

Mobilizing against Change

Veteran Organizations as a Pivotal Political Actor

Danijela Dolenc and Daniela Širinić

10.1 Introduction

On 18 November 2016, around 100,000 people marched from the Vukovar city centre to the cemetery, commemorating Vukovar Remembrance Day, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the day when Vukovar fell into the hands of Serbian occupying forces in 1991. The event was organized by local veteran organizations and attended by the prime minister and his cabinet, the president, army chiefs of staff, numerous MPs, generals, and other notables from the political elite. Following the September election that year, both the parliamentary majority and the presidency were in the hands of the right-wing party Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica (HDZ), and the entire party leadership was in attendance. Participants came to Vukovar from all parts of Croatia, including some from neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina, many of them draped in Croatian flags, others carrying military insignia from the Homeland War. After laying the wreaths at the city cemetery to commemorate soldiers and civilians who died in Vukovar during the war, the Catholic archbishop held mass.

Though this was a mass gathering, we justifiably hesitate to call it a 'protest'. The organizers were not making claims against the government. To the contrary, the prime minister, the president of Croatia and top government representatives were heading the march, while the powerful leadership of the Catholic Church was shaping key messages during the event. Indeed, this event bears striking resemblance to the one described in the [introduction](#), organized in Warsaw by the Law and Justice (PiS) party in April 2016 to commemorate the Smolensk plane crash. In both cases the ruling party coordinated and actively supported the mass mobilization, defying the standard scenario from contentious politics literature according to which protests represent weapons of the weak. Both in Warsaw and in Vukovar, what we saw was *pro-active mobilization*, where the state mobilizes social actors to enhance its own legitimacy and pre-empt potential challenges by the opposition. Such collective actions instigated by the state to advance

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its interests seem to be best captured by the concept of State-Mobilized Movements (SMMs).

In the case of Croatia, further insights about this dynamic can be drawn by comparing the described event from 2016 with the same Remembrance Day ceremony from three years earlier. On 18 November 2013, around 70,000¹ people marched from the Vukovar city centre to the cemetery. The event was organized by veteran organizations, responsible for directing participants through the designated route and ensuring everyone's safety. Like in 2016, the event was attended by the prime minister and his ministers, the president of Croatia, army chiefs of staff, many retired generals, MPs, heads of political parties, and other notable guests. The key distinction was in the fact that both the parliamentary majority and the presidency were at that time held by a coalition of Social Democrats and Liberals. At one point during the march, veterans blocked the way for government representatives, not allowing them to proceed along the designated route towards the cemetery. National TV stations were broadcasting perplexed and worried faces of the heads of state as they stood in the middle of a crowded street. In the next moment, they started moving backwards, giving up on completing the route to the city cemetery. The veteran organizations successfully prevented top government officials from taking part in the closing ceremony.

What was happening there? Why did the veteran organizations block government representatives from marching to the cemetery? Was this a protest, a war commemoration, or both? These two contentious episodes are intended to introduce the main protagonists in our analysis of the dynamic between veteran organizations as the main agent of protest politics and the right-wing political party HDZ, which dominates Croatia's politics since the country's independence in 1990. Between winning the first multi-party election in 1990 and the current government in 2019, HDZ has headed the state for more than twenty years. In addition to heading the government after seven out of nine rounds of parliamentary elections so far, in many counties and municipalities HDZ has enjoyed uninterrupted rule throughout the past three decades. It seems fair therefore to treat it as a hegemonic political actor which, though operating in a multi-party environment, is in many ways closely entwined with state institutions since their inception in the 1990s. As a political party that grew during the 1990–5 Homeland War, HDZ has learned how to rely on mass mobilization as 'a tactic of the state to exercise power and promote its own objectives' (see the [introduction](#)). Through a series of decisions and events that we describe in this chapter, HDZ has managed to, firstly, successfully claim war victory and completion of the state-building project as the

Research funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, IZ11Z0_166540 – PROMYS as part of the project 'DISOBEDIENT DEMOCRACY: A Comparative Analyses of Contentious Politics in the European Semi-periphery'.

¹ According to regional TV station Slavonska Televizija, broadcast on 18 November 2013, available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=plDk9XqaHGQ (accessed 14 February 2020).

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party's doing; and secondly, tie a large veteran population into a clientelist relationship with the party. As a result, when HDZ is in power – which has been almost always – veteran organizations proactively mobilize in order to strengthen HDZ legitimacy and weaken oppositional claims to power. In contrast, during the two terms when HDZ was in opposition, veteran mobilization became contentious, aiming to destabilize the incumbent government and rally the vote for HDZ.

In this chapter we first describe the broad social mobilization for the war that created the veteran population and the dominant role of HDZ in the politics of the 1990s. We also outline the institutional architecture of veterans' rights that was implemented under HDZ governments in the 1990s, creating a client–patron relationship between this political party and the veteran population. In the second part of the chapter we focus on the period after 2000, analysing this interaction both in the arena of political institutions and in the protest arena. Recent analyses suggest that veterans represent HDZ's voting constituency, while veteran organizations' recourse to citizens' petitions for referenda reveal both close ties to HDZ and at the same time some serious friction. Veteran organizations are those that ultimately possess the capacity for mass mobilization, which means that the power relationship between them and the party is not entirely asymmetric. Since 2000 HDZ was in opposition twice – 2000–3 and 2011–15 – so we contrast periods when HDZ was in power with those when they were in opposition in order to establish whether levels of contention by veteran groups support the logic of a party-mobilized movement. Using protest event data, we show that in periods when HDZ was not in power the level of contentious mobilization of veterans was substantially higher; we suggest that the aim of this mobilization was to reinstate HDZ into government.

10.2 A Soldiers' State

The case of Croatia fundamentally departs from the general storyline of the third wave of democratization in Eastern Europe as a top-down, elite-driven 'transition' to multiparty electoral democracy and capitalism (Merkel, 2011; Dolenc, 2016). This is a country which underwent democratization through war (Dolenc, 2013), so the new state was born out of large-scale nationalist mobilization.

Still within the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), in May 1990 the first multiparty election was held in Croatia, in which HDZ won 42 per cent of the vote and 58 per cent of seats. Soon after that, the Yugoslav National Army confiscated all weapons from the Croatian Territorial Defence, setting in motion a series of belligerent steps that led to war. Not being able to rely on existing defence institutions, the new Croatian state founded the Croatian National Guard (CNG), initially as a crossover between police and army (Marijan, 2008), which was in 1991 transformed into the Armed Forces of the Republic of Croatia (AFRC). The armed insurrection of Serbs

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populated areas of Croatia escalated into full-blown war, and in 1991 a quarter of Croatia's territory was occupied by insurgent forces (Šterc and Pokos, 1993; Živić, 2005). Full numbers for participation in the AFRC are difficult to ascertain. According to Marijan (2008), at the end of 1991 the AFRC had 200,000 people under arms. Other sources estimate that around 300,000 people were under arms during 1991–2.² According to Smerić (2009), mass participation in the armed forces of the Republic of Croatia during the Homeland War therefore represents one of the fundamental formative institutions of contemporary Croatian state, impacting the entire institutional configuration of Croatian society.

The Official Register of Veterans, published only in 2012, estimates the number of veterans³ in Croatia at 503,112. If this number is correct, veterans make up about 12 per cent of the population of Croatia,⁴ and so it seems safe to say that in the 1990s this society underwent dramatic social upheaval and mobilization. It is also worth mentioning that Croatian society draws on a legacy of mass mobilization from during and after World War II. According to Unkovski Korica (2017), in the spring of 1945 the People's Liberation Movement (Narodno-Oslobodilački Pokret, NOP) in Croatia numbered 800,000 people. Similarly, at the end of 1947 the Popular Front had 955,450 members (Spehnjak, 1987). Rothschild (1993) describes the Yugoslav regime in the 1940s and 1950s as possessing a 'deep reservoir of authentic popularity, prestige, and legitimacy that Tito, his Partisan movement and his Communist party amassed during the war' (p. 105).

This experience with party-led mass mobilization from Yugoslav times might help in part account for HDZ's large party membership, as well as its growing experience with and reliance on mass mobilization as a way of exercising power while in government. Čular and Nikić Čakar (2018) categorize HDZ in the 1990s as a charismatic movement party. As numerous analyses have shown (see e.g. Kasapović, 1996; Zakošek, 2002; Čular, 2005; Dolenec, 2013), HDZ has decisively shaped politics in Croatia. Since 1990, HDZ has been in power for 20 years; out of nine elections, the party was in opposition only twice (Čular and Nikić Čakar, 2018). At the same time, despite being in government most of the time since Croatia's independence, in the early 1990s HDZ was 'the leader of a broad nationalist movement seeking independence and democratization of Croatia' (Čular and Nikić Čakar, 2018, p. 2). Even though it institutionalized into a strong organization with a large membership, the initial

² Prolexis Online Encyclopedia, Miroslav Krleža Institute of Lexicography,

<http://proleksis.lzmk.hr/18243/>

³ We use the term 'veteran' since this is the standard term for this population in academic literature, but in Croatia this population self-identifies with the name 'defenders'. This term was encoded in relevant legislation during the 1990s and is now the most frequently used name for this social group, both by themselves and the general public.

⁴ Croatian Bureau of Statistics quotes 4,284.889 inhabitants in 2011.

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circumstances of its development suggest a resemblance to Kitschelt's (2006) movement parties. The party's rapid growth and Franjo Tuđman's charismatic leadership pushed HDZ towards relying on movement-type linkages with citizens while sidelining formal institutional procedures (Čular and Nikić Čakar, 2018). In parallel, the party grew a strong membership base and a loyal electorate, both of which helped maintain its political dominance. In 1995, the party had 400,000 members, and the number continued to grow until 2001, reaching 432,000 members (Čular, 2010). In contrast, its main competitor party on the left, the Social Democratic Party (SDP), never reached above 30,000 members. In summary, throughout the 1990s more than half a million people in Croatia were party members, an overwhelming majority of which were HDZ supporters (Čular, 2010).

The Yugoslav war legacy also meant that Croatia had experience with welfare programmes for veterans before the Homeland War. Partisans who fought in the Second World War in Croatia were awarded the status of veterans during SFRY, and many received state-insured pensions⁵. The rights of Homeland War veterans were legislated from 1994 onwards, under successive HDZ governments. Significant changes to the legislation were made in 1996, 2001, and 2004 (Begić, Sanader, and Žunec, 2007). By 2004, the law awarded thirty-seven different material entitlements to this population, most importantly pensions, disability compensation, health services, housing, child allowance, unemployment benefits, financial help in securing employment, tax cuts, scholarships, guaranteed university entry, and others (Begić, Sanader, and Žunec, 2007). According to the last available report⁶ published by the Croatian government in 2013, the total annual material compensation to veterans amounted to 5 per cent of the state budget and around 1.8 per cent of Croatia's GDP.⁷ Veteran pensions represent the largest share of material compensations. Of the total number of veterans, in 2016, 72,001 were recipients of state pensions, 80 per cent of which receive disability pensions (Croatian Pension Fund 3/2016). Veteran pensions are around three times higher than standard pensions and higher than the average net salary (Bađun, 2009). In comparison, in Israel, a welfare state with comprehensive provisions for veterans, fully disabled veterans receive benefits at the level of 66 per cent of the average wage (Gal and Bar, 2000). A comparative study of eleven countries, including the United States, Israel, and Germany, found Croatia at the very top regarding the extent and quality of privileges accorded to veterans (Ferenčak, Kardov, and Rodik, 2003; see also Žunec, 2006; Dobrotić, 2008).

⁵ In 2009, there were 64,000 participants in the Second World War, both partisans and NDH soldiers (Bađun, 2009).

⁶ Reports regarding the implementation costs of veteran-related legislation were discontinued by HDZ coalition governments.

⁷ Historical data on GDP taken from the website of the Central Bank of Croatia, available at www.hnb.hr.

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The Act from 2004 was further amended in 2005; twice in 2007; twice in 2009; in 2010, 2011, and 2012; three times in 2013, and once in 2014; an entirely new Act with significant increases in rights and material entitlements was introduced in 2017. In other words, after the HDZ government put in place welfare state entitlements for veterans in the mid-1990s, all subsequent governments were compelled to deal with these state programmes for veterans. Data from the Croatian Policy Agendas Project (Širinić, 2018; Širinić et al., 2016)⁸ shows that, after the initial focus on building the armed forces, from mid-1992 to 2015 there is remarkable stability in the share of government attention on the policy issue of veterans and their dependents. The key question is whether veteran benefits get extended or reduced under HDZ and SDP governments respectively. Under the first SDP-led government 2001–2003, state pensions, disability support, and other benefits for veterans were reduced and discontinued (Begić, Sanader, and Žunec, 2007). Conversely, the largest increases in the number of disability pension entitlements for veterans occurred in 1999, 2007, and most recently in 2017, election years when HDZ was in power (Stubbs and Zrinščak, 2011). As an illustration, the number of disabled veterans registered in the pension system grew three times between 2003 and 2010, years of the first and second Sanader government, with the largest increase in election year 2007, with 5,500 new insurances issued for veterans with disability (Bađun, 2011). After returning to power, HDZ adopted a new Act on Veterans in 2017, substantially increasing various material benefits for this population, reducing thresholds for accessing state pensions, and opening access to state pensions to soldiers who fought in Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁹

In the following section we portray the evolution of veteran organizations into pivotal political actors, delving further into the complexity of their interaction with HDZ. Though HDZ mobilizes veterans both to protect the status quo and to win back elections, this case also shows that veteran contention possesses strong blackmail potential and is ever only partially under the party's control.

⁸ Longitudinal data from the Croatian Policy Agendas Project, covering the period from 1990 to the end of 2015 (Širinić et al., 2016). The government agenda dataset coded agendas of all cabinet weekly meetings from 1990 to 2015, amounting to over 40,000 agenda items (Širinić, 2018). All items were coded following the methodology of the Comparative Agendas Project (Bevan, 2015), where each unit of analysis is coded into 21 major policy topics and 214 subtopics.

⁹ 'Novi zakon: branitelji će lakše u mirovinu, imat će i veće penzije', Jutarnji list, August 4, 2017, www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/novi-zakon-branitelji-lakse-u-mirovinu-imat-ce-i-vece-penzije-uvodi-se-i-naknada-za-nezaposlene-te-ubrzava-njihovo-stambeno-zbrinjavanje/6435139/ (accessed 14 February 2020).

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10.3 Veteran Organizations as Pivotal Political Actors

HDZ governments in the early 1990s instituted welfare programmes for the veteran population, but arguably much of the welfare package would not have happened without veterans organizing to put pressure on the state. In the spring of 1992 the first veteran non-governmental organization (NGO) was founded, and in 1993 it held a federative assembly of over fifteen chapters. The assembly meeting was attended by the then-president of Croatia, Franjo Tuđman, while General Martin Špegelj, the first chief of staff of the Croatian Armed Forces, was elected president of the association. The Association of Patriotic War Volunteers and Veterans of the Republic of Croatia (UDVDR), as the federation is called, today numbers 21 member organizations at county level, over 200 chapters on the local level, and around 80 social clubs. Its website boasts a membership of 220,000, 'representing the population of around 350,000 Croatian veterans, who together with their families come close to one million citizens of Croatia'.¹⁰ The Association of Disabled Veterans of the Homeland War (HVIDR-a) is similarly federated across Croatia, with member organizations on county level.¹¹ According to Mihalec, Pavlin, and Relja (2012), HVIDR-a has a membership of 35,000, with 20 regional and 105 local chapters. Its president served as HDZ's MP and he headed the parliamentary Board for Veterans. During 2010, veteran NGOs participated in thirteen advisory and consultative bodies of the government, spanning issues from employment policies to regional development (Mihalec, Pavlin, and Relja, 2012). Finally, the Association of Volunteer Veterans, the third-largest federation of veteran NGOs, has member organizations in eight of the twenty-one counties, with chapters and clubs like UDVDR.¹² In addition to large veteran federations, in 2016, no less than 795 NGOs in Croatia registered veteran issues as their primary objective.¹³

Though the generosity of the welfare package for veterans creates the impression of a highly privileged population, compensatory government programmes have in fact created a passive, state-dependent population (Dobrotić, 2008). Given that during the war these were generally young people, most often with only secondary education qualifications, with little or no job experience prior to going to war, the compensatory approach has contributed to their social isolation (Dobrotić, 2008). In the 1990s, veterans were overrepresented in lower socioeconomic groups such as the unemployed, welfare recipients, and the poor (Žunec, 2006). Studies showed that only

¹⁰ Quoted from the website of the organization, accessible in Croatian at www.udvdr.hr/povjesnica-2/.

¹¹ The website of HVIDR-a is much less informative about its size and composition: see www.hvidra.hr/.

¹² See www.uhbddr.hr/pdf/ustrojbeni%20oblici%20udruge.pdf.

¹³ Information from Ministry of Administration, Official Registry of NGOs.

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37 per cent had returned to their jobs from before the war (Đilas and Vukušić, 1996; Grizelj and Vukušić, 1996; Žunec, 2006). According to a survey by veteran associations, around 50 per cent of former soldiers were unemployed, a third of them claimed they were unsatisfied with their socioeconomic position, and 50 per cent thought they were disadvantaged compared to the population that did not fight in the war (Žunec, 2006).

The contradictory social position of being perceived as privileged but at the same time feeling marginalized contributed to the emergence of a politically explosive social group. Though over time both the symbolic and material politics tied veterans to HDZ, this relationship was neither straightforward nor harmonious. Such a large population, officially encompassing over half a million people, unavoidably entails social, economic, and cultural heterogeneity. In addition, significant differences exist between those 70,000 who receive handsome pensions and the rest who do not, as well as between those who cultivate close links to HDZ party leadership, who work in government agencies or serve as MPs, and again the large majority which does not have access to these social and economic privileges. At the same time, the leadership of veteran organizations has repeatedly proven their ability to mobilize veterans in the hundreds of thousands. Having all this in mind, mass mobilization of veterans in Croatia perhaps carries similarities to what Beissinger (see Chapter 6 in this volume) terms 'composite' mobilization of various strands of motivations and incentives pulled together.

The UDVDR was the first veteran organization to exert political pressure on the government, starting in 1993, when it adopted its first Declaration on Veterans in the Homeland War, and 1994, when it adopted the Resolution on Rights of Croatian Veterans of the Homeland War. Both documents were advocacy initiatives for regulating social rights of veterans and their families. In October 1996 UDVDR organized a high-profile event in the Zagreb Concert Hall, in the presence of high-ranking government officials, at which they presented their '15 Fundamental Demands', together with a petition signed by 90,000 veterans to support the introduction of these demands into the Act on Rights of Croatian Veterans.¹⁴ Though the initial reaction of President Tuđman to these demands was unfriendly, two months later the government legislated a new Act on the Rights of Croatian Veterans from the Homeland War and their Families (NN 108/96, 23.XII.1996). Following that, in 1997 the government set up a separate Ministry for Croatian Veterans of the Homeland War, fulfilling another request by veteran organizations.

Overall, between 1993 and 1996 – partly of its own volition and partly in response to pressures from veteran organizations – HDZ governments created a comprehensive institutional architecture of rights and entitlements for veterans and their families. This in turn created a strong bond between HDZ and the veteran population (Kasapović, 1996), described as a powerful client–patron axis charged with both symbolic meaning and material benefits (Čular, 2000). In other words, during the

¹⁴ Information based on the report on UDVDR website, www.udvdr.hr/kategorija/aktivnosti-od-1992-1999/.

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1990s in their struggle for state recognition and state benefits, veterans evolved from unorganized cohort to client group, they became a prominent social identity and through their strong network of federative organizations they became a powerful pressure group. We know from welfare state literature that once social protection mechanisms are instituted, interest groups organize to defend them (Gal and Bar, 2000; Brooks and Manza, 2007; Maddaloni, 2014), creating an ongoing dynamic of negotiation and confrontation with the state. If the veteran group is large enough, like was the case in the late-nineteenth-century United States, and in Croatia in the 1990s, veteran organizations can become pivotal political players, forging alliances with political parties and influencing election outcomes.

In the United States, the veteran organization Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) was organizationally and ideologically central to late-nineteenth-century politics, influencing the soldiers' vote to affect outcomes of presidential and congressional races (Skocpol, 1995; Ainsworth, 1995). The case of Croatia, we argue, exhibits some important parallels to this dynamic. At the same time, the relationship between HDZ and the veteran population is not a straightforward case of mobilization by the state. The evolution of veterans as an interest group with large mobilization capacity is not the result of HDZ deliberate design but rather of the party using state resources and institutions during the 1990s in seeking to proactively manage this interest group and securing a loyal constituency base. When wielding state control, HDZ uses veteran mobilization in an *order-producing* process (Slater and Smith, 2016), with the dual purpose of both dissuading the opposition and persuading veteran leadership that it is in their best interest to continue to work together (Robertson, 2009). The overall effect is similar to what Beissinger ([Chapter 8](#) in this volume) describes in the case of counterrevolutionary mobilization in Ukraine, of demonstrating the continuing coherence of the regime's institutional control.

By locking in comprehensive welfare programmes for veterans, funding the work of veteran NGOs and enabling veteran representation in many state and party¹⁵ bodies, HDZ managed to co-opt not only veteran organizations but a significant part of the veteran population as well. However, the fact that it is the veteran organizations that ultimately possess capacity for mass mobilization unavoidably contains the potential of backfiring. For this reason, as Ekiert and Perry argue in the [introduction](#) to this volume, mass mobilization – even when undertaken with clear state support – unavoidably carries a degree of ambivalence and anxiety for the state.

In the following two sections of the paper, partly mirroring the structure of Handlin's analysis of Venezuela (see [Chapter 9](#) in this volume), we explore how this relationship plays out in the arenas of political institutions and of protest.

¹⁵ In 2014 HDZ formed an advisory body called the Community of Veterans ('Gjoko Šušak') to reinforce the position of veterans within the party. The Community is also open for veterans who are not registered members of the party.

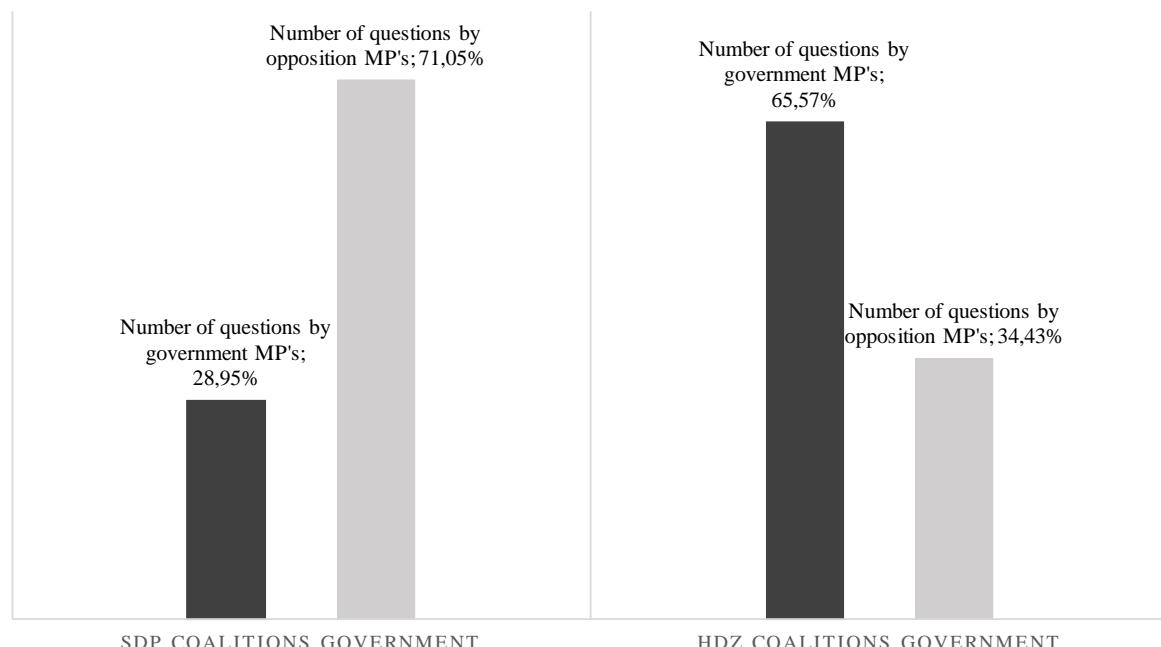
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10.3.1 HDZ and Veterans: The Arena of Political Institutions

In this section we analyse the representation of veteran interests in Parliament, veteran voter preferences in recent elections, and the use that veteran organizations have made of citizen petitions for referenda since 2000.

Parliamentary questions by MPs are used both as an opposition pressure tool and as a way to promote government policies (Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011). In our analysis, MP questions pertaining to veteran issues may be revealing of whether one political party stands out in terms of representing veteran interests. Figure 10.1 shows the share of questions of government and opposition MPs, summarized by the SDP and HDZ government terms between 2000 and 2015.¹⁶

Figure 10.1 Share of MP questions on veteran-related issues from 2000 to 2015.



Source: Croatian Policy Agendas Dataset (Širinić et al., 2016)

Figure 10.1 shows that, during SDP-led governments, 71.05 per cent of parliamentary questions related to veteran issues were posed by HDZ MPs and their coalitional partners. More interestingly though, even during terms when HDZ held parliamentary majorities and led governments, again their MPs posed most of questions

¹⁶ CAP dataset (Širinić et al., 2016) includes all MP questions for parliamentary terms between 2000 and 2015. Out of 3,111 MP questions, 99 were devoted to veteran issues.

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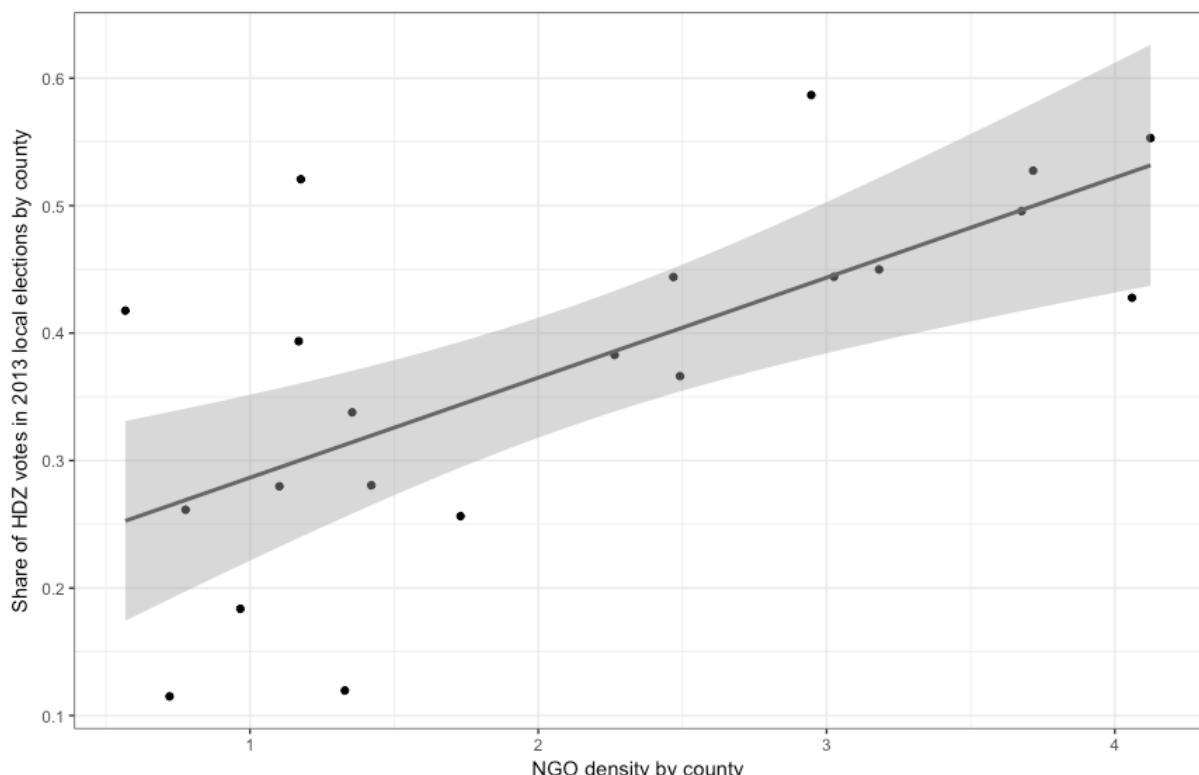
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related to veteran issues (65.57%). In other words, compared to all other parties, HDZ invests by far the greatest energy in representing veteran interests in the parliamentary arena.

Regarding the veteran vote, a long academic silence on this topic in Croatia has been broken recently by a few studies, including ours. In the absence of individual data on veteran vote, Glaurdić and Vuković (2016) analysed voting outcomes at municipal level to investigate whether veterans represent HDZ's voter base. They used the indicator 'war disabled per 1,000 inhabitants' as a proxy for the effects of war violence on individual municipalities, looking at the extent to which this indicator is related to HDZ vote share on municipal level. Since this indicator spatially closely mirrors war impact, being highest in areas of direct combat, it seems like a reasonably reliable proxy for the impact of war on local communities, as well as for a higher density of veteran population. Analysing voting outcomes on municipal level for five rounds of parliamentary elections between 2000 and 2015, Glaurdić and Vuković (2016) found that this indicator had a consistently positive, statistically significant relationship with the vote for HDZ and a negative relationship with the vote for SDP-led coalitions.

We introduce another way of indirectly relating veteran voting behaviour with voting for HDZ, by correlating the density of veteran NGOs¹⁷ with HDZ vote share on the county level, for the 2013 local election.

Figure 10.2 Density of veteran NGOs and HDZ vote share in 2013 local election



inhabitants in each of the twenty-one counties.

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[Figure 10.2](#) suggests a relatively strong relationship between the density of veteran NGOs and vote share for HDZ ($r=0.64$), further corroborating the claim that HDZ captures a significant part of the veteran vote.

Along the same lines, Bagić and Kardov's (2018) survey of veteran political orientations finds that veterans more often describe their political orientation as right-wing: 37 per cent of veterans do so, in comparison to 27 per cent of the general electorate. Furthermore, 14 per cent of veterans self-identify as far-right, compared to around 6 per cent of non-veteran voters. While 21 per cent of voters did not declare their ideological self-positioning, only 13 per cent of veterans failed to, which suggests that this social group is more politicized than the average voter. And indeed, veterans seem to vote somewhat more often than the general voter – 69.9 per cent as opposed to 66.2 per cent, though in this study this does not translate into a statistically significant difference.

Regarding veteran vote choice, Bagić and Kardov (2018) sorted results into preferences for right-wing, centre, and left-wing political parties. They grouped HDZ together with five other small right-wing parties, so these findings do not establish a direct correspondence between the veteran vote and HDZ. However, given that most of the other parties in the group barely manage to cross the electoral threshold for parliamentary representation, and that they often form coalitions with HDZ, it seems plausible to assume a high correspondence between voting right-wing and voting for HDZ. Bagić and Kardov's (2018) main finding is that 51 per cent of veterans voted for right-wing parties in the 2011 election, compared to 38.7 per cent of general voters. The survey also asked about vote choice in the 2015 presidential election, as well as the intended vote in the then-upcoming 2015 parliamentary election. Logistic regression models for each of these three elections returned statistically significant results, with veteran status increasing the likelihood of a right-wing vote by 1.5 times. Also, results for each of the three elections are very similar, suggesting stability in the vote choice. This finding is in line with Čular and Nikić Čakar (2018), who show that HDZ has the most stable electorate among political parties in Croatia. Measuring stability of the party vote at the individual level between 1990–2016, they find that on average 75 per cent of HDZ voters voted for HDZ in the previous election as well (Čular and Nikić Čakar, 2018).

Another dimension of veteran – HDZ political alignment became apparent after 2000, when HDZ went into opposition for the first time. The Social Democratic government immediately initiated the process of EU integration, which brought on pressure from the EU towards improving Croatia's cooperation with the Hague Tribunal and the prosecution of war crimes (Dolenec, 2013). At the same time, several reforms to welfare programmes for veterans, as well as a downsizing of the army and police, were initiated. Unsurprisingly, the veteran population feared that their material interests,

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social standing, and – for some – personal freedom were under threat, and this population mobilized to an unprecedented level.

Amendments to the constitution implemented by the SDP-led government in 2001 introduced, among other institutional reforms, the option of citizens' initiatives for referenda. Though the conditions were very prohibitive, requiring that the initiative collect signatures from 10 per cent of voters in Croatia within fifteen days,¹⁸ for large veteran organizations with member organizations across Croatia it opened an avenue of political mobilization. A few months after the Constitutional amendments were approved by Parliament, veteran organizations submitted a citizens' initiative to Parliament with the aim of preventing Croatia's cooperation with the Hague Tribunal (Smerdel, 2010). Their immediate grievance was the fact that in February 2001 warrants for the arrest of suspects in a wartime murder were issued, including for General Mirko Norac (Dolenec, 2013). In an impressive show of mobilizational capacity, veteran organizations collected over 400,000 signatures in two weeks, reaching the legal threshold for holding a referendum. The referendum did not take place, however. The loophole that the SDP government used was the fact that the Referendum Act had not been amended in line with the new constitutional framework. Nevertheless, though the government managed to diffuse this particular threat, 2001 and 2002 would prove to be highly contentious, as we show in [Section 10.3.2](#).

The second citizens' initiative for referendum by veteran organizations was launched in 2007, with the same objective of preventing Croatia's cooperation with the Hague Tribunal. However, there was a crucial difference in the political opportunity structure: HDZ was now in government. Under the leadership of Ivo Sanader, HDZ maintained the course of European integration as the fundamental policy objective event at the cost of serious friction with parts of its constituency (Dolenec, 2013). In June 2004 the EU proposed to open accession negotiations with Croatia on the condition that it 'maintain full cooperation with the ICTY' (Council of the European Union, 2004). Capturing and extraditing General Ante Gotovina became the crucial bone of contention between the Croatian government and the ICTY, with Sanader playing a game of nerves in an effort to both stay in power and acquiesce to European demands (Dolenec, 2013). Croatia's candidacy status hung in the balance until the very last moment in 2005, when Gotovina was finally arrested and brought before the ICTY to stand trial. How costly this move was for HDZ is reflected in the party membership: in the period between 2001 and 2005 the party's membership fell from 432,000 to 220,000. Though this was a trying period for HDZ, it also showed that veteran organizations were not as strong without HDZ support. The 2007 initiative for

¹⁸ By comparison, in Switzerland the required percentage of signatures is less than 2 per cent of registered voters, while the period for the collection of signatures is eighteen months (Kriesi, 2011). Closer to home, in Slovenia around 2 per cent of voters' signatures must be collected in thirty-five days (Erceg, 2011).

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referendum was not able to collect the required number of signatures, though a respectable number of 296,000 (Dolenec, 2014) testifies to the serious rift that the party's stance towards the Hague Tribunal caused in its voter base.

After the 2007 initiative against cooperation with the Hague Tribunal, veteran organizations retreated from mass mobilizations, only to return after the SDP government came into office in December 2011. With HDZ in opposition, veterans' organizations again started disrupting public events organized on important state holidays, especially those related to the Homeland War. The prime minister and president were booed and in other ways disrespected during public appearances, in particular during the annual celebration of Victory Day in Knin and on Vukovar Remembrance Day, when demonstrations and other types of disruptive activities were organized against the government. As described in the [introduction](#), in November 2013 the commemoration of Vukovar Remembrance Day came close to violence, in a culmination of a month-long crisis in which veterans were tearing down placards in Cyrillic letters from public buildings in Vukovar. After months of clashes with police, arrests and public demonstrations, veteran associations started their referendum initiative under the slogan 'In defence of Croatian Vukovar'. The initiative proposed to exempt Vukovar from the implementation of Cyrillic alphabet placards in public locations. This time the initiative collected 632,165 signatures, which was more than enough for initiating a referendum (Dolenec, 2014). Again, the referendum did not take place, this time due to the ruling of the Constitutional Court, which argued that the formulation of the question on the referendum ballot was unconstitutional.

Analysed together, the three campaigns for referenda by veteran organizations show that they possess impressive mobilization capacity and resources necessary to collect hundreds of thousands of signatures in a span of fifteen days. At the same time, it also highlights that veteran organizations were successful in crossing this high threshold only when supported by HDZ. In the [next section](#) we look specifically into the dynamic between veteran organizations and HDZ in the protest arena.

10.3.2 HDZ and Veterans: The Protest Arena

The 2000 election that brought a Social Democrat-led coalition to power was counted as a democratic turning point by relevant international and domestic assessments (Schimmelfennig, 2005; Čular, 2005). The SPD-led government initiated constitutional reform to strengthen parliamentarism and reduce the powers of the president (Kasapović, 2008), secured WTO membership, signed the CEFTA, joined NATO's Partnership for Peace, signed the SAA, and secured candidacy for the EU (Dolenec, 2013). The process of EU integration created strong pressures on the government to cooperate with the Hague Tribunal, including extraditing Homeland War generals. It

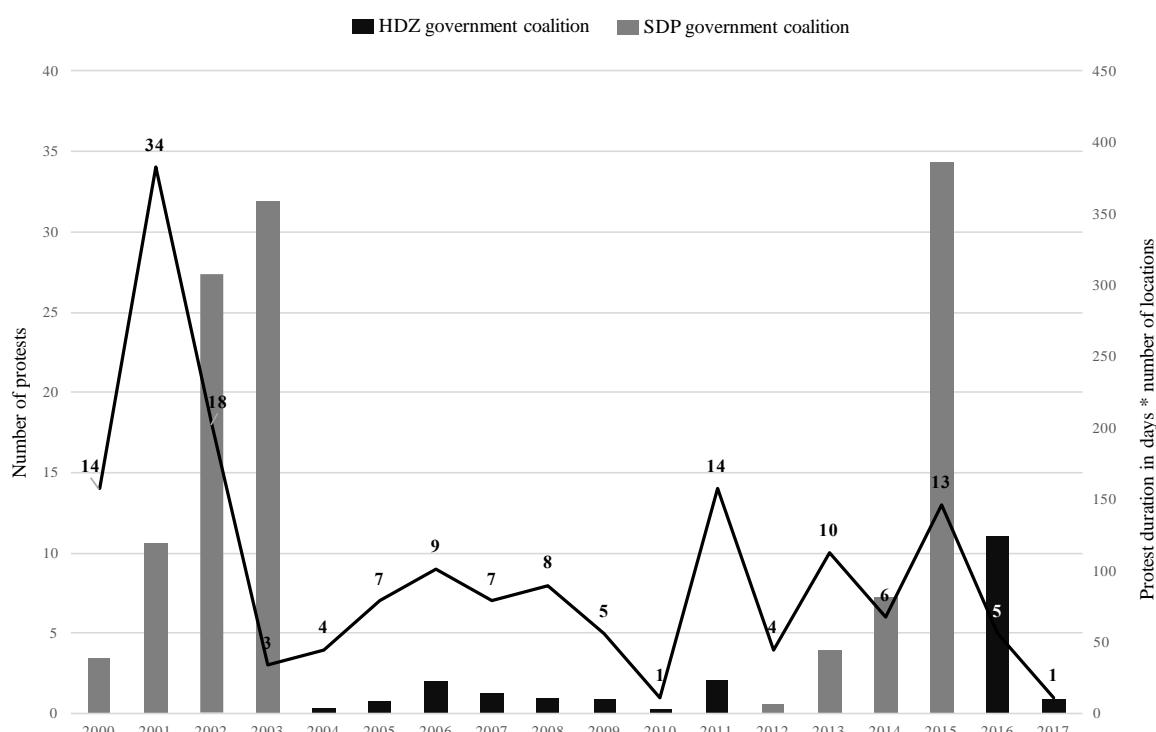
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was in this context that the veteran population moved full force into the protest arena, hoping to destabilize the government and bring HDZ back into power.

Figure 10.3 shows veteran protests in Croatia between 2000 and 2017.¹⁹ The left axis shows the number of protests in a given year, while the right axis shows their duration, calculated as number of protest days multiplied by the number of locations where protests were held. Years when HDZ is in power are marked in black, while years when SDP is in power are marked in grey.

Figure 10.3 Veteran protests between 2000 and 2017.



Taking the number of protests and protest duration together shows a clear picture of strong episodes of contention by veteran groups during the two periods of

¹⁹ PEA data collected by the research project 'DISOBEDIENT DEMOCRACY: A Comparative Analyses of Contentious Politics in the European Semi-periphery', funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, IZ11Z0_166540 – PROMYS.

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SDP-led governments. Looking at the number of protests, the year 2001 is most contentious of the whole period, while years 2002 and 2014 stand out as most contentious on the indicator of protest duration. Both these periods when HDZ was in opposition represent crucial contentious episodes which we describe in the following sections.

The first contentious episode starts in February 2001, when warrants for the arrest of several veterans suspected of involvement in a wartime murder were issued, including General Mirko Norac, who failed to appear before a judge. In response to the issuing of the warrant, veteran groups blocked the main north-south highway route in the Sinj, a city close to General Norac's home town. The road blockade protest made it to newspaper front pages, with statements from veteran organizations as well as HDZ and other party officials. According to media reports,²⁰ veteran organizations threatened that Norac's arrest would lead to the whole of Croatia being blocked. They accused the government of treason and affirmed that they were defending the foundations of the Croatian state. HDZ leadership made public statements to the effect that it was time for more radical steps, mass mobilizations, and blocking of main transport routes. The following day protests and road blockades took place in at least six towns across Croatia. In Sinj, the HDZ county president addressed the protesters, saying that it was not General Norac who was on trial but the Homeland War and Croatia itself. Also in Sinj, leaders of the veteran organizations announced a big demonstration in Split, stating, 'Either they fall, or we do!'²¹ In Pula, another member of a veteran organization made a public statement, saying that 'in case the prime minister and his government did not change their position regarding the Homeland War, there might be massive disobedience, even civil war'.²²

On 11 February, veteran organizations held a large protest in the city of Split. The organizers estimated the number at 200,000, while the media and the police put the number at between 100,000 and 150,000 protesters.²³ The same day supporting demonstrations of between 3,000 and 10,000 people were held in five other cities in Eastern Croatia.²⁴ The slogan of the protest was 'We are all Mirko Norac'. Many retired generals were in attendance, as well as HDZ president Ivo Sanader (who addressed the audience), many other HDZ notables, and party leaderships of other right-wing parties. Veteran organizations issued a declaration demanding amnesty for all Croatian generals and calling for early parliamentary and presidential elections.²⁵ During the protest, both

²⁰ 'Branitelji u Sinju pozvali Hrvate da odaberu stranu', Večernji list, 9 February 2001.

²¹ 'Poruka stožera u Sinju: Ovih dana padamo ili mi, ili oni', Jutarnji list, 10 February 2001.

²² Ibid.

²³ 'U ovoj zemlji i odlučujemo', Jutarnji list, 12 February 2001; 'Na skupu u Splitu više od 150,000 ljudi' Večernji list, 12 February 2001.

²⁴ 'Mirko ne predaj se! Nemaš kome', Večernji list, 12 February 2001.

²⁵ 'U ovoj zemlji i odlučujemo', Jutarnji list, 12 February 2001.

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the president and prime minister were insulted and accused of treason, and the language used towards the SDP government was insulting and inflammatory. Harnessing veteran revolt, at that moment HDZ had hoped to topple the SDP-led coalition government (Babić, 2003).

Veteran organizations announced another protest in front of the Parliament in Zagreb on February 15, but in the few days between the Split and Zagreb protests it became clear that veteran organizations were not united about the next move. The protest in Zagreb was considerably smaller, estimated at around 13,000 people, and none of the HDZ politicians addressed the crowd.²⁶ It seems that HDZ, though initially riding the wave of this mass mobilization, decided to hit the brakes. Responding to a journalist asking him whether the situation was a potential threat to the legal order in Croatia, a top HDZ official said that it was 'necessary to do everything to stop an uncontrollable avalanche of events' and that it was irresponsible of his party to have used the protests to demand early elections.²⁷ Though the slogans used by the protesters in Zagreb used inflammatory rhetoric and displayed far-right Ustasha insignia, overall the moment of serious instability for the government had passed.²⁸ When Mirko Norac appeared before the court on February 22, claiming that he was not aware that a warrant for his arrest had been issued,²⁹ veteran organizations initiated new protests. Overall, during 2001 there were thirty-four and during 2002 eighteen veteran protests recorded by national newspapers. The most protracted of them was a 600-day sit-in on St Mark's Square in Zagreb, the seat of the parliament and government. Discharged police officers who were Homeland veterans camped on the square with the intention of annulling the government's decision. This government measure was part of a large reform effort aimed at downsizing and reforming the armed forces and the police. Between 2001 and 2004 the number employed in the armed forces was cut by around 40 per cent.³⁰

The second contentious episode started after the SDP government returned to office in 2011. This time veteran grievances were directed against the implementation of Serbian-minority language rights pertaining to the use of Cyrillic alphabet in public spaces in Vukovar. In March 2013, veteran organizations campaigned in the local election against the incumbent Social Democratic mayor, supporting the HDZ candidate in exchange for his endorsement of their demand to exempt the city of Vukovar from the

²⁶ 'Viđene i desnice u zraku uz pozdrav Za dom spremni', Večernji list, 16 February 2001.

²⁷ 'HDZ je sam kriv što ga vlast optužuje za ekstremizam', Večernji list, 14 February 2001.

²⁸ In the summer of 2002, the second-largest party in the SDP-led coalition, HSLS, suffered serious fractioning leading to government reconstruction, but the parliamentary majority was maintained (Kasapović, 2005).

²⁹ 'Norac u pritvoru i negira optužbe', Večernji list, 23 February 2001.

³⁰ Data from website of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Croatia, available at

www.osrh.hr/#rub211.

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introduction of Cyrillic signs on public buildings. When the government went on to pursue the implementation of the said policy, this was met with acts of civil disobedience, including repeated tearing down of Cyrillic placards and several arrests. As described in the [introduction](#), the stand-off between veteran organizations and the SDP-led government culminated during Remembrance Day, when the march through the streets of Vukovar with the prime minister, the president, and other government officials was blocked, leading the situation to the brink of violence.

A year later, in October 2014, veteran organizations occupied the public square in front of the Ministry of Veterans in 66 Savska Street, demanding the resignation of the minister and his key aids. Through this action they initiated a sit-in that lasted 555 days, ending after HDZ returned to power. The placard that the veteran organizations displayed at their tent read '1991: they both fell, 2015: they will both fall'. The phrase 'they both fell' is common knowledge in Croatia, referring to the excited exclamation of a soldier recorded on tape after the successful knocking down of two YNA aircraft flying over Zadar in 1991. 'They will both fall' in 2015 alluded to the presidential and parliamentary elections, for posts at that time held by Social Democrats. The start of the veteran protest was aligned with the electoral campaign for presidential elections, which the incumbent Social Democratic president Ivo Josipović lost to HDZ candidate Kolinda Grabar Kitarović. The first place she visited on election night, and again upon assuming office, was the veterans' tent on 66 Savska Street. Though the 2015 election was close,³¹ HDZ won the November 2015 parliamentary election too. An HDZ party member who had been an active participant in the veteran protest on 66 Savska Street became the new minister of veterans³².

In the summer before this election, with the SDP-led government in power, the annual celebration of Victory Day that always took place in Knin was exceptionally moved to Zagreb. The previous year in Knin, the SDP prime minister and the president, together with their entourage, received a hostile reception, and they were booed during their speeches.³³ Echoing the Vukovar Remembrance Day experience, there was uncertainty as to how the heads of state would join the march of the Armed Forces and veteran organizations. In the end, the government officials refrained from joining the march.

In stark contrast, with HDZ back in power, on 5 August 2016 Victory Day was again celebrated in Knin, with the prime minister, the president of Croatia, generals of the Armed Forces, top HDZ officials, and numerous veteran organizations in attendance.

³¹ HDZ won 33.4 per cent of the vote, in comparison with the coalition led by the Social Democrats which won 33.2 per cent of the vote.

³² See www.vecernji.hr/hrvatska/tomo-medved-je-novi-ministar-branitelja-1070056.

³³ 'Milanovića i Josipovića izviđali, premijer uzvratio: Dođite na Markov trg!', Večernji list, 5 August 2014, www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/drzavni-vrh-na-proslavi-19obljetnice-oluje-u-knинu-954116 (accessed 30 October 2017).

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News sources estimated that around 100,000 people³⁴ attended the event, while HDZ politicians gave fiery speeches exulting the war victory, celebrating veteran sacrifice and denigrating the Social Democrats. In other words, similarly to the Law and Justice party (PiS) in Poland, HDZ actively supports and coordinates mass mobilization around key commemorative events of the Homeland War, through which they repeatedly renew their symbolic ties to veterans as fathers of the state. These mass gatherings with high symbolic resonance resemble Scott's (1990) ritualized protest which serves to reinforce the party's domination and demonstrate the continued coherence of the regime (Beissinger, Chapter 8 in this volume).

HDZ went on to win the early parliamentary election a month later, on 8 September 2016. Consolidating their victory though pre-emptive mobilization, and once again demonstrating how mobilization can be used as a deliberate state tactic, they organized the mass gathering for Vukovar Remembrance Day on November 18, described at the opening of this chapter.

10.4 Concluding Remarks

This chapter explores the complex three-way dynamic between veteran organizations, the evolution of state support for veterans and veteran organizations, and the right-wing political party HDZ which has dominated Croatia's politics since the country's independence in 1990. Despite heading state institutions during the entire decade in the 1990s, HDZ at the same time led a broad nationalist movement and, in that process, learned how to rely on mass mobilization as 'a tactic of the state to exercise power and promote its own objectives' (Ekiert and Perry in the introduction). The party's rapid growth pushed HDZ towards relying on movement-type linkages with citizens and sidelining formal institutional procedures, while also growing a strong membership of several hundred thousand. In parallel, a comprehensive state institutional architecture of veterans' rights was implemented under HDZ governments, creating a three-way client-patron relationship between the state, HDZ, and the veteran population, producing an interesting variety of a state-mobilized movement instigated to enhance the state's legitimacy.

Our analysis showed how the combined reliance on comprehensive state resources as well as symbolic mass gatherings has helped align the veteran vote and maintain the loyalty of veteran organizations to HDZ. This case also shows that the mobilization capacity of veteran organizations is ever only partially under outside control. This was best illustrated by the 2007 petition for referenda which the veteran

³⁴ 'Poruka onima koji su Hrvatsku nazvali slučajnom: Država je stvorena voljom naroda', Večernji list, 5 August 2016, <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/u-kninu-se-slavi-21-obljetnica-akcije-oluja-1104271> (accessed 30 October 2017).

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organizations organized in defiance of the state's decision to maintain full cooperation with the Hague Tribunal. Veteran organizations are fundamentally dependent on the state for financing of their activities, but it is they that ultimately possess mobilization capacity, so this power relationship is not entirely asymmetric. However, since HDZ has been in government most of the time, and since it operates an admirable party machine, the party is able to wield state infrastructure and substantial funding in support of veteran organizations and hence rely on them for mass mobilization. This has created a powerful political dynamic in Croatia whereby veteran organizations are motivated to stop reforms to state institutions designed during the 1990s. In other words, betraying the standard image of social movements as challengers to the state, our case shows veteran organizations proactively mobilizing in order to maintain the status quo. As a result, handsomely financed and supported to help the state 'rule by other means', veteran organizations have played a pivotal role in the outcomes of elections in Croatia.

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