



Change and contestation of meaning in the commemoration of Croatian Statehood Day

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Abstract

This paper examines issues surrounding the existing lack of more active engagement of Croatian citizens in the commemoration of some of the most important national holidays, in particular the Statehood Day. The paper is divided into two parts: the changes in the commemoration of the Statehood Day by the political leadership over the past 25 years (macro-perspective), and the reasons for the lack of engagement of Croatian citizens in its celebration today (micro-perspective). We will first go back to the year 1990 when Croatian political elite and the citizens en masse and passionately celebrated the first Statehood Day, and compare this to the quite meagre commemorations that we have witnessed over the past years. We will then present the results of qualitative empirical research conducted in 2013 using the method of in-depth semi-structured interviews, in which Croatian citizens themselves discuss their personal involvement in the commemoration of national holidays, and the reasons why they have not engaged more actively in the Statehood Day celebration. Some of the issues that arise over the past years cannot be explained by natural multivocality of symbols, or the “cooling down” of “hot nationalism” of the 1990s. Main issues primarily arise from the lack of continuity and contestation of meaning of this national holiday, at both the level of the political leadership and the level of “ordinary” citizens.

Keywords

National holidays, national identity, hot and cold nationalism, Statehood Day, Croatia

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Introduction²

During the formation of independent nation-state in the 1990s, Croatia underwent dramatic socio-political changes, which consequently reflected in the changes of the symbolic dimension of its national identity. Old symbols, which were no longer relevant, were removed, in order to separate from former socialist Yugoslavian past, while new symbols were (re-)defined and (re-)created, in order to represent new democratic nation-state. The power of national symbolism in representing this new socio-political organization, on one hand, consolidated its members around common national meanings and values, and on the other hand, was recognized from the beginning of Croatian nation-state formation. Much of contemporary national symbolism was therefore (re-)established at the very beginning of the 1990s, including the three most prominent symbols and rituals of modern nation-states – the national flag, the national anthem and the Statehood Day.

During the 1990s, Croatian political elite and the citizens *en masse* and passionately celebrated the Statehood Day. However, when we compare this to the celebrations over the past years, there is an obvious lack of active involvement in its organization, promotion and participation by both the political leadership and the citizens. The aim of this paper is to examine the reasons behind the contestation of meaning of the Statehood Day in contemporary Croatian public discourse, and the lack of more active engagement in its commemoration by both the political leadership and “ordinary” citizens. We ask whether the issues that arise can be explained by natural multivocality of symbols, and the “cooling down” of “hot nationalism” of the 1990s. Or, whether there are additional issues, which stand in the way of this national holiday functioning more successfully as part of contemporary Croatian national identity.

In order to address these questions, the paper is divided into two parts. In the first part of the paper, we examine the ways in which Croatian Statehood Day was commemorated over the past 25 years, by comparing the first celebration in 1990 and the most recent one in 2015. We focus on the macro-perspective of Croatian political elite, in particular by exploring the changes of the dates of commemoration, the contestation of its meaning and the level of their involvement in its organization and celebration. We support our arguments by relying on other authors who also wrote about this topic, as well as archival research of available media resources from this period (national newspapers and video clips from Croatian National Television). In the second, main part of the paper, we move toward the micro-perspective of Croatian citizens who, in our qualitative empirical research conducted in 2013, discuss their personal involvement in the

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commemoration of national holidays, in particular the Statehood Day. As Brubaker et al. (2008) observe, while “the central role of elites in nationalist politics is indisputable” (p. 13), “viewing nationalist politics from a distance, and from above, fosters a kind of optical illusion” (p. 167). Or, as Hobsbawm (1992: 10-11) states, also cited in Brubaker et al. (2006: 13), “Nationhood and nationalism are ‘dual phenomena’: they are ‘constructed from above’, yet they ‘cannot be understood unless also analysed from below, that is in terms of the assumptions [...] of ordinary people’.” The wider socio-political context and the citizens’ responses are interpreted within the existing sociological and related theoretical framework, which argues for the crucial importance of national symbols and rituals in the formation and sustenance of nations and nation-states.

The significance of national symbols and rituals

Kertzer (1988: 2) observes that despite the fact that symbols and rituals are used by every political organization ever created in the history of mankind, “few people recognize how important ritual is in modern politics.” He continues: “According to mainstream Western ideology, ritual occupies at best a peripheral, if not irrelevant, role in political life. Serious political analysts, we are led to believe, would hardly waste their time by distracting attention from the real nitty-gritty of politics – interest groups, economic forces, and power relations – in order to turn a critical eye to ritual” (Kertzer 1988: 12). Even in sociological and related literature on nations and nationalism, national symbols and rituals are often understood as mere decorations or embellishments of the so-called “real” politics, instead as integral to the functioning of all political systems, including “established Western societies” (Kertzer 1988: 3; on the significance of national symbols and rituals, see also: Kertzer 1996; Morris 2005; Elgenius 2011; Edelman 1964; Elder and Cobb 1983). National symbols can be defined as communicative tools, which serve as the carriers of meanings of national identity, and have a crucial role in its formation, consolidation and sustenance (for a more detailed discussion on the role of symbols in identity formation, see, e.g.: Burke and Stets 2009). In other words, the role of national symbols is twofold. On one hand, national system represents itself through its symbols to its members (inward), as well as to non-members (outward). These symbolic representations help the members of a national system imagine such complex and abstract ideas as nation and state (see, e.g.: Anderson [1983] 2006; Morris 2005: 1). On the other hand, national symbols not only “make it possible to imagine abstract entities such as nations and states,” but they also “play an important role in creating emotionally charged bonds of social solidarity” (Morris 2005: 1; see also: Kertzer 1988: 67; Smith 2001: 522).

Firstly, political symbols and rituals are the ways in which politics “manifests” itself (Rihtman-Auguštin and Čapo 2004: 48). “No organization – whether Ku Klux Klan or General Motors – can exist without symbolic representation, for organizations can be ‘seen’ only through their associated symbols” (Kertzer 1988: 15). In addition, not only do political systems represent themselves symbolically, but their members perceive and identify with these systems through their symbolism or, to be more precise, through

meanings that their symbolism carries. As Walzer (1967), cited in Kertzer (1988: 6), explains, “The state is invisible; it must be personified before it can be seen, symbolized before it can be loved, imagined before it can be conceived.” Or, as Anderson ([1983] 2006) famously states, nations are nothing but “imagined political communities.” And they “are imagined by means of symbols” (Morris 2005: 4). “People subscribe to the ‘master fiction’ that the world is divided into a fixed number of mutually exclusive nations; they see these units as part of the nature of things, and assume an antiquity that the nations in fact lack. The symbolic conception of the universe leads people to believe that everyone ‘has’ a nationality, in the same sense that everyone has a gender” (Kertzer 1988: 6).

Secondly, once established, national system strives for sustenance, which can only be secured through identification of its members with its core meanings and values. The role of national symbols and rituals is again crucial, as they “serve political organizations by producing bonds of solidarity without requiring uniformity of belief” (Kertzer 1988: 67). “Groups of people become nations by identifying with common symbols, and individuals become aware of their membership in the nation as they become conscious that they share their attachment to certain symbols with others” (Morris 2005: 4). As Hałas (2002: 7) explains, “Every group, not only a primary one, is a community in this sense that it has common meanings and values informed by the communication system. The features of its internal cohesion and objective unity are thus given by means of symbolization, through symbols of group identity and authority, all symbolic suggestions of common values, including continuity of its existence. Common symbolization enables coordinated actions, temporal continuity, collective memory, tradition and history.” Furthermore, people show and strengthen their identification with and allegiance to a political system through symbolism (Kertzer 1988: 16). “I wear certain clothing, I say on oath, I sing a song, I cut my hair in a certain way, I address people with certain terms, and by doing so I consider myself and am considered by others to belong to a particular organization” (Kertzer 1988: 16).

All of this is possible because of particular properties of symbols as communicative tools –condensation of meaning, multivocality, and ambiguity (Kertzer 1988: 11). “Condensation refers to the way in which individual symbols represent and unify a rich diversity of meanings” (Kertzer 1988: 11; see also: Turner 1967). “Closely tied to the condensation of meaning in ritual symbols is their multivocality, the variety of different meanings attached to the same symbol” (Kertzer 1988: 11; see also: Turner 1967). Finally, as Morris (2005: 4) explains, “It is the ambiguity of symbols that gives them such important role in the creation of social solidarity. They are ambiguous both because the same symbol can be interpreted by different individuals in different ways, and because for each person a given symbol represents diverse ideas which interact in individual’s subconscious and become associated together in her or his mind.” This is what Kertzer (1988: 69) defines as “solidarity without consensus”: “Ritual can promote social solidarity without implying that people share the same values, or even the same interpretation of the ritual.” However, “social cohesion can be threatened,” argues Morris (2005: 5), “if ambiguity gives way to open conflicts over meaning.”

However, how then can we explain obvious discrepancies between passionate waving of national flags on almost daily basis during state-formation or social disruptions, and its less enthusiastic display during more stable and calm social periods? Some authors argue that while symbols and rituals might have a role in the formation and sustenance of newly-formed nations and states, they have certainly lost all significance in more “established” democracies, especially in the West. As Morris (2005: 4) explains, “The idea that only ‘backward’ and possibly irrational people attach great importance to symbols remains influential today. When parts of Europe such as Northern Ireland or the Balkans are said to be afflicted with tribalism the implication is [...] that the local people exhibit excessive attachment to myths, rituals and symbols.” However, as he concludes, “The dismissal of symbolism underestimates the extent to which, unavoidably, people understand the world through symbolism. Nations and states, in particular, are entities which cannot be perceived or represented except in symbolic form” (Morris 2005: 4). Billig (1995) argues that this stems from the assumption that the term nationalism should be reserved only for the “outbreaks of ‘hot’ nationalist passion,” which arise in times of social disruption (p. 44), such as the period of the 1990s in Croatia. Rather, nationalism should be defined as “patterns of belief and practice,” which reproduce all nation-states (Billig 1995: 15). Therefore, even though national symbols, which were passionately displayed at the forefront of nation-building take a back seat once “hot” nationalism “cools down,” their representative and cohesive role as carriers of meanings of national identity remain relevant. Symbols may become more banal, such as the flag at the post-office building we walk by every day without even noticing it, but they are never benign, as they still act as almost subconscious reminders of nationhood (Billig 1995: 6).

Furthermore, precisely because national symbolism takes a back seat in the everyday functioning of “established” nations, collective national rituals that disrupt these everyday routines become even more important. “Sentiments of patriotic emotion, which the rest of the year have to be kept far from the business of ordinary life, can surge forth” during these special days, thus helping “sustain what is loosely called national identity” (Billig 1995: 45). “These occasions are sufficient to flag nationhood, so that it is remembered during the rest of the year, when the banal routines of private life predominate.” (Billig 1995: 45). Three main characteristics of national rituals, such as the Statehood Day, are thus essential for their successful functioning in their role of representing the nation and bringing together its members around shared meanings and values. These are the consolidation of meanings of national symbols, which “provide the content of ritual” (Kertzer 1988: 9), collective participation, and continuity. Collective participation and continuity are important “as the knowledge that people throughout the country are saluting the same flag and singing the same anthem helps individuals imagine themselves as part of a present-day national community,” but also because “the knowledge that people in the past saluted this flag and sang this anthem makes it easier to imagine that previous generations belonged to the same national community” (Morris 2005: 6; see also: Anderson [1983] 2006, Hobsbawm 1992).

The commemoration of the Statehood Day in Croatia (macro-perspective)

The date of 30th May 1990 is one of the most significant in modern Croatian history. At the first multi-party elections held the previous month, the single-party system led by the Communist Party was defeated, which marked the end of socialism in Croatia, and was the precursor of dramatic political changes that led to the dissolution of former socialist Yugoslavia. On 30th May, the first democratic Croatian Parliament was instated and it in turn inaugurated newly elected Croatian political leadership led by Franjo Tuđman, who will soon after become Croatia's first president, and his political party, the Croatian Democratic Union. For this occasion, an entire day was devoted to the celebration of the "Day of Croatian Statehood," as it was already termed by the political leadership and the media (see, e.g.: Večernji list 1990, Lipovac 2013). This date continued to be celebrated as the Statehood Day and was officially declared as such by the first law on national holidays in modern Croatia in 1996 (Zakon o blagdanima... 1996). On 30th May 1990, "the central event of the day was certainly the special constituting session of the new Parliament, which began at 10 o'clock in the morning. Before the session, the Mass was held at the Zagreb Cathedral (beginning at 9 am)" (Hudelist 2015; see also: HRT 2005). "After the session of the Parliament there was a magnificent national celebration held at the central Zagreb square, still called the Square of the Republic, where the citizens loudly welcomed the newly elected leadership" (HRT 2005). In the largest public celebration in modern Croatian history, tens of thousands of people, and some reports say up to two hundred thousand, gathered in the central square and neighbouring streets of the capital Zagreb, while millions more followed the live broadcast on Croatian National Television (see, e.g.: Večernji list 1990). "At the end of the day [...] this enormous mass of people moved to the Jarun Lake to continue the celebration late into the night" (HRT 2005). The celebration was pregnant with symbolism, in the hands of both the citizens and the political elite. The purpose of this symbolism could hardly be missed: it was to remind the people of and unify them around the idea of Croatia's historic right to its claim to statehood (for more on Croatian historic right to statehood see, e.g.: Bellamy 2003), through the evocation of national symbolism from its ethnic and national past. For example, the political and intellectual elite attending Roman-Catholic Mass re-affirmed the historic connection between Croatian ethno-nationalism and Roman-Catholic religion, which remains an intrinsic part of Croatian national identity to this day. This can best be seen in the current list of national non-working holidays, which consist of those related to the establishment of modern Croatian state, religious and other national holidays.

Table 1. State-related, religious and other national non-working holidays in Croatia

Date	National holidays	Holiday status
January 1	New Year's Day	national
January 6	Epiphany	religious
Easter and Easter Monday	Easter and Easter Monday	religious
May 1	International Workers' Day	national
60 days after Easter	Corpus Christi (introduced in 2001)	religious
June 22	Anti-Fascist Struggle Day (in 1996 replaced the Day of Croatian People's Uprising, which was celebrated on July 27 th in former Yugoslavia)	national
June 25	Statehood Day (in 2001 changed from May 30 th to June 25 th)	state
August 5	Victory and Homeland Thanksgiving Day and the Day of Croatian defenders (in 1996 Homeland Thanksgiving Day, in 2001 name changed to Victory and Homeland Thanksgiving Day, in 2008 changed to current name)	state
August 15	Assumption of Mary	religious
October 8	Independence Day (introduced in 2001)	state
November 1	All Saints' Day	religious
December 25 and 26	Christmas holidays (Christmas and St. Stephen's Day)	religious

History and tradition were invoked throughout the celebratory programme organized for the public, through flags, songs, historic uniforms, national costumes, and traditional handiwork. Tuđman spoke about “the birth of a new Croatia” to the gathered crowd, symbolically marking it with a child’s crib. An old Croatian custom was revived of gifting a new-born baby with a piece of bread, a historic ducat coin and a feather placed under its pillow (HRT 2005). The choir sang excerpts from one of the most popular national operas “Nikola Šubić Zrinski,” composed by Ivan pl. Zajc during the period of “Croatian national awakening” in the 19th century. Flags were especially symbolic. The flag in the hands of the flag-bearer on the stage was a 19th century original from the period when most of current Croatian territory was united under one ruler, Austro-Hungarian Ban Josip Jelačić (Stančić and Peić Čaldarović 2011: 142-144; see also: Jereb 2010: 57-58). In addition, Jelačić was one of the most important Croatian national figures, and the central Zagreb square where this celebration was held carried his name between 1848 and 1947. The socialist government had changed the name of the square in 1947, and had removed Jelačić’s statue on a horse. Both the name and the statue were returned by the new political leadership on 16th October 1990 in another large public celebration. On the flags of the gathered citizens, as well as those on the stage, the five-pointed red star that appeared on the flag of Socialist Republic of Croatia had been replaced by the so-called “historical Croatian coat-of-arms.” This change was also officially adopted by the

Amendment to the Constitution of Socialist Republic of Croatia on 25th July 1990 (Peić-Ćaldarović & Stančić 2011: 202; Odluka o proglašenju amandmana... 1990). However, while it was clear that the “historical Croatian coat-of-arms” referred to red and white chequered coat-of-arms, which has been found to have marked Croatian political territories since the 14th century (Peić-Ćaldarović & Stančić 2011: 20), the Amendment did not specify which colour should come first. Most flags appearing during the first Statehood Day celebration, as well as the one that was officially raised on 25th July 1990 on the building of the Croatian Parliament, had the first white field on the coat-of-arms (see, e.g.: HRT 2014). This seemingly small variation in the design evoked another variant of Croatian historic flag, from the period between 1941 and 1945, when Croatia was an Independent State, but really a puppet state of fascist Germany. By December 1990 the Croatian Parliament decided upon the design of the national flag that is used today, which consists of red, white and blue stripes laid horizontally, with the checked pattern of the coat of arms in the centre, so that the first field of the shield with twenty-five alternating red and white fields is red (Zakon o grbu, zastavi i himni... 1990; Ustav [1990] 2010). The crown above the shield is evocative of Croatian national history as it consists of five historic Croatian coats of arms.

Fast forwarding 25 years later, a visitor wanting to participate in the 25th anniversary of that first Statehood Day would have found Zagreb’s central square deserted on 30th May 2015. This is because in 2001, the Social-Democratic Party changed the date of the Statehood Day commemoration from 30th May to 25th June. It was argued that as this is the day when the Parliament officially declared Croatia as an independent and sovereign state, it was therefore more appropriate (Zakon o izmjenama i dopuni... 2001; Ustavna odluka... 1991). The date of 30th May was declared a memorial Day of the Croatian Parliament. However, regardless of the suitability of one date or the other, this change provoked much discussion in Croatian public discourse, which has not settled to this day (see, e.g.: Šarić 2002, Večernji list 2003; Puhovski 2007; Večernji list 2010; Jajčinović 2012; Pavičić 2014; see also: Jereb 2010, 393; Skoko 2013; Lipovac 2013). In addition, the Croatian Democratic Union opposed this change of the dates, declaring this move to be a sign of the “de-Tuđmanization” of Croatia and an anti-national, left-wing provocation. In addition, another national holiday was introduced in 2001 – the Independence Day. It was to be celebrated on 8th October and mark the official separation from former Yugoslavia in 1991. An introduction of another equally important state holiday, alongside the changes in the dates of the first one, created further confusion.

In the years that followed, there was a visible decline in both organized celebrations as well as the citizens being actively engaged in the commemoration of any national state holidays, in particular the Statehood and Independence Day. Even larger anniversaries such as the 20th anniversary of 25th June Statehood Day in 2011, or the 25th anniversary of the Day of the Croatian Parliament in 2015 went largely unmarked. When they are celebrated, it is usually on the level of the political leadership, like the 20th anniversary of the new Statehood Day in 2011 (Jutarnji.hr 2011), with sporadic celebrations in some cities if they decide to organize their own celebrations. Moreover, there are

continuous contestations among the political leadership of the appropriateness of these dates and events for state holidays. Furthermore, day-to-day politics often stands in the way of the political leadership's involvement in the commemoration of key national days. For example, representatives from the two largest political parties did not attend the session of the Parliament organized to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Day of the Croatian Parliament (see, e.g.: HRT 2015). Skoko (2013) describes the commemoration of the last Statehood Day before Croatia joined the EU in 2013 as a "grey, lifeless and depressive day in the Croatian capital." "Only some buildings displayed the Croatian flag. Zagreb's squares and parks showed no sign of any festive events. No marches, concerts, uniforms, picnics, and no national symbols! Only St. Mark's Church held the Mass for the Homeland, and the representatives of the government laid down flowers on five or six graves and memorial sites at Zagreb's graveyard Mirogoj" (Skoko 2013). "Many who spent it at the sea or in the country probably enjoyed it, but let's be realistic and admit that most of them did not even know what we were actually celebrating. The only thing that remains important is that it is a non-working day and that we can merge it with the weekend. All in all, this state holiday went by without emotion, patriotism, euphoria or much important symbolism. Just like it did for the past years. So why even commemorate such Statehood Day?" (Skoko 2013).

In 2015 a celebratory programme was organized for the citizens of Zagreb to mark the 24th anniversary of 25th June Statehood Day. However, even though the programme included national symbolism – folklore ensembles in national costume, flags around the stage, national philharmonic orchestra and popular musicians playing and singing national music, and the president in attendance in the audience – it did not quite hit the mark on some of the most important aspect of collective national rituals for several reasons. Firstly, the entire celebration was undermined by the Croatian Democratic Union (even though it was held under the patronage of the current president who originated from this party) who 14 years later still refused to comply with 25th June as the Statehood Day (see, e.g.: Ćurić 2015; Koretić 2015; 24Sata 2015). Secondly, the number of people gathered was not small, but nothing close to a large crowd. In addition, the event was not televised so it was confined mostly to the citizens of Zagreb who attended, while other citizens did not have the opportunity to share in the commemoration as members of the national collective. Thirdly, people remained more as passive observers of a classical concert, than active participants in this celebration, sporadically joining in singing some of the more popular songs but not engaging with national symbolism personally. There were no flags or other national insignia in the audience, and everyone quickly dissipated after the concert. Another larger public celebration was the 20th anniversary of the Victory Day on 5th August 2015. It was organized for the wider Croatian public in different cities, was televised and promoted outside Croatian borders, and involved the political leadership and the citizens in a day-long celebratory programme. However, this date is not commemorated in such a public way every year so there is still a lack of continuity, and there were also contestations among some members of the political leadership as well as the citizens about the appropriateness of this holiday as being national at all (mainly

because it is connected to the events from the Homeland War) and about the proper ways to mark its celebration.

Croatian citizens on the commemoration of the Statehood Day (micro-perspective)

Method

This research is based on the qualitative study of Croatian citizens using the method of in-depth semi-structured interviews. Respondents were selected across Croatia, which was divided into five statistical regions (East Croatia, North and Central Croatia, Istria, Primorje and Lika, South Croatia, and Zagreb County). The citizens that were interviewed were selected by a purposive sample, stratified by the following socio-demographic characteristics within each statistical region: age, gender, urban/rural area, ethnicity, religion, education, political orientation, and additional sampling of Croatian war veterans. The research was given permission by the Research Ethics Board at the Department of sociology, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb. All respondents were informed about the purpose of the research and were guaranteed anonymity. Eighty-five respondents (N=85) were interviewed between February and May 2013 – sixty-one (N=61) responded to the question on the commemoration of national holidays and seventy-two (N=72) on the Statehood Day. We should stress that the sample is unusually big for a qualitative research. The reason for this is the presumed regional heterogeneity of Croatian population, and the lack of similar qualitative research on a larger national scale that we could rely upon.

Interviews were conducted at the respondents' places of residence, either at home, at work or in a local café. On average, interviews lasted for an hour and a half. The researcher recorded the interviews with the permission of the respondents and then transcribed them personally. Interviews enabled direct "face-to-face" contact with respondents in their "natural" environment, while semi-structured format allowed us to ask respondents to further elaborate on some of their answers.

Data was analysed by using thematic analysis. "Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail" (Braun and Clarke 2006: 79), as well as interprets various aspects of the research topic, as Boyatzis (1998) explains, cited in Braun and Clarke (2006: 79). "A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun and Clarke 2006: 82). Considering the goals of this research we used theoretical thematic analysis and latent themes. Theoretical thematic analysis "would tend to be driven by the researcher's theoretical or analytic interest in the area, and is thus more explicitly analyst-driven" (Braun and Clarke 2006: 84). Additionally, "a thematic analysis at the latent level goes beyond the semantic content of the data, and starts to identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations – and ideologies – that are theorised as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data" (Braun and Clarke 2006: 84). The results of this research

cannot be generalized to Croatian population, but the citizens' responses provide an in-depth insight into the meanings attributed to the Statehood Day from the micro-perspective. The saturation principle was used in determining that enough data was collected reaching the point where "the new" that is discovered does not add anything to the overall topic of research (Strauss and Corbin 1998: 136). In the presentation of the results, "N" marks the overall number of respondents who answered a question, while "n" marks the number of respondents within a coded subcategory of respondents' answers.

Results

The commemoration of Croatian national holidays

Out of sixty-one citizens (N=61) who reported on the commemoration of national holidays, most respondents (n=46) listed religious holidays as most important for them personally, then state holidays (n=26), and then other holidays and commemorative days (n=16). One respondent (n=1) only celebrated family events, one (n=1) only celebrated holidays in spring, all holidays were equally important to four respondents (n=4), while no holidays were important to three respondents (n=3).

Among religious holidays and memorial days, respondents listed (by frequency): Christmas, Easter, the Assumption of Mary, Corpus Christi, while some respondents also mentioned other Roman-Catholic holidays that are not public holidays, and some mentioned public holidays related to other (their) religions (Ramadan Bayram – non-working holiday for Islamic believers, Serbian-Orthodox Christmas celebrated on January 7th). Among state holidays, respondents listed (by frequency): the Statehood Day, the Independence Day, the Victory and Homeland Thanksgiving Day and the Day of Croatian Defenders, as well as two memorial days, the Day of the Croatian Parliament, and the Day of International Recognition of the Republic of Croatia. Respondents additionally listed other national holidays: International Workers' Day, New Year's Day, Anti-Fascist Struggle Day, as well as the dates that are not non-working public holidays such as International Women's Day, the Day of the City and the Day of the Region.

Some respondents say they commemorate these holidays but only because they are non-working day that can be used for rest. Some like the fact that most of these holidays are in spring, which is a good time of the year to have a non-working day, which they can spend in nature and travelling. There are also those respondents who particularly emphasize the importance of having non-working days to spend more time with friends and family.

Well, for me... I commemorate them all, I merge that day with the weekend and make... They are all great... spring... They really fit me... (male, 65, Istria, Primorje and Lika).

Of all the state holidays, I don't know... Victory Day or Statehood Day. Victory Day because it is on the 5th, in August, so the weather is good, I go for a barbeque (male, 50, Istria, Primorje and Lika).

Actually, we are all a bit selfish. Now that we are talking about this, I am looking at it from the perspective that it is good to have a break, right? Because every day is... and non-working day is very important... And then if it can be merged with something, that's really good, so, yes... [...] [A holiday in] June is also welcome, after... before summer vacation... It is good to have that, so, [we are] a bit egoistic... (female, 61, North and Central Croatia).

It should be noted that some holidays are commemorated as relevant in themselves, especially Christmas and Easter as the most important Christian holidays, or as the most important Roman-Catholic holidays. One respondent states that International Workers' Day should be commemorated as relevant in itself, because it glorifies workers. However, respondents report no state-related holidays as important to commemorate because of their relevance in themselves. Finally, custom and tradition seem to be important reasons to a number of respondents for the celebration of national holidays, however, no state-related holidays are listed as important to commemorate because there of a long-standing custom or existing tradition.

Some respondents (n=22) also comment on some of the issues that they perceive regarding the commemoration of national holidays, in particular state holidays. Most feel that there are too many national holidays of equal importance, so the citizens are often left to decide for themselves which of the many holidays they will choose to celebrate.

Look, it's because there is a big difference in public attitudes. For some it is the Day of International Recognition, for some it is the declaration of independence, which is sometime in March, or April, when the Parliament got... for some it is 5th August, for some it is 3rd. How do I explain this? There is no unified attitude, so we have the situation that we have (male, 64, Zagreb).

Some respondents suggest that it would be good to have only one national state holiday. Most mention the Statehood Day, while others also mention the Independence Day and the Day of the Parliament (former Statehood Day). One argues for the abolishment of all religious and other national holidays except for one state holiday and one regional memorial day. Another respondent comments that because of a large number of other national holidays, there has been an unnecessary reduction in the number of non-working days for holidays such as International Workers' Day or the New Year. As national non-working holidays are usually marked red in the calendars, one respondent jokes on the subject of too many public holidays:

I always joke when I get the calendar [at the beginning of the year]: "Why did you bring me this Communist calendar, its f* full of red letters" (laugh) (male, 56, East Croatia).

Moreover, some respondents think there are too many religious holidays. Some feel that only Christmas and Easter should be celebrated, some include the Assumption of Mary. One respondent states that all religious communities should be given two holidays to celebrate, like the Roman-Catholics have Christmas and Easter. One argues for the abolishment of all religious holidays as national holidays in Croatia as a secular state.

A repeating argument is that the changes in the dates of national state holidays have caused much confusion among the citizens:

When I have guests over [from other countries] [...] during the Independence Day... I have to say to them that this is our 'Independence Day', then I have to explain to them how and why... why it was celebrated on 30th May, why it is now in October ... Because the Parliament has made us all a little crazy with these dates (female, 44, South Croatia).

And, I have to admit that the Statehood Day on May 30th meant much more to me at that time, because it was symbolic, and so on... And, today, I don't even know when the Statehood Day is... (male, 56, Istria, Primorje and Lika).

Some respondents state that national state holidays are not commemorated enough. One respondent remembers former Yugoslavian holidays, which were celebrated *en masse*, such as the Day of the Republic on 29th November. Another describes how the 20th anniversary of the Statehood Day went largely unnoticed:

Let's say, there should be some kind of day, Croatian Statehood Day, let's say, like Independence Day in the US... I don't know, one day when that would really be something. See, this year is the 20th anniversary of Croatian independence. I haven't heard any songs made, seen any kind of promotional videos, nothing. I don't know, I think that the 20th anniversary should be commemorated a bit more. And some holidays, let's say church holidays are ok, but they are celebrated more than the Statehood Day, Victory Day, Independence, when we were internationally recognized. None of us even know, when TV reporters go around and ask, not a living soul knows what holiday is on that day (female, 52, South Croatia).

Finally, several respondents don't agree with the fact that the commemoration remains mostly in the public sphere, without reflection in the citizens' private lives. However, a lesser number of respondents think the opposite, which is that national holidays should remain in the public sphere and not be commemorated privately.

The commemoration of the Statehood Day

Out of seventy-two (N=72) citizens who responded to the question on the commemoration of the Statehood Day, most respondents (n=54) stated that they do not engage in its celebration. Additionally, eight respondents (n=8) stated they do commemorate it but not as the Statehood Day, only as another non-working holiday. A lesser number of respondents (n=10) commemorates the Statehood Day.

Amongst respondents who commemorate the Statehood Day, some do not give more specific reasons why, four respondents state they do so by putting up a flag on the outside of their homes, two respondents commemorate it within their family circle, and one celebrates it with a wider circle of friends. One respondent describes:

We always prepare a festive lunch at home, make everything beautiful... (female, 44, Istria, Primorje and Lika).

Another respondent further elaborates on the meaning that the Statehood Day has for her. The example she uses of the “placing of the hand to the heart” refers to a custom when the national anthem is playing, which is sometimes associated with the right-wing political orientation in Croatia:

Yes. I think [it should be celebrated], and for me it is unthinkable [not to celebrate it], regardless of the fact that I don't hold a hand to my heart, and that I don't have, as could have already see, that kind of relationship. But, something must be built, something must become our tradition, and we keep destroying that day after day, keep changing it every year, we are simply not building that tradition (female, 59, Southern Croatia).

The largest group of respondents are those who state they do not commemorate the Statehood Day. The citizens who celebrate the Statehood Day as nothing more than a non-working holiday do not associate this national holiday with what it represents. As two respondents explain:

Well, [I don't celebrate it] not particularly, no, only as a non-working day, so we use it for some kind of a day out, or a trip (female, 62, Istria, Primorje and Lika).

I don't [commemorate it], it is a non-working day, so I go with my friends to Drava [river] (male, 54, East Croatia).

Most respondents, however, claim that it should be celebrated but don't engage in the celebration. When they list more specific reasons, most say that it is due to the changes of the dates of commemoration.

Well, [I don't celebrate it] not really... yeah, yeah... As I said, I have lost that [interest], because they [the dates] were changing, so I also lost [interest]... So, that's... But, as I said, I am, I am a supporter that we should celebrate it (male, 48, Zagreb).

I don't even know what date it is on, as they changed it (male, 23, North and Central Croatia).

But, in any case, those days should be commemorated. Because they come from more recent Croatian past and should be known as such. There are many young people who don't know what some of them mean, some older people don't know (laugh), which holiday is which. Right? (male, 49, Zagreb).

No. Because I don't, I... there, I have to check a calendar to even know when they are. So that's why whether we celebrate them or don't celebrate them means nothing to me (female, 57, East Croatia).

Several respondents mention former 30th May as the date they got used to or think as more appropriate for the Statehood Day.

We should really have only one state holiday. In that sense, 30th May functioned much better, didn't it? (male, 34, Zagreb).

There are also those respondents who feel there are too many national holidays. In connection with this, some express confusion regarding the fact that they no longer know what event is commemorated on which day.

It is hard to say which would be the most important days for the state, I think it is unnecessary [that] we have Independence Day, Statehood Day, Victory Day, I think it should all be put into the same day - that would be enough (female, 34, North and Central Croatia).

We shouldn't have so many, we should only take one day... (male, 58, North and Central Croatia).

Some respondents comment that the Statehood Day is not commemorated enough, by both the state and the people. Some say that even when celebrations are organized, they are quite meagre. US Independence Day is sometimes given as an example of the way some citizens imagine Statehood Day should be celebrated – how the majority of the citizens should get involved, or as an example of the pride the citizens think should be felt on such days.

Respondents also describe uncertainties they feel regarding the appropriateness of public and/or private sphere for the Statehood Day commemoration. Some respondents feel that the celebration of national holidays should not be part of private, family lives, but reserved only for the public sphere. Some think it should be commemorated within the private sphere as well, but they do not do so personally, or don't know to do it properly (putting up a flag, expressing national feelings, etc.). One respondent states that the Statehood Day should be commemorated, but that it is not appropriate to celebrate it. Another says that the celebration sometimes “goes overboard” in the sense of the expression of too strong nationalistic feelings.

Another argument that comes up is economy, and some respondents think that the Statehood Day should not be a non-working day due to economic reasons. This is especially connected with the custom of “merging” a non-working day with the working days up to the upcoming weekend, which some people find problematic for economic functioning of the country.

Finally, several respondents state they do not celebrate national days at all because they do not have a strong feeling of national identity. Some say that national days related to the Homeland War, such as the Day of Vukovar, Maslenica, or the Victory Day, mean much more to them than the current Statehood Day. One respondent says that she is a pacifist so she would prefer national days to commemorate something other than events related to the Homeland war.

Discussion and conclusion

Since the formation of the nation-state in the 1990s, Croatia has consolidated itself as a modern democracy, which culminated in its accession to the European Union in July 2013. However, a number of national symbols established during this formative period continue to be contested in Croatian public discourse (see, e.g., our wider research on meanings of

contemporary Croatian national symbols: Trako Poljak 2016). In this paper, we examined the Statehood Day as one of the main national holidays, in order to determine some of the reasons behind the issues surrounding its commemoration over the past years. We presented a wider socio-political context of the changes and contestation of meaning of the Statehood Day by the political elite (macro-perspective), and the meanings attributed to its commemoration by “ordinary” Croatian citizens (micro-perspective).

The significance of national days is well supported in sociological and related literature on national symbols and rituals. Moreover, it is argued that national days are especially relevant in “established” nation-states, where national symbols have been consolidated within the national consciousness to such an extent that most of the time they go unnoticed in the everyday lives of the citizens. Therefore, national days are important as they “disrupt the normal routines,” making these occasions “sufficient to flag nationhood, so that it is remembered during the rest of the year, when banal routines of private life predominate” (Billig 1995: 45). Continuity and collective participation are crucial prerequisites for their success as regular reminders of shared history, and tradition, meanings and values, not only with one another but also with past and future members of the nation (see, e.g.: Anderson [1983] 2006; Hałas 2002). Another important characteristic is the multivocality of symbols, the very fabric that the rituals are made of, as they enable rituals to strengthen “the bonds of social solidarity” among the members of the nation, without the need for a consensus (Kertzer 1988).

Our analysis of the Statehood Day in Croatia revealed issues at both the level of the political elite and the citizens, which stand in the way of its successful functioning as one of the main national holidays. Two main issues arose at the level of the political leadership: the lack of understanding of the integral role of national symbols and rituals, and the lack of continuity in promoting the symbolic dimension of national identity. Discontinuity is most visible in the changes of the dates of the Statehood Day commemoration. It is also evident in the lack of regularly organized celebrations, especially for the wider public. As for the lack of understanding of the significance of national holidays, continuous discussions among the political leadership about the appropriateness of different events and dates undermine the relevance of the Statehood Day commemoration. There is also a tendency to connect national symbols to the period of their establishment during the 1990s. Therefore, some seem to think that the meanings of national symbols set by this right-wing conservative period should not or cannot be changed, which is completely in contrast with the multivocality of symbols as one of their key characteristics. On one hand, this leads to the usurpation of national symbols by the conservatives and right wing and, on the other hand, to the aversion toward their meanings and use by the liberals and left wing. Some evoke more “functional” arguments – that national days should not be commemorated while the country is in economic crisis – forgetting that nation and nation-state are not purely economic constructs. Finally, the political elite at times refuses to participate in the commemoration of national holidays even when they are organized because of day-to-day politics.

Many of the issues detected among the political leadership also reflect in the meanings attributed to the Statehood Day and involvement in its commemoration by Croatian citizens. First of all, it is important to note that respondents report that they commemorate religious holidays more than state ones. This is not surprising as religious holidays have maintained precisely those characteristics that are lacking with state holidays: there is continuity in both the dates and collective ways of their commemoration, and their meanings are widely shared by those who commemorate them. It is also important to note that the majority of respondents feel that national state holidays, and especially the Statehood Day, should be celebrated. Two main reasons arise behind the lack of citizens being personally involved in the Statehood Day commemoration: the general sense of confusion and the lack of understanding of the significance of national days and their commemoration. The confusion is primarily connected with the disruption in the continuity by changing of the dates of the Statehood Day, as well as the introduction of additional national days of equal importance, such as the Independence Day. There are also too many national state, religious and other holidays, according to some citizens. In addition, the citizens express confusion regarding proper ways of their involvement in the celebration (putting up flags, private or public commemoration, etc.). Finally, the meanings of the Statehood Day and its commemoration are not always clear. Some citizens feel that any display of national feelings is nationalistic in a negative way and should be avoided. This is because they equate the idea of national identity only with nationalism in a negative sense. Others, as mentioned above, associate some aspects of the symbolic dimension of Croatian national identity with conservative and right-wing values, promoting or rejecting them as such. Discontinuity stems from the lack of organized public annual celebrations by the political leadership, and from the lack of involvement of the people even when they are organized. Some respondents mention former Yugoslavia as an example when state celebrations were organized more effectively, while others give examples from other countries such as the US and its Independence Day. Finally, just like the political leadership, some citizens consider national symbolism as mere decorations of “real” political and economic issues, which, according to them, should be the focus.

Both Croatian political leadership and the citizens do not fully understand the relevance of symbols and rituals of national identity and their integral role as carriers of its core meanings and values, which, once established, need to continue to be sustained over time and among the members of the national collective. This has had consequences on the Statehood Day commemoration, creating discontinuity in its celebration and confusion in its meanings. As Croatia joined the European Union soon after this research in 2013, gaining a whole new set of symbols and rituals in which Croatian citizens are expected to share and participate, as well as promote their own, the importance of a clearer symbolic dimension of its national identity becomes even more important.

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