

## **Reporting the past: representation of the Fall of Vukovar in Croatian daily newspapers**

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# REPORTING THE PAST: REPRESENTATION OF THE FALL OF VUKOVAR IN CROATIAN DAILY NEWSPAPERS

## ABSTRACT

The research focused on mainstream journalism's reporting of the past and used the Republic of Croatia as an example of a country with contested history in whose context the research can take place. While there have been several studies done on commemorative journalism, the interplay of political ideology and commemorative journalism remained widely unexplored. Therefore, the aim of the research was to understand the role that political ideology plays in commemorative journalism, and how that role affects the way in which a certain disputed historic event is reported in the mainstream media. In order to understand this complex relation, the research focused on journalistic reporting of the Fall of Vukovar, the most tragic event that occurred during the contested nineties in Croatia. The analysis was conducted on the two Croatian daily newspapers *Jutarnji list* and *Večernji list* in a period between 2011 and 2021. The selected time range from 2011 to 2021 presented a reliable frame for exploring the role of political ideology in commemorative journalism in the context of the Republic of Croatia. Namely, during the 11 years, both parliamentarian and presidential political situations changed, seeing a transition from a coalition gathered around the biggest Croatian left-wing political party to a coalition formed around the biggest Croatian right-wing political party. Similar changes took place as well within a presidential political environment. The study took a qualitative approach and used content analysis as a data collection method that resulted in 60 newspaper articles (30 from each newspaper outlet) on the topic of Fall of Vukovar that were then subjected to a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis of the selected feature stories and opinion pieces revealed four thematic categories, "Reviving memories", "Point of division", "Arena for politicization", "Symbol of dignity, respect, and pride", that were reoccurring across the data set and the dominant themes belonging to them. The research showed that the Fall of Vukovar, in spite of more than 30 years that have passed since, remains to be a comprehensively represented topic in the two Croatian daily newspapers analyzed. Focusing mainly on keeping memories alive, through the retelling of stories from 1991 and revoking past emotions, the analyzed units showed that the Fall of Vukovar continues to be a delicate topic prone to divisions, political

manipulations, but also eliciting feelings of dignity, pride, and respect for the sufferings that it underwent through. The research also showed that the Fall of Vukovar remains to be a sensitive topic bearing various political connotations. Even when not implicitly revealed, political ideology manages to be transposed through purposeful omission of certain content and placing focus on another one that serves in its promoting.

**KEYWORDS:** *Collective memory, commemorative journalism, political ideology, national identity, Vukovar*

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## 1. Introduction

Journalism is among the most important authorities in remembering and recording the past (Zelizer, 2008), and to be able to understand what mechanisms are used for that and why they are used, allows recipients to critically assess what they have been served with. Glover (2011), focusing on the genocide in Rwanda and the Haitian Revolution, found that commemorations simultaneously preserve tragedies in cultural memory, and block historical events in a specific time and place which allows the production of politicized and reactionary crisis appropriations. Similarly, researching the remembrance of the Berlin Wall, Somerstein (2017) concluded that the structure of news associated with a specific date is influenced by the expectations that ground them. Consequently, memory is often generated by political and journalistic meddling, while its overuse leads to banalization and affects individuals who shared their testimonies or those who are targeted by them (Ferrández, 2008). The interplay between memory and society becomes even more important when tackling traumatic events in countries with contested pasts (Auchter, 2014). Such societies present a fertile ground to explore the role of collective memory and framing in commemorative journalism and their potential to strengthen and manipulate national identity. Commemorative reporting negotiates repetition and renewal while minding the profile of media consumers, and considering other memory agents, i.e., current socio-political situation (Meyers, 2021).

The Republic of Croatia, up to today's date the youngest member of the European Union (joined in July 2013), had a rough path to walk before finally gaining independence in 1991 (Bartlett, 2003) and is, therefore, an exemplar of a country with burdened past. The split of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which Croatia was a part of along with Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, Montenegro, and Macedonia, was anything but a peaceful diplomatic process, resulting in numerous deaths and inter-ethnic hatred spilled across the region. Among many atrocities that took place during the Homeland War that was fought from 1991 to 1995, the Battle of Vukovar, a city in eastern Croatia, that on 18 November 1991 resulted in the fall of the city was the most tragic event (Marijan, 2002). The siege of Vukovar began on August 25, 1991, when the Yugoslav People's Army supported by Serbian paramilitary units shelled the city. Vukovar's location on the Croatian and Serbian border, its mixed ethnic composition, and the disproportion in military and men's power between defending Croatian and oppressing Yugoslav People's Army forces led to its fall into the oppressor's hands on November 18, 1991. During the battle, approximately 1,850 Croatian veterans and 1,600 civilians, among which 86 children, lost their lives (Marijan, 2002).

Around 2500 people were wounded, 570 of whom remained lifelong invalids. In total, 858 children lost one or both their parents (Marijan, 2002). To commemorate the tragedy, November 18 has been proclaimed the Day of Remembrance for the Victims of the Homeland War and the Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Vukovar and Škabrnja. Each year, on the days surrounding November 18, all eyes are on Vukovar and the Memorial Parade that takes place in the city itself, and figuratively in minds of people who remotely join it through its media coverage to honor those who lost their lives while fighting for freedom. Vukovar thus becomes a central topic of mainstream media which results in numerous narratives framed that always spark discussions and grab the attention of the wider audience.

### **1.1 Societal relevance**

Although more than 30 years have passed since the Battle of Vukovar took place, Croatia is still searching for approximately 1,800 people which prevents numerous families to move forward and causes constant tensions in foreign relations with Serbia who, being on the oppressor side, is the one who should resolve the issue and provide the missing data. This never fully closed chapter gained another momentum in 2020 when the Croatian Government led by the conservative, center-right political party Croatian Democratic Union proclaimed the Remembrance Day of November 18 a public holiday. While some wholeheartedly accepted another free day, many prompted discussions about whether a day of mourning should be exploited for gaining cheap political points (e.g., Dežulović, 2021; Filipović, 2021) while nothing is being done to revitalize the life in the still heavily left behind Vukovar.

In the context of Croatia, where there is still a lack of media literacy (Gavran & Zgrabljić Rotar, 2014) and no strategy to increase it, understanding how commemorative journalism works could be vital to comprehend how collective memory is constructed and, potentially, national history moderated or even rewritten. Revealing how the Fall of Vukovar was represented in the mainstream media could bring valuable findings on the role of journalism in memory construction, and the mechanisms commemorative journalism is using to approach the same topics differently over the years. It can also shed a light on how national identity is being reinforced and the wider public manipulated to form beliefs that are aligned with those of the ruling political party. When discussing the media landscape of Croatia, the relation between politics and journalism should be brought to light. Traditionally, certain outlets are well known to be more prone to a particular political option which consequently leads to a significantly different framing of delicate narratives such as the one on the Fall of

Vukovar (Segvic, 2005). An example of that is the recent coverage in Croatian media of present atrocities happening in Ukraine that brought back memories of the events that happened in Croatia, and primarily Vukovar, during the nineties (Rašović, 2022). Comparisons between Kyiv and Vukovar, although the two being radically different in terms of population, size, and other geopolitical markers, were present in the early coverages and evoked memories of the days before the falling of Vukovar (Škaro, 2022). The angle from which the comparisons have been made varied however depending on the outlet in which they have been published.

## 1.2 Academic relevance

Meyers (2021) studied the critical, and subversive potential of commemorative journalism in the context of the Israeli national past. While focusing on commemorative photographs that were accompanying journalistic texts in Israeli dailies, Meyers (2021) found that there are three dominant storytelling tactics journalists use to demise the national synecdoche: questioning the national voice, national narrative, and national gaze. Britten (2013) noted that commemorative journalism is subordinated to collective memory, i.e., rather than critically assessing the past, it encourages the masses to continue passing on a shared, reaffirmed version of the past. What is more, when journalists deliver the current news by relating them with past events (as when covering various anniversaries and commemorative recurring events), they blend current with past by trying to stay as close as possible to the facts and reality, whilst at the same time also heavily relying on the memory (Zelizer, 2008).

While it is well known that media play a great role in remembering, it remains to be explored how various factors affect their workings. The interplay between politics and mainstream media, and primarily commemorative journalism, remains widely unknown, so the aim of this research was to yield valuable findings that, although coming from a specific geopolitical area, can be applied to a broader context. Even though scholars previously studied the relationship between memory and society, and the construction of collective memory through mainstream media, there is a substantial lack of understanding of the relationship between politics, the dominant ideology, and commemorative journalism. The same gap was also noted when studying closely the research done on commemorative journalism in Croatia.

A study done by Šuligoj and Kennell (2021) explored the role of dark commemorative and sports events in facilitating peaceful coexistence across the post-Yugoslav region. The

authors conducted a discourse analysis of a regional media outlet and noted that, while commemorations have the potential to accelerate the dialogue, they also pose a significant threat to perpetuating everyday life by bringing together victims and perpetrators and challenging the claims of justice (Šuligoj & Kennell, 2021). Another approach was taken by Baker (2009) who studied how Homeland War is commemorated in popular and rap music in Eastern Slavonia (the region where Vukovar is situated). The research found that Vukovar was incorporated into “banal nationalism” (Bilic, 1995, as cited in Baker, 2009) of the nineties in Croatia which consequently “injected routinized commemorations into everyday life” (Baker, 2009, p. 38). Benčić Kužnar (2021) focused on exploring the oral memory of the Homeland War of those who at the time were not directly involved in the happenings, nor have performed any political function. The paper revealed that personal memories are characterized by opposing and conflicted interpretations of the events that took place during the nineties (Benčić Kužnar, 2021). Those personal memories then translate into the collective memory that is being shaped within the wider public discourse. Segvic (2005) highlighted the lack of research attention given to journalism in post-Yugoslav countries, concluding that the close relationship between media and government is one of the most prominent features of the Croatian mainstream media landscape. Thus, that power-relation significantly influences how the stories are being told (Segvic, 2005) and should be further analyzed. To address the gap and yield new findings, this study focused on Croatia, my homeland, and delved into how the Fall of Vukovar, the most tragic event that happened during the contested nineties (Marijan, 2002), is being remembered, i.e., reported on in two Croatian mainstream media newspapers.

### **1.3 Research question and sub/question**

To explore how past is being reported in mainstream media outlets, and what effect political actors in power have on the press coverage of delicate events, this study aimed to answer the following research question and sub-question:

How was the Fall of Vukovar represented in Croatian newspapers between 2011 and 2021?

What role does political ideology have in commemorative journalism?

To answer the questions, this research took a qualitative approach and performed a content analysis on a set of newspaper articles published in two prominent Croatian outlets: *Jutarnji list* and *Večernji list*.

#### **1.4 Thesis outline**

The thesis is conceptualized in five chapters in total: introduction, theoretical framework, methods, results, conclusion and discussion. Each of the main sections is divided into subsections dealing with a specific part of the wholesome research project. In the end, a list of references, as well as required appendices are given.

## 2. Theoretical framework

This chapter provides an overview of the theories and previous findings relevant to the research process. The key concepts detected and in greater detail revealed are as follows. The first section is tackling collective memory, and it is divided into the terminology subsection and the subchapter elaborating on the semantics behind the term. Journalism and collective memory is the second part of the chapter and it is comprised of four subheadings.

### 2.1 Collective memory

#### 2.1.1 *The question of terminology*

*Lieux de mémoire* or sites of memory, units where memory is stored accompanied by a presence of historical continuity (Nora, 1989) keeps sparking the interests of scholars dealing with the issue of memory. Different perspectives on the topic and understanding of the concept of memory led to the coexistence of several different terminologies when addressing it. The terminology becomes especially complex and tangled when tackling what Halbwachs (1992) called collective memory. Different studies dealing with memory propose thus several names: “cultural memory” (Glover, 2011), “communicative memory” (J. Assmann, 2011), and “collective memory” (Halbwachs, 1992). In the present study, these concepts, and the differences between them will be explained, but collective memory, which according to J. Assmann (2011) is a superordinate concept of the other two, will be used as one of the key theoretical concepts.

Before delving further into the notion of collective memory, cultural and communicative memory are to be explained. Cultural memory implies a form of collective memory in which a number of individuals share the same cultural memory, objectified and saved in a symbolic form, that makes them create a collective identity (J. Assmann, 2011). It exists within a socio-cultural context and comes as a result of the interaction between the past and present (Young, 2008). Young (2008) puts forward concepts as the central parts around which cultural memory revolves, i.e., the creation of themes and ways of handling certain objects. Cultural memory is thus characterized by its transdisciplinary nature (Young, 2008).

Communicative memory, unlike the cultural memory, is embodied, not institutionalized, and does not occur through transmission or interpretation, but rather exists through interaction and communication (J. Assmann, 2011). The difference between the two lies in the social dimension. While communicative memory does not know of formal specialists and is diffuse, cultural memory has its specialists (teachers, scholars, priests, etc.) and has a fixed point of

reference (J. Assmann, 2011). When put in comparison with collective memory, cultural and communicative memory function as “ways of remembering” (J. Assmann, 2011, p. 17).

Therefore, to avoid terminological confusion, the present study will focus on the collective memory as an umbrella term including both cultural and communicative memory.

### ***2.1.2 Collective memory: beyond the term***

The simplest way to approach collective memory is to define it as a common understanding a certain community has built of its shared past (Edy, 2019). It is therefore a socially constructed concept (Coser, 1992) that is presumed by collective consciousness (Funkenstein, 1989). Hence, not even a highly personal memory can be understood without considering its relation to society. When observed as a social construction, the past presents either a connective structure or diachronic identity to both individuals and societies, while memory is the tool that constructs a narrative of that past, and consequently, a narrative of each individual per se (J. Assmann, 2011). In other words, collective memory stands as a metaphor for “(...) society’s retention and loss of information about its past in the familiar terms of individual remembering and forgetting” (Schwartz, 1991, p. 302).

To explain the link between individual and collective memory, Funkenstein (1989) borrows the structuralist dichotomy between language (being abstract) and speech (the realization of language) proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure. When observed with this dichotomy, collective memory is thus close to language: it is a system of “signs, symbols, and practices” (Funkenstein, 1989, p. 7), and it includes the times, places’ names, stereotypical images, even language. Hence, it is characterized by its abstractness. The space, either the one people have access to, or that that is reconstructed in imagination, occupies a central place in remembering as it preserves the past (Halbwachs, 1992). When remembering exceptional events, spatial framework plays a colossal role and thus every collective memory uncoils within one (Halbwachs, 1992). Individual memory, on the other hand, is the “act of remembering” (Funkenstein, 1989, p. 7), putting the system of symbols to use (realization of collective memory). Human memory depends thus on socialization and communication, and as such can be observed as a function of social life (Coser, 1992).

While memory has the power to affect the present, the present has also the power to shape the memory (Muller, 2002). Therefore, collective memory is dynamic, not linear, and cannot be taken as proof of the authenticity of a shared past, but rather as one of its versions, a fragmented part that a certain community chose to remember (Meyers, 2021). Halbwachs

(1992) noted that collective memory is associated with reconfiguring instead of retrieving information, implying how within its realm the past is observed through the lenses of the present. That gives way to subjectivity and enhances the importance of the current circumstances and hinders the objectivity and certainty of memory. Individuals' remembering occurs within a social framework (Halbwachs, 1992) which leads to a clash between individual and collective, and thus poses a question of who is the “prime remembering subject” (Nyirubugara, 2013, p. 104). The relation between individual and collective puts interactivity of the remembering process in opposition to its notion of being primarily personal, and thus unique (Nyirubugara, 2013).

Remembering comes with forgetting and collective occlusion is another concept that needs to be addressed in relation to collective memory. It targets the parts that are left out of common knowledge, and thus not easily retrievable (Nyirubugara, 2013). In the context of former Yugoslav countries, the notion of collective forgetting, named the “Balkanization” or “de-Yugoslavization” of memory (Milošević, 2017, p. 895) follows the notion of collective occlusion. Milošević (2017) explains how a new narrative of national statehood, supporting the independence claims of former Yugoslav countries, substituted the forcedly led to the erosion memory of the previous political regime that had to be forgotten to give way to a new narrative (Milošević, 2017). The fluidness of collective memory and its openness to reinterpretation and manipulation enhances the importance of studying it, especially in relation to journalism and media that operate as a sense-making machine through which individuals understand their past (Edy, 1999).

## **2.2 Journalism and collective memory**

### ***2.2.1 Journalism as an agent of collective memory***

The past continues to exist in a double form (J. Assmann, 2011). On one hand, there are personal memories, unique to each individual, while on the other there is a social construction (J. Assmann, 2011). Journalism, like politics, law, or education, presents a setting where individuals can easily influence the course of current events by deciding what and how the past is remembered (Zelizer, 2016). While the news is the first record of happenings and last shortly, their duration can be prolonged when enriching them with a historic perspective that evokes memory, and thus emotional background, step away from objectivity, and addition of imagination (Zelizer, 2016). For members of society who did not partake in a certain event, media presents the easiest way to access history and helps in shaping collective memory

(Edy, 1999). Hence, journalism plays an important role in the construction of collective memory and has mechanisms to reshape it according to the current circumstances.

The way in which journalists present the past affects how the community relates to it, i.e., whether it relates to and remembers that past at all (Edy, 1999). That is especially important when it comes to war-like events. Reductive media coverage might limit public understanding of the happening (Keith, 2012) or present it in a way that suits the perspective of the general public. During unprecedeted times, the reliance on memory grows rapidly as journalists try to keep up to date with the ongoing events and put them in a meaningful context (Zelizer, 2016). Whenever a new crisis emerges, the journalistic tendency to evoke memory immediately comes into the spotlight. Zelizer (1993) introduced the notion of “double time” to explain how journalists approach unprecedeted events that start unfolding. While trying to place what is happening within a larger frame, they start engaging with present and past (hence, double time), and strive to associate “here and now” with “there and then” (Zelizer, 2016).

Journalists have the authority when retelling the past, mainly because of the documentary style of writing that is peculiar for journalism as a profession (Edy, 1999). The authority that they possess gives them also the power to establish a strong emotional connection, especially with that part of the audience that already has some emotional biases towards the topic (Edy, 1999). Nonetheless, as journalism is characterized by instantaneity and immediacy when in need of a longer-lasting engagement, journalists rely on historians to achieve it (Zelizer, 2016). This is exactly where the importance, as well as the problematic side of memory, come into play. Associated with subjectivity which evokes emotions, and imagination, memory is not expected to be in the foreground of news (Zelizer, 2016). Yet, despite being on the opposite side of objectivity, it often is. To explain that Zelizer (2008) compared the relationship between memory and journalism to those of two distant cousins. Each of them is aware of the other’s existence, and none of them manages to reach its optimum without the other (Zelizer, 2008).

Journalism is dependent on memory when placing events in context, and memory counts on journalism to ensure public recollections of the past (Zelizer, 2008). What is more, the distinction between past and present becomes increasingly less relevant with news blending remembered and experienced, old and new, known and unknown (Zelizer, 2016). In relation to that, Lavoinne and Motlow (1994) explain how there are three basic journalistic roles. Depending on the content they are providing, journalists can be seen as a servant of future historians, historians of the present, and historians of the past (Lavoinne & Motlow, 1994).

Although journalists are not historians and do not have the same expertise, they are the first to communicate fresh news to the public (Lavoinne & Motlow, 1994). Therefore, they have a crucial role in constructing collective memory by creating the first records (either written ones or recorded ones), i.e., versions of events that historians will use in the future (Lavoinne & Motlow, 1994).

Especially when it comes to reporting on breaking news, journalists need to act quickly and record events that are memorable by putting them into context and thus creating a new kind of history (Lavoinne & Motlow, 1994). On the other side of reporting on breaking news is dealing with historic events. As Lavoinne and Motlow (1994) noted, history remains one of the primary sources of information and hence leaves a lot of space for journalists to interpret and present it in their own specific way that will eventually be picked up by future historians and the general public of news consumers. While writing the first version of history, journalists collect, verify, and transmit large volumes of data, but their work remains largely uncorrected (Daly, 2011). That does not mean that the pieces they produce are false because most of the time they are factually accurate, but various interpretations are possible, as well as omissions or even suppressions of certain details (Daly, 2011). Such examples include journalistic writings back in 1898 when recording the war fought between the United States and Spain and producing a version of history that was, like many others, significantly discredited by scholars afterward (Daly, 2011).

### ***2.2.2 Framing in relation to specific events***

Framing stands for “(...) an active, processual phenomenon that implies agency and contention at the level of reality construction.” (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 614). The time that passed from a certain event does not make the memory less vivid, but it rather enforces its strength and takes a toll on its shape (A. Assmann, 2011). Somerstein (2017) researched the mainstream media’s commemoration of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Berlin Wall’s opening by conducting a qualitative content analysis to understand how visual collective memory is constructed. The author, in line with Zelizer (1998), found that manifestations of collective memory are not fixed, but they constantly change depending on how they are framed, and thus have the capacity to reshape the past (Somerstein, 2017).

Iyengar (1991) noted that responsibility and remedy are central to media framing, i.e., detecting who caused a certain problem, and who can offer a solution. That becomes especially interesting when touching upon traumas, like the Fall of Vukovar, as memory there

plays a crucial role in constructing social and political narratives (Auchter, 2014). Hence, the dichotomy between the problem and solution becomes even more prominent depending on how it is framed and calls for socio-political and temporal contextualizing to be understood. Memory often comes into play when is not expected, clustering otherwise disparate events (Zelizer, 2016). Especially during troubling times, journalism presents its power in connecting events backward (Zelizer, 2016), constructing thus a frame that enables collective memory to shape what is important and why in perceiving current news.

The power of framing in relation to specific events was best summarized in what Zelizer (2016) named “Cold War mindedness” and which stands for the idea that events such as war do not need to be necessarily observable in order to be believed. Cold War was more of an idea than an actual war so journalists had to use their imagination to depict its existence to the audience (Zelizer, 2016). Although it ended in 1989, it did not evaporate from the media landscape but rather continued to reappear as a frame for the interpretation of emerging crises (Zelizer, 2016). It has been turned into what Zelizer (2016) named “deep memory”. While exploring the construction of collective memory in Spain, Ferrández (2008) concluded that not only historical memory is generated as a result of political and journalistic meddling, but that its overuse in public discourse leads to its banalization which consequently affects real people who either shared testimonies or are targeted by them. An example of overuse of historic memory can also be seen in the political approach to remembering the events around Vukovar and its usage as a “lieux de memoire”, i.e., site of memory (Nora, 1989). Milosevic (2017) noted that insisting on the narrative of Homeland War significantly influences policy-shaping and decision-making even in the context outside Croatia, namely within the European Parliament. Vukovar is thus often referred to as a hero city. On the other hand, its heroic victimhood is pointed out not only as a symbol of the price that Croatia had to pay on its path to independence but also as a symbol of Europeaness, i.e., its effort in the anti-totalitarian battle (Milosevic, 2019).

Journalistic framing can work in the other way as well, i.e., it can make a certain event seem less horrendous (Zelizer, 2016). Suppressing the visibility of a phenomenon has the same effect as its overusing, implying that leaving elements out of a certain coverage equates to their hypervisibility (Barthes & Heath, 1993). The TV coverage in the United States of America of the Gulf War in 1991 was an example of that: no war was presented, but rather footage of live cameras and graphics was put forward (Zelizer, 2016). Soren Kierkegaard pointed out that living with an outlook on the future relies on understanding what has happened in the past (Zelizer, 2016). Individuals’ recognition of the fact that looking back

blocks and shapes the understanding of the present seems crucial to that (Zelizer, 2016) as it makes them aware that no reception is neutral *per se*, but rather interpreted within the frame of the previously known.

### ***2.2.3 Commemorative and anniversary journalism***

Although commemorative and anniversary journalism are sometimes used as synonyms (Edy, 1999), there is a difference between them. Commemorative journalism does not tend to produce a meaningful connection between the past and the present and thus is not successful in establishing a historical context (Edy, 1999). Anniversary journalism is never only about the past, but it rather reinforces the values a certain society considers important by examining the present through the past, and the other way round (Chu, 2021). However, while the focus of anniversary journalism is a specific date, hence its contemporary remembering, commemorative journalism reveals more about the story behind a certain event remembered (Edy, 1999).

Commemorative journalism pieces are often considered to be authoritative due to their claims of being factual, and because a lot of news recipients have no other sources to turn to in seek of another interpretation (Edy, 1999). Zelizer (2008) explains three ways how form merges memory and journalism: the structure of a journalistic piece is such that form needs memory (engagement with the past is necessary); the coverage is based on the present but invites the past; and the coverage touches upon the past to underline the need to better approach a certain historic event (the form gives way to memory). In the case of commemorative and anniversary journalism, the form requires memory, i.e., should they not look back in history, journalists would not have a story to tell (Zelizer, 2008). Part of commemorative and anniversary journalism's success lies in the stability they seem to offer and that is grounded in shared meanings (without questioning whether the information was tweaked or is even completely wrong) (Zelizer, 2016).

While there is a consensus on a fact that journalists write the first version of history, there is much to be said about its rewriting for which journalists, especially those engaged with the genre of commemorative journalism, are also in charge (Eddy, 1999). Writing is no longer subordinated to the human mind but is rather seen as a tool that can instrumentalize it (A. Assmann, 2011). Commemorative journalism, however, still seems to have the most adequate tools for past reexamination (Edy, 1999). Journalists, on commemorative events, mingle with repetition and renewal and thus produce pieces that offer a tone of the national ritual blended

with new stories and perspectives (Meyers, 2021). Not to be forgotten is the fact that journalists always take a good account of who is their audience and what that audience likes to consume (Meyers, 2021). All of that play significant roles in how commemorative and anniversary journalism are produced and manage to stay captivating and relevant to society.

#### ***2.2.4 Role of journalism in shaping national identity***

Discussing memory cannot go without mentioning national identity. Being aware of the connection between the two is crucial to understanding why memory has such a big impact in a society in which political identities are ever-changing (Auchter, 2014). National identity implies both the internal characteristics certain citizens have in common and the extent to which a certain country or ethnic group differs from another (Triandafyllidou, 1998). Thus, national identity has meaning only when put in a relation of opposition (Triandafyllidou, 1998). In the arena of commemorative journalism, what has been forgotten becomes equally important as what has been remembered (Auchter, 2014). Translating that into the context of Croatia and its mainstream media landscape, the importance of the relation between memory and (national) identity gains even more significance. As Čapo Žmegač (2015) concludes, the process of memorizing substantially burdens Croatian politics, media, and society members of great influence. Memory, as an exemplar of a category that is constantly contested, moderated, and subjected to change, can easily be interpreted in a way that suits a political idea that wants to be propagated (Auchter, 2014).

While studying how Homeland War was commemorated in popular and rap music in Eastern Slavonia, Baker (2009) found that Vukovar was used as an instrument of promoting nationalism in the nineties in Croatia. Glorifications of a country's history often become a means of showcasing national identity, as the past is perceived as a symbolic capital that brings individuals together through a common feeling of ancestry and fate (Rivera, 2008). Thus, memory shapes one's identity while also having the ability to generate divisions by emphasizing political identities and the distinction between them (Auchter, 2014). Collective memory is therefore inherently related to power, and in relation to a modern state, a mechanism to support certain narratives or reject them (Auchter, 2014). Commemorative and anniversary journalism can influence how nations relate to their pasts and form their collective memories and are thus worth exploring (Keith, 2012). Their potential to create a sense of a cohesive national community among the recipients operates as a means of passing collective memory and values associated with it (Meyers, 2021).

While Jacques Derrida questioned the need to have memory (Derrida & Stiegler, 2002, as cited in Nyirubugara, 2013), Van Dijck (2006) rejected the idea of a “unified collective memory” (p. 370) and introduced the notion of many different sites used for construction of a past shared by a certain community (Nyirubugara, 2013). Silencing memories of the past that might be considered malicious for preserving the national identity image a certain nation has, has been a well-known tactic to preserve the current socio-political order and move the undesirable practices away from public discussion (Nyirubugara, 2013). Remembering does not come without forgetting (Nyirubugara, 2013). Nietzsche (as cited in Nyirubugara, 2013) made a remark that memory’s usefulness is much greater when forgetting overcomes remembering, while Ernest Renan (as cited in Nyirubugara, 2013) applied that to national cohesion and highlighted the pressing need to forget elements that are threatening national unity (as cited in Nyirubugara, 2013). War-like happenings often have a traumatic impact on society, and thus their remembrance can be potentially socially or politically problematic (Rivera, 2008). In exploring how the Croatian government changed representations of the history in the region through international tourism, Rivera (2008) found that covering and cultural reframing replaced recognition. That was associated with national identity, a collection of multiple social actors taking part in cultural representation, that was built with the state controlling the historic narrative and managing the stigma (Goffman, 1974) of burdensome events (Rivera, 2008).

The connectedness of memory and identity is a feature pertaining exclusively to human capabilities of communication and symbolization (J. Assmann, 2011). The strength of memory in enhancing national identity lies in the following: memory allows for individuals to feel like a part of a larger group, a community, and that ability to live in a group gives a way to memory building (Halbwachs, 1992). Public states’ presentation of history and culture affects the perception of countries same as media reports (Rivera, 2008). Except for being an agent of remembering, collective memory plays a role in formation of the identity, power consolidation, and creation of a sense of community (Zelizer, 2016). Halbwachs (1992) stated that individuals’ recollections of past events are not dissociated from those of others who share the same perspective, and from the dominant framework that was built by a certain society. Media here plays a great role as it is known to have a wider and stronger influence on the general population than for example formal education system (Edy, 1999). What is more, partial or reflective media accounts tend to have a bigger authority than works written by historians (Keith, 2012). Consequently, parts that are emphasized and constantly

repeated in the media might be those that are better remembered, while those that are silenced and omitted could easily die out of the collective memory (Keith, 2012).

### **3. Methodology**

The methods chapter consists of six sections. First, the research approach is defined and explained. The following section explains how the data was collected and is followed by an overview of sampling. Then follows an elaboration on the data analysis procedure. Lastly, the chapter closes with a section explaining the validity and reliability of the research.

#### **3.1 Research approach**

This research aimed to explore how the Fall of Vukovar was represented in two different Croatian newspapers and what role political ideology plays in commemorative journalism and thus seek a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research can be defined as a scientific and systematic investigation that aims to yield a complete, mostly narrative depiction of a certain social or cultural phenomenon in order to inform the researcher's comprehension of it (Astalin, 2013). The nature of the research questions developed was descriptive. It sought for comprehending the representation of a contested event, and therefore suggested using a qualitative approach to the study. Qualitative approaches take into account diversity, complexity, and all the nuances of the topic researched (Holloway & Todres, 2003) and are suitable when it comes to tackling journalistic texts that are rich with data. The qualitative analysis aims to ponder the depth of understanding, and in doing so, it is flexible, sensitive, and responsive to the context (Fossey et al., 2002). It implies reviewing, synthesizing, and interpreting data to connect the focus of research with a wider context (Fossey et al., 2002). Constant comparison, analytic induction, and theoretical sensitivity, three steppingstones of qualitative analysis (Boeije, 2010), allowed for thorough and systematic analysis of the extensive data corpus used in the research, establishing the connection between the media content and society to whom the newspapers are addressed, and finally answering the proposed research question and sub-question. While qualitative research is driven by a research question, it also simultaneously touches upon several questions that researcher needs to be able to connect with one another and explain how they are associated (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Taking qualitative research approach was the right choice to meet the goals of this research project.

#### **3.2 Data collection**

To collect the data relevant for answering the research questions how the Fall of Vukovar was reported in Croatian newspapers and what role political ideology plays in commemorative journalism, content analysis was performed on a set of the selected articles

published in the two Croatian printed daily newspapers *Jutarnji list* and *Večernji list* within a defined time range of eleven years between 2011 and 2021. The content analysis enables the researcher to go beyond the count and meaning of words (Hsiu-Fang & Shannon, 2005) and is focused on description, interpreting, and understanding (Schreier, 2013). Thus, it proved to be adequate for eliciting data needed to meet the aim of the research. Content analysis was conducted focusing on the following criteria: the objective of the research, the context in which it takes place, the relevance of the content to the topic of the research, and suitability for addressing the research question (Krippendorff, 2018). Therefore, the data collected was appropriate for obtaining quality standards of the research, primarily objectivity, validity, and reliability (Kuckartz, 2014). Using content analysis allowed for establishing connections between the data researched and the context within which the research takes place (Krippendorff, 2018). Being able to establish the connection between the data and the context was relevant to addressing the research questions as it allowed for exploring specific features of the texts that were occurring in certain years, while they were not present or at least prominent in the rest of the dataset.

The nature of my research project was qualitative and strived for exploring common patterns in the rich textual data of written journalistic texts, and content analysis was the most suitable method to analyze their meaning, as well as the ways in which the texts were structured (Bryman, 2012). While enabling the researcher to delve into the depth and draw conclusions in an organized manner (Schreier, 2013), content analysis remains highly systematic (Mayring, 2000) and was thus the right method to elicit and analyze the relevant data for answering the research questions and by doing so to achieve the goal of the research project.

### **3.3 Sampling**

The sampling units used in the research were two Croatian newspaper outlets, *Jutarnji list* and *Večernji list*. The two daily newspapers analyzed in this research are distributed and read across the whole of Croatia and their articles are often taken as a primary source of information. According to the last available report by the Croatian Competition Agency (2021) for 2020 on paid press circulation in the Republic of Croatia, i.e., the number of copies sold, the total amount of all general information dailies sold was 42,9 million. *Večernji list* and *Jutarnji list* held second and third place with market shares of 20 to 30 percent, and 10 to 20 percent, respectively (Croatian Competition Agency, 2021). The biggest market share of 30 to 40 percent was reported for *24sata* (Croatian Competition Agency, 2021), but

that Croatian daily newspaper was excluded from this research due to its mainly tabloid nature and lack of credibility. Another reason to opt for *Jutarnji list* and *Večernji list* was that the two newspapers in question are associated with different ideologies, i.e., parts of the political spectrum in Croatia: *Jutarnji list* is traditionally prone to left-wing, while *Večernji list* is leaning towards the right-wing of political landscape. Including the two was thus vital to address the research questions and explore the role that political ideology plays in commemorative journalism. Each of the two newspapers was represented with 30 articles in total.

Feature stories and opinion pieces were used as coding units of the research. Although there are several different definitions of feature stories, authors agree that a “discourse of intimacy” (Steensen, 2011, p. 54) is always present as their prominent characteristic. What is covered by this syntagma is that journalists writing a feature story needs to establish an intimate rapport with the source to elicit an emotional response, as well as aim for establishing an intimate connection with the recipients of the story (Steensen, 2011). Therefore, stories are more personalized, and usage of the first-person singular form is not uncommon (Steensen, 2011). Opinion pieces, on the other hand, stand for written works of a certain author expressing their point of view on a specific topic, in this case, the Fall of Vukovar and the relating Remembrance Day. The set of chosen articles per year consisted of exclusively Vukovar feature stories and opinion pieces published on 16, 17, 18, and 19 November, i.e., on the two days before the Remembrance Day (16 and 17 November), the Remembrance Day (18 November) and the day after (19 November). On those dates, Vukovar becomes a central topic of the media in Croatia and receives extensive coverage and attention. In addition to being the most covered topic in regular newspaper issues, special editions of newspapers are published on those dates and were therefore included in the analysis. The selection of these specific dates offered the possibility as well to look into how the tone and content change before and after the actual Remembrance Day commemoration took place. As there were more than 60 articles over the selected years that met the criteria to undergo the analysis, randomization was used. All of the articles were originally exclusively published in the Croatian language.

When conducting qualitative research, the sampling methods should be guided by appropriateness and adequacy (Fossey et al., 2002). As the focus of this research was to explore the representation of a specific event, the sampling was purposive (Fossey et al., 2002), i.e., only articles referring to the Fall of Vukovar were subjected to the analysis. The selected time range starting from November 16, 2011, to November 19, 2021, was chosen to

cater to political changes that happened in the Republic of Croatia. The final chosen data set reflected the total amount of articles taken into primary consideration. The data set of 60 articles that underwent coding analysis consisted thus of newspaper articles (feature stories and opinion pieces) related to the Fall of Vukovar that were published in *Jutarnji list* and *Večernji list* between 2011 and 2021. Although the selected range of years might seem like a long period, these exact years were chosen to include in the overview all the political changes that occurred in the Republic of Croatia. Without looking at the selected years chronologically, one could struggle to exclude the interference of political biases in the interpretation of results. Namely, 2011 saw the government transition from a coalition gathered around the right-wing Croatian Democratic Union led by Prime Minister Jadranka Kosor to the coalition gathered around the left-wing Social Democratic Party of Croatia led by Prime Minister Zoran Milanović that stayed in power until 2016. As of then, with one change of a Prime Minister (Tihomir Orešković served as a Prime Minister for nine months in 2016), right-wing coalitions led by Croatian Democratic Union had reclaimed the ruling position, and are still in power with Andrej Plenković serving as a Prime Minister. Between 2011 and 2021, Croatia had three presidential elections and saw three politically different presidents: Ivo Josipović (candidate of left-wing parties), Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović (candidate of the right-wing parties), and Zoran Milanović (non-partisan candidate supported by left-wing parties, and former Prime Minister and leader of leftist Social Democratic Party). Lastly, the chosen time range included 2020, the first year when the Fall of Vukovar became a holiday in Croatia, as well as 2021 which marked the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this Remembrance Day. The decision made by the Government of Croatia in 2020 to proclaim the Remembrance Day a public holiday led to fierce reactions questioning whether a day of mourning should be exploited for gaining cheap political points by providing citizens with another day off (e.g., Dežulović, 2021; Filipović, 2021) and hence could have affected the way in which the days prior, on, and after the commemoration was represented in the mainstream media outlets. Therefore, including 2020, and looking at the subsequent 2021 presented an important addition to obtaining objective results of the study.

In total 186 articles from *Jutarnji list* related to the topic of Fall of Vukovar were scanned. The selected period of time resulted in 281 articles scanned from *Večernji list*. Therefore, in total 467 articles touching upon the topic of Fall of Vukovar were scanned. Out of that set, 60 articles were chosen and further analyzed. Each newspaper outlet was represented with 30 articles. The editions of the papers that were used in the study were accessed through the archives of the Zagreb City Library in Croatia. I was provided with the

original editions of newspapers and made my own digital scan copies that were then used for further content analysis. There were no digital archives available, so I reached out to the Zagreb City Library and ordered needed editions of the newspapers. I browsed through all of them looking for Vukovar-related pieces and scanned the chosen pages manually. That resulted in multiple pages PDF documents that were created for each of the years selected (each newspaper separately). Lastly, articles selected for the analysis were extracted and uploaded to Atlas.ti where they were further dealt with.

Table 1.  
*Overview of the sample*

Year	Dates	<i>Jutarnji list</i>	<i>Večernji list</i>	Total
2011	17 Nov	-	1	1
	18 Nov	1	1	2
	19 Nov	2	1	3
2012	16 Nov	-	1	1
	17 Nov	1	1	2
	18 Nov	-	1	1
2013	19 Nov	2	-	2
	17 Nov	1	1	2
	18 Nov	1	1	2
2014	19 Nov	1	1	2
	17 Nov	2	1	3
	18 Nov	1	1	2
2015	19 Nov	-	1	1
	17 Nov	-	-	0
	18 Nov	2	2	4
2016	19 Nov	1	1	2
	17 Nov	-	-	0
	18 Nov	2	1	3
2017	19 Nov	1	2	3
	17 Nov	-	1	1
	18 Nov	-	1	1
2018	19 Nov	1	-	1
	17 Nov	1	1	2
	18 Nov	-	1	1
2019	19 Nov	1	1	2
	17 Nov	1	1	2
	18 Nov	2	-	2
2020	19 Nov	-	1	1
	17 Nov	-	3	3
	18 Nov	3	-	3
2021	19 Nov	-	-	0
	17 Nov	-	1	1
	18 Nov	2	-	2
	19 Nov	1	1	2

### 3.4 Data analysis

The study used a thematic analysis to process the data. Thematic analysis is a foundational method to analyze qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2013), and is especially useful when the focus is on analyzing a richer set of data. The aim of thematic analysis is to understand the text's meaning (Joffe & Yardley, 2004) which makes it appropriate for analyzing journalistic pieces on a highly sensitive topic because it allows for establishing connections between the published written texts and the wider socio-political context they were set in. While on the one hand thematic analysis tends to be understood as an experiential hence a realist method, with the theoretical freedom approach it offers, it proved to be a valuable research tool to provide detailed and nuanced data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Its flexibility of approach to analyzing qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) is suitable for digging behind the obvious and untangling hidden implications that come with mainstream media's representation of a specific event, especially those disputed and delicate. To understand how mainstream media's representation of stories that are associated with the Fall of Vukovar was constructed, selected feature stories and opinion pieces had to be taken as units of analysis. Approaching whole articles as a unit allowed for detecting and analyzing patterns within the rich data (Clarke & Braun, 2013), comprehending the relation between culture and language used to depict it (Harris, 1981), the underlying power relations, as well as editorial decisions made. In other words, themes, relevant to answering the research question, were detected, and those with high prevalence were taken as focal points to explain the complex phenomenon of media representation of the event in question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As thematic analysis most often focuses on one level, i.e., either semantic or explicit level, or at a latent or interpretative level (Boyatzis, 1998, as cited in Braun & Clarke, 2006), this research paid specific attention to the semantic, that is explicit level. Taking this approach allowed for detecting themes while looking at explicit meanings of the data (thus, what has actually been written in the newspapers and not just potentially implied). That does not mean that the analysis stopped at mere organizing of data to find out patterns, but rather dug behind the importance of these patterns, as well as their wider meanings and implications (Patton, 1990, as cited in Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Processing of the data consisted of multiple human readings and an intuitive approach to analyzing the articles and conducting the analysis through the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti. Coding, the central point of data analysis, was twofold: it located and assembled similar data and elicited data associated with more than one label, thus providing an insight into common patterns, similarities, and differences (Fossey et al., 2002). The

analysis took the inductive, bottom-up, approach, allowing for concepts and theory to emerge from the data (Thomas, 2006). The themes identified were thus severely associated with the data from the articles used in the analysis (Patton, 1990, as cited in Clarke & Braun, 2013). As the inductive approach implies, all the data used was collected exclusively for the purpose of this research (Clarke & Braun, 2013). The researcher's analytical previous knowledge and expectations were set aside, and the data elicited during this data-driven analysis was not accommodated to a preexisting coding frame (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Opting for an inductive approach implied patience, open-mindedness, staying close to the data, and an iterative process of rereading and rethinking codes, but proved to be more suitable for the purposes of this specific research.

Following the inductive approach steps by Thomas (2006), and the structure of thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), the procedure of analysis took place as follows. First, data was collected (original newspaper articles) and prepared for analysis. The process included manual browsing of physical newspapers in Zagreb City Library as there was no digital archive of the newspapers that were used in the research. Pre-selected articles were scanned and analyzed further in the newly created PDF format. Close reading was done second to get a general sense, after which the initial coding process started and line-by-line coding took place. Then, the proportion of coded and uncoded text was checked and the iterative process of revision and refinement commenced (Thomas, 2006). Similar and related codes were put into broader categories and the initial themes were formed. The themes were then revised and improved, and the process of analysis continued until no new categories emerged, i.e., saturation was reached (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Lastly, the writing-up stage contextualized the findings in relation to the existing literature (Clarke & Braun, 2013) and formed an answer to the proposed research question and its sub-question.

As previously mentioned, the analysis took an inductive approach and started with initial, open, line-by-line coding (Charmaz, 2006). Following Charmaz (2006) instructions, I remained open to all theoretical possibilities emerging from my reading of the data and tried to set aside any previous theoretical knowledge and potential expectations I might have had. During the whole process of initial coding that included 30 articles from the set (15 from each newspaper), I stayed close to the data which resulted in 693 provisional codes. The tentative interpretations and notes I was taking during the initial coding phase were taken as incentives for the concretization of ideas at the later analytic writing stage (Charmaz, 2006). Before moving on to the second coding phase, I went back and looked at which codes keep repeating themselves, and which had more power, and I tried to compare them in order to see which of

them have some common features and can be put under the same umbrella label. The second stage of coding, axial coding, proceeded with the rest of the data sample, i.e., the remaining 30 articles (15 from each of the chosen newspapers). During axial coding sentences and even whole paragraphs were coded, and no line-by-coding took place. The aim was to establish categories, that is to synthesize and organize initial codes into larger groups (Charmaz, 2006). The axial coding reduced 693 initial codes into 112 focused codes. At the end of the axial coding, a coding frame was created. Each stage of the coding process was well aligned with the one preceding and the one following next, ensuring that the analysis produces valid and reliable findings (Elo et al., 2014).

The developed coding frame was applied then to the whole data sample (60 articles) during the third stage, i.e., selective coding. The most dominant codes were elevated to the level of categories and represent sections in the results chapter. Four categories were developed. The first one was named “Reviving memories” and covers all the detected themes of remembrance and dealing with the past in the present moment. The second one was “Point of division” which stands for themes relating to disputes between either inter-ethnic communities or political ideology discrepancies and in general the observed tendency of the Remembrance Day to enhance polarization within the society. The third one was labeled as “Arena for politicization” and covers themes of political manipulation with the Vukovar’s tragedy. The last detected category was “Symbol of dignity, respect, and pride” and covers themes related to iteratively evoked heroism and enhanced feelings of being a Croatian national.

Table 2.  
*Overview of categories and relating codes*

<b>Reviving memories</b>	<b>Point of division</b>	<b>Arena for politicization</b>	<b>Symbol of dignity, respect, and pride</b>
Remembering life before war	Negative stance towards Serbia	Political fights	Heroism
Remembering killed	Unsolved issue of missing people	Disrespect for Vukovar’s victim	Croatianess
War stories	Us vs. them	Forgotten Vukovar	

Like any method, the thematic analysis does not come without its limitations. Its reliance on the reflexivity of the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006) should be kept in mind during all

stages of the process as the researcher's ideology and previous knowledge can largely influence the course of analysis and the interpretation of results. To prevent this, the analysis followed a straightforward and detailed plan, and the data corpus included two ideologically opposite media outlets that were analyzed following the same protocol. Lastly, thematic analysis proved to be adequate for discovering repeated meaning patterns across a wide set of written content and was, therefore, appropriate to obtain the aim of this specific research.

### **3.5 Validity and Reliability**

Even though being interpretative and reflexive which to an extent evocates subjectivity (Schreier, 2012), the trustworthiness of qualitative analysis can be preserved if adequate, rich, and densely saturated data are included in the research process (Elo et al., 2014). Bearing that in mind, I did not shy away from longer texts and decided to take into account 60 articles in total, with 30 coming from each of the two selected outlets. Elo et al. (2014) emphasized how all the stages of dealing with data, starting from preparation, through organizing, and finally reporting, need to be well aligned in order to ensure the analysis will be valid and reliable and can be trusted. Constant comparison, a prerequisite for ensuring the validity of the research (Silverman, 2011), was an important part of the data analysis. Results from the three stages of coding were iteratively compared, and, when facing confusion or insecurities, the original data were considered as the point of reference to go back to. As I opted for an inductive approach to the study, I tried to stay away from my expectations and previous knowledge that could compromise the objectivity of the analysis, and let the data be the authority and my first and foremost guide.

## 4. Results

This chapter presents the results of the research. Sections are organized around the identified categories and within each, an overview of detected themes with relevant examples is given. As the articles were all originally published in Croatian, the quotes included illustrating the themes identified were translated from Croatian into English by me.

### 4.1 “Reviving memories”

A reoccurring category found in both *Jutarnji list* and *Večernji list* is “Reviving memories”. On the days taken into close consideration (days between November 16 and November 19, each of the eleven years from 2011 to 2021), media coverage reveals abundant content on the dominant themes of remembering life before the war, remembering killed, i.e., lost family members and friends, and anecdotal war stories either directly experienced or heard of and passed on. Among the three themes belonging to this category, remembering killed performed the best with being detected in 21 out of 60 articles. War stories were recorded in 14 articles, and code remembering life before the war was noted in 13 articles.

When talking about the “life before the war” in Vukovar, a substantial idealistic narrative is detected: “Until the war, family Balaž lived a normal life, not lacking anything.” (Borovac, 2014) Recollections often mention symbols of Vukovar such as the river of Danube, Vukovar’s Watertower (heavily destroyed during the war and reconstructed several years ago), and successful economy the city nurtured before the autumn of 1991 took place. Several comparisons of Vukovar being before the war the most prosperous economic center in Croatia and today facing the problem of brain drain and high unemployment rate are also noted. Interestingly, the days around the Remembrance Day are also days when stories of people who decided to stay in Vukovar despite all difficulties are brought forward: “I know that people do not have jobs and that it is not easy, but there is a light in Vukovar. (...) I will stay here as long as I have the last bread crumble, just to survive, I will fight with my hands and feet, and I will not leave.” (Pušić, 2016).

Several instances of mothers “remembering killed” sons are noted such as “Everything reminds me of sons who are no longer here.” (Bradarić, 2015). Children who lost their parents are also given the spotlight, sharing nostalgic and grieving memories or stories that were passed to them from other surviving family members, hence through the shared collective memory. When remembering their lost parents, the protagonists of the stories emphasize their gratefulness for today’s independence and freedom and often talk about their

stolen childhood interrupted by war atrocities. In instances of remembering their killed parents, protagonists of the stories usually mention how the stories were passed on to them, i.e., they do not have their own recollections but rather live on the stories and memories that were presented to them. Young people in general, who either were not born during the war years or were too young to remember actual events, speak more positively about inter-ethnic relation with Serbian minority (although some of them went to separate kindergartens and schools), while veterans tend to be more reserved although not openly opposing the idea of peaceful coexistence in the city.

The media coverage on the days surrounding the Remembrance Day provides extensive data on the war stories of those who witnessed atrocities and engaged in armed fights. Feature stories bring recollections on the disproportion between men's and military power between Croatian veterans and oppressor's forces with examples such as "Small, but brave group of poorly armed veterans" (Patković, 2018), enhancing thus the bravery of those who put their life on the line for Croatia. Emotional feature stories of veterans remembering and retelling their stories from the battlefield and honoring their killed fellow veterans are also common. They are usually accompanied with survived old photographs from the wartime that add to the emotional appeal of the story.

	<i>Jutarnji list</i>	<i>Večernji list</i>	<b>Total</b>
Remembering life before war	5/30	8/30	13/60
Remembering killed	8/30	13/30	21/60
War stories	7/30	7/30	14/60

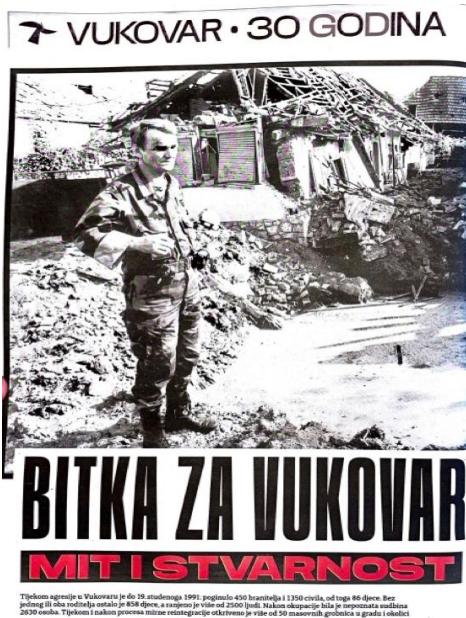


Figure 1.

*Translation of the heading: Vukovar – 30 years. Battle for Vukovar. Myth and reality.*

#### 4.2 “Point of division”

The second category found is “Point of division”, referring to both divisions in Vukovar and Croatia, and the interethnic segregation during the war days and in the present moment. While examples from *Jutarnji list* focus more on the political divisions and intolerance to different ideologies and troubling relegations with neighboring Serbia, *Večernji list* showed stronger and more common usage of strengthening the Croatian unity and togetherness (emphasizing pronouns “us”, “we”) contrasted with problematic “them”. Under this category, the theme us vs. them performed the best being noted in 21 articles. A negative stance towards Serbia was present in 19 articles, while the unsolved issue of missing people occurred in 14 articles.

Quotes relating to “negative stances towards Serbia” resemble examples such as “(...) as in Serbia that still today lives underneath the veil of Beograd’s mythomania.” (Despot, 2018). In relation to this theme, an interesting pattern was detected. The number of articles published related to Vukovar significantly increased starting from 2012, after a liberating verdict for Croatian generals Ante Gotovina and Mladen Markač was brought by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in the Hague. The verdict confirmed what the majority in Croatia believed: the Croatian army was only defending itself and did no intentional, organized war crime. What is more, articles published after the verdict seem to be less neutral and non-biased, and more well-known people in Croatia were included in different feature stories sharing their takes on the events regarding the Fall of Vukovar itself,

as well as the organization of the Remembrance Day. After the liberating verdicts in 2012, the content of the articles referring to the Remembrance Day that year emphasized the “positive atmosphere” in which the Memorial parade took place, and iterative statements by the public attending it claiming how now the world finally knows what Croatians knew long ago: Croatia did not commit any crimes but was just defending itself against the oppressor. Vivid descriptions of Croatian national symbols also gained momentum, as well as positioning Croatians as “us” versus Serbians as “them”. Bombastic subheadings such as “Justice has won two days before the Vukovar’s tragedy” (Pavić, 2012) were noted in both analyzed media outlets.

That is associated with othering, i.e., extensive usage of pronouns “us” and “them”, where “us” stands for Croatians, and “them” for Serbians, another theme observed within the category “Point of division”. “For me, they are still them.” (Pušić, 2016), and “They attack and we run against them” (Pavić, 2015) are some of the examples that illustrate this reoccurring theme. “We”, “us”, “all as one”, and similar utterances, are used to strengthen the national identity during the days surrounding the Remembrance Day, as well as to enforce the resilience and strength that Croatian people were showing during the war days. It is also often associated with emphasizing how poorly armed and prepared was the Croatian side, and what bravery and readiness to give life for “our” homeland people showed when exercising resistance to “them”, heavily armed oppressors.

Another prevalent theme is the “unsolved issue of missing people” that seems to be burdening the possibility to close the war chapter and turn to building a better future: “(...) need to put the effort in finding bodies of missing people so that families, and all of us together, can find our peace” (Bradarić & Lepan Štefančić, 2021). Politicians giving statements on the still unresolved problem of missing people often use the momentum to call out Serbian political leaders and blame their lack of will to cooperate on resolving the issue and unwillingness to provide the data and prosecute war crimes. An example is a statement from 2011 given by Jadranka Kosor, Croatian Prime Minister at the time: “In relations with Serbia, the most pressing issue is the question of missing people” (Patković, 2011).

	<i>Jutarnji list</i>	<i>Večernji list</i>	<b>Total</b>
Negative stance towards Serbia	11/30	8/30	19/60
Unsolved issue of missing people	6/30	8/30	14/60
Us vs. them	10/30	11/30	21/60



Figure 2.

*Translation of the heading: That 1991 we were all as one, we knew what we are fighting for.*

#### 4.3 “Arena for politicization”

The third category found while analyzing the representation of the Fall of Vukovar in the two selected newspapers is “Arena for politicization”, i.e., the political manipulation of the Vukovar’s tragedy and its commemoration day. The three dominant themes were noted: political fights (appearing in 17 of 60 articles), disrespect for Vukovar’s victim (present in 15 out of 60 articles), and forgotten Vukovar (occurring in 10 of 60 articles of the dataset).

Under this category, the theme of “political fights” stands as a recurring motif: “(...) it is particularly shameful that those who are swearing on Vukovar’s importance are compromising its role by turning it into yet another opportunity to fight against phantom political Yugoslavs” (Butković, 2014). The theme of political fights was common in the

articles published in 2020 and 2021. The two years were special because the organization of the Remembrance Day and the actual memorial parade took place during the times of the coronavirus pandemic, which was a dividing issue *per se*, and created further divisions in the society that were then reflected in the media coverage. Thus, the takeaways on the organization of a memorial parade in such conditions varied substantially. While some prominent politicians (such as current Croatian president Milanović) did not attend the parade and paid respect to victims privately, others (including current Prime Minister Plenković and other high representatives of his central-right cabinet) gave open support to the organizers and attended the commemoration.

“Disrespect for Vukovar’s victim” is present throughout the whole dataset as well. While sometimes addressed more implicitly, implicit examples such as “(...) Croatia is mocking Vukovar’s victims” (Lovrić, 2014) are also found. Divisions that occurred during the memorial parade, especially in 2013 when at the time the left-wing government was excluded from the official protocol during the Memorial Parade as a central event of the Remembrance Day, were also associated with this thematic realm. That same year a huge revolt happened when Zoran Milanović’s left-wing government decided to implement Cyrillic scripts in Vukovar leading to demonstrations and violent behavior that included burning Serbian flags and forceful tearing down of the newly placed bilingual signs. The media gave a lot of attention to opposers of the Cyrillic scripts who seized the opportunity to criticize the government’s decision especially because a year before liberating verdicts for Croatian generals were presented and the general public was thriving on the freshly reclaimed Croatian national pride. The two media outlets were giving different media spaces to political parties to advocate their ideas and talk poorly about the opponents. While *Jutarnji list* proved to be more neutral towards politicians, analyses of the articles published in *Večernji list* revealed a much more openly negative stance towards leftist politicians. Interestingly, Zoran Milanović was seen as a very negative figure, especially after his cabinet decided to introduce Cyrillic letter signs in Vukovar. As mentioned, in 2013, the Assembly for the protection of Croatian Vukovar (Stožer za obranu hrvatskog Vukovara), one of the organizers of the Memorial parade, the central event of the Remembrance Day commemoration in Vukovar, opted for two separate parades, i.e., did not want to allow for the Government at the time to join the official protocol. The media coverage by *Jutarnji list* revealed a much more negative stance towards the organizers of the parade and emphasized the disrespect they showed both for Vukovar’s victims and political elites. *Večernji list*, on the other hand, dedicated much more space to opponents of the Cyrillic letter who advocated disobey towards the Government, as

well as to the right-wing opposition leaders at the time who were part of the official protocol that year.

Hypocritical political behavior, i.e., complaints and concerns that politicians care for Vukovar only on the days surrounding the Remembrance Day keep repeating in a number of feature stories, as well as opinion pieces. Thus the theme “forgotten Vukovar” is noticed in quotes such as „Vukovar has become, almost the whole Slavonia region, state's blind spot.“ (Ivanković, 2015). The idea being reinforced is that the Republic of Croatia, in the name of which, according to the across the society believed thesis, Vukovar fell, does not care about Vukovar and its pressing issues such as unemployment and severe brain-drain that is happening but is rather using it as a stage to undermine political opponents and collecting cheap political points. The theme was prominent in the media coverage in 2020, when the Government of the Republic of Croatia proclaimed 18<sup>th</sup> November as a public holiday which evidently turned the tone around the Memorial Parade and all the events happening around Fall of Vukovar Remembrance Day. While *Jutarnji list* published more articles (especially opinion pieces) against that Government's decision (center-right coalition), *Večernji list* remained much more distant and with a neutral stance. Opposers of the idea claimed that for a city that is forgotten on all other days during the year, proclaiming the Remembrance Day a public holiday is yet another political manipulation and expression of disrespect. Supporters of the idea, on the other hand, expressed their sympathies for the government's decision, claiming that it adds value to the importance of the Remembrance Day. As 2021 marked the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Fall of Vukovar, the media coverage of that year revealed an increase of feature stories published with protagonists sharing their memories and drawing comparisons between what they fought for and what Croatia turned to be today. Abundant use of adjectives and hyperboles (“burning with sadness”, “exhausting pain, anger, frustration”) was noted in the majority of analyzed articles, especially when the grievance of a loss was put in comparison with the current state of (“forgotten”) Vukovar.

	<i>Jutarnji list</i>	<i>Večernji list</i>	<b>Total</b>
Political fights	10/30	7/30	17/60
Disrespect for	7/30	8/30	15/60
Vukovar's victim			
Forgotten Vukovar	6/30	4/30	10/60



Figure 3.

*Translation of the heading: Croatia that respects Vukovar has won.*

#### 4.4 “Symbol of dignity, respect, and pride”

The fourth and last category found is “Symbol of dignity, respect, and pride”. It is an overarching category repeating across the chosen dataset. Related to the feelings of dignity, pride, and bravery, “heroism” is detected as a recurring theme. What is more, code heroism is detected in 41 out of 60 articles, and thus is the most prominent theme spotted during the analysis. The second theme within this category was named “Croatianess” and was present in 21 of 60 chosen articles in the dataset.

Except for referring to the heroism of the men who gave their lives for independence and freedom, heroism is often spotted in naming Vukovar a Hero City: “Pay respect to the victimhood of a Hero City” (Patković, 2012). Feature stories on killed veterans and volunteers who refused to leave Vukovar during 1991 or even came exclusively to Vukovar to defend it, regularly address protagonists as heroes and attach “heroic” to their depictions.

“Distinction for the forgotten hero of Vukovar” (Rašović, 2011), “In a week when Vukovar’s heroism becomes a medium for prolonging pragmatic national-melodramatic pathos” (Gerovac, 2018) are some of the examples found in the articles analyzed. Liberated generals were also often addressed as heroes, while politicians who did nothing to protect them before they were extradited to The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in the Hague were labeled by some people who shared their opinion in the media as traitors, haters, and enemies. The heroic cult that was created especially around general Gotovina resulted in several journalists calling him a hero and a saint.

Pride and respect are also comprised in the theme “Croatianess”, standing for hyperbolic mentioning of Croatian national symbols such as the flag, anthem, and coat of arms.

Especially when reporting on the Memorial Parade that takes place every November 18, journalists emphasize the number of Croatian national symbols present equating them to the feelings of dignity, respect, pride, and love for the country. Explicit statements expressing love and dedication to Croatia are also repeatedly featured: “I love and respect this country and its institutions, I fought for Croatia, and lost part of my body for it” (Boban Valečić & Maretić Žonja, 2020). The explosion of explicit pride in being Croatian was noted in 2012 and was primarily associated with the liberating verdicts for generals Gotovina and Markač. The coverage of the Memorial Parade in 2013 also brought forward both written and photographic stances of enhanced “Croatianess” grounded in the disagreeing with the government at the time and organizing two separate memorial parades. A year later, in 2014, a similar attempt to obstruct joining the highest national politicians in the official colony happened but did not succeed, resulting in headings such as “Croatia that respects Vukovar has won” (Bradarić & Flego, 2014).

Another interesting finding was that significant number of articles dealing with the topic of Vukovar was written by the same authors over the years and in the same media environment (therefore creating a very authentic style of covering the topic for each of the two newspapers). Croatia is indeed a small country and thus there is only a limited number of journalists dealing with political and historic content who could comprehensively approach such a delicate topic. However, when taking into consideration that journalists work within a setting from which they can easily influence course of current events by deciding what and how the past is remembered (Zelizer, 2016), it does seem worrying the lack of pluralism and options for readers to consume various content.

Heroism	27/30	14/30	41/60
Croatianess	13/30	8/30	21/60



Figure 4.

Translation of the heading: *Paying respect for Vukovar's victims finally without divisions and politicizing.*

## 5. Conclusion and Discussion

To answer the research question of how the Fall of Vukovar was represented in Croatian newspapers between 2011 and 2021 and to determine the role of political ideology in commemorative journalism a thematic analysis was conducted on 60 purposively sampled newspaper articles. This chapter presents the conclusion and discussion.

The research has shown that when reporting on the Fall of Vukovar-related topics, several similar thematic patterns can be spotted. Firstly, reporting operates in the realm of blending the past with the present, i.e., reviving memories. Adding a historic perspective that induces memory and emotions, moves the focus from objective reporting and prolongs the duration of the influence of a certain journalistic text (Zelizer, 2016). While tackling remembrance of the life before the war, people killed in the war, and vivid war stories, journalists are stepping away from objectivity and entering the realm of a more personal and ideologically nuanced way of writing.

The second thematic category found in the research on reporting the Fall of Vukovar in Croatian daily newspapers was “point of division”, referring to both divisions within the country and the clear distinction between “us” and “them” where “them” stands for the oppressor’s side, i.e., neighboring Serbia. The burdening unsolved question of missing people recurred throughout the dataset, either being part of political accusations, or emotional testimonials of those who are still searching for their family members. Different tones and themes were spotted when comparing feature stories related to the Fall of Vukovar that were centered around youth when compared to those that put veterans and older members of a society in the spotlight. As collective memory is a socially constructed concept (Coser, 1992), not even personal memory is to be understood without considering its relation to society. Memory thus operates as a tool that shapes a narrative of the past, and a narrative of individuals (J. Assmann, 2011). Hence, this research’s findings are in line with what has already been known about collective memory and its workings. Even though younger generations have heard stories about the Fall of Vukovar from their ancestors, they relate differently to them and to the society surrounding them. They tend to speak more about the future and rebuilding their life than dwelling on the past. The past still continues to exist, but it takes a double form (J. Assmann, 2011): on one side there are personal memories, and on the other stands social construction.

Thirdly, and most relevant for the research question on the role of political ideology in commemorative journalism, the politicization of Vukovar’s tragedy was found as the

prevalent thematic category. Reductive and selective media coverage has the potential of restricting public understanding of certain events (Keith, 2012), as well as displaying it in a way that suits the favorable perspective. Hence the interplay between political ideology and commemorative journalism. Each journalist brings their own ideology into their writings and consequently takes part in the construction of collective occlusion. In the context of Croatia, the notion of collective forgetting (Milošević, 2017) comes as a result of purposive omitting and forgetting that is driven by the political ideology of a person engaging with commemorative journalism.

The analysis proved the presence of abundant elements symbolizing respect, dignity, and pride, and within them persistent tendency to emphasize heroism and Croatian nationalism. Constant referring to Vukovar as the “Hero City”, as well as attaching heroic connotations to the Battle of Vukovar itself and the people who fought for it, gives way to strengthening national identity which then, as Milosevic (2017) noted, helps influence policy-shaping and decision-making processes both within a country and in its foreign affairs.

The data collection process, as well as the subsequent data analysis, showed that most articles on the topic of Vukovar were written by the same journalists which resulted in consistent approaches to the topic, style, points of view, and underlying political ideology they share throughout the texts they are publishing. As Edy (1999) noted, journalists and media are agents of collective memory construction which leads to the conclusion that their political ideology plays an important role in commemorative journalism and consequently in shaping the collective memory of the targeted audience. That finding is also in line with Zelizer's (2016) conclusion that journalism is an arena in which individuals who are shaping it, i.e., journalists can effortlessly influence how the past is being remembered by making conscious decisions about what to write about, and what to leave out.

The research proved that political ideology plays an important role in how the past is remembered in commemorative journalism, and although the results were obtained in the limited geopolitical setting of Croatia, they can be applicable and valuable for similar countries who experienced contested pasts and do not enjoy the greatest media pluralism. Being aware of the influence of political ideology on how the past is remembered and journalistic texts manipulated, is important in today's society where disinformation and fabrication of facts present one of the biggest threats. As media offers the easiest way to understand history, it is crucial to be able to understand that, especially for those who do not have personal experience of a certain event or phenomenon, media significantly shapes collective memory (Edy, 1999), and general comprehension of the world around us.

When it comes to the limitation of the research, the fact that only two mainstream media outlets were included in the analysis stands out as the biggest one. In order to attain the feasibility of the research, *Jutarnji list* and *Večernji list* were chosen as the two most widely read papers in Croatia, having the longest tradition and constantly high numbers of readership. Future research on the topic could however expand the scope of analysis and include other media outlets in Croatia (for example *24sata* as the paper reported to gain the biggest revenues when it comes to advertising), and therefore seek to get a more nuanced overview. Another limitation is the fact that only feature stories and opinion pieces were selected for the research.

Future research could include whole specials published around the dates in question, as well as look at how the seemingly neutral news were constructed and whether there are hidden implications. With the growing pluralism of media in Croatia, future research could focus on exploring articles written by nonprofit media that are mainly available just in digital form. Another interesting research path to take would be to analyze interviews of prominent politicians, generals, or people who fought for Vukovar and see how they answer questions regarding the topic, as well as to dig behind the construction of questions that are posed to them. Such analyses could elaborate further on the role of political ideology in commemorative journalism and yield valuable findings on the mechanisms of collective memory, as well as the function of journalists as the ones who write the first version of history (Daly, 2011).

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## 7. Appendices

## Initial coding

## Axial coding

## Selective coding

## Code book

<b>Reviving memories</b>	<b>Point of division</b>	<b>Arena for politicization</b>	<b>Symbol of dignity, respect, and pride</b>
Remembering life before war	Negative stance towards Serbia	Political fights	Heroism
Remembering killed	Unsolved issue of missing people	Disrespect for Vukovar's victim	Croatianess
War stories	Us vs. them	Forgotten Vukovar	