
They don't need a "storm" – Croatia, Ukraine and war veterans

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Abstract

In recent years, there is a close cooperation between Croatia and Ukraine in the field of psychological rehabilitation and professional adaptation of war veterans. Joined sport events, conferences, seminars, etc. are also organized. According to numerous publications in the media, the Ukrainian state intends to apply the "Croatian model" for socialization and adaptation of veterans to civilian life. This article briefly examines the benefits of the adaptation of veterans in Ukraine, which, in our view, will obtain a socio-political character, following the so-called "Croatian experience".

Key words: Croatia, Ukraine, veteran, crisis.

Introduction

Europe often thinks of itself as one of the safest places in the world, but in the last three decades alone more countries have been destroyed than in any other region. The fall of communist regimes in the USSR and Southeast Europe left us as a legacy fifteen new states from the former Soviet Union, seven from the collapse of Yugoslavia and two from the break-up of Czechoslovakia. As a result of the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact the geopolitical balance of the former bipolar world is also changing.

Results and Discussion

The new balance of powers on a global scale, both at the beginning of the twentieth century and at the end of it, is evident in the Balkans, where the main points of the Washington-Moscow and Moscow-Western Europe conflict are linked to the break-up of the Yugoslav federation (Dimitrova, P., 2005, p. 244-251).

Following a series of military conflicts in the former Yugoslavia at the end of the last century, at the beginning of the new 21st century the Ukrainian political crisis (2014) is one of the most serious security challenges in Europe and a new point of conflict between Russia and NATO (Caucasus Times).

Increasingly, politicians, analysts and journalists are comparing the events of the 1990s in Yugoslavia, and in particular the Croatian War of Independence with the Ukrainian crisis, and Russia claims to be the architect of the "Yugoslav scenario" in Ukraine, making analogies mostly between Serbian Krajina and Donbas.

Croatian military operation "Storm" (Operation Storm is a joint military operation of the Croatian Army and the 5th Corps of Bosnia and Herzegovina conducted in August 1995 against Serb-occupied Croatian territory – Serbian Krajina. As a result of the military intervention, Krajina was liquidated and the Croats regained the captured territories.) against Serbs in Krajina has repeatedly been cited as a possible "Croatian scenario" for resolving the Donbas conflict and appears to be an

increasingly acceptable option in the predictions of politicians, the military and even diplomats (Peskova, V., 2019).

In support of these predictions we can point to the work of Oleg Valetskii, entitled “The Fall of the Serbian Krajina” (Valetskii, O. V., 2014), where the author in the introduction emphasizes that the book can be instructive for Eastern Ukraine, and in conclusion focuses on operation “Storm” as evidence for the defeat of Serbian politics in Krajina.

However, we must note here that, unlike the Yugoslav crisis, where Moscow didn’t take more serious action to protect its traditional interests in the region, Ukraine’s transition to the Western camp (perhaps the biggest geopolitical loss for Moscow since the beginning of the XXI century) doesn’t pass without Russian intervention, which doesn’t seek only to destabilize Ukraine in order to interrupt the country’s integration into the EU and NATO (after all, Russia doesn’t want the enlargement of the Atlantic Alliance particularly close to its borders), but also to show that the Russian Federation is still an international player (Heletiy, M., 2017, p. 60).

In his article “Russia and the West: central conflict?” (Miroslavovich, S., 2015, p. 45) Sergei Miroslavovich emphasizes Russian intervention in Ukraine, stressing that in the second half of 2014 the Kremlin signaled that it would not allow the Balkan scenario in Donbas, similar to Croatia’s “Storm” and Lightning operations against the unrecognized Republika Srpska Krajina.

In our opinion, a military operation similar to the Croatian “Storm” in the occupied Ukrainian territories couldn’t take place. First, because Russia is not Serbia, the current geopolitical situation is not similar to that of the 1990s, and Ukraine cannot count on the same support from the West as Croatia. But this doesn’t mean that Ukraine hasn’t taken notes from the Croatian War of Independence and, to be more precise, from the new military generation it has left behind.

In the last few years, there has been close cooperation between Ukraine and Croatia in the field of psychological rehabilitation and professional adaptation of military veterans, sports forums, conferences, seminars and the like are also organized (Ukrinform 2021).

This article will try to briefly examine the benefits of the adaptation of veterans in Ukraine, who, in our opinion, will acquire a socio-political character, following the so-called **“Croatian experience”**.

To this end, we will first briefly consider the role of the veterans of the Homeland War (or the Croatian War of Independence) in modern Croatia. It should be noted that the volume of this article does not allow the problem to be considered in more detail.

The defenders in Croatia

We can call all participants in the Croatian War of Independence (“Domovinski rat”) veterans. However, in Croatia the term “defenders” is used (“branitelji”).

Defenders occupy a special place in the collective memory of Croatia and are often portrayed in society as executors of the ten-century-old Croatian dream – a Croatian nation with its own independent state.

Gratitude to the defenders, who lost or risked their lives for Independent Croatia is expressed in a number of social and material benefits, described “in detail in the Law on Croatian Defenders of the Homeland War and Members of Their Families” (Law on Croatian, 2017).

The law defines a “Croatian defender” (“Hrvatski branitelj”) as a person who is mobilized or participates voluntarily in the protection of the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Croatian state. It is emphasized again the main role of the defenders of Croatia’s independence, defending it within the internationally recognized borders from the armed aggression carried out by Serbia, Montenegro, the Yugoslav People’s Army and the Serb population on the territory of Croatia.

The amount of pensions that veterans of the Independence War receive are several times higher than all other pensions in the country, and the Ministry of Veterans (Ministry of Croatian Veterans, 2018) unique for the region, founded in 1997, aims to ensure that ex-combatants and victims of the Homeland War, as well as their merits in the defense of the Fatherland, are permanently and with dignity appreciated, and their sacrifice will not be forgotten.

War veterans in today's Croatia make up more than 10% (by 2019, just over 507,000 people) of the country's population, and their numbers continue to rise, even though the war ended more than 20 years ago (Asenov, Yu., 2021).

Defenders, their unions and associations are the more active and vigilant part of Croatian society. Their number of over half a million in the country of four million makes them an unavoidable factor in public and political life. It is no coincidence that veterans' organizations are considered a third political force.

Defenders' political support is often concentrated in one political party, and anti-Serbian rhetoric often accompanies that support. As already mentioned, ex-combatants have a special place in Croatia's collective memory, and any attempt to redefine identities and categories established after the war faces strong opposition from veterans' organizations.

(In 2013, defenders staged a protest against the introduction of bilingual Croatian and Serbian signs in Latin and Cyrillic on official buildings in the city of Vukovar. The protest lasted 18 months.

In 2014, the organization of military veterans "For the Protection of Croatian Vukovar" organized a petition for changes in the legislation on minorities.

The initiative was provoked by the placement of signs in Latin and Cyrillic on public buildings to serve the bilingual population in the city. During subsequent demonstrations their plates were disfigured and torn down by Croatian veterans' associations. The law allows the Cyrillic alphabet in regions of Croatia where Serbs make up at least a third of the population. In a referendum, the defenders want this share to be raised to 50 per 100. These are bilingual Latin and Cyrillic inscriptions in areas populated by large numbers of ethnic Serbs.

The court ruled that such a referendum to amend Croatia's minority law would be unconstitutional and rejected the request. In 2014, war veterans staged a protest following a statement by Deputy Veterans Minister Bojan Glavashevic that civilians killed, including Serbs, should be treated as victims of the war. The protest began in October 2014 and consisted of blocking traffic, gatherings in tents (against the Ministry of Veterans), where press conferences, live reports and daily speeches were organized. During the protest, Croatian veteran Damir Cakinic flooded himself with petrol and set himself on fire.)

Many defense associations identify themselves as nationalists and openly oppose some minorities in Croatia. Veterans' associations censor a number of cultural events at their discretion, and the Serbian newspaper Novosti is also blacklisted by veterans. An example of how defense organizations can influence the socio-political life of the country can be found in 2019, when the Croatian government didn't build a refugee camp on the territory of Croatia precisely because of a protest by veterans' organizations. It should be noted here that there are many defenders who hold important state and political positions, thanks to which veterans' organizations can receive additional help and support at any time.

Military veterans in Ukraine

Since the beginning of the conflict in Donbass, more than 400,000 Ukrainians have taken part, with more than 13,000 disabled people. Hence the need for an institution to fill the critical gap in Ukraine's national security by supporting returning military veterans.

Thus, on November 22, 2018, the Ministry of Veterans Affairs of Ukraine was established. The need for this institution arises not only because of the need for comprehensive social care for veterans (caused mainly by the many suicides among returning fighters, household violence, unemployment, etc.), but also because of the opposition to the disinformation aimed at veterans by Russia.

In terms of disinformation, we can add here that when the values, beliefs and principles of a society are attacked, then it is assumed that the necessary actions have been taken to divide it. Similarly, such attacks and reciprocal measures can be traced in the Croatian War of Independence, and to limit them we can look at today's Ukraine (Akrap, G., Viacheslav Semenenko, 2020).

After declaring its independence in 1991 until the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis, the Ukrainian state was under strong Russian influence (political, economic and cultural).

The close language, religion, history, way of life and culture are the basis of Russian propaganda not only on the territory of Ukraine, but also in countries such as Serbia and Bulgaria. In Ukraine, however, its more successful adaptation can be observed in the eastern parts of Ukraine. By no means can we deny the connection between the Russian and Ukrainian people, but perhaps the close language, culture and way of life are not the basis of this connection.

In the 2005 sociological survey of the Ukrainian Center for Economic and Political Studies “Oleksandar Razumkov”, entitled “Problems and prospects of Ukrainian-Russian cooperation in the assessment of Ukrainian citizens”, (Oleksandar Razumkov Ukrainian Centre, 4 (64) 2005, p. 39-52) the common language is indicated by 13.9%, religion – 7.1%, closeness of cultures – 27.9%, and nearly 54% indicated that the closeness between Russians and Ukrainians is due to family ties between the inhabitants of the two countries.

It turns out that it is not the language, religion or culture, but the family relations that are the basis of the modern Russian-Ukrainian relationship.

The beginning of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014 marked the beginning of the disintegration of Russian-Ukrainian relations in political, economic and cultural aspects. But is there any way to accelerate the disintegration of these ties and build their counterbalance?

It is here that we believe that the returning ex-fighters can open a new front.

Following the “Croatian model”, Ukrainian veterans, or as they are called in Ukraine “defenders”, can occupy a special place in the collective memory of “European Ukraine”, as heroes fighting for the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, and why not for the realization of the political goals of the country – membership in the EU and NATO.

The commemoration of the new heroes of Ukraine who died fighting against the aggression of the Russian Federation is already a fact (Ukrainian Pravda, 2021).

As already mentioned, since the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis, more than 400,000 Ukrainians have taken part in hostilities. Given the fact that the war is not over yet, this number will continue to grow. If we add to these 400,000 members of their families (as in Croatia), it would turn out that so far over 1 million Ukrainians are directly involved in hostilities. The growing number of veterans will increase the rate of political pressure they will be able to exert, and their unions and associations may become an unavoidable political factor in the country (as in Croatia), and why not an arbiter in society? As “players” in Ukrainian politics, they are likely to form alliances with conservative and/or nationalist parties.

Veterans in Ukraine and members of their families are likely to be the necessary counterweight and tool to accelerate the disintegration of Russian-Ukrainian ties. They will be a privileged group, and their rights and the amount of state aid and benefits will be further expanded over time. Some of the arguments for granting this status to veterans could be high levels of unemployment among veterans and the country’s poor entrepreneurial climate due to the war.

Their vote is likely to be concentrated in one political party or coalition, with anti-Russian rhetoric being an integral part of them. In any left or center-left party, veterans and their organizations will see their status threatened, which will lead to the development of a strategy for confrontation with left and/or center-left parties. Additional NGOs are likely to be established to identify veterans' concerns as their main goal.

Former fighters already hold important state and political positions and establish international contacts, thanks to which veterans' organizations can receive additional help and support at any time (Bellingcat, 2019).

The Ukrainian state allocates more and more funds for the needs of military veterans and their families. (Interfax-Ukraine 2021). If this trend continues, it is likely that the status of “veteran”, which allows additional material and moral support from the state, will begin to start “supply and demand”, which will lead to an additional and artificial increase in the number of veterans or to the phenomenon of “fake veterans” (a phenomenon that is current in Croatia).

Conclusions

The common language, way of life, culture, traditions, history, the common struggle for the liberation of Yugoslavia (1941-1944), Yugoslavism and Titovism find their collapse in a series of interethnic conflicts on the territory of Yugoslavia.

Although the war ended more than 20 years ago, the memory of it does not fade so quickly. Those who have taken part in battles or lost some of their loved ones, in addition to carrying the memory of the loss in themselves, they pass it on to future generations. Nothing separates peoples more than war. The line of hostility has also been drawn in Ukraine. The conflict in Donbass is likely to end traditional Russian-Ukrainian ties.

The memoirization of the struggle (which in turn evokes the memory of pain, deprivation and casualties during the war) by veterans' associations in Croatia serves as a wall that stops any attempt to redefine identities and categories established after the war. Veterans' organizations in Ukraine are about to start building such a wall.

They don't need a "Storm"!

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