ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Next Generation: Nationalism and Violence in the Narratives of Serbian Students on the Break-up of Yugoslavia

Rodoljub Jovanović | Ángela Bermúdez

University of Deusto, Bilbao, Spain

Correspondence
Rodoljub Jovanović, University of Deusto, Bilbao, Spain.
Email: r.jovanovic@deusto.es

Abstract

Twenty years after the end of the violent break-up of Yugoslavia, new generations of young people in Serbia are living with its legacies. Despite the socio-psychological implications of violent conflict in post-conflict societies being well established in the literature, there are still only a few studies which focus on young Serbians' meaning-making in relation to the recent wars. The present study focuses on how a group of young Serbians, born after the violence was over, understands the violent break-up of Yugoslavia. The article presents the analysis of interviews and group discussions with 31 first-year university students in Serbia about these events. The goal of the analysis is to determine a) whether participants' narratives contain identifiable themes of a collective memory of conflict and b) whether participants normalize past violence through narrative. The relationship between the two as well as the relationship between history textbooks and participants' narratives will be discussed. Finally, the findings are discussed in regard to how participants' understandings of past violence might shape their political positioning in relation to nationalism.

KEYWORDS

nationalism, violence, youth, Serbia, Yugoslav break-up, qualitative study

INTRODUCTION

> There was no electricity […] my mother literally gave birth to me under flashlights. Luckily everything went well, but my parents had to leave the hospital a few hours after she gave birth, on a stretcher, because the hospital was close to something they wanted to bomb. (Interview with Emilija)[1]

More than twenty years after the end of the mass violence that marked the break-up of Yugoslavia, a new generation of Serbian students, born during or after the Kosovo War, entered university. Emilija's words reveal a very particular relationship with these events. Young people may not have a keen curiosity about history, but they do have a lay understanding of what happened and how it continues to influence Serbian society. Fortunately, these young people have never experienced violence first-hand, but while growing up in Serbia they have had numerous opportunities to encounter stories about it. This article reports on an in-depth examination into how a small group of students narrates the violent break-up of Yugoslavia.

The immense psychological implications of violent inter-group conflict for societies are well established in the literature. Conceptualized in various ways, such as the transmission of a chosen trauma (Volkan, 2001) or an ethos of conflict (Bar-Tal, 2007), to name just two, psychological implications are particularly prominent in societies which experience an intractable conflict. The more the conflict is protracted and violent, the greater the psychological consequences for the societies involved. Particular memories, beliefs, emotions, and attitudes about the conflict are communicated through various means within society, thus helping to maintain the culture of conflict (Bar-Tal, 2013). Indeed, the collective memory of physical violence can be an important component for sustaining the culture of conflict long after the conflict is over (Bar-Tal, 2003).

One of the most important modes of dissemination, due to its epistemic authority and wide reach among young people, is education (Bar-Tal, 2013), and especially history education, since this is where official versions of past events are conveyed. Research on textbook narratives shows that history textbooks tend to minimize and sanitize past violence (Bermúdez, 2019; Brown & Brown, 2010; Hein & Selden, 2000; Williams, 2014). They do so, for instance, by representing it as an unfortunate but necessary means to achieve societal goals (Bermúdez, 2016; Jovanović, 2020). Bermúdez (2019) has conceptualized this as one of the mechanisms in the normalization of violence that can hinder young people's critical understanding of violence and the development of a culture of peace.

Post-war Serbia offers an interesting and important case to study the historical representations and psychological implications of violent conflicts. With more than 130,000 victims, the violent break-up of Yugoslavia represents the biggest armed conflict in Europe since the Second World War. Serbia was involved in all three wars pertaining to Yugoslav secession (the war in Croatia 1991–1995, the war in Bosnia 1992–1995, and the war in Kosovo 1998–1999). Nowadays, the Republic of Serbia has established and maintains regular diplomatic relations with the Republic of Croatia and the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, it does not recognize Kosovo as an independent republic.

There is already a vast literature on the break-up of Yugoslavia which examines the actual reasons leading to the break-up itself (Dragović-Soso, 2002; Gagnon, 2004; Jovic, 2001; Jović, 2003; Ramet, 2014; to mention just a few). However, there has been far less of a focus on examining how ordinary people understand that break-up, and the studies that do exist are generally limited to broad opinion surveys (Ipsos Strategic Marketing, 2011; Stojanović et al., 2010). There are even fewer studies investigating how young people in Serbia understand these events (Malešević, 2003; Yerkes, 2004), and only a few of these include young people without any direct experience or memory of the wars (Obradović, 2016; Pavasović-Trošt, 2013).

Overall, studies that deal with the ways young people who did not witness the wars first-hand understand nationalist violence are alsmost non-existent.

A limited number of studies from the fields of psychology, sociology, and education that focus on ordinary people's knowledge and understanding of historical events have found that young people in Serbia know very little about recent violent history and that they instead hold various misconceptions about it. A survey of a representative sample of adult Serbian citizens (Stojanović et al., 2010) showed that participants primarily learned history in school, and that the majority lack any interest in or knowledge of historical events. In relation to the break-up of Yugoslavia, participants demonstrated a fundamental lack of knowledge of the violence during the wars of the 1990s, and most participants thought that Croats carried the greatest responsibility for the break-up. The majority of participants in another opinion poll (Ipsos Strategic Marketing, 2011) believed that Serbs suffered the largest number of casualties and that Croats committed the most crimes during these wars.

Although these survey studies of the general population offer important insights into average opinions about the recent violent history within Serbian society, few studies focus specifically on young people's knowledge and attitudes. Some such studies point to a connection between nationalism and understandings of the past. Yerkes (2004) found that young people's perceptions of 'facing the past' in Serbian society are affected by nationalism. Malešević (2003) argues that young people are trapped between an 'ethno-national' and 'cosmopolitan' identity, partly due to the role of Serbian political elites during the wars and the contradictions that ensued after the fall of Slobodan Milošević. However, both of these studies included participants who were old enough to remember some of these events. Nonetheless, we know that attitudes towards, beliefs about, and memories of conflict are transmitted to all new generations of young people long after a conflict has ended. To understand the effects of this phenomenon it is therefore particularly important to examine the views of young people born after the conflict.

Studies focusing on young Serbians with no direct experience of war are mostly quantitative and provide a general idea of their relationship with and knowledge about the recent violent past. For example, the youngest participants in the abovementioned opinion polls were significantly less likely to indicate that Serbs suffered the largest number of casualties or that Croats committed the most crimes during these wars (Ipsos Strategic Marketing, 2011), but showed less knowledge of the violent episodes that took place in the 1990s during the wars (Stojanović et al., 2010).

A recent survey of a representative sample of young people in Serbia (Popadić et al., 2019) found that a large portion of participants had never travelled outside of Serbia and that many have a fear of travelling to the neighbouring countries in which the wars of the 1990s took place (the highest level of fear related to Kosovo, followed by Croatia, with the lowest for Bosnia and Herzegovina). One in four of the youngest participants (born between 1996 and 2005) do not have even one friend of a different nationality, religion, or language, and the level of ethnic distance expressed towards Albanians, Croats, Roma, and Bosniaks is high in this sub-group (Popadić et al., 2019). Only a handful of studies have included an in-depth examination of how young people born after the wars understand and negotiate the recent past.

Looking at the connection between understandings of the past and the construction of ethnic identity, Pavasović-Trošt (2018) found that the post-war youth in both Croatia and Serbia have little interest in history. Furthermore, their narratives are often inconsistent, and apart from the wars of the 1990s, they also struggle with narratives about the Second World War. Despite blaming the other group for crimes committed, no actual animosity was found, and young people are 'instead more preoccupied with just living a better life and actual day-to-day concerns and largely seemed genuinely eager to move past rigid ethnonationalist categories' (Pavasović-Trošt, 2013: 279). Similarly, Obradović (2016) found that social representations of recent history among the younger generation of Serbians show more in-group criticism and more awareness of the complexities compared with those of the older generation.

The ways in which young people understand and negotiate recent violent history is influenced by various sources, such as the media, cultural products, and textbooks (Grever & van der Vlies, 2017; Haydn & Ribbens, 2017). However, education is one the most important means of transmitting beliefs about the past because textbooks and other educational resources are considered to be an epistemic authority, they reach almost all young people in a society (Bar-Tal, 2013), and their contents are controlled by the state. Thus, research on history education in Serbia and the Balkans is important in contextualizing young people's understandings of the recent violent past.

REWRITING HISTORY

An abundant literature has demonstrated how histories in the ex-Yugoslav republics have been rewritten following the violent conflicts of the 1990s (Koren & Baranović, 2009; Ognjenović & Jozelić, 2020; Stojanović, 2009). This research shows that immediately after the break-up of Yugoslavia, the successor states started making changes to history textbooks to reflect the new realities, including elements of victimization and the negative portrayal of others. While being continually revised and improved, most still include these features.

Croatian history education, for example, has come a long way from being predominantly determined by the ideology of ethnic nationalism as previously. However, these developments are still highly contested and ambivalent (Koren, 2020; Marić, 2016). A comparative analysis of Croatian and Serbian textbooks (Tomljenović, 2012) found that in both cases, 'we' are depicted as a victim of the 'other'. While some Croatian textbooks adopt a modern approach to history education, the image of Serbs is still negative (Švigir, 2018). In Montenegro, history textbooks that earlier followed a nationalist ideology appear to have been decisively reformed since the early 2000s (Knežević & Čagorović, 2020), while North Macedonian textbooks are said to contain a myth of self-victimization (Stojanov & Todorov, 2020) and continue to promote ethnocentric narratives (Todorov, 2016). Textbooks in Serbia and Kosovo, according to Gashi, 'do not promote civic values because they promote inter-ethnic hatred' (Gashi, 2020: 83). The situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina seems very similar (Soldo et al., 2017), but is more complicated due to the country's very complex educational system: 'there is a power struggle between the three ruling political elites, and each have a set of textbooks that glorifies their own people, nation, and state, and undermines minorities and neighbouring states' (Šimić, 2020).

History textbooks in Serbia, just as those in other successor states, have undergone several important changes over the last thirty years. The first big change came in 1993, when 'wartime textbooks' were introduced that contained narratives that justified waging the ongoing wars. After the Democratic Revolution in 2000, the textbooks offered a gentler depiction of the recent wars (Stojanović, 2009) or plainly avoided these topics, while textbooks published from 2005 to 2009 reintroduced narratives of victimization (Pavasović-Trošt, 2018). According to a recent study of Serbian high-school history textbooks currently in use, their narratives normalize violence and to a certain degree support a culture of conflict (Jovanović, 2020). This body of literature is indispensable for understanding the official narratives conveyed to young people through history education in the Yugoslav successor states. However, its main focus is on system-level phenomena rather than a detailed analysis of young people's understanding and meaning-making.

NATIONALISM AND UNDERSTANDING PAST VIOLENCE

Research on young people in Serbia and the analysis of history textbooks provide valuable insights into the general views that young people hold about the violent past and some of the

factors that might have shaped these opinions. Beyond this, it is also important to understand the consequences of holding these views for the political positioning of young people, and for the presence of nationalism in their narratives. Perry (2019) claims that in Serbia there is a 'prevalent and unresolved culture of extremism, grounded in the reciprocal dynamics of the socio-political ecosystem that has emerged since the wars in the 1990s' (Perry, 2019: 18). Potential reasons include the close link between the most important political actors in Serbia today and at the time of war (Perry, 2019), or the links between the political mainstream and the far-right parties through coalitions that often blur the boundaries between them (Kelly, 2019). Other studies suggest there is a connection between understandings of past violence and nationalism (Malešević, 2003; Yerkes, 2004), although these studies do not directly measure nationalist tendencies. In a recent report covering this issue, Radoman (2020) categorized almost half of the participants in the study as mild nationalists on both organic and ethno-centric nationalism scales. One third of the participants agreed with the claim that Serbs have no responsibility for the wars or for war crimes. Radoman concludes that young people are more nationalistic than the general population due to their not remembering the wars of the 1990s.

The current study aims to deepen our understanding of how young people understand the recent violent past, as well as the ways in which these views might shape their political positioning and nationalistic tendencies. Its focus on youth who did not directly experience the violence offers a novel approach that will contribute to the literature on young people's understandings of recent violence in post-conflict societies and the effects of history rewriting, and to discussions of the relationship between violence and nationalism. The study consisted of in-depth interviews and small-group discussions about the Yugoslav wars with 31 first-year university students in Serbia. Participants' narratives were analysed using two analytical frameworks: the collective memory of conflict (Bar-Tal, 2013), which comes from the field of social psychology; and narrative keys for the normalization of violence (Bermúdez, 2019), which stems from history education research. Using these frameworks we analysed: a) whether participants' narratives contain identifiable themes of a collective memory of conflict and b) whether participants normalize past violence through narrative. The relationship between the two analytical frameworks as well as the relationship between history textbooks and participants' narratives will be discussed. The findings are further discussed with regard to how participants' understandings of past violence might shape their political positioning in relation to nationalism.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The Socio-Psychological Foundations of Intractable Conflicts

Violence has immense psychological implications that affect generations of young people long after a conflict is over (Bar-Tal, 2013; Cehajic et al., 2008; Psaltis et al., 2017; Volkan, 2001). Intractable conflicts can have a great number of psychological implications for group members. There are several approaches to conceptualizing these implications. For example, from a psychoanalytic perspective, Volkan (2001) proposes the process of transgenerational transmission of a chosen trauma. This refers to a mental representation of a traumatic past event shared by a large group in which the group occupied the position of the victim (i.e. suffering loss, humiliation, etc.) or the position of the victimizer (i.e. the experience of loss and shame associated with the past). The trauma is chosen because 'it reflects [a] large group's unconscious "choice" to add a past generation's mental representation of an event to its own identity' (Volkan, 2001: 88). The chosen trauma then becomes woven into the large group identity and can be activated to different degrees, depending on the large group's circumstances. One of the most influential and overarching approaches to conceptualizing the impact of violence on a large group focuses on the socio-psychological foundations of intractable conflicts (Bar-Tal, 2007, 2010, 2013).

According to Bar-Tal, during a conflict, society members experience stress, hardship, uncertainty, loss, and suffering, and they face several challenges in terms of satisfying their needs, coping with stress, and withstanding the enemy. In order to meet these challenges, societies develop a socio-psychological repertoire that consists of societal beliefs, attitudes, and emotions. Once this repertoire is institutionalized, a socio-psychological infrastructure consolidates, which then becomes the foundation of a culture of continuing conflict that includes three elements: a collective emotional orientation, an ethos of conflict, and a collective memory of conflict. In the context of an intractable conflict, the collective memory of the conflict expresses conflict-supporting narratives. These are 'socially constructed narratives that have some basis in actual events but are biased, selective, and distorted in ways that meet the society's present needs', and are 'treated by many [citizens] as truthful accounts of the past and a valid history of the society' (Bar-Tal, 2007: 1436). These narratives are organized around three main and interrelated themes: victimization of one's own group; delegitimization of the opponent; and justification of the conflict's outbreak (Bar-Tal et al., 2009: 241).

Once the violence is over and peace treaties are signed, societies embark on a long and uncertain journey of reconciliation, and it is exactly these narratives that need to change in order for a society to achieve a culture of peace. One of the key elements in this process is that peace becomes a supreme value, which entails that 'both parties […] must establish a common moral as well as utilitarian epistemic basis that negates completely the use of violence' (Bar-Tal, 2013: 373). The adoption of new social narratives about the conflict – less antagonistic, less biased towards the in-group, more open to acknowledging some responsibility for the conflict, and less insistent on a sense of victimization – may create a new space for peace-oriented beliefs and values. However, do such renewed narratives necessarily transform people's views about violence? This question is particularly important, since research on school history textbooks indicates that violent pasts are represented in ways that do not shine a critical light on the use of violence. The next section presents the second analytical framework that will be used to examine representations of violence in students' narratives.

Normalizing Violence

Studies in different contexts (Bermúdez, 2016, 2019; Brown & Brown, 2010; Friedrich, 2014; Hein & Selden, 2000; Jovanović, 2020) show how history textbook narratives minimize and sanitize past violence and represent it in a way that perpetuates and reproduces the harmful biases and stereotypes that can prevent students from developing a critical understanding of the violence. For example, in dealing with representations of violence against African Americans in US history and civic education curricula, Brown and Brown reveal that episodes of violence against African Americans, while more evident in textbooks than before, are portrayed as the 'acts of autonomous immoral agents rather than systematic acts that had direct and long-term effects' (2010: 56). According to the authors, these representations sustain the belief that racism exists only because of ruthless individuals; hence students fail to understand the socioeconomic and political infrastructure, institutional support, or systemic problems that form the background to such events. In another example analysing how new, progressive Argentinian textbooks represent the military dictatorship in that country, Friedrich (2014) points to three distinct narrative features (presenting history as the progress of democracy, creating a binary opposition between dictatorship and democracy, and excluding the large part of the population that supported the dictatorship), and concludes that these narratives limit students' critical understanding of historical processes and do not help to strengthen democracy.

A recent research programme studying representations of violence in the history textbooks of a number of countries (Bermúdez, 2016; Bermúdez Vélez & Martínez, 2018; Jovanović, 2020; Stoskopf & Bermúdez, 2017) offers a more comprehensive perspective by drawing on Galtung's

understanding and typology of violence (1996). According to Galtung, violence is a purposeful strategy used to achieve the desired goals in situations of conflict. His model discusses three distinct types of violence: direct, structural, and cultural. Cultural violence refers to the complex web of belief systems and social practices through which instrumental, destructive, and unfair practices are rendered acceptable (Galtung, 1990). This then serves to legitimize the other two types of violence (Galtung, 1996). Bermúdez (2019) argues that representations of violence in history textbooks often serve as mechanisms of cultural violence. The basic premise is that historical narratives, while filled with references to violent events, tend to normalize violence by representing it as an expected and natural part of the conflict, and an inescapable trait of human interactions – thus reducing opportunities for readers to engage with the violence critically.

The analytical framework used in the current study (Bermúdez, 2019; Bermúdez & Epstein, 2020) identifies distinct and specific mechanisms (*ten narrative keys*) that drive the (de) normalization of violence in history textbooks, and it has recently been successfully applied in the analysis of memorial-museum exhibits (Bermúdez & Epstein, 2020) and Serbian high-school history textbooks (Jovanović, 2020). However, the model has not yet been applied systematically to analyse ordinary young people's narratives. The current study represents a first attempt to do this by exploring how young people make sense of, appropriate, and negotiate the meaning of recent violence. In this way we hope to contribute to this evolving model and also to explore the link between the normalization of violence identified in the history textbook narratives and the potential normalization of violence in young people's narratives.

METHODOLOGY

To answer our research questions, we carried out two studies. In the first study, 17 in-depth interviews (lasting one hour on average) were conducted in late 2018 at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade.[2] In the second study, three participants from the first study and 14 new participants took part in group discussions (GD), which were conducted in the spring of 2019 at the same faculty. Both studies followed a similar protocol. First, participants were asked about their experiences with school in general, history classes, and history lessons on the break-up of Yugoslavia. The facilitator took special care to note the personal experiences of participants or their families during the wars in order to better understand their positions, while carefully navigating the conversation around sensitive topics so as to avoid causing additional trauma. Following this, the main part of the protocol employed political maps of the region dating from 1990 and post-2008, respectively. Participants were asked to describe, in their own words, what had changed and what had happened. After a general explanation, each of the wars was discussed individually. The last two themes for discussion related to the use of violence and Serbia's role in the wars. All interviews and group discussions were facilitated by the first author, who is a trained psychologist with experience in interviewing and facilitating group discussions.

Sample

A purposeful sampling strategy was used, which yielded a total of 31 participants across the two studies. All participants were first-year university students aged 18 to 19, chosen because of their specific position within the education system: having just graduated from high school, these students had a maximum amount of recent exposure to history education. Limiting the study to first-year university students is warranted by two considerations. First, the fact that the majority of high-school graduates in Serbia move on to some form of higher education (Republički Zavod za Statistiku, 2019, 2020). Second, because relevant knowledge and

experiences from high school were still fresh for this group, since they had attended their last history lesson only a few months before the first study began. The call to participate in the first study was disseminated across two faculties at the University of Belgrade. In this way, we obtained a longlist of potential participants from which we selected our group of young people, striving for diversity in terms of gender and place of birth. For the second study we recruited students from various universities in Belgrade via an open call published in various student social-network groups. All potential discussion-group participants were offered a symbolic gift. Four discussion groups were formed, with three to five participants in each one.

The characteristics of the overall sample (Table 1) are comparable with the wider university student population. In terms of gender distribution, females made up 61.9% of our sample across the two studies, while female students made up 55.2% of all students enrolled for the first time in some form of higher education in 2019–2020 (Republički Zavod za Statistiku, 2019). Two thirds of the students in our overall sample graduated from a grammar school (*gimnazija*), and research shows that grammar-school students enrol in university studies at a higher rate (Jovanović et al., 2016: 46). In terms of place of birth, students coming from various cities across Serbia are represented in our sample. In the overall sample, 13 participants (40%) reported their family having some kind of direct experience of war, either as refugees or through a father having participated in the war. The same percentage reported their family as having had no experience of war, while five participants were unsure of their family's experiences. As a general pattern, participants whose family had had war experiences demonstrated far more interest in the topic, which often translated into a fiercer reaction to the probing questions, as well as their having stronger opinions on certain wartime episodes. They possessed more information based on their family history, but this did not amount to more general knowledge about the episodes beyond the retold experiences.

Analytical Strategy

A theory-driven deductive analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) underpins the approach taken to the data collected in both studies. Thematic analysis was used to examine the presence of identifiable themes of the collective memory of conflict (Bar-Tal, 2013) in participants' narratives. Following this, discourse analysis (Billig, 1996; Gee, 2014) was used to explore if and how participants relied on narrative keys to normalize the violence (Bermúdez, 2019) in their reflections and discussion. We examined how social meanings are communicated through the content and structure of participants' narratives and expanded on this by exploring which actors are included or

T A B L E 1   Sample overview.

		Study One	Study Two
Gender	Female	9	12
	Male	8	5
City	Belgrade	7	9
	Other	10	8
Type of high school	Gimnazija	13	11
	Other	4	6
Family experience of war	Yes	10	5
	No	5	9
	Unclear	2	3
Total		17*	17*

*Three students participated in both studies.

excluded within the narratives, how they are positioned in relation to each other, how causal relationships are established and broken, and which events are completely dropped from the narrative (Bermúdez, 2014; Haste & Bermúdez, 2017). In the next sections we will present our findings based on a thematic analysis that employs the three themes of the collective memory of conflict, followed by the discourse analysis, organized around three narrative keys for normalizing violence.

FINDINGS: THE COLLECTIVE MEMORY OF CONFLICT

Many of our participants do recognize that Serbia is responsible for some crimes and this could be seen in general remarks such as 'we are not perfect' (Kristina, GD) and 'there were crimes on both sides' (Damjan, GD). However, three major themes in the collective memory of conflict emerged in the analysis: the victimization of one's own group; the delegitimization of the opponent group; and the justness of one's own goals. For Bar-Tal et al. these 'form a triangular system that constitutes the core beliefs of the intractable conflict' (2009: 241).

Victimization of One's Own Group

Theoretically, victimization of one's own group results from a perceived intentional harm that has severe and lasting consequences, inflicted on a group by another group or groups. It can be based on social constructions or objective experiences and relates to harm done in the recent or more distant past. In addition, the victim status need not be recognized by the international community, nor even on occasion exist if the group is considered to be the perpetrator (Bar-Tal, 2003; Bar-Tal et al., 2009). When participants narrate specific episodes such as the war in Croatia, victimization-related beliefs are quite salient, as illustrated in the following examples:

Filip: Since there was a majority of Serbs there, what they did is not ethnic cleansing but genocide. (Int)

Toma: I am not sure if that is correct but it [Operation Storm] is the biggest ethnic cleansing since the Second World War and in general. (Int)

Jovan: This is new information for me. I thought that Operation Storm expanded the borders of Croatia [vis-à-vis Serbia]. (Int)

Djurdja: I think I heard somewhere, but I am not sure if it is true, that the Serbs had more victims. (Int)

Researcher: In the context of the break-up, what do you know about the war in Croatia?
Ivana: I know about [Croats] forcing Serbs to leave Croatia. (Int)

Dubravka: Well in Knin we have the Croatian Army committing violence against civilians [Serbs] and in Priština we have the same situation with the Kosovo Army. (Int)

Ivana: Serbia lost everything, it really lost a lot. I am not sure that it got anything at all, I think it didn't get anything. (Int)

These excerpts are just some of the numerous examples of how the story is focused on harm to one's own group. Ivana's words point to victimization. Participants omit many violent episodes

in which violence is committed by the Serbian side, and the story is reduced to an episode in which Serbs were the victims. In addition, here we can see how participants overestimate the severity of the crimes (Filip, Toma), the negative effects the wars had for Serbs (Jovan), and the number of Serb victims compared with the opponent group (Djurdja).

Delegitimization of the Opponent

Theoretically, delegitimization of the opponent implies categorizing a group or groups within negative social categories. These groups are viewed as breaching basic human standards (their acts violate the limits of acceptable norms or values or both), and they are thus considered to deserve maltreatment (Bar-Tal & Hammack, 2012). In our analysis, three distinct types of delegitimization emerged: a) depicting the opponent group as cruel and brutal; b) depicting the opponent group as immoral – i.e. intentionally committing harm; and c) labelling the opponent groups as terrorist.

Janko: I just know that they, the Albanians were very brutal. (Int)

Toma: […] we could have tried taking the diplomatic route but that would not stop the rampage of Albanians in Kosovo. (Int)

Andrijana: I absolutely agree that Croats were more brutal. (GD)

Jovan: If I am going to be honest, completely honest […] I think that Croats […] they are significantly more guilty for this […] meaning they were much more brutal, I think there was much more hate there. (GD)

Jasna: They [Albanians] were hiding and attacking our people, year after year, day after day, and I can say that their army was growing and they became more aggressive. (Int)

Gojko: There were killings, I think that started in 1991, like officially, when they started […] and there was this case of a peasant of ours, I know, they even burned him alive or something like that, burned, killed, I can't remember exactly, something really blood-thirsty. (GD)

Participants describe the opponent group using adjectives such as brutal, aggressive, and blood-thirsty. Jasna constructs this characterization by evoking events that portray the opponent group as sneaky and using unfair tactics, while Gojko uses anecdotal evidence to support the claim that in the past the opponent group was indeed bloodthirsty. The opponent groups are delegitimized by positioning them as groups that violate basic human norms. The second type of delegitimization to emerge from the analysis is when we see participants going one step further by ascribing intent to the opponent groups.

Damjan: Well, Croats got what they wanted. They forced the Serbs out. (GD)

Marija: Well, because they [Croats] wanted to cleanse the territory, so there are no more Serbs, so only they can be there. (Int)

Toma: Croats killed because they wanted to start some kind of ethnic cleansing. (Int)

Ivana: […] they cleansed Croatia of Serbs and that is how they wanted it. Well they celebrate after that, like they killed a lot of Serbs and this is some kind of holiday for them, some celebration, like it's a good thing. (Int)

Ascribing intent enhances the immorality of the opponent group. Damjan, Marija, and Toma ascribe to Croats the desire to have a Serb-free state. Ivana makes the case for their motivation by emphasizing the fact that the opponent group is happy about the harm they committed. By portraying opponent groups as intentionally acting outside of acceptable values, the participants further delegitimize them. Depicting opponent groups as cruel and immoral is congruent with the appearance of a third theme in which participants label them as terrorists.

Researcher: And who was on the other side [in the Kosovo War]?
Gojko: Well, that was […] literally
Zorica: the terrorist organization
Valentina: the KLA [Kosovo Liberation Army]
Gojko: I think it is qualified as a terrorist organization
Dubravka: Yes, a terrorist organization, Hashim Thaçi (GD)

Damjan: […] and now the whole world thinks that the worst jihadists and the Taliban started appearing in Bosnia exactly during that war in the 1990s (GD)

This kind of labelling serves as a shortcut to charging the opponent groups with having fought via illegitimate means, and with having used violent methods and unfair strategies to achieve their immoral goals.

Justifying the Goals of One's Own Group

In order for any conflict to exist, there needs to be a conflicting set of goals pertaining to each of the opposing groups. According to Bar-Tal (2013), justifying the goals of one's own group underlines the crucial importance of that particular group; it explains the significance of the group and provides its acting rationale, while at the same time denying the goals of rival groups. The main theme that emerged in the participants' narratives – consistent with describing the opponent groups as immoral, brutal, and cruel – is the danger in which members of the ethnic in-group were placed, and this justifies the in-group's participation in the violent conflict:

Zoran: […] Croats kicked Serbs out as an equal nation and proclaimed them to be a national minority; Serbs felt threatened, thinking they will be assimilated into the Croatian nation, and then they took over those police stations. (GD)

Djurdja: It [Serbia's aim] was to send the military to Croatia and Bosnia to defend its people. (Int)

Filip: Serbs wanted to protect their brothers across the Drina river, and this is how […] that is how there was war. (Int)

Toma: I think that the interest of Serbia was simply in people living peacefully, not in fear of someone coming to their house and forcing them to leave and […] simply not to be killed. (Int)

Jovan: If I am honest, I think there are some goals that justify going to war. We do not live in a fairy tale with rainbows and unicorns, it simply has to happen, especially for […] if that opposite state obviously won't give freedom to their people, that it will not give any privileges and if people are suffering under the oppression, I think war is a justified means. (GD)

Filip's words 'that is how there was war' imply that there would have been no war if Serbs had not been in danger, and Toma enriches this story by ascribing a yearning for peace to his own group. The quotes show how participants build a causal sequence to explain the outbreak of the conflict, which consists of the ideas: we wanted peace – we were being attacked – we had to defend our own people. By rhetorically positioning a threat to in-group members at the beginning of this sequence, Serbian involvement is transformed into a completely justified, direct response to this threat. Participants focus on the sense of threat and the desire for peace while making no reference to the political, economic, and social goals of Serbs or the violence committed against others in order to achieve these goals. Jovan reaches the same conclusion by calling upon the inevitability of wars. He establishes the context ('the world is a messy place where wars are reality') and places the wars of the 1990s within this. This allows him to conclude with the same point – under the given circumstances, the goals of his own group were justified.

The findings discussed above demonstrate the prominence of the three major themes of the collective memory of conflict in participants' narratives. These themes interact in ways that feed and sustain each other, thus creating a kind of causal loop. Focusing on how brutal and immoral the opponent groups are, combined with believing in the justness of the in-group's own goals, leads to the conclusion that one's own group is the sole or biggest victim of the conflict. Alternatively, the in-group's goals are justified because one's own group is the main victim of the opponent groups' immoral and unjust behaviour. The three themes support and enhance each other in a narrative that sustains the collective memory of the conflict.

FINDINGS: THE NORMALIZATION OF VIOLENCE

In this section we present findings based on the analytical framework of *ten narrative keys for the normalization of violence* (Bermúdez, 2019), which shows that participant narratives normalize the violence committed during the wars of the 1990s, and that they do so using three salient narrative keys: a narrative framing that justifies the violence; a disjointed discussion of social structures that sustain and propel violence; and the biased representation of different narratives.

A Narrative Framing that Justifies Violence

Much like other historical events, violent episodes are framed within a historical narrative that provides a bigger story within which they feature, and which illuminates the meaning and value of violent acts (Bermúdez, 2016). According to Bermúdez (2019), narratives often 'portray violence as unfortunate but necessary means to valued social ends'. In our study, participants' narratives invoke the larger narrative frame of the 'inevitable break-up' of Yugoslavia. This narrative frame rests on four ideas that support its inevitability: a) the artificiality of Yugoslavia; b) Tito as the only thing holding Yugoslavia together; c) the emphasis on cultural differences; and d) the existence of ancient hostilities.

As concerns *the artificiality of Yugoslavia*, the participants presented the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia as an artificial creation that was therefore destined to fail and break up. This is clearly noticeable in the following excerpts:

Emilija: Well, I sincerely think Yugoslavia was destined to break up because it was artificially created. (Int)

Maja: Well, in the first place I think this idea was simply never going to succeed – for so many different people to live all of a sudden under one law, one president or whatever, and then they started separating. (Int)

Marko: So, this is also my opinion that all of this was coming from the state, given that there was […] um […] socialism and the dictatorship, that all of this was held together […] by the state in an artificial way […] and people were forced by the state to believe in these ideals, simply. (Int)

This idea of artificiality serves to emphasize that the socialist federation was something opposed to the natural forces of ethnic and national essences. As Marko says, the source of this artificiality is found in socialism and the dictatorship: two top-down processes for moulding the beliefs of citizens that run counter to nationalist sentiments that worked in the opposite direction and emerged 'bottom-up' from the essence of people's identities. Another top-down element that is further emphasized is Yugoslavia's former president, Tito.

Let us now consider *Tito as the only thing holding Yugoslavia together*. Given that Josip Broz Tito is seen as the main source of unity, his death in 1980 opened the 'dam' that up until then had kept nationalism in check.

Dubravka: He [Tito] did make people come together for a short time, but they also, because of such a regime and polity, had to stay together as long as they had to. But, also, this is the reason everything culminated in the way it did, because it was suppressed for a very long time and then, so to say, exploded. (Int)

Julija: Well yes, while he was there, there was a possibility of […] of existence, of the appearance of the existence of the community, and when he was not there anymore, everyone started to scramble, each wanted their own. (GD)

Marko: Now, when there was no more Tito […] one part of that ideal of being Yugoslav was lost and then everything started sinking slowly back to, to the divisions that were naturally created over time. (Int)

Jasna: I for one think that when Tito died everything started going downhill – he held it together and they had to listen to him because he was the authority and had a lot of influence, some of which we did not know about. And I think he was the main one who held Yugoslavia together […] in some kind of unity until the catastrophe started. (Int)

Tito is positioned as an authority figure and as the only element of unity. His death meant that the ideal of unity crumbled because it was not the ideal of the people: 'they had to stay together'. Julija qualifies the existence of the community as merely an appearance created by Tito, implying that what is real is the division. Other participants' language also implies the authenticity of what followed. Dubravka uses a metaphor of explosion, which indicates that an outburst of energy was earlier suppressed, while Marko talks about 'sinking back' and

returning to a 'regular' order of things. This language erases any other causal factors that might have contributed to the break-up after Tito's death. In addition, it renders invisible any strategic decision-making by the various actors involved in the events that followed, which thus adds to the depiction of nationalism as a force of nature, temporarily tamed by the benevolent dictator. But what exactly was temporarily tamed and supressed?

The third point, *the emphasis on differences*, contains another important idea that supports the 'inevitable break-up' narrative frame by emphasizing the differences between the ethnic groups:

Filip: What contributed to this [the break-up] is also the religious differences, because Croats are Catholics; furthermore, probably linguistic [differences] and with that basically these are the most important differences, the most important characteristics of one nation […] and they led to the end. (Int)

Dragana: There could be some cultural reasons. I mean […] two religions […] Christianity – yes, but Catholic and Orthodox, the larger influence of the West, the larger influence of the East. Again, the south part of Serbia – Turkey […] It is possible that, I do not know enough, but it is possible that there are some deeply rooted motives that just piled on, piled on, and piled on, and it just couldn't work. (Int)

Dubravka: Well, I mean these […] these differences and the hostility that existed. You have nations that in general can't stand each other or that speak different languages, that have a lack of understanding on many different levels, and they are put together in one state. (Int)

Milena: Now, I think that somehow, I don't know enough, but I think there were always disagreements between Serbs and Croats. (Int)

Cultural differences between the nations that made up the SFR Yugoslavia were real. However, participants seem to give them too much explanatory power. In discursive terms, what is happening here is that other information that does not fit the overall narrative frame of the 'inevitable break-up' is excluded. For example, participants omitted any reference to the similarities between the nations or to the fact that the system did create room for cultural differences to (co) exist. By focusing on the differences, participants construct a story reminiscent of the pressure cooker idea – that the suppression of differences and disagreements led to the piling on of natural tensions that kept increasing with nothing to ease them, until finally everything exploded.

Turning finally to *the existence of ancient hostilities*, what is interesting is that cultural differences are equated with a hostility that clearly signifies ancient hatreds between these groups.

Dragana: Under the cultural differences we can consider precisely the fact that there was always some hostility between Serbs and Croats. I mean, it has permeated throughout history for I don't know how long. (Int)

Toma: I would just mention, for example, those, let's say, unresolved circumstances from the past. The Independent State of Croatia, for example, and maybe even earlier, […] let's say […] when we were all in conflict against each other. (Int)

Ljubica: I think that nationalism always existed in each of the republics, it was not something that emerged after Tito died, but there was always some sort of inequality and nuisance between the republics. The Croat was not the same as the Serb, and no one was ever equal there, there were always tensions. (GD)

Dragana talks about the continuity of a bad relationship ('there were always hostilities') and thus establishes hostility and hatred as trademarks of the groups in question. Jovan also proposes that these groups were never united and adds that everyone was aware of this. By evoking events from the distant past, Toma supports the idea of some continuity in a bad relationship. Additionally, differences are portrayed as long-established, immemorial, and ancient.

The four ideas discussed above form the narrative frame that renders the Yugoslav break-up as inevitable. Within this frame, the federation was *artificially created* out of nations with *irreconcilable differences*, held together only by *Tito*. In addition to being different, the nations had *hostile relationships* long before they entered the federation. Once the beloved dictator had died and the oppressive system had started to loosen its grip on society, everything started 'slowly sinking' back to 'normal'. The nationalist sentiments that had been repressed and which then took over led directly to the violent break-up of the country.

Although some research participants did have a basic knowledge of the different causal factors at play (such as political leaders and economic factors), these were few in number and all were placed on the margins of the 'inevitable break-up' narrative frame. They become free-floating pieces of information, unrelated to the main story, and stripped of any explanatory power within this simplistic, almost fatalistic narrative frame. Furthermore, by qualifying the nations as eternally hostile towards each other and the hostilities as something 'natural', this implies that the violence that followed was also expected, natural, and normal. Hence within this narrative frame, not only was the break-up inevitable, but the violence too.

A Disjointed Discussion of Social Structures that Propel and Sustain Violence

According to Bermúdez (2019), history textbook narratives often disguise the network of social, economic, and political structures and dynamics that inform the decisions made by different actors. Violent practices tend to be described in a vacuum, disconnected from the complex interaction of social structures that generate conflict and trigger the use of violence as a means to manage tensions and contradictions. However, inclusion of these is crucial for a critical understanding of the origins of violence in conflicts. The following excerpts illustrate how participants use this narrative key in support of the 'inevitable break-up' narrative frame.

Jovan: I think that was the key thing, the awakening of the extreme nationalism was the key thing for the secession of these areas. (GD)

Marina: I think when you are well off for some time, be it one, three, five years, you get used to it and then all of a sudden something starts that you did not expect. With that your worst qualities come out and what you are capable of. (Int)

Researcher: Generally, in relation to the break-up of Yugoslavia, why was it so violent?
Natalija: Well, it is possible that it is because the hostility was piling on, anger, dissatisfaction and then all at once, when one lets everything out. (GD)

Nationalism is an 'awakening', anger and dissatisfaction are being 'let out', and violence starts 'all of a sudden' and 'overnight'. It 'breaks out' and the worst qualities 'come about' as a natural consequence of this nationalism. The language used by participants indicates a process that develops organically, with no reference to the external factors that intervene to change things. In participants' narratives, the violence is not a consequence of deliberate actions, decision-making, or choices made by groups and individuals attending to particular reasons, interests, and expected outcomes. These narratives point to the empty space between conflict

and violence in which not much happens. The abruptness and inevitability makes the violence seem self-made, and the social, economic, and political dynamics and structures that lie behind it are completely invisible.

The identification of the main actors in the violence further speaks to the disjointed discussion of social structures that sustain and propel violence. Occasionally, participants refer to military forces (the Yugoslav People's Army, the Croatian Army, the Army of Republika Srpska), political leaders (Slobodan Milošević, Franjo Tuđman, Alija Izetbegović) and military leaders (Ratko Mladić, Radovan Karadžić). However, for most of them, the actors in their stories are ethnic and religious groups in general: more often than not, participants refer to the violence as being committed (and suffered) by Serbs, Croats, Bosniaks, Albanians, Christians, and Muslims.

Marina: Well, let's say that most of Kosovo is Albanian people, right? I guess that was the war between Serbs and Albanians. (Int)

Olja: Well, I think that here [the war in Bosnia] we are talking about the conflict between Muslim and Christian, I think it is divided now and it was divided back then. (GD)

Vladimir: Well, I think there was a conflict between Orthodox and Muslim in Bosnia. (Int)

Referring to the actors as entire ethnic or religious groups gives the impression that there are no social, economic, ideological, or other distinctions within these groups. Furthermore, narrative homogenization of the ethnic groups renders any opposition to violence within these communities completely invisible, which is clear in the participants' lack of knowledge about anti-war activism. With the exception of three students, participants had no knowledge of any organization, person, or movement that had participated in the numerous anti-war protests across Yugoslavia during the break-up. This kind of narrative exclusion contributes to the normalization of past violence.

Biased Representations in Different Narratives

It has been shown that history textbooks often present one single narrative, while alternative viewpoints are largely marginalized. The evidence supporting alternative viewpoints, i.e. those not fitting the narrative frame that justifies violence, is frequently distorted or completely omitted from the story (Bermúdez, 2019). When narrating specific violent episodes within the 'inevitable break-up' frame, participants in our studies tended to omit the alternative viewpoints of other groups involved in the conflict. For example, when narrating the war in Croatia, most of them reduced it to Operation Storm, a military action that took place at the end of the war, during which a large number of ethnic Serbs were forced to leave Croatia.

Researcher: OK, there were elections in Croatia and what happened after that?
Kristina: Well, the ethnic cleansing of Serbs started, I think. (GD)

Researcher: Have you ever heard about the war in Croatia?
Jasna: That's Storm [Operation Storm], isn't it? Is that where this event fits? (Int)

Researcher: The break-up was accompanied by violent conflicts, do you know from when to when the conflicts lasted, where they happened, what they were?
Gojko: Well, the most important one for us is Storm in my opinion. (GD)

Note how all the participants quoted here omit the whole course of the war in Croatia (1991–1995) – four years of war marked by various violent episodes on both sides of the conflict – and go straight to the operation that marked the end of the war. Kristina positions the beginning of the ethnic cleansing right after the elections of 1990, while Jasna gives the impression that Operation Storm represents the whole war. Gojko even shows an awareness that the most important event 'for us' is the violence against our own group. As discussed earlier, when asked about the role of Serbia in the wars, quite a few participants do note that everyone, including 'us', committed crimes. However, when asked to tell the story of a specific violent episode, this information is missing and is not coordinated within a multi-vocal narrative. In a similar fashion, some participants briefly mentioned Vukovar or Knin in relation to the war in Croatia. However, almost no one included in their narrative the Yugoslav People's Army's (JNA's) bombing of Croatian cities (Kolarić, 2018), or other military actions undertaken by either the JNA (Hoare, 2010; Kolarić, 2018), the military of Republika Srpska (Hoare, 2010), or Serbian paramilitary units (Vukušić, 2018). The war in Croatia becomes a tale in which Croats – driven by their desire for a homogeneous nation-state following Tito's death when the 'ban on nationalism' was lifted – started forcing Serbs out of Croatia. A similar pattern is discernible in how participants narrate the war in Kosovo.

| Andrijana: | Well, when the break-up of everything started, Albanians created that image of Great Albania and then it started little by little. (GD) |

| Researcher: | So, do you know about Kosovo? |
| Vladimir: | Well OK, the stories that are present with the people are that Albanians came to the territory of Kosovo and they started […] to, well move in with […] in the houses of Serbs and practically forced them out, and that is how it started. (Int) |

Researcher:	When we say war in Kosovo and the problems in Kosovo, how would you explain this to someone? […] Do you know something [about it]? What is the first thing that comes to mind?
Jovan:	That man breaking the cross,[3] everyone is talking about that.
Dragana:	Same, yes.
Everyone:	Yes! (GD)

These students reduce the war to a few processes or events that all represent violence against their own group. This is similar to the story of the war in Croatia being reduced to Operation Storm. Even though the war in Kosovo took place from 1998 to 1999, participants focus on an event in 2004. Nowhere in the student narratives can we find reference to the viewpoints of the victims of the Serbian oppression of Albanians (Udovički, 2000), the Serbian offensive in May 1998 (Trix, 2010), or the war crimes committed by the Serbian police (Stjepanović, 2017).

DISCUSSION

In this paper we have explored whether participants' narratives contain identifiable themes of a collective memory of conflict, and whether participants normalize past violence through narrative. We have presented findings from in-depth interviews and small-group discussions on the Yugoslav break-up which were carried out with a group of young people in Serbia. Theory-driven thematic analysis has revealed that participants hold what Bar-Tal calls a collective memory of conflict (Bar-Tal, 2007, 2013), composed of three main themes. When narrating the violent episodes related to the Yugoslav break-up, the participants focus on victimization – the harm done to one's own group by another group or groups (Bar-Tal et al., 2009) – while largely

disregarding the violence committed by their own group. Furthermore, participants delegitimize opponent groups (Bar-Tal & Hammack, 2012) using three interrelated yet distinct strategies: a) describing other groups as cruel, brutal, and bloodthirsty; b) representing other groups as immoral by ascribing to them the intention to commit violent acts against their own group; and c) labelling opponent groups as terrorists. Finally, they justify the participation of their own group in the violence as self-defence in the face of an external threat (Bar-Tal, 2013).

Discourse analysis of participants' representations of violence shows that when narrating the break-up of Yugoslavia, they employ three narrative features that contribute to the normalization of violence (Bermúdez, 2019). Participants employed the narrative frame of an 'inevitable break-up' to make sense of the violence committed during the break-up of Yugoslavia. Resting on four ideas (the artificiality of Yugoslavia, Tito as the only thing holding Yugoslavia together, the emphasis of cultural differences, and the existence of ancient hostilities), this narrative frame serves to justify the violence. It does so by arguing that the SFR Yugoslavia, held together by Tito's authority, was an artificial creation that temporarily dulled the edges of the irreconcilable cultural differences and ancient hatreds between the ethnic groups. Told in this way, the story necessarily leads to the break-up and to violence as a consequence of the bottled-up and repressed natural tendencies. Fitting their accounts into this narrative frame, participants almost never talk about the complex social, economic, and political dynamics and structures that actively inform the decisions made by different actors. Violence is further ascribed to entire ethnic or religious groups, which thus renders any in-group differences invisible. Lastly, participants do not coordinate different perspectives into a multi-vocal narrative.

Of particular note is the interesting parallel the findings reveal between the narrative features of the normalization of violence and the themes of the collective memory of conflict. Both frameworks point in a similar direction; that participants' narratives display a simplistic, biased understanding that perpetuates the culture of conflict and justifies violence. In addition, the narrative features shape the expression of the collective memory of conflict. For example, using the narrative frame of the inevitable break-up makes it easier to justify the goals of one's own group. The narrative frame provides an explanation and justification of violence, while at the same time implying a causal sequence that justifies the involvement of one's own group in the violence. Similarly, the homogenizing of ethnic groups places the story within the overall frame that uses nationalism as the main explanatory tool. Establishing whole groups as actors in the conflict paves the way for victimization and delegitimization to appear.

Given their recent exposure to history education, it is surprising that for the most part, participants were not able to reproduce more detailed accounts of the events; and looking at what is missing reveals some shared 'holes'. For example, participants report knowing little about the war in Croatia, and were often not even able to date it correctly, yet they possess a considerable amount of information about Operation Storm during which Serbs were forced to flee Croatia. Similarly, the war in Kosovo is often limited to the NATO bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and many participants are unable to provide evidence of events prior to March 1999 when the bombing started. We refer to these 'holes' as strategic silences. They are strategic because the events dropped from the narrative have something in common – they refer to violence committed by their own group, and to the perspectives and experiences of their victims. Strategic silences represent the missing building blocks of the stories that allow for distortions and certain kinds of conclusions. Strategic silences about own-group transgressions and the victims of such transgressions enable the creation of an explanation for the conflict which makes it much easier to subscribe to beliefs based on victimization and delegitimization of the opponent.

Furthermore, strategic silences reveal an important connection between history textbook narratives and participants' narratives. We know that Serbian high-school history textbooks skip the same violent episodes and their consequences (Jovanović, 2020). However, most of our participants reported not having covered these lessons during their history classes. This points to the possibility that both history textbooks and our participants reflect the same dominant

narrative; one that our participants do an excellent job of adopting and actively employing. Furthermore, this attests to the effectiveness of these social discourses in permeating citizens' lives through education, public discourse, and the media. While more research is needed in order to draw definite conclusions about the relative importance that formal history education has for how young people in Serbia understand the violent break-up of Yugoslavia, it is certain that history education misses an opportunity to introduce facts that could work towards enriching the views of young people and helping them evaluate past violence critically.

The demonstrated narrative pattern about the recent violent past, if present beyond this group, could have important consequences for Serbia as a post-conflict society. First, the lack of critical interrogation of violent practices could reduce the chances of resolving future conflicts in a non-violent manner. As mentioned previously, violence is just one of the ways in which humans interact in a conflict situation. It is not an inescapable trait of human nature, but a deliberate practice used to achieve certain goals (Galtung, 1996). In order to prevent violence, it seems necessary to engage critically with past uses of violence and reveal the social, economic, and political dynamics that made it possible. Second, it is said that in order to build a stable and lasting peace, societies need to work on changing 'societal beliefs (i.e. collective memories) about the past by learning about the rival group's collective memory and recognizing one's own past misdeeds and responsibility for the outbreak and maintenance of the conflict' (Bar-Tal, 2013: 382). Our findings point to the conclusion that Serbian society is still far from achieving a stable and lasting peace described in this way, since learning about the rival group's memory and recognizing the misdeeds of one's own group is exactly what is missing from our participants' narratives. Finally, the findings contribute to a discussion of the connection between understanding past violence and nationalism. Participants use nationalism as the main explanatory tool in the story of the Yugoslav break-up. Based on these findings, participants are, in a way, agreeing that nationalism is how things work – that the world is guided by nationalisms that can easily, and legitimately, turn violent. A couple of participants expressed this in a fairly straightforward manner:

Filip: […] exactly because there were no clear ethnic borders […] that is how it came to be, essentially that is how war came to be, that is how war started. (Int)

Milena: Well, I think that when there is, in one place, a certain number of Serbs and Croats, there has to be more Croats so that place could belong to them, because if there are more Serbs, it is theirs. (Int)

Both Filip, by calling for clear ethnic borders, and Milena, by explaining the 'majority rule' of 'what belongs to whom', imply that any territory where minority and majority ethnic groups live together consists of a potential war-in-waiting. Since all ethnic groups operate in the same way, guided by a primary desire to create a homogeneous nation-state, violent encounters are not just a natural way for 'us' to achieve that goal, but essential in an effort to protect ourselves from 'them' trying to achieve it.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we have shown that participants' narratives contain identifiable themes of a collective memory of conflict. Specifically, participants emphasize self-victimization and often disregard the violence committed by the group they belong to. Furthermore, they delegitimize opponent groups by a) describing other groups as cruel, brutal, and bloodthirsty; b) representing other groups as immoral by ascribing to them the intention to commit violent acts against their own group; and c) labelling opponent groups as terrorists. Finally, they justify

the involvement of members of their own group in the violent acts. We also showed how participants normalize past violence by placing it within the 'inevitable break-up' narrative frame, by disguising the complex social, economic, and political dynamics and structures that actively inform the decisions made by different actors, and by failing to coordinate different perspectives into a multi-vocal narrative.

We have focused on an in-depth exploration of the participants' narratives regarding the break-up of Yugoslavia, and this methodology necessarily comes with certain limitations. While affording an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the ideas expressed by participants, interviews and small-group discussions rely on a small number of participants, which limits the possibility of generalization. In addition, the convenient sampling strategy used in this study resulted in a sample which did not include any high-school students who did not enter higher education, any lower socio-economic status youth, or any young people from rural areas, and the findings should be understood in this light.

Future research should include a larger and more diverse group of participants in a similar type of study, and also seek confirmation of the findings by employing additional methodologies. Since the scope and methodological approach of this paper did not allow for this, future research programmes should test the impact of history education on young people and their opinions about the violent episodes. In this way, it would be possible to track better the effects that a particular way of teaching history has on students' understandings. In addition, it would be interesting to continue to explore the application of the two methodologies to other studies in order to learn more about what they yield together and the challenges that may emerge.

Nonetheless, the findings do show that the narratives of young Serbians who have no direct experience of war and whose only access to stories about the violent break-up of Yugoslavia is indirect – through family members' stories, movies, TV, news, and history education – contain many characteristics of the conflict-supporting narratives while simultaneously normalizing violence as a legitimate and inevitable strategy in a situation of inter-group conflict. These young people use nationalism as one of the main explanatory tools when trying to make sense of the past violence, and this view can have important consequences for their current and future political positioning. If they accept nationalism as the main driving force and the lesson they take away is one that reaffirms nationalism as the 'natural order of things', there seems to be little to stop them from interpreting current and future inter-group relations in the same manner.

NOTES

[1] Pseudonyms are used throughout the paper; comments are marked as arising during individual interviews (Int) or in group discussions (GD).

[2] All participants signed a consent form. The study design together with the interview and group discussion protocols were approved by the University of Deusto Ethical Committee.

[3] This refers to the violence of March 2004 when 'at least 550 homes and 27 Orthodox churches and monasteries were burned, leaving approximately 4,100 Serbs, Roma, Ashkali, and other non-Albanian minorities displaced' (Human Rights Watch, 2004).

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Rodoljub Jovanović is a PhD candidate at the Centre for Applied Ethics at the University of Deusto in Bilbao, Spain. His research focuses on the ways young people in post-conflict societies understand recent violent conflicts. He examines group processes with an emphasis on the role of history education in post-conflict societies. He holds a BA in Psychology from the University of Belgrade and an MA in Interdisciplinary Research and Studies on Eastern Europe (MIREES) from the Universities of Bologna and Ljubljana.

Ángela Bermúdez is a researcher at the Centre for Applied Ethics at the University of Deusto in Bilbao, Spain. She investigates how history education in different countries fosters or hinders a critical understanding of political violence. She holds a doctorate from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Previously, she worked in Colombia, where she conducted research and developed curriculum guidelines and teaching resources for history and civic education.