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Nicolas Moll

Independent researcher

moll.nicolas@gmail.com

<http://www.suedosteuropa.uni-graz.at/cse/en/moll>

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A positive hero for everyone? The memorialization of Srđan Aleksić in post-Yugoslav countries

Nicolas Moll*

Despite various attempts, the memory of persons who helped and rescued endangered persons “from the other side” during the breakup wars of Yugoslavia is rarely publicly acknowledged. There is, nevertheless, one exception: the case of Srđan Aleksić, a young Bosnian Serb who was killed while saving a Muslim acquaintance in Trebinje in January 1993. Since 2007, Srđan Aleksić has not only become publicly known, but his memory is also widely positively connoted in different countries and by groups of various political and ethnic backgrounds in the post-Yugoslav space. This article analyzes the emergence of this memory and the narratives around it, how fragile or strong the consensus which has emerged around his memory is, and what this memorialization indicates about the current memory culture in post-Yugoslav countries and its evolutions.

Keywords: Srđan Aleksić, Bosnian War, Memory, Rescuer, Heroism

Introduction

Since the end of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), different attempts have been undertaken, especially by civil society actors, to promote stories of interethnic help and rescue which occurred during the war. Svetlana Broz published the book *Good People in an Evil Time*¹ in 1999, and, with her NGO *Gariwo*, promotes such stories through lectures, films and educational activities, while also advocating the creation of a *Garden of the Righteous* for those who rescued others during the War in BiH.² Stories of interethnic help and rescue were also collected and published by Jezdimir Milošević and his association *Protector* in 1999,³ and in 2010 by the NGO *Research and Documentation Center in Sarajevo* (RDC) with the book *The Signals of Heart*.⁴ In 2013, the NGO *Post-Conflict-Research Center* (P-CRC) launched the project *Ordinary Heroes: Tales of moral courage and rescue*, including the production of a documentary on Bosnia-Herzegovinian rescuers and the realization of a photographic exhibition with the title *Rescuers* which has been touring different towns throughout BiH.⁵

* Nicolas Moll is an independent researcher and lives in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, since 2007. He holds a PhD in Contemporary History from the University of Freiburg i.Br. Germany. His research interests include post-war reconciliation processes, political symbolism and memory studies in an European context.

¹ Broz, Svetlana. 1999. *Dobri ljudi u vremenu zla*. Banja Luka: Media Centar Prepom; English edition: Broz, Svetlana. 2005. *Good People in an Evil Time: Portraits of Complicity and Resistance in the Bosnian War*. New York: Other Press.

² See the website of [Gariwo](#).

³ Milošević, Jezdimir and Snježana Milošević. 1999. *Svjetla u tunelu*. Sarajevo: Protector.

⁴ Research and Documentation Centre (RDC). 2010. *The Signals of Heart*. Sarajevo: RDC.

⁵ See the website of the [PCRC](#).

Despite these different efforts, most stories have not attracted wider public attention and remain widely unknown. As research on post-Yugoslav memorialization processes is showing, BiH and the other successor countries of Yugoslavia are dominated by ethno-national narratives, making it very difficult for transnational or non-nationalist narratives and symbols to emerge.⁶ During the War in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the other Yugoslav breakup wars, individuals who helped endangered persons from 'the other side' in general acted secretly and, if discovered, were considered traitors. In the divided and polarized post-Yugoslav space this stigma often continues to linger. How difficult it is to publicly disseminate these stories is evident also in the attempts mentioned at the beginning: Concerning the book project *Signals of the Heart*, several persons contacted refused to participate, and among those who agreed to tell their stories a number preferred to stay anonymous, fearing negative reactions within their environs.⁷ One striking example of negative reactions relates to the documentary film *Nedo of Ljubuški*, produced by *Gariwo* in 2012, and dedicated to Nedeljko Galić, a Bosnian Croat from the Herzegovinian town of Ljubuški who helped several hundred Bosniaks to be released from the Heliodrom camp near Mostar in 1993. When the film was premiered in Ljubuški, it provoked heavy criticism from Croat nationalist groups, while Galić's widow, Štefica Galić, was physically assaulted in the street. One year later Štefica Galić decided to leave Ljubuški and resettle in Mostar.⁸

Similar stories of cross-ethnic help and rescue, which were followed by difficulties emerging afterwards, are not limited to the post-Yugoslav space. In post-war societies, national or other groups are often primarily focus upon their own military heroes, own victims and perpetrators of the other side(s), which does not leave much space for other figures as rescuers. In the first decades after the Second World War, in many European countries stories of rescuers of Jews from the Holocaust were rarely in the center of commemorative activities; the State of Israel only began to actively promote the *Righteous Among the Nations* in the 1960s, and it took until the 1990s for the category of the *Righteous* to be institutionalized also in various European countries.⁹ Oskar Schindler only became the universally-known positive symbol of a Holocaust

⁶ See for example Dević, Ana. 2014. *Jaws of the Nation and Weak Embraces of the State: the Lines of Division, Indifference and Loyalty in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, in *Strategies of Symbolic Nation-Building in South Eastern Europe*, edited by Kolstø, Pål. Farnham: Ashgate, 51-86; Pauker, Iva. 2012. *War Through Other Means, Examining the Role of Symbols in BiH*, in *Peace Psychology in the Balkans: Dealing with a Violent Past While Building Peace*, edited by Simić, Olivera / Volčić, Zala and Catherine R. Philpot. New York: Springer, 109-28; Moll, Nicolas. 2013. *Fragmented Memories in a Fragmented Country: Memory Competition and Political Identity Building in Today's Bosnia and Herzegovina*. *Nationalities Papers*, 41(6), 910-35.

⁷ RDC, *The Signals*, 28-9.

⁸ The film *Nedo of Ljubuški*, 2012, *Gariwo*, can be seen on [YouTube](#); For the reactions to the movie see *Gariwo*. 2012. [Hatred of Svetlana Broz and/or Hatred of Civil Courage](#). *Gariwo*, 17. December 2012 (accessed: 27. January 2016); Behrad, Mirsam. 2013. [Napadačica osuđena, Štefica Galić ipak napušta Ljubuški](#). *Slobodnaevropa*, 14. November 2013 (accessed: 27. Januar 2016).

⁹ See Gensburger, Sarah. 2010. *Les Justes de France. Politiques publiques de la mémoire*. Paris: Presses de la FNSP; for a recent overview on rescuers of Jews during the Second World War, see for example: Klützke, Anja-Isabell. 2012. *Kollektiv-solidarische Zivilcourage: Judenretter im Nationalsozialismus. Erprobung eines Konzepts in der Widerstandsforschung*. Marburg: Tectum, 23-25, 52-57.

rescuer in the 1990s, thanks to Steven Spielberg's film *Schindler's List*; before that he remained widely unknown, and in the German town of Frankfurt where he lived from 1958 until his death 1974, he was openly insulted several times as a "friend of Jews" or "servant of Jews."¹⁰

Despite the quoted difficulties and the polarized memory landscape in BiH and the post-Yugoslav space, there is nevertheless one name and story which has managed to become known and popular: that of Srđan Aleksić, a 26-year-old Bosnian Serb who, on the 21st January 1993, intervened on the central square of Trebinje to stop Bosnian Serb soldiers from assaulting a Muslim acquaintance of his, Alen Glavović. Glavović managed to escape thanks to his intervention, but in return Aleksić was so heavenly beaten by the other soldiers that he fell into a coma and died six days later, on the 27th of January 1993. Since 2007, the name of Srđan Aleksić has emerged as a widely positive identification figure not only in BiH, but also in other Yugoslav successor-states. How and why did this story become popular, while many others did not manage to do so? How strong or fragile is the consensus which seems to have been achieved so far around the memory of Aleksić? And what does the emergence of the Aleksić-story mean for the culture of remembrance in the post-Yugoslav space? These have been the leading questions for my research, and in order to address them I will proceed in the following way. First I will present the different steps of the memorialization of Srđan Aleksić from the war until today, and the spectrum of actors and activities which have been and are promoting him within this memorialization process. All these actors have been producing a main narrative around Aleksić, presenting him as a *hero*. There are nuances within this discourse, but nevertheless one dominating perspective has emerged presenting the figure and story of Aleksić in a depoliticized-human way, what appears as a decisive factor for the consensus around Aleksić, which I will analyze in the second part. The human-depoliticizing interpretation of Aleksić and his act is connected with three more specific consensus-building strategies which are applied to promote his story, what will be the topic of the third part. In the fourth part, I will analyze the resistances and reluctances in relation to the promotion of Aleksić, what will enable to more comprehensively approach the question of how far-reaching or limited the achieved consensus is. In the fifth part, I will explore additional reasons which explain the success of the Aleksić-story as a consensual hero-figure, by comparing his figure with other rescuer-figures related to the war in BiH. Finally, in the last part, I will ask for the larger political significance of the success of the Aleksić-narrative and explore to what extent the emergence of the Aleksić-figure constitutes something original within the post-Yugoslav space and in Europe in general. I will finish by explaining where I see the biggest problems in relation to the memorialization process of Aleksić. Methodologically, I am analyzing the promotion of Aleksić as the production of a public discourse in which different actors are involved and which fulfills certain sociopolitical functions; this discourse is articulated through various

¹⁰ For the importance of "Schindler's List" to the memorialization process of Oskar Schindler and rescuers in general see Rosenfeld, Alvin H. 1997. *The Americanization of the Holocaust*, in *Thinking about the Holocaust after Half a Century*, edited by Rosenfeld, Alvin H. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 138-41; For the attitudes towards Schindler in post-war Germany see Crowe, David M. 2002. *Oskar Schindler: The Untold Account of His Life, Wartime Activities, and the True Story Behind the List*. New York: Basic Books, 509-10.

means and activities, as public speeches, media articles, comments on internet forums, and symbolic gestures as awards and street names, and these tools do also constitute the main sources of my research.¹¹ The general aim of the paper is to contribute to a better understanding of current memorialization processes in the post-Yugoslav space and to a discussion of possibilities and challenges for developing consensual symbols and memory sites in divided post-war societies.¹²

Steps and actors in the public emergence of the memory of Srđan Aleksić

Two phases can be clearly distinguished regarding the memorialization of Srđan Aleksić. The first phase spans from 1993 to 2006, where nearly nobody spoke in public about him. This does not mean that the story of the 21st January 1993 was unknown. Srđan Aleksić's intervention to help Alen Glavović, followed by his beating which resulted in his death did not go unnoticed. First of all, at the local level, in his hometown of Trebinje, Srđan Aleksić was not an anonymous figure. He had been a junior swimming champion, his father was a local basketball trainer, and the beating took place during broad daylight in the central market place in front of many witnesses, and his funeral in Trebinje gathered several hundred persons.¹³ The story circulated immediately also outside of Trebinje: A short text about Aleksić and his death was published in the Belgrade newspaper *Borba*,¹⁴ and also some lines appeared in an UN report and in the *New York Times*, in connection with more general reports on war events in Trebinje, mentioning that "a Serb was beaten to death for defending his Muslim friend,"¹⁵ but without quoting Aleksić's name. After the war, the story of Srđan Aleksić partially lived on outside of BiH amongst persons from Trebinje who had left the town during the war: particularly Bosniak refugees from Trebinje in Sweden regularly honored his memory.¹⁶ But in the media, however, nearly nothing was published, except

¹¹ Concerning the role of discourse analysis for the research within historical and social sciences see for example Angermüller, Johannes / Nonhoff, Martin / Herschinger, Eva / Macgilchrist, Felicitas / Reisl, Martin / Wedl, Juliette / Wrana, Daniel and Alexander Ziem (eds.). 2014. *Diskursforschung. Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch*. Bielefeld: transkript, 2 vol.

¹² For discussion on the divisive and binding potential of symbols see for example Moeschberger, Scott L., and Rebekah A. Phillips DeZalia. (eds.). 2014. *Symbols that Bind, Symbols that Divide. The Semiotics of Peace and Conflict*. New York: Springer; concerning BiH see for example Pauker, Iva. 2006. Reconciliation and Popular Culture: A Promising Development in Former Yugoslavia?. *Local-Global: Identity, Security, Community*(2), 72-81; Moll, Nicolas. 2015. An Integrative Symbol for a Divided Country? Commemorating the 1984 Sarajevo Winter Olympics in Bosnia and Herzegovina from the 1992-1995 War until Today. *Politička Misao* 51(5), 127-56.

¹³ The television documentary "Srđo" by Sanja Dragičević and the testimony of Rade Aleksić in RDC, *The Signals*, 167-73; these two sources are so far the most extensive reports on the life and death of Srđan Aleksić.

¹⁴ *Borba*. 1993. Srđana uloga za večnost. *Borba*, 6. July 1993.

¹⁵ UN Commission on Human Rights. 1993. Report on the situation of human rights in the territory of the former Yugoslavia. *United Nations*, 10. February 1993; See Sudetic, Chuck. 1993. Serbs expel 4,000 from Bosnian town. *New York Times*, 7. February 1993.

¹⁶ Especially in online journal "Izvori", run by Amer Arslanagić who had been a friend of Aleksić, see for example: In memoriam Srđan A. *Izvori*, January 2000; Arslanagić, Amir. 2001. Sjećanje na Srđana: Da li je umro uzalud...? *Izvori*, March/April 2001.

one report by *Radio Slobodna Evropa* in 2003, which didn't attract greater attention.¹⁷

The second phase began in 2007 and is ongoing to the time of writing (May 2015), and is characterized by the fact that the name of Aleksić and his act in January 1993 have received prominent and broad public attention, with various actors in different countries being involved. The process started in Serbia, more precisely in Novi Sad, where journalist Dinko Gruhonjić, who had heard about Aleksić's story from a friend of his from Trebinje, published a press communiqué for the BETA-news agency upon the occasion of the anniversary of Aleksić's death, in January 2007.¹⁸ Another journalist, Sanja Dragičević, from Serbian public television RTS, read this communiqué, which motivated her to research the topic, resulting in the production of a documentary film. Based on interviews with Aleksić's father, several of his friends, and Alen Glavović, the film, with the title *Srđo*, was shown in March 2007 on RTS, and provoked so much positive reaction that it was broadcast again twice in the following weeks.¹⁹ The film raised awareness about Aleksić outside of Serbia. Also, one member of the *Helsinki Committee for Human Rights* (HCHR) BiH saw the movie and proposed that the HCHR should give Aleksić a posthumous award, which happened in June 2007, the first public recognition in BiH.²⁰

Since then, the memorialization process has continued to develop, crossing geographical, political and ethnic boundaries, with different levels of actors involved. There are, on the one hand, civil society actors and citizens' initiatives. In January 2008, more than 100 NGOs, especially from Serbia and BiH, launched a common appeal to all municipalities in the region to name a street after Aleksić.²¹ Among the most active groups to promote the memory of Aleksić have been citizen initiatives in Novi Sad, where Dinko Gruhonjić was actively involved, which lobbied from early 2007 onward for a street to be named in Novi Sad,²² and in Pančevo where the *Građanska Akcija Pančevo* did the same, and each year it organizes a public event upon the anniversary of the death of Aleksić.²³ In BiH, after the HCHR award, *Gariwo* also awarded Aleksić posthumously, with the *Duško Kondor Civil Courage Award*.²⁴ Furthermore, two annual competitions have been named after him. In 2010 the

¹⁷ Skype Interview by the author with Nikola Gurović, author of the report, 26. February 2013; Extracts of the report from 2003 can be found in Preradović, Zoran / Kolak, Nebojša and Nikola Gurović. 2007. *Poginuo vršeci ljudsku dužnost*. *Slobodnaevropa*, 16. March 2007 (accessed: 27. January 2016); Nikola Gurović had heard about the story during the war, through his father who lives in Trebinje.

¹⁸ Interview by the author with Dinko Gruhonjić, Novi Sad, 23. February 2013; the communiqué was for example published in *Oslobođenje*. 2007. *Ubijen zato što je vrsio svoju ljudsku dužnost*. *Oslobođenje*, 28. January 2007.

¹⁹ Skype interview by the author with Sanja Dragičević, 18. May 2013; the film "Srđo" can be seen on [YouTube](#).

²⁰ Interview by the author with Srđan Dizdarević, Sarajevo, 5. February 2013; see also Helsinki komitet. 2007. *Žrtvujući svoj, omogućio život drugom*. *Glasnik helsinškog komiteta za ljudska prava u BiH*(9), 4-7; partial English translation of this article can be found [here](#).

²¹ *Nezavisne*. 2008. *Traže ulice s imenom Srđana Aleksića*. *Nezavisne Novine*, 25. January 2008.

²² Interview with Gruhonjić; Novisad. 2009. *Otkrivena ploča sa natpisom prolaz Srđana Aleksića u Novom Sadu*. *Novisad*. 23. July 2009 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

²³ Interview by the author with Lilja Spasić, Građanska Akcija Pančevo, 18. May 2013; RTV Pančevo. 2015. *Godine hrabrosti Srđana Aleksića*. *rtv Pančevo*, 28. January 2015 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

²⁴ [Duško Kondor Civil Courage Award for 2010](#).

journalistic award *Srđan Aleksić* was created, dedicated to “the development of socially-responsible journalism”,²⁵ and the P-CRC has organized the *Srđan Aleksić Youth Competition* since 2012.²⁶ Another crucial role in the promotion of the memory of Aleksić has been, and is played by, the media. The importance of *Srđo* has already been mentioned, and since its broadcast many newspapers and news portals, especially in BiH, Serbia and Montenegro, have been talking about Aleksić, in particular around the annual anniversary of his death, also regularly reporting about other activities related to his memorialization. The positive reporting on Aleksić’s memory concerns newspapers not only from different countries, but also from different styles and political backgrounds.²⁷ Social media has also contributed to making the story more known, and several Facebook groups honoring and promoting Aleksić’s memory have been created.²⁸

Furthermore, different municipalities have been contributing to the promotion of the memory of Srđan Aleksić: street names were dedicated to him in Sarajevo in 2008,²⁹ in Novi Sad in 2009,³⁰ in Pančevo in 2010³¹ and Podgorica in 2013,³² and the city of Belgrade decided to do so in 2013, even though the decision has not yet been implemented.³³ Concerning political parties, Social-democratic parties became particularly active. In May 2007, the SDP politician Denis Bećirović launched an initiative in the House of Representatives of BiH proposing that the Council of Ministers should financially support the municipality of Trebinje in order to erect a monument to Aleksić, a resolution which was adopted by the Parliament in June 2007.³⁴ On a local level, in Mostar, it was the youth organization of the SDP which launched a street name initiative.³⁵ The SDP is also a driving force for promoting the memory of

²⁵ The competition was created in 2010 by the NGOs *Helsinkiški parlament građana Banja Luka*, *Fondacija Cure* (Sarajevo) and *Udruženje mladih novinara RS* (Banja Luka), and is since 2013 organized by the NGO network *Mreže za izgradnju mira BiH*; E-Novine. 2014. [Dragan Bursac dobitnik nagrade Srđan Aleksić](#). *E-novine*, 20. September 2014 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

²⁶ For more information see the P-CRC [website](#).

²⁷ Among the numerous articles published for the 20th anniversary of his death, in January 2013, see for example: Blic. 2013. *Srđan sinonim za dobrotu*, *Blic*, 23. January 2013; Dnevni list. 2013. *Ostavio je svima nama poruku da je čovjek vrjedniji*, *Dnevni List* (Mostar), 27. January 2013.

²⁸ See for example the public Facebook group “[Ulica Srđana Aleksića u Beogradu](#)”, created in 2012, and the Facebook page “[Srđjan Aleksić Srdjo](#)”, created in 2011.

²⁹ Klix. 2013. [Ulice sa imenom Srđana Aleksića širom Balkana](#). *Klix*, 8. February 2013 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

³⁰ Gruhonjić, Dinko. 2009. *Novi Sad dobio "Prolaz Srđana Aleksića"*. *DW*, 23. July 2009 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

³¹ RTV. 2010. [U Pančevu otvoren Prolaz Srđana Aleksića](#). *RTV*, 8. October 2010 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

³² RTCG. 2013. [A boulevard in Podgorica named after Srđan Aleksić](#). *Radiotelevizija Crne Gore*, 11. July 2013 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

³³ B92. 2013. [Belgrade backs initiative to name street after Bosnian Serb](#). B92, 6. February 2013 (accessed: 27. January 2016); Bulatović, Radmila. 2015. *Od 2013. nisu postavili tablu sa imenom Srđana Aleksića*. *Blic*, 31. January 2015 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

³⁴ See Transkript 9. [Sjednice](#) Predstavničkog Doma Parlamentarne Skupštine Bosne i Hercegovine. održane 23. May 2007.godine; Transkript 10. [Sjednice](#) Predstavničkog Doma Parlamentarne Skupštine Bosne i Hercegovine održane 13. June 2007.godine.

³⁵ Tacno. 2011. [Peticija za ulicu, trg ili most Srđana Aleksića u Mostaru](#). *Tacno*, 26. January 2011 (accessed: 15. May 2015).

Aleksić in Podgorica, Montenegro, together with the NGO *Forum Bošnjaka*.³⁶ But other political parties are also actively participating in the promotion. In Banja Luka, the leading party SNSD in 2013 stated it would advocate for a street name to be given to Aleksić, and the opposition party PDP also declared its support.³⁷ Srđan Aleksić has also posthumously received several highest-level official awards. In February 2012, Serbian President Boris Tadić awarded him the Gold *‘Miloš Obilić’ Medal for Bravery*,³⁸ and one year later the president of the Republika Srpska (RS) entity of BiH, Milorad Dodik, awarded him with the highest decoration of the RS.³⁹

Moreover, Aleksić has also found his way into the domain of popular culture. In 2013, the fiction movie *Circles* from the Serbian film director Srđan Golubović was released, based on the story of Aleksić and dedicated to him. It marked an important step in making the story more widely known, both domestically and internationally. The film received a lot of media attention, positive reactions from the public, and also several awards in film festivals, both inside and outside the Balkans, additionally it represented Serbia at the Academy Awards in 2014.⁴⁰ The figure and story of Aleksić has also attracted the attention of other cultural actors: on a more local level, in Trebinje, the theater company *Slovo* produced and performed a play about Aleksić in December 2008.⁴¹ Aleksić became also the subject of musical productions. In 2013, the group *Srpska Tromedja* released a folklore song dedicated to him,⁴² and the same year the Sarajevean hip-hop-musician Kontra mentioned Aleksić in one of his songs.⁴³

Any list of actors who contribute to the promotion of Aleksić’ memory would be incomplete without mentioning one individual who has played a central role in the whole process -the father of Srđan Aleksić, Rade Aleksić. Since 2007, he has often and regularly spoken about his son through interviews in the media, and he has been invited to and participated at many of the activities mentioned before, especially street inaugurations and the giving of posthumous awards by NGOs and statesmen.⁴⁴ He has, in a certain way, become the recognized and central guardian of the memory of his son, and a connecting link between many of the mentioned memorialization activities.

³⁶ *Slobodna Evropa*. 2014. *U Podgorici zasadeno drvo u čast Srđana Aleksića*. *Slobodnaevropa*, 26. January 2014 (accessed: 27. January 2016); *FB*. 2014. *Trajno poštovanje Srđanu Aleksiću*. *Forumbošnjaka*, 1. February 2013 (accessed: 27. January 2016); the main protagonist of the “*Forum Bošnjaka*”, Rifat Rastoder, is also a vice-president of the Social Democrat Party in Montenegro.

³⁷ Šiniković, Marko. 2013. *Banja Luka dobija ulicu Srđana Aleksića?*. *Nezavisne*, 17. October 2013 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

³⁸ Aljazeera. 2012. *Tadić posthumno odlikovao Srđana Aleksića*. *Aljazeerabalkans*, 14. February 2012 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

³⁹ *Nezavisne*. 2013. *Živote date za RS ne smijemo zaboraviti*. *Nezavisne Novine*, 10. January 2013.

⁴⁰ *Balkaninside*. 2013. *Film Circles – Serbia’s contender for Oscar*. *Balkaninside*, 30. August 2013 (accessed: 27. January 2016); see also [here](#) the official Facebook page of the movie.

⁴¹ *E-Novine*. 2008. *Epilog o Srđanu Aleksiću*. *E-novine*, 30. November 2008 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

⁴² Song “*Srđan Aleksić*”, published on YouTube 16. February 2013.

⁴³ Song “*Heroji*”, published on YouTube 16. July 2013.

⁴⁴ For example at the inauguration of the boulevard in Podgorica see: *RTCG, A boulevard in Podgorica*; or at the posthumous award ceremony by Milorad Dodik, see: *Telegraf*. 2013. *Dodik posthumno odlikovao Srđana Aleksića*. *Telegraf*, 9. January 2013 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

Close connections and interactions between several of the named activities and actors appear when it comes to the production of the film *Circles* as well. Golubović first read about the story in 2007 on the internet, then watched the documentary *Srđo* and met the author, Sanja Dragičević, who then helped in the preparation of the film. Furthermore, Golubović also went to Trebinje to meet Aleksić's father.⁴⁵ At the premiere of the film in Belgrade in February 2013, and at the Sarajevo Film Festival in August 2013, Rade Aleksić was invited as guest of honor,⁴⁶ and after its release the film itself was used by other actors who are promoting Aleksić's memory. In Pančevo, for example, a special projection of *Circles* was organized by the NGO *Građanska Akcija* on the anniversary of Aleksić's death in 2014.⁴⁷ From his side, Golubović publicly supported the street name initiative for Aleksić in Belgrade.⁴⁸ In general, the film *Circles* constituted a new and important progenitor in the memorialization dynamics, never seeming to lose momentum as new initiatives regularly come up. In 2014, activists from Trebinje launched the symbolic initiative to rename the town *Srđangrad*;⁴⁹ in the same year, Jezdimir Milošević and his basketball foundation *Fenix* launched the idea of building a sports complex in Sarajevo which would be named after Aleksić,⁵⁰ and in Tuzla in March 2015 the mayor of the city and Rade Aleksić opened the first '*Srđan Aleksić*' memorial football tournament.⁵¹

A heroic story and its sociopolitical functions

What kind of narrative(s) about the story of Srđan Aleksić do these actors and activities promote? Despite the variety of actors, there is one common narrative which appears, and basically qualifies and promotes Srđan Aleksić as a hero by emphasizing his courageous act to save his threatened Bosniak neighbor on the 21 January 1993.⁵² At the same time, within this general narrative, and despite many connections between several of the different actors, there are also different accentuations among the various memory entrepreneurs, which becomes apparent, for example, when looking at different terms which are often associated with the term 'hero'. Sometimes Aleksić is qualified as a "*true Serb hero*,"⁵³ often in order to oppose him to Serb nationalist war heroes. Others use "*Serb hero*"⁵⁴ to integrate Aleksić into the general panorama of Serb

⁴⁵ Interview by the author with Srđan Golubović, Sarajevo, 20. August 2013.

⁴⁶ For the Sarajevo Film Festival see for example Klix. 2013. Rade Aleksić: Sarajlije najbolje osjećaju poruku Srđanovog čina. *Klix*, 19. August 2013 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

⁴⁷ RTVP. Projekcije filma 'Krugovi' Srđana Golubovića i tribina 'Srđanovi krugovi ili priča o heroju'. *RTVPančevo*, 27. January 2014 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

⁴⁸ See his statement in the introduction of the online petition for naming a street after Aleksić in Belgrade.

⁴⁹ Moj Portal. 2014. Trebinje ce se preimenovati u Srđangrad. *Mojportal*, 27. January 2014 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

⁵⁰ Đugum, Aida. 2014. Sportski kompleks Srđan Aleksić. *Slobodnaevropa*, 1. March 2014 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

⁵¹ Trebinje Danas. 2015. Rade Aleksić u Tuzli: Srđan više nije samo moj sin. *Trebinjedanas*, 15. March 2015 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

⁵² See for example Otisak. 2015. Na današnji dan umro je heroj Srđan Aleksić. *Otisak*, 27. January 2015 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

⁵³ In an interview with *Dani* (29. March 2013: "Neherojskom vremenu uprkos") Golubović contrasts Aleksić to the "fake heroes" and "heroes with bloody hands," as Mladić, Karadžić and Arkan.

⁵⁴ For example BKTV. 2015. Srđan Aleksić, srpski heroj koji je životom odbranio druga muslimana. *Bktnews*, 27. January 2015 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

heroism, without antagonizing him through other historical or political figures. Sometimes he is also presented as a “*Bosnian hero*” or “*Bosnia-Herzegovinian hero*,”⁵⁵ through which the multiethnic dimension of his deed is emphasized. The terms “*true hero*”⁵⁶, “*hero of our generation*”⁵⁷ and “*hero of our time*”⁵⁸ emphasize that Aleksić is representing something new, distinct from the more traditional values and symbols, without referring to ethnic categories or rejecting them. The “*antiwar hero*”⁵⁹ presents Aleksić as an opponent to the war, an interpretation which does not appear in other narratives. Another term which is very strongly used is the term of “*human / human being*”, in contrast to ethnicizing categorizations, which often refers to a very often quoted sentence which Aleksić’s father used in the obituary to his son in 1993: “*He died fulfilling his human duty.*”⁶⁰ Rade Aleksić himself avoids the term “*hero*” and regularly emphasizes that his son “*is not a hero but only a human being who exercised his human duty in the moment when it was necessary to behave as a human being.*”⁶¹ But in the same time it is precisely this humanness which for many qualifies Aleksić as a hero. “*Hero is he who remains human*” says a poem dedicated to Aleksić,⁶² and the synthesis which is operated between “*heroism*” and “*humanness*” through the figure of Aleksić appears also in denominations such as “*hero - human being*,”⁶³ “*hero of humanness*”⁶⁴ or “*hero of big heart.*”⁶⁵

Together, the different qualifications and interpretations of Aleksić oscillate between four general tendencies, which I would define as follows: *universalization* and *ethnification* on the one hand, *politicization* and *de-politicization* on the other. By using these categories the following lexical field can be established regarding the hero-qualifications of Aleksić.

⁵⁵ Dnevni Avaz. 2015. Dan kada je preminuo bh. heroj Srđan Aleksić. *Dnevni Avaz*, 27. January 2015 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

⁵⁶ See for example Vijesti. 2013. Srđan Aleksić je pravi heroj, ne onaj o kakvima guslaju nacionalni bardovi. *Vijesti*, 27. January 2013 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

⁵⁷ See for example comment 136, 24. February 2013, to the online petition for naming a street after Aleksić in Belgrade; in different statements Golubović emphasized that Aleksić is “the hero of my generation and of my time”, see for example Krtinić, Marija. 2013. Sećanje na Srđana. *Danas*, 27. January 2013 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

⁵⁸ See for example Vesti. 2009. Srđan Aleksić heroj našeg doba. *Vesti*, 28. November 2009 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

⁵⁹ See for example the President of the City Assembly of Novi Sad Aleksandar Jovanović, quoted in Gruhonjić, *Novi Sad*.

⁶⁰ See for example Brzevijesti. 2014. Na današnji dan 1993 godine preminuo je čovjek - Srđan Aleksić. *Brzevijesti*, 27. January 2014 (accessed: 27. January 2016); the obituary can be found here.

⁶¹ Kurir. 2012. Otac Srđana Aleksića o Čedomiru Jovanoviću: U njemu nema ni čovjeka ni političara. *Kurir*, 2. February 2012 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

⁶² Čaveliš, Marin. 2015. Život za čovjeka. *Klix*, 27. January 2015 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

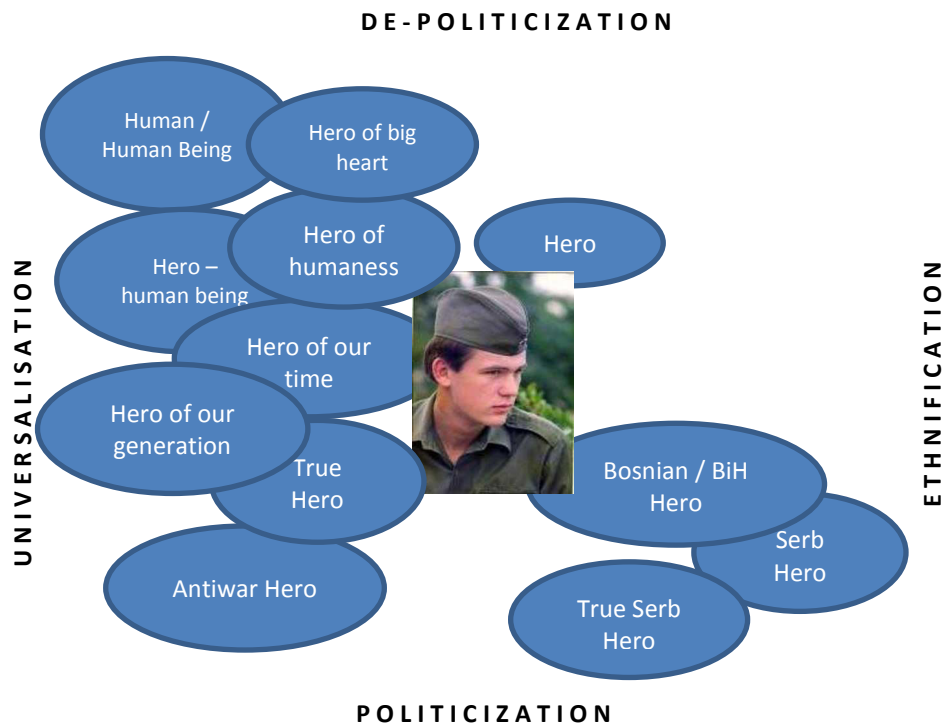
⁶³ Comment posted on RTS Orden za heroja, 14. February 2012.

⁶⁴ See for example Dragičević, Sanja. 2013. Heroj ljudskosti—Znate li tko je Srđan Aleksić?. *Tportal*, 7. February 2013 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

⁶⁵ Klix. 2014. Dan kada je preminuo heroj Srđan Aleksić postoji samo čovjek, sve drugo je vraka. *Klix*, 27. January 2014 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

A positive hero for everyone?
The memorialization of Srđan Aleksić in post-Yugoslav countries

Diagram 1:



Source: The author of the text

There are often no clear distinctions between these interpretations, and the same memory entrepreneur is sometimes using different categories in parallel. These ambivalences appear, for example, in two statements from film director Srđan Golubović related to his film *Circles*. In one statement, he insists on the ethnic Serb dimension of the story: “*The story about Srđan Aleksić is one of the most Serb stories in recent history (...) I think that the movie is not political and that it even less so hurts our feelings. On the contrary, I really believe that the film is very, very, very Serb.*”⁶⁶ In another statement Golubović insists that the story should be seen outside of ethnic categorizations: “*This story is neither anti-Serb nor pro-Serb, nor anti-Bosniak or pro-Bosniak, it is just – human.*”⁶⁷ The different declarations can be partially explained by the fact that they are addressed to different publics. The first statement was given to a Belgrade newspaper, while the second was given to a Sarajevo newspaper. At the same time, the two statements also have one common point, through the presentation of the Aleksić story not as a political, but as a human story.⁶⁸ This depoliticizing-human approach is the strongest tendency in the narratives

⁶⁶ Savković, Mladen. 2013. *Jedan vrlo, vrlo ... srpski film*. *B92*, 17. January 2013 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

⁶⁷ Slobodna Bosna. 2013. Film koji nas čini boljim ljudima. *Slobodna Bosna*, 31. January 2013.

⁶⁸ See also Golubović’s statement: *His [Aleksić] act was everything but not political, before all and exclusively it was human*, Interview with Golubović in *Vreme*. 2013. Moja lična pobjeda. *Vreme*, 21. February 2013; the tendency to depoliticize the story of Aleksić, especially by emphasizing its human dimension, does not mean that this approach does not fulfill political functions, as will become apparent in the further development of the text.

about Aleksić, and is advocated by many, in particular by his father Rade Aleksić. The depoliticizing-human approach sometimes includes the notion that ethnic categories are not only not emphasized but even explicitly downplayed or negated: “*The essence of the story is not that Srđan defended a Bosniak, but a neighbor and an unprotected man.*”⁶⁹ But this is said with the assumption that everybody anyway knows the ethnic backgrounds of the involved persons, and most of the time the two perceptions are co-existing: “the human hero”, and “the Serb who saved his Bosniak neighbor.”⁷⁰

With that human-universal and simultaneously (at least implicitly) ethnic approach, the story about Aleksić simultaneously matches three major sociopolitical needs, which must be seen as one major explanation for its prominence and positive resonance in the last eight years. First, on the level of the post-Yugoslav space in general, which continues to be heavily marked by the consequences of the wars of the 1990s, the story of Aleksić relates to the need for positive stories and human heroes and role-models as an alternative to the traditionally dominant war-time and post-war heroes and stories, and also to what is perceived as a dominating atmosphere of cynicism, nihilism and moral depravation. The use of the term “true hero” relates to this context, and this attitude was, for example, expressed by Denis Bećirović when he explained his initiative in the BiH Parliament: “*I think that in this country we really should start talking also about positive people, so that in our daily life and on the first minutes of the news not only feature: fascists, war criminals, gangsters and criminals.*”⁷¹ Golubović takes a similar direction when he explains that for him it was very important to make his film because we are in times “*where we have stopped to believe in anything good,*” and that the heroism of Aleksić can help people to “*believe that good continues to exist here.*”⁷² Second, especially in BiH, the Aleksić story relates to the need to find examples of people who overcome the omnipresent ethno-national divisions and antagonisms. This symbolic value appears, for example, when Aleksić is presented as one of the “*Good Bosnians*” for whom the humanity of his neighbor was more important than his ethnicity, and whose deed illustrates the indestructible tradition of living together in BiH.⁷³ Significantly also, Jezdimir Milošević proposed that his ‘*Srđan Aleksić*’ sports complex should be built on the entity line between Sarajevo and East Sarajevo, with the complex supposedly to become a “*place of reconciliation and connection.*”⁷⁴ Third, and this goes especially for Serbia, the Aleksić story relates to the need to find and present “good Serbs” and to illustrate that not all Serbs have been bad, which appears for example in the

⁶⁹ Interview with Srđan Golubović, *Naše Novine*. 2013. Srđan je bio najbolji od nas. *Naše Novine*, 25. February 2013.

⁷⁰ Rade Aleksić, who strongly emphasizes the human dimension of the story, also sometimes applies national categories, see for example B92. 2012. *Father Dedicates Son's Bravery Medal to 'Serb People.'* B92, 16. February 2012 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

⁷¹ *Transkript 9. Sjednice* Predstavničkog Doma Parlamentarne Skupštine Bosne i Hercegovine održane 23. May 2007.

⁷² Interview with Golubović, Krtinić, Marija. 2013. *Ljudima su potrebni heroji.* *Danas*, 10. February 2013 (accessed: 27. January 2016); in another interview Golubović emphasized that heroes like Aleksić are important because in Serb society “*moral values are totally devastated*” and there exists a “*moral chaos*” in *Vijesti*. 2013. *Golubović: Ne trebaju nam superheroji, već obični ljudi koji čine dobre stvari.* *Vijesti*, 13. February 2013 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

⁷³ RDC, *The Signals*, 9-12.

⁷⁴ Đugum, Aida. 2014. *Sportski kompleks Srđan Aleksić.* *Slobodna Evropa*, 1. March 2014 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

following statement of Golubović: “*I think that, after many years, Srđan Aleksić presents us as a nation in the best light (...) ‘Circles’ presented Serbs to the world as they haven’t seen them before.*”⁷⁵ For this last point, it is important to recall the political context in Serbia in 2007, the year that the television documentary *Srđo* attracted so much positive interest in Serbia and boosted the general memorialization process. In the mid-2000s, Serbian society, after having predominantly denied any responsibility for the crimes committed during the War in Bosnia and Herzegovina, had begun to be confronted more directly with the problem of the crimes committed during the wars of the 1990s, and the question of their responsibility and subsequent denial. The trial against Slobodan Milošević in Hague had lasted for several years, the video showing the murder of civilians by Serb soldiers near Srebrenica was released in Serbia in 2005, and charges against Serbia for genocide in BiH were being considered before the International Court of Justice in 2006.⁷⁶ The fact that RTS showed the film *Srđo* and that it raised so many positive reactions must also be seen in this context, reflecting the need to see and promote “a good Serb” from the period of the war as a positive counterpoint to the bad image of Serbia related to it, which is generally dominant outside of Serbia and with which Serbia is confronted.

Individualization, romanticization, decontextualization: strategies of consensus-building

When looking more precisely at the human-depoliticizing approach to the memory of Aleksić and his rescuing act on the 21st January 1993, three more specific strategies can be distinguished in relation to this approach, which play an important role in the memorialization process around Aleksić.

Firstly, in regard to the story of the 21st January 1993, the focus is mainly on the person of Aleksić himself, while the other involved actors in general remain extremely vague. This concerns the attackers of Glavović and of Aleksić, who are most of the time presented as four soldiers of the Army of Republika Srpska. Sometimes it is mentioned that one of them died later in the war and the three others were sentenced to two and half years of prison,⁷⁷ but in general nothing more is told about them, and in nearly all cases they remain anonymous, without individual names. “*I am not interested in these people*” says Rade Aleksić in *Srđo*, which seems to also summarize the attitude of most other memory entrepreneurs.⁷⁸ Concerning the witnesses and bystanders to the assault, which took place at the central marketplace of Trebinje during broad daylight, they are sometimes a topic, for example in the movie *Circles*, and it is sometimes also mentioned that the beating took place in the direct vicinity of Trebinje police station.⁷⁹ But in general the witnesses and bystanders appear

⁷⁵ Interview with Srđan Golubović in *Vreme*.

⁷⁶ On the discussions of the crimes in the 1990s in Serbia in the first decade following the fall of Milošević see Gordy, Eric. 2013. *Guilt, Responsibility, and Denial: The Past at Stake in Post-Milošević Serbia*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

⁷⁷ See for example B92. 2013. [Belgrade backs initiative to name street after Bosnian Serb](#). B92, 6. February 2013 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

⁷⁸ “*Srđo*”, Minute 14.’

⁷⁹ See for example Buka. 2007. [Everything happened near the market place and the police station in Trebinje](#). Buka, 22. March 2007 (accessed: 15. May 2015).

as a decoration, or are not mentioned at all. One main reason that the aggressors and the bystanders remain so vague is that focusing on them would risk raising disturbing questions, such as why nobody else intervened to help Glavović and then Aleksić, and provoke controversy, such as questioning the motivation of the four soldiers, and at the same time risk shifting the narrative away from Aleksić and his act. Concerning Alen Glavović, the dominant narrative is generally limited to the fact that he was a friend or acquaintance of Aleksić; that he later emigrated to Sweden where he married and had two children, and that he returns every summer to Trebinje where he visits the grave of Aleksić.⁸⁰ At the same time what is nearly never publicly mentioned is that Glavović had been a soldier in the Army of Republika Srpska. This was not unusual, especially in Trebinje, where in 1991-92 many Muslims were drafted first into the JNA and then into the Army of Republika Srpska in order to hold the Dubrovnik front. But this is not widely publicized, and mentioning the fact would be confusing and disturbing, as it does not fit in to the usual ethnic scheme of the war, and can also be assumed to not fit in with public expectations of a “perfect victim” - as if the fact that Glavović had been a soldier for the Army of Republika Srpska would make him a less legitimate or a less ‘good’ victim.⁸¹

Secondly, the individual focus on Aleksić goes hand-in-hand with a certain romanticization of his figure, with a strong tendency to construct him as a “pure” and irreproachable hero, ripped of any possible ambiguity. Except for his act on 21 January 1993, two things are regularly mentioned concerning his biography: that he had been a junior swimming champion and an amateur actor, which underlines how talented he was; and that he was a (Bosnian Serb) soldier.⁸² In regard to the fact that he was a soldier, it is sometimes mentioned that in November 1991, on the Dubrovnik front, he demonstratively threw away his gun and then left the JNA, an act that is emphasized by those who tend to perceive Aleksić as an antiwar hero.⁸³ But what is nearly never present in the narratives is that after he left the JNA in 1991, he first joined some paramilitary units to fight on the Mostar front, and then created, with some friends, his own paramilitary unit, the *Trebinje Guard (Trebinjska Garda)*, with which he led a military action on the Dubrovnik front in Spring 1992.⁸⁴ Being a member of a paramilitary unit is obviously not something that fits into the narrative of a pure hero, as paramilitary units have in general a bad

⁸⁰ See for example B92, *Belgrade backs initiative*.

⁸¹ That Alen Glavović had been a soldier in the Army of Republika Srpska and that he had been wounded during the war and was in convalescence in January 1993 is mentioned by Rade Aleksić in RDC, *Signals*, 171; Alen Glavović has only rarely talked to journalists, for the rare interviews see: Start. 2009. Znae li šta znači spasiti nečiji život?... E, Srđan je to uradio. *Start*, 25. August 2009; Leskovic, Miljana. 2015. *Ispovest Bošnjaka kog je spasio heroj Srbin: Vaspitavam decu da budu plemenita kao Srđan*. *Blic*, 29. January 2015 (accessed: 27. January 2016); in these interviews Glavović mentions that he had been wounded in the war and that after this he was selling goods on the marketplace of Trebinje.

⁸² See for example Gavrilović, N. 2013. *Na današnji dan je Srbin Srđan Aleksić pretučen spasavajući Bošnjaka!*. *Alo*, 21. January 2013 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

⁸³ See for example SB. 2007. Svitac u noći. *Slobodna Vojvodina*, 23. March 2007.

⁸⁴ Interviews and e-mail exchange by the author with friends and acquaintances of Srđan Aleksić in Trebinje and Sweden, February and April 2013. According to these interviews the “Trebinje Guard” was disarmed by the local government in June 1992; after this it seems that Aleksić did not participate in further military actions and that sometimes with some friends he patrolled the city in order to bring drunken soldiers to the police.

reputation, and mentioning this might raise the question of what his units did, and whether they were involved in war crimes, even if there is no evidence for this.

Thirdly, the individual focus on Aleksić and on certain parts of his biography is in parallel with the complete decontextualization of the story of the 21st January 1993. Most of the time the war is simply mentioned as a general context, without any specification, suggesting that what happened the 21st January 1993 was an individual war incident. These “*were bad times when some people went wild*” Rade Aleksić⁸⁵ comments, while Golubović, in the universalizing perspective, states that “*the story, unfortunately, happened around us during a time of war, but it could have happened anywhere.*”⁸⁶ But to what extent was it just a coincidence that the story occurred in January 1993 in Trebinje? It is actually very striking that the story of Aleksić is nearly never placed in relation to the fact that in January 1993 the main phase of ethnic cleansing of the non-Serb population of Trebinje began. Negotiations about the Vance-Owen Plan, which proposed the division of BiH into ten provinces on the ground of ethnicity had taken place in January 1993, which triggered a new wave of ethnic cleansing through BiH, including Trebinje, where a majority of the Muslim population had remained during 1992. This means that during January 1993, the pressure and intimidations against non-Serbs in Trebinje were strongly increasing, and in the last week of January the deportation of the 4,000 remaining Muslims by bus to Montenegro began.⁸⁷ In this framework, the assault upon Glavović on 21st of January ceases to appear as a random act which happened out of nowhere, and can be seen as part of the aggressive social-political atmosphere which was put in place in January 1993. Nevertheless, the story of the ethnic cleansing in Trebinje and the story of Aleksić are nearly always completely separated. Such a linking of events would potentially provoke disturbing and controversial questions about more general crimes in Trebinje, even more so as the question of the ethnic cleansing in Trebinje in 1993 remains a highly disputed and controversial topic.⁸⁸

As for every memorialization process, also the one concerning Srđan Aleksić has its blind spots and is a selective process, emphasizing some aspects and not others. That most reports about Aleksić do not mention that Glavović had been in the Army of RS, that Aleksić had been in a paramilitary unit, or that during January 1993 the ethnic cleaning of Muslims in Trebinje started is not necessarily happening on purpose. Outside of Trebinje many of those who promote the story of Aleksić are actually unaware of these facts.⁸⁹ At the same time it can be assumed that they also don't want to know more about it and that those who know are obviously not interested in it and don't want to emphasize it, because they believe it to be unimportant and/or that it would

⁸⁵ RDC, *Signals*, 17

⁸⁶ Interview with Srđan Golubović in *Nezavisne*. 2013. Srđan Aleksić je moj lični junak. *Nezavisne Novine*, 2. February 2013.

⁸⁷ The Guardian. 1993. Muslims flee fresh wave of 'ethnic cleansing. *The Guardian*, 8. February 1993 (accessed: 27. January 2016); New York Times, *Serbs Expel*.

⁸⁸ On controversies about the ethnic cleansing in Trebinje in 1993 and the role of Trebinje's wartime mayor Božidar Vučurević see for example Sensetribunal. 2013. Božidar Vučurević – 'protector' of Trebinje Muslims. *Sense-agency*, 25. March 2013 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

⁸⁹ I experienced this for example in discussions with NGO-activists in Sarajevo, February 2013.

make the story more complex. These facts are not a secret, and most of them have already been mentioned, especially in some of the earlier reports.⁹⁰ But with time, the general narrative of Aleksić's story has become more and more simplified, and many media articles simply copy-paste some general sentences about Aleksić from other texts, without undertaking their own research. At the same time the general pattern which dominates the general narratives about Aleksić has already been set by the highly influential television documentary *Srđo*. In the eyes of the director Sanja Dragičević "this is not a story about the war or politics, but just a good example about humanity". For her, this is also the reason why her documentary met with such success: "Because the film had no political background, it showed the humanity of one person; it is a universal story, and everybody can identify with it".⁹¹ The individualization and decontextualization of the story and the romanticization of the figure of Aleksić must primarily be seen as elements of a strategy to construct a consensual memory site and also to protect it from potential controversies. The usually-omitted aspects are linked with potentially disturbing questions, and to emphasize them would risk shifting the attention away from Aleksić and his act of rescue to other questions which would, in turn, place in danger the consensual memory around him.

Reluctances and resistances: The limits of the consensus surrounding Srđan Aleksić

Even if Srđan Aleksić has emerged as a largely consensual memory site in several successor-states of Yugoslavia, this does not mean that this consensus does not have its limits. Geographically, the memorialization process mainly takes place in Serbia and BiH, partially also in Montenegro, while other countries of the post-Yugoslav space, such as Croatia,⁹² are not so much concerned with it. But also in BiH and Serbia there are hesitations and resistances in relation to the memorialization of Aleksić. This appears, for example, in the fact that many street name initiatives, as those in Mostar and Bihać in BiH, or in Maglić in Serbia,⁹³ have not succeeded. It also appears in social media and on internet forums, when after articles on Aleksić the comments are not necessarily unanimous. It especially appears in Trebinje where the idea of building a monument to Aleksić has existed for nearly ten years, but has so far not been implemented; and where the *Organization of War Veterans from the City of Trebinje (Boračka Organizacija Opštine Trebinje)* has openly called for a boycott of the film *Circles*.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ The article by Duka V. 2007. Srđan je branio čovječnost. *Nezavisne Novine*, 7. February 2007, for example, mentions that Glavović was a "soldier of the Army of Republika Srpska, who these days was in convalescence because he had been wounded". The UN Report and article of the *New York Times* from February 1993 (see above footnote 15) explicitly link the story of Aleksić with the campaign of ethnic cleansing in Trebinje. That Aleksić had formed his own military group is for example mentioned by Rade Aleksić in RDC, *Signals*, 170.

⁹¹ Skype interview with Dragičević.

⁹² Significantly, in 2013, a Croatian web portal published an article about Aleksić: Duhaček, Goran. 2013. *Znate li Tko je Srđan Aleksić*. *Tportal*, 7. February 2013 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

⁹³ See Tacno, *Peticija*; Ševko, Kadrić. 2008. *Srđanu Aleksiću ulica u Bihaću*. *Orbus*, 12. February 2008 (accessed: 27. January 2016); CETIM. 2011. CETIM initiative to one street in Maglic would be named as a street of Srđan Aleksić. *Cetim*, 29. August 2011.

⁹⁴ *Oslobodenje*. 2013. Poziv na bojkot filma o Srđana Aleksiću. *Oslobodenje*, 17. March 2013.

Considering more precisely the content and the reasons for these hesitations and resistances, different levels of critical discourse can be found. On internet forums comments sometimes appear asking why Aleksić should be honored considering he was part of the Bosnian Serb Army which was fighting against Croatia and BiH, or stating that his case has been an absolute exception: “*And now my Bosniaks should fall for that 0.00001% of nice stories (...) All Serbs are Chetniks, 0.00001% of Serbs aren't.*”⁹⁵ The fact that Aleksić is from Trebinje and was fighting on the Dubrovnik front does not constitute a good precondition to make him popular in Croatia and among more nationalist Bosnian Croats, and the fact that the rescue story concerns a Serb and a Muslim makes it also less attractive for a Croatian public. If the saved person had been a Croat, Aleksić would probably be more known and honored also in Croatia. Other critical comments focus on the strong emphasis placed on Aleksić which is seen as problematic for different reason. A citizen from Sarajevo told me of being skeptical towards the promotion of Aleksić, arguing that “*it is too early to promote and honor a good Serb, as Serb society hasn't critically addressed its criminal past yet.*”⁹⁶ Others estimate that the strong emphasis on Aleksić is problematic because it is overshadowing the fact that there were also other rescuers: “*I think it has become too much. It looks as if there has been only him, which is not true.*”⁹⁷

The memorialization of Aleksić presents also a problem for some more nationalist Serbian and Bosnian Serb circles, which appears for example if we look at the reluctance toward commemorative activities in Trebinje. A sport center in Trebinje was named in 2007 after Aleksić, but a specific monument has not yet been constructed, despite the fact that since 2007 the mayor of the town has made public declarations upon numerous occasions that he would support this idea, at the same time having done nothing to implement it.⁹⁸ Is Aleksić considered a traitor who deserved his fate because he defended a Muslim? It is sometimes reported that a defendant of one of the aggressors had declared “*That is what you deserve when you defend a Balija*”.⁹⁹ This kind of perception may still exist today in Trebinje, but other attitudes are articulated more explicitly which explain the existing reluctances. On the one hand, the fact that Glavović and then Aleksić were assaulted by Bosnian Serb soldiers sheds a bad light on the Army of Republika Srpska and its soldiers, especially when they are painted as undisciplined and drunk, as in *Circles*. “*We have to defend the honor, the dignity, the pride and the patriotism of Serb soldiers. (...) The Serb soldiers are shown in the movie as drunks, criminals and brigands, which is a big lie*”, declared the *Organization of War Veterans from the City of Trebinje* in their press communiqué where they called for a boycott of *Circles*.¹⁰⁰ On the other hand, putting Aleksić's example forward threatens to diminish the role of the “normal” soldiers of the Army of RS: “*Why should he be more*

⁹⁵ Online comment to Klix, *Rade Aleksić*.

⁹⁶ On-street interview by the author, Sarajevo, 15. March 2013.

⁹⁷ Interview by the author with an NGO activist, Sarajevo, 2. February 2013.

⁹⁸ Dobroslav Ćuk, mayor of Trebinje from 2004 to 2012, announced several times that he was in favor of a monument for Aleksić, see for example his statement in “*Srdo*”, (minute 19'45); see also Klix, 2012. Ćuk: [Trebinje ima obaveznu da izgradi spomenik Srđanu Aleksiću](#). *Klix*, 24. February 2012 (accessed: 27. January 2016); For the sports center in Trebinje see below p. 26.

⁹⁹ See for example Buka, *Everything happened*; *Balija* is a pejorative term for Muslims from BiH, generally meaning an uneducated peasant or “scum”.

¹⁰⁰ [Press release](#) of the *Organization of War Veterans from the City of Trebinje*, 15. March 2013.

honored for what he did than the soldiers who died defending our town and fatherland?"¹⁰¹ Resistance to the honoring of Aleksić is even stronger, as in both liberal and Bosniak nationalist circles Aleksić is regularly praised in contrast to nationalist Serb war heroes. Due to these different reasons Aleksić's story is regularly perceived as "anti-Serb"¹⁰² both in Serbia and the RS, even if this is rarely loudly declared.

Combined with these resistances exist attempts to relativize the rescue story and to discredit Srđan Aleksić by insinuating that everything was very different from what is generally portrayed. I heard this kind of discourse during my field research in Trebinje. It can also be found in internet comments and has been most explicitly articulated in a lengthy text by Miroљjub Petrović published on a Belgrade-based internet portal on February 2014. Concerning Srđan Aleksić, the author pretends that he "*did not spend one day in the theater of war*", but that he was active in black marketeering during the war, and that Alen Glavović was working for him to sell his goods. Building on this, the author then says that the Bosnian Serb soldiers didn't stop Glavović on 21st January 1993 because he was a Muslim, but because he was selling black market goods, which leads also to the conclusion that "*Srđan Aleksić jumped in to protect his goods, and not Alen Glavović*". The author then says that Aleksić's intervention was followed by a brawl, where Aleksić fell down and unfortunately his head hit on the concrete, thus presenting his injuries not as the consequence of an assault but of an unfortunate accident. Consequently, the author qualifies the whole publicly promoted Srđan Aleksić story as a "*lie*" and as another piece of anti-Serb propaganda.¹⁰³

Other dissonant voices have sometimes been expressed by persons who sympathize with the person and act of Aleksić but who have problems with the general consensus around his memory and/or with the apolitical way in which he is memorialized. In 2013, the writer Eli Bektaš evoked his "*feeling of nausea*" when seeing how "*Serb liberals and Bosniak-Bosnian patriots (...) and those in love with Serbhood and the Republika Srpska*" are all trying, like "*vultures*", to appropriate Aleksić for their own purposes.¹⁰⁴ The journalist Uglješa Vuković heavily criticized Golubović's statement that Aleksić's act was not a political act, but just a human one. Vuković claimed that it is necessary to recognize that it was "*a human and a political act, especially in the circumstances that strengthened the ethnic division of BiH in which we still live today, and when his life was lost because of ethnic and political opposition to this strengthening*". He further qualified Golubović's will to present the story as a psychological drama which doesn't take into account the political context as

¹⁰¹ Interview by the author with representatives of the *Organization of War Veteran from the City of Trebinje*, April 2013.

¹⁰² For example in the mentioned press release of the *Organization of War Veterans from the City of Trebinje*.

¹⁰³ Petrović, Ljubomir. 2014. *Da li je laž o 'junaštvu' Srđana Aleksića veća od laži o 'genocidu' u Srebrenici? Vaseljenska*, 5. February 2014 (accessed: 27. January 2016); the text was reproduced on several other websites, for example by the news portal *Beograd.in*, 6. February 2014, with the title: *Beograd. The lie about the heroism of Srđan Aleksić*. The author of this text, *Miroљjub Petrović*, is a Serbian conspiracy theorist and pseudoscientist.

¹⁰⁴ Bektaš, Elis. 2013. *Lešinari nad Srđanom Aleksićem. Radiosarajevo*, 27. January 2013 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

“a lie” and a “hypocrisy”.¹⁰⁵ Also in Trebinje some friends of Aleksić view with scepticism all the hype surrounding his memory, wondering what Aleksić would have thought about it. Significantly, since the publication of *Srđo* in 2007, they have not participated in other public promotion activities.¹⁰⁶ Sometimes, also the participation of some memory entrepreneurs has been critically perceived. When Milorad Dodik awarded Aleksić with the highest decoration of the RS, the Human Rights activist Sinan Alić criticized it as “political hypocrisy, boldness and a lie” and as a shameful attempt to manipulate the story of Aleksić for the nationalist goals of Dodik and the RS alike.¹⁰⁷

These various dissonant and critical voices, coming from different sides, illustrate that the consensus around the memory of Aleksić is not unanimous, and must also be seen as fragile. This experience was also noted by Golubović concerning his film *Circles*. In an interview he declared that he hadn't expected that the negative reactions and anti-Serb accusations would be so strong,¹⁰⁸ which would certainly also explain his many depoliticizing comments around the movie, and at the same time his insistence to present it as a “very Serb” movie. Beyond the movie *Circles*, this potential fragility must also be seen in general as a major reason for the human-depoliticizing approach in public discourses about Aleksić, in order to make the story as un-attackable as possible.

But even if there have been and are different dissonant and critical voices, what is also very striking is how little they resonate in the public sphere. Resistances are more often articulated silently than openly as in the case of Mostar, where the request for a street name was never formally rejected by the municipality, - it was simply never answered.¹⁰⁹ The discreteness of the critics and resistances is another illustration of the strength of the positive consensus which has been achieved around the memory of Aleksić, which also appears in the fact that the story is rarely explicitly used against others in the political arena. As mentioned, it is sometimes used in comments against Karadžić and Mladić, and sometimes from the Bosniak nationalist side his case is highlighted in order to implicitly stigmatize the Serb majority who didn't act as him.¹¹⁰ That Aleksić can be used in inner-Serb conflicts and also in anti-Bosniak perspective appeared in a controversial television debate between Milorad Dodik and the Serbian liberal politician Čedomir Jovanović in January 2012. The latter tried to attack Dodik by claiming that Aleksić should be considered a Serb hero and not Mladić; Dodik replied that indeed it is important to honor Aleksić, and then added: “*But find me one case of a Bosniak*

¹⁰⁵ Tacno. 2015. *Zašto neću pogledati film Krugovi*. Tacno, 2. April 2013 (accessed: 15. May 2015).

¹⁰⁶ Interviews and e-mail exchange by the author with friends and acquaintances of Srđan Aleksić in Trebinje and Sweden, February and April 2013.

¹⁰⁷ Oslobođenje. 2013. Tragedija i orden. *Oslobođenje*, 28. January 2013.

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Srđan Golubović, *Neherojskom vremenu*.

¹⁰⁹ Interview by the author with Selma Jakupović, SDP representative from Mostar in the FBiH House of Representatives, Sarajevo, April 2013.

¹¹⁰ See for example the comment in an online-discussion: “*Srđan has shown how to be a human and that it is possible to be human. But Srđan has also shown how you are in majority. Because it is again your tribesmen who murdered him*” in Dežulović, Boris. 2013. *20 godina od ubojstva Srđana Aleksića: Kako su ubili najvećeg Srbina ovoga vremena*. *Poskok*, 21. January 2013 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

*who sacrificed himself for a Serb.*¹¹¹ This kind of polemical remark in relation to Aleksić can also be found in internet comments, but they are very rare in the public sphere, as are also direct controversies around Aleksić's memory. The mentioned television debate was so far one of the very rare exceptions for a direct controversy where Aleksić was used as an argument, and it is important to note that the fact that Jovanović had used Aleksić in his attack against Dodik triggered an immediate and strong reaction by Rade Aleksić, who openly condemned Jovanović for having "*misused the name of my son for political aims.*"¹¹² Rade Aleksić's reaction is another illustration of how strong the will is to keep Aleksić's memory away from political controversies. The rarity of public controversies so far allows us also to say that there exists not only a consensus around the memory of Aleksić, but widely also a consensus to maintain this consensus.

Why Srđan Aleksić?

The success of the Srđan Aleksić story can be mainly explained by its universal-depoliticizing approach, which is based on the de-contextualization and individualization of the story as well as the romanticization of its main protagonist, and by the fact that it matches different socio-political needs in the post-Yugoslav sphere. But why did Aleksić in particular succeed in becoming such a consensual hero-figure and not, for example, Nedeljko Galić from Ljubuški? There are also other aspects which need to be mentioned in order to understand why it is precisely the story of Srđan Aleksić which has become so popular, and not other figures of rescuers.

On the one hand, there is the simplicity of the story and also its tragic dimension: a man is attacked, another intervenes to save him, and dies because of that. Several persons, among them also the writer Miljenko Jergović, have assimilated Aleksić's story with a classic "*antique tragedy*".¹¹³ The blood sacrifice makes this individual act particularly striking, and also the fact that the act of rescuing was performed openly and publicly.¹¹⁴ In contrast to this, Nedeljko Galić's rescue actions were undertaken secretly and Galić survived the war. Furthermore his act is also more difficult to de-contextualize and depoliticize than Aleksić's act. When promoting the story of a man who succeeded to liberate several hundred persons from a camp, you have to explain about the context of the camp's existence.

On the other hand, there is the fact that Srđan Aleksić is a Serb. There is undoubtedly a bigger need to find and promote "good Serbs" than to find "good Bosniaks" or "good Croats", as Serbs are generally seen as "the villains" in

¹¹¹ Klix. 2012. *Jovanović: Aleksić je pijemont srpstva, a ne Karadžić i Krajišnik*. *Klix*, 1. February 2012 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

¹¹² Telegraf. 2012. *Rade Aleksić: Čedomir Jovanović je zloupotrebio ime mog pokojnog sina*. *Telegraf*, 5. February 2012 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

¹¹³ Jergović, Miljenko. 2013. *Život i smrt Srđana Aleksića*. *Vreme*, 28. February 2013 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

¹¹⁴ On the symbolic importance of blood sacrifice for modern group-cohesion processes see for example Marvin, Carolyn and David W. Ingle. 1999. *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

relation to the wars of the 1990s. This also makes Aleksić more attractive than Galić.

Furthermore, there is Aleksić's personality and biography (at least the parts which are emphasized in the public narratives). He was not only young, good looking and talented, he was also well-integrated in the society, and, as a soldier, appears as part of the system, but also with his own taste and style as an amateur theater actor, and displaying civic courage through his intervention in favor of Alen Glavović. Taken together, this offers identification possibilities for many different persons, including nationalist and anti-nationalist circles. On the contrary, Nedeljko Galić is, in general, described as an outsider in his hometown,¹¹⁵ which makes him a more one-dimensional figure and offers less identification possibilities.

Concerning the (re)presentation of Aleksić's person, it is also interesting to note the choice of the photos which are regularly used to illustrate media reports about him, and which show him much younger than he was at the moment of his death. These are mainly two photos from the 1980s: one as a teenager of approximately 14 years of age (*photo 2*), and the other a portrait of him in the uniform of the JNA when he undertook his military service at the age of 18 (*photo 1*). The latter photo is the one most used in media reports. It has the advantage of emphasizing Aleksić's youth while also showing him as a soldier, but as a soldier from before the war, during his JNA military service, which is an experience each family from former Yugoslavia can relate to and identify with.¹¹⁶ Significantly, another photo of Aleksić from the early 1990s (*photo 3*), which shows him unshaved and more adult, is used much more rarely in current media reports.¹¹⁷ The choice of photos is another illustration of the need and the will to promote a perfectly pure and consensual hero.



Photos of Srđan Aleksić used in media reports: most frequently photo 1 (left), often also photo 2 (middle), rarely photo 3 (right).

Finally, it is important to come back and to emphasize again the role of Aleksić's father as a key actor in the memorialization process within and between many of the memory entrepreneurs. Srđan Aleksić being dead, Rade Aleksić as his father appears to be the most legitimate person to represent him, and he is fulfilling this role in a very specific way: with dignity, where grief

¹¹⁵ Cp. the film "Nedo of Ljubuški" (see above footnote 8).

¹¹⁶ Petrović, Tanja. 2010. *Nostalgia for the JNA? Remembering the Army in the Former Yugoslavia*, in *Post-communist Nostalgia*, edited by Todorova, Maria and Zsuzsa Gille. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 61-81.

¹¹⁷ It is the photo Rade Aleksić used for the obituary of his son in 1993, see above footnote 60.

over the loss of his son is not turned into victimhood but into pride in the deed of his son and active promotion of his human legacy, without accusing anybody or being aggressive. For example in the debate about a monument to his son in Trebinje, he holds a very moderate position, often declaring that more important than a monument itself is that his son “*is living in the heart of the town of Trebinje and of its inhabitants.*”¹¹⁸ His personality and attitude earns him a lot of respect, and regularly the admiration towards Srđan Aleksić is also explicitly directed towards his father, with comments that with such a father it is no surprise that Srđan acted as he did to save his neighbor.¹¹⁹ This respect for and the consensus around Rade Aleksić is undoubtedly a strong factor in the achieved consensus around Srđan Aleksić. Regarding Nedeljko Galić, who died in 2010, there is also someone to represent his memory. His wife Štefica Galić. But she was involved in his rescue actions, which makes her automatically more exposed and attackable, and she is also much more political and less consensual than Rade Aleksić, as she is for example openly confrontational toward nationalist attitudes.¹²⁰

The strong presence of the father emphasizes also another aspect in the represented figure of Srđan Aleksić, which goes together with the focus on his youth, namely Srđan’s identity as a *son*, which is also strongly emphasized, constituting an additional factor of identification and attraction. Significantly, Rade Aleksić has declared several times in the last years that he considers Srđan not only as his son, but that he has now become “*the son of all of us*”.¹²¹

Conclusions: The memorialization of Srđan Aleksić within the post-Yugoslav culture of remembrance: an exception, a beginning or a continuation?

Srđan Aleksić can be considered as the only war-related figure who has so far succeeded in becoming a consensual memory site within different parts of the post-Yugoslav space. This observation underlines his importance but at the same time also its limits: how important may one consensual memory site be within the widely divided memory cultures in BiH and the former Yugoslavia? Aleksić may therefore appear more as an exception than as the beginning or the illustration of an evolution. But on two levels I see, nevertheless, a political significance and impact.

Contrary to the sometimes expressed concern that the focus on Aleksić would make people forget that there have also been other positive stories, the memorialization of Srđan Aleksić has arguably contributed to a search for similar cases and the promotion of other persons and stories, making them

¹¹⁸ Oslobođenje. 2013. Rade Aleksić: Srđan treba da živi u srcu grada Trebinja. *Oslobođenje*, 24. September 2013 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

¹¹⁹ See for example the following statements: “*The father as the son. Srđan has shown all the most positive humanity which exists, but when I listen to his father, I understand that when you grow up with such a father then you cannot be different [...] His father is acting like a very good man. It is not a surprise that Srđan Aleksić is a hero when he comes from such a family!*”Comments to *Orden za heroja*.

¹²⁰ Štefica Galić is, since 2010, editor-in-chief of the Mostar-based news portal *tacno.net*, which is known for its antinationalist stands; see for example Seemo. 2014. Interview with Štefica Galić. *Seemo*, n.d. 2014 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

¹²¹ Dnevni Avaz. 2013. Srđan Aleksić danas je sin svih nas. *Dnevni Avaz*, 28. January 2013.

more widely known. “*What is the name of your ‘Srđan Aleksić’*” was, for example, the title of an online survey launched by *Dnevni Avaz* in 2012,¹²² and the reference to Aleksić is often used in media to draw the attention to other, less known rescuers.¹²³ In 2015, the *Independent Journalists Association of Vojvodina* and the *Association of BiH Journalists* launched the project *Living Together*, with five television documentaries about persons from BiH and Serbia who helped and rescued others during the war. At its origin we find again Dinko Gruhonjić, and also Srđan Aleksić. The initial inspiration for this series was “*the known-to-all story of Srđan Aleksić from Trebinje*”, explains Gruhonjić: “*the question arose of how many other people exist like Srđan, which are not known and about whom today nearly nobody is talking.*”¹²⁴ Aleksić has therefore become the sort of embodiment and reference point for rescuers connected with the Yugoslav break-up wars, and his memory has strengthened the awareness of the existence of such persons and figures, for “*heroes of the type of Srđan Aleksić*”.¹²⁵

In general, public attention for acts and figures of rescue seems to have developed in recent years in the post-Yugoslav space, also related to events other than the wars of the 1990s. Different film projects have been launched, in Serbia and Croatia, to promote the story of Diana Budisavljević, who saved thousands of Serb children from the Jasenovac concentration camp in 1943.¹²⁶ Interestingly, in February 2013 the Serbian Orthodox church honored Ivan Hiti, a former Croat soldier who had saved old books and icons from a destroyed orthodox church during the war in Croatia in 1992. There is not necessarily a direct link here with Aleksić; at the same time, it might be more than a coincidence that Patriarch Irenja awarded Hiti in the same week that *Circles* was premiered in Belgrade. Furthermore the media discourse used a vocabulary nearly identical to that of the Aleksić narratives, writing that Hiti had “*fulfilled his human duty*”, and that “*humanness and heroism*” were the two words which were best suited to describe him.¹²⁷

Does this stronger interest for rescuers necessarily imply a more critical approach towards the past? No. We have seen that the story of Srđan Aleksić can be promoted - and most of the time is promoted - without going into the historical-political context. And the example of Milorad Dodik shows that it is possible to promote in parallel Radovan Karadžić and Srđan Aleksić. Furthermore, the commemoration of a “good Serb” can have (and does have) exculpatory functions as well. But even if the promotion of Aleksić’s memory

¹²² Dnevni Avaz – online [Forum](#), February 2012.

¹²³ See for example Oslobodjenje. 2007. Heroji ili jednostavno ljudi. *Oslobodjenje*, 20. March 2007, where the comparison with Aleksić is used to promote the memory of Goran Čengić who was killed in June 1992 in Sarajevo because he defended a Bosniak neighbor.

¹²⁴ Slobodna Bosna. 2015. Bosanski Šindleri. *Slobodna Bosna*, 19. March 2015; On the project see also the [website](#).

¹²⁵ See also Facetv. 2014. [Refik Višća heroj kao Srđan: Heroj koji je spasio 12 zarobljenih Srba](#). *Face TV*, November 2014 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

¹²⁶ Novosti. 2012. [Hrabrost Diane Budisavljević jača od zaborava](#). *Novosti*, 16. February 2012 (accessed: 27. January 2016); in February 2012, Boris Tadić gave the posthumous bravery award not only to Aleksić, but also to Budisavljević: Nezavisne. 2012. [Tadić odlikovao Novaka Đokovića, te heroje Srđana Aleksića i Dianu Budisavljević](#). *Nezavisne novine*, 14. February 2012 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

¹²⁷ Blic. 2013. [Hrvastki vojnik iz minirane srpske crkve spasio slike](#). *Blic*, 23. February 2013.

does not transform the memory culture(s) in former Yugoslavia into a culture of self-critical acknowledgement, what is new and important is the construction and emergence of an alternative hero-narrative, which does not necessarily deconstruct other narratives but at least opens other spaces in the culture of remembrance and introduces new symbolic figures, and this not only in liberal-democratic circles, but also in more nationalist ones. On the one hand, the rescuer-figure in addition to the usual focus on the victim-perpetrator pattern, and on the other, the “hero of humanness” figure in addition to traditional war hero-figures, and in distinction to criminal-hero figures such as Arkan, Tuta or Juka, who have been strongly promoted both during and after the wars of the 1990s.¹²⁸

Srđan Aleksić has succeeded in emerging in the post-Yugoslav space mainly as an embodiment of the *moral* hero, fighting for Good, and also of the *ordinary* hero through which an expansion of the panorama of heroism in the post-Yugoslav space is represented. “*We don’t need super-heroes, we need ordinary people who everyday do something good*”, declared Golubović in relation to Aleksić,¹²⁹ and a Bosnian news portal emphasized: “*An ordinary person can also become a hero, as shown by the young man from Trebinje, Srđan Aleksić.*”¹³⁰ If Aleksić represents a new type of hero in the post-Yugoslav space, this does not mean that his figure does not include more traditional elements of heroism. His figure and story combine elements of the traditional and of new forms of heroism, and this must also be seen as one of the reasons for his success. Among traditional elements of heroism related to the figure of Aleksić are the following: he is a man and a soldier, the story is about protection and sacrifice, and partially about national identity. Among the new forms of heroism figure the following elements: non-violent intervention, civic commitment beyond ethnic borders, individual action. The figure of Aleksić as promoted through his act of 21st January 1993 combines all of this. Aleksić appears as a soldier, but not a warrior; his heroic act does not intervene during the situation of a military battle and is directed towards a civilian; he is stopping an act of violence without exercising violence himself; his courage is simultaneously physical and moral; he is acting as an individual and as a protector, not of a whole community, but of another individual and in the same time of ethical, universal values. Aleksić is sometimes also explicitly linked to former expressions of heroism, which underlines that his figure does not represent exclusively something new. In 2012, the mayor of Trebinje placed Aleksić in direct continuity with the book “*Examples of humanity and heroism*”, written in the 19th century by the Montenegrin general and writer Marko Miljanov Popović where he portrayed common and humble people and their courageous deeds. The mayor offered this book to Rade Aleksić and situated his

¹²⁸ Concerning the emergence of war-related criminal-hero-figures in the post-Yugoslav space see Čolović, Ivan. 2007. *Bordel ratnika. Folklor, politika i rat*. Belgrade: Biblioteka XX vek; Čolović, Ivan. 2011. *Za njima smo išli pevajući – junaci devedesetih*. Zagreb: Pelago; Čolović, Ivan. 2004. *A Criminal-National hero? But who else?*, in *Balkan Identities: Nation and Memory*, edited by Todorova, Maria. London: Hurst, 253-68; for Čolović, one characteristic point of the criminal hero-figure is that he “*is, and remains, outside the law and has no moral restraints*” (267).

¹²⁹ Vijesti. 2013. Golubović: Ne trebaju nama superheroji, već obični ljudi koji čine dobro stvari. *Vijesti*, 13. February 2013 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

¹³⁰ Mojportal. 2015. *Biti čovjek se isplati i po cijeni koju je on platio*. *Mojportal*, 27. January 2015 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

son in this line of heritage, by stating that if Srđan would have lived in this time, his “*chivalrous deed*” would have guaranteed him a place in this book.¹³¹

If the emergence of Aleksić as a positive hero-figure appears as something rather original within the post-Yugoslav space, it must be seen at the same time as part of a more general trend in Europe and beyond since the end of the 20th century. This trend marks the construction of new hero-figures which increasingly emphasize the importance of moral strength and civic commitment than that of physical or military force, as personified for example by Nelson Mandela or Mother Teresa, and which are multifaceted enough to fulfill both national and post-national needs.¹³² These new types of popular heroes include the rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust, which appears especially in the emergence of the *Righteous* as a universal, post-ideological hero-category in the last 20 years, not only in relation to the Holocaust but also to other mass crimes, and whose protagonists are often labeled as ordinary people.¹³³ Direct parallels can be seen here with Aleksić as a rescuer figure and as a moral hero from the War in Bosnia and Herzegovina promoted similarly to rescuers from other historical contexts. In the post-Yugoslav space, Aleksić is sometimes explicitly connected to this more general trend, for example by also calling him *Righteous*.¹³⁴ Additionally, the figure of Aleksić fits also into the more general European and Western hero-narratives, apparent through the fact that in November 2007 the French-German television channel ARTE designated Aleksić as *European of the Week*.¹³⁵

Where do I see the main problems related to the current memorialization process of Srđan Aleksić in the post-Yugoslav space? One problem is that this process is turning more and more into a sanctification of the figure of Aleksić. All heroification processes include also dimensions of religion and sacredness,¹³⁶ and this appears also to be so in the case of Aleksić: as he died on 27th January, which is also the feast day of Saint Sava, the medieval founder of the Serbian Orthodox Church, a connection is sometimes established between Aleksić and the Serbian Orthodox Church's most important saint.¹³⁷ Sometimes his death is also explicitly assimilated with the sacrifice of Jesus: “*On 27.1.1993 expired a man who had saved another man. Also Jesus died so*

¹³¹ *Nezavisne*. 2012. *Srđan nikad neće biti zaboravljen*. *Nezavisne Novine*, 25. February 2012.

¹³² On the role of heroes and heroism in the 20th century and the evolution of their perception see for example Centlivres, Pierre / Fabre, Daniel and Francoise Zonabend (eds.). 1999. *La fabrique des héros*. Paris: Editions de la MSH, especially Muxel, Anne. 1999. *Les héros des jeunes français. Vers un humanisme politique conciliateur*, in *La fabrique des héros*, edited by Centlivres, Pierre / Fabre, Daniel and Francoise Zonabend. Paris: Editions de la MSH, 82-100; Bohrer, Karl-Heinz (ed.). 2009. *Heldengedenken. Über das heroische Phantasma*. Sonderheft Merkur Heft (9/10), 63; LWL-Industriemuseum (ed.). 2010. *Helden: Von der Sehnsucht nach dem Besonderen*. Essen: Verlag Klartext.

¹³³ Gensburger, *Justes*.

¹³⁴ Trifunović, Aleksandar. 2012. *Ljudi i ništavila*. *Buka*, 29. January 2012 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

¹³⁵ Arte. 2007. Broadcast Zoom Europa. *ARTETV*, 14. November 2007.

¹³⁶ On this question see (here) the recent conference “Sakralität und Heldentum. Zum Relationsgeflecht von Heroischem und Religiösem”, organized the 21-22. November 2014 by the University of Freiburg in the framework of the research program “Heroes - Heroizations – Heroisms.”

¹³⁷ See for example *Nezavisne*. 2013. *Srđanovo djelo pojam čovječnosti*. *Nezavisne Novine*, 22. January 2013.

that people could continue to live."¹³⁸ Even without explicit religious references, the memorialization of Aleksić looks increasingly like a sanctification in the sense that his figure is constructed exclusively as an object of veneration, thus not affording much space for discussion about his deed nor for a critical approach towards the uses of his memory. The story and figure of Aleksić have the potential to raise stimulating questions, for example "How did we behave during the war?" or "How would each of us have reacted in Aleksić's situation?"; sometimes such questions are also explicitly put forward.¹³⁹ But in general the promoters and consumers of his story are contending themselves with seeing him as a "hero" without questioning the hero-discourse or trying to look behind the dominating image. This attitude is clearly illustrated in the comment of a person who signed the petition in favor of a Srđan Aleksić Street in Belgrade: "*One doesn't need to discuss the courage of this young man! One needs to admire him!!!*"¹⁴⁰

Another problem I see is that the universalizing and de-contextualizing approach, while perhaps having the advantage of avoiding Aleksić's memory from being torn apart within political controversies and also opening new ways in the post-Yugoslav memory culture, it nonetheless leaves enough space for nationalist appropriations and especially implies the danger of forgetting and even of covering up the historical and political context. One last example may illustrate how the use of the memory of Aleksić may also contribute to literally covering other dimensions of the past. In Trebinje, the former basketball star Dejan Bodiroga and the Serbian Orthodox Church built, in 2006, a sports center with outdoor basketball fields where every summer *the Dejan Bodiroga Basketball Camp* is organized for young people from all over the world. In 2007, the sports building was baptized 'Srđan Aleksić', and this is sometimes quoted in reports in order to show that Aleksić is also honored in Trebinje, even if a proper monument has not yet been built.¹⁴¹ But what is not mentioned in the same reports is that this sports center has been built on the space where one of the most important buildings from the Ottoman period was located in Trebinje, the Resulbegović House, a protected monument which in Yugoslav times was used as museum and restaurant, and which during the 1992-1995 war was deliberately destroyed in the framework of the ethnic cleansing campaign in Trebinje. After the war, the destroyed building was placed on the list of National Monuments by the BiH Commission to Preserve National Monuments, with the intent of reconstruction in accordance with the Dayton Peace Agreement's Annex 8 on cultural heritage. Despite and against these plans, the sports complex was built in 2006 on the same location, and since then it has remained there with its annual popular *Dejan Bodiroga Basketball Camps*, even if the Commission to Preserve National Monuments ordered - in

¹³⁸ Bajić, Bojan. 2011. *Jevandelje po Srđanu*. *E-novine*, 26. January 2011 (accessed: 27. January 2016); Miljenko Jergović is also establishing a parallel with Jesus' sacrifice in Jergović, *Život i smrt*.

¹³⁹ For example by Srđan Golubović in several of his interviews, see Gracija. 2013. Mislim da sam hrabar čovjek, ali ne znam da li bih učinio isto što i Srđan. *Gracija*, 30. August 2013; and Dani. 2013. Neherojskom vremenu uprkos. *Dani*, 29. March 2013.

¹⁴⁰ [Comment](#) from 2. February 2013.

¹⁴¹ See for example Informer. 2012. *Rade Aleksić: Srđan pokazao kako treba da se odnosi čovjek prema čovjeku*. *Informer*, 27. January 2012 (accessed: 27. January 2016); on the naming ceremony in 2007 see: Trebinjeinfo. 2007. *Otvoren drugi košarkaški kamp Dejana Bodiroge u Trebinju*. *Trebinjeinfo* 6. July 2007 (accessed: 15. May 2015).

vain - the removal of the illegally-built structures from the protected site.¹⁴² In summary, this means that a sports complex which is hosting tournaments whose aim is “to bring people together”¹⁴³, and which has then been baptized with the name of Srđan Aleksić, “the symbol of the good, the beauty and the fight against the evil”¹⁴⁴, has been erected on the site of a cultural monument which was intentionally destroyed during the war, and where it is not solely occupying the space of the destroyed monument, but is also actively preventing its reconstruction, meanwhile contributing to the erasure of its memory. The use of Srđan Aleksić’s name in this context leaves a bitter aftertaste, irrespective of whether his name was given to this illegally-built sports complex in order to give it an additional moral legitimization, or to deliver some good conscience to the owners, or to make the reconstruction of the Ottoman-era house even more difficult, or to deflect the public attention even more from the original purpose of the site, or simply to honor Srđan Aleksić.

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¹⁴² Walasek, Helen. 2015. *Domains of Restoration: Actors and Agendas in Post-Conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina*, in *Bosnia and the destruction of cultural heritage*, edited by Helen, Walasek. Franham: Ashgate, 205-58, esp. 251-54.

¹⁴³ Mijanović, Ratimir. 2010. Košarka i Dejan spajaju ljude. *Glassrpske*, 18. July 2010 (accessed: 27. January 2016).

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