

Expediency of statistics: War and Post-War Casualties in Croatia and Bosnia (1991–1999)*

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Violent conflict in former Yugoslavia triggered involuntary migration as well as ethnic cleansing in war effected areas. All types of movements of people were accompanied by various levels and intensity of war crimes and human rights abuse. Official state statistics did not follow these movements by reliable data. Therefore, concerned researchers and activists tried to grasp the picture by applying then available instruments of data collecting procedures to refugees (in Croatia). It became clear that those instruments were of rather limited use for the specific events of human rights abuse on territory and population concerned (Bosnia, Croatia). Shortcomings were both of substantive and procedural (specific programs) nature.

With war activities ended, NGOs – working with women war victims – decided to start follow up study on militarization of the society and post-war violence against women. The focus was on incidences of beating, harassment, sexual abuse, and homicide of female population in the last decade as being informed about in newspapers. The goal of the study was to present statistics on violence against women to judiciary and parliament in order to get Criminal law reformed. Applied were the instruments available for the human rights abuse documentation (HURIDOCS): again, it became obvious that these instruments were of limited use for statistically informed legislature. Therefore NGOs decided to apply statistical packages available to refine data and make them readable to other NGOs and government. The paper argues that basic concepts of official statistics and instruments available for statistical elaboration of human rights abuse should be refined in order to get data more powerful in arguing the need for legislator's action.

Key words: VIOLENCE, STATISTICS, HUMAN RIGHTS, NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATION, LEGISLATOR.

1. Emergency and Statistics

A drive to build a statistical “bridge between the chaos of particular and transparency of the whole” (Cole, 1994:1) regularly, even in the most severe conditions of genocide and ethnic cleansing, is seemingly hard to resist. The Balkan wars (1991–1999) proved to be no exception to that: “statistics”, “data” about atrocities, abuse, violations of human rights appeared suddenly to be in high demand. The power of numbers, of counting, classification, of projections and surveys to represent volatile phenomena of war collaterals like population displacements urged compiling of various statistical sources and constructions of data in early 1990s. Consumers were military and civilian international agencies, peace mediators, journalists, NGOs, physicians, philanthropists, and academics; suppliers were less diversified. At the beginning of the war (Summer 1991 in Croatia), before UNCHR came in, State Statistical Office and improvised agencies supplied data on refugee flows. With the beginning of the war in Bosnia (Spring 1992), UNCHR covered the area of displacement of populations in satisfactory way; yet, other collaterals of the conflict (ethnic cleansing, human rights violations, rape and robberies) were left out of official domain. Since the high demand for data was growing – understandably enough, the very nature of these events informed prime time TV networks, peace makers and human rights agencies – it’s been saturated by innumerable sources of questionable validity. Statisticians (demographers, geographers included) became heroes; their trade found universal acceptance among main consumers.

It was evident, though, that “data” and “statistics” on human disaster in the Balkans kept being produced in two principal forms of discourses: one, as a parable, “numerified” story used to illustrate certain humane disasters, with inflated or deflated figures, depending which side the producer was on. And two, as a fair try to assess validity and areas of uncertainty of data. In the space between these two main forms of “statistical discourse” on violence and human rights dwelled various attempts to serve either, or even both of them simultaneously. Their common purpose was – to make some sense out of chaos created by unexpected and overwhelming events and by the avalanche of sheer numbers. The validity of data was not questioned, not even by the academic community. The latter had little to say about what such “statistics” actually represented. Hence, the most serious issues, like rape, displaced and destroyed settlements and families, wounded and mutilated children, and ethnic cleansing, got supported by “data” based on erratic observations and/or reported incidents (if at all) of individual cases. On such grounds, there were attempts to draw conclusions about aggregate groups and causality of incidents. The case of figures on rape in Bosnia and Croatia was notorious for that: when first reports started to come out from the Serbian concentration camps in Bosnia (early summer of 1992), “statistics” of incidents of rapes and sexual assaults varied from 15.000 to 80.000.¹

All parts involved in conflicts – international mediators included – displayed widespread enthusiasm for statistics. Seemingly impenetrable complexity of the Balkans’ divisions and slaughtering used to be represented and even explained by numbers as evidence of precision and rigor. Thus, final Dayton assessment of division of Bosnia was based on Yugoslav (last)

population Census (April 1991). This Census had been taken at time of significant turbulence of population, caused by ethnic migration and refusal of certain ethnic groups to be surveyed at all (Albanians); further, between the beginning of the war in Croatia and Bosnia (1991/92) and Dayton agreements (1995) two million of people were displaced, killed and lost. Nonetheless, numerous public opinion surveys were taken at time, claiming generalizability of outcomes in the situation where the basic parameters of sampling were impossible to be met. They served as justification for different goals: from registration of voters for referendums to “negotiated” population transfers.²

Such a framework was fertile soil for biases and partisanship in producing data concerning causes and consequences of the conflicts in the area. The principal question was – is anything like reliable statistics feasible in time of emergency, particularly under the strain of ethno-nationalistic conflict? Rather obvious answer at time was – no! Also, it was predictable that the same framework of data production and statistics would persist in the future, even after the peace would be settled. There we would go again, with the same old familiar Balkan story after the Second World War: never ending disputes about “how many” and “whose” victims on one side and bits and pieces of “truth” established by governmental and international truth committees on the other. The gap created between these two “facts establishing” discourses was never closed; on the contrary, it was enlarging.³ Its ramifications were efficiently used by various nationalistic fractions in former Yugoslavia.

In order to alleviate such use of data, the group of experts on various fields in Croatia – psychiatrists, psychologists, sociologists, demographers, computer specialists – set out in 1993 to establish non governmental organisation called HEG – Humanitarian Expert Group; The goal was to design and run data base about **sources, interpretations, elaborations and methods applied** by various agents in collecting and displaying data on refugees, displacees, victims and human rights abuse in war effected area. Data base was designed to collect information from five main sources: (1) statistics released regularly by UNCHR and related agencies based in Croatia and Bosnia, (2) data of NGOs dealing with human rights, (3) data of NGOs and experts dealing with therapeutic work, (4) data based on surveys in shelters executed by social workers, and (5) academic and related written production on war, traumatic stress, displacement and violence.

The assumption was that compilation of such data base would enable users to compare various sources of information in Croatia, Europe and Canada, related to the same or similar events or cases. Hence much needed threshold of critical approach to sources and interpretations would be maintained. HEG was conceived as an educational framework for minimal expertise for everybody interested in sources and data about the Balkan wars and their consequences. By the end of 1995, when the war in Croatia was over, it became necessary to build up a network of “sister-basis” for monitoring of human rights abuse and special cases of post-war violence. The idea was to disseminate HURIDOCS (Human Rights Documentation System) among main non-governmental organisations which were monitoring human rights abuse in Croatia, particularly to: Helsinki Committee in Croatia (HHO), Citizens’ Initiative for Human Rights and to the Center for Women War Victims,⁴ and to educate personnel in user-friendly statistical procedures. In doing this, the group was faced with major “conceptual” problem: HURIDOCS’ system was fine for individual narratives, but was not meant for producing statistics. It was not possible to transform the raw material of thousands of detailed narratives of tortures, abuses, displacements, into an intelligible and communicable statistical format. Trained and supported by HURIDOCS personnel from Geneva, many NGOs decided to – at least – document narratives of abuses, leaving statistics aside. Under the pressure of numerous cases of human rights violations, mainly on ethnic basis, this was an understandable move. Nonetheless, several human rights activists and researchers decided to try to run both sides of human rights violations documentation: individual cases – narratives and transformation of “cases” into intelligible statistical format, which would enable user(s) to apply accessible statistical packages (SPSS, for instance) for more sophisticated elaboration. Post-war violation against women in Croatia between 1993 and 1999 was chosen as the testing ground for transforming individual narratives into statistics. Before going into transformation, the group formed within Center for Women War Victims in Zagreb, made clear – together with HURIDOCS expert – why their system was not suitable for statistical outputs.

2. Statistics and Individual Narratives

The Balkan crisis caused the displacement of approximately two and half million of people, in Croatia and Bosnia between 1991–1996, and between Croatia and Serbia in Fall 1995. This figure represented more than 10% of the population of former Yugoslavia. The phenomenon of ethnic cleansing and population displacement was staggeringly new, with no clear borders; there was no previous knowledge in the area about it, no concepts to even think it through. Official state statistics was no help; state agencies were falling apart because the still existing state – Yugoslavia – was in disarray, the newly proclaimed independent state of Croatia tried to get together bits and pieces of old and new institutions, statistical offices included. When certain stabilization of basic institutions was obtained, there were indices of deliberate concealment or misrepresentation of data on the part of state agencies. Some crucial areas of population turmoil and war casualties were – according to human rights NGOs evidence – misinterpreted or, simply, left out of scope, either of State statistical office or particular state agencies. Thus figures on displacement of large ethnic groups – ethnic cleansing, disappearing, kidnapping, rape, war crimes and civilian casualties of various political and ethnic affiliations, were being concealed or manipulated. UNHCR statistics proved to be the most reliable source for data on refugees, displacees and returnees at the time. But, with the conflict over, international agencies moved out or redefined their roles – and war-torn country had to face reverse transfers of disaster: returning of refugees and displacees, emptiness and death in ethnically cleansed areas, revenge of new political elites, together with the urgent need for housing, employment and education policies. Statistics and other information, produced by state agencies or by the surveys of independent agencies, become crucial. State agencies got together, started to function and produce data more or less harmonized with European standards. Yet, there are crucial areas left out of systematic collection and analysis: first of all, the **narratives of violations of human rights**⁵ and new forms of family violence, instigated by the war. In Croatia today, the most reliable sources for such data are NGOs, particularly two of them: Helsinki Committee Croatia and Center for Women War Victims. Both agencies are dealing with human rights violations, data being collected and recorded as individual narratives. They both started

using HURIDOCs format, created as a tool for collection (not analysis) of data on violation of human rights. Meanwhile, for various reasons, this format proved not to be thoroughly applicable.⁶ It was, for the time being, dropped out of the picture; currently, basic activity of collecting and analysis of human rights violations in post-war Croatia by Helsinki Committee is supported by evidence collected and stored in the form of interviews and simple (if at all) frequency distributions. In this case, the narrative of violation has been given priority over statistics. The possibility of arguing the cases of violation in public by aggregation and structure was abandoned, on purpose. The philosophy behind such decision was that “human rights violation” contained, by definition, individual and personalized attributes, decisive for action. Each case, therefore, required tactful treatment and, in most cases, secrecy.

3. Translating narratives into figures; violence against women – the case study

A group of activists and researchers around the Center for Women War Victims decided to check out two ways of handling data on women human rights violations: through HURIDOCs and through an user friendly statistical package. The goals of the project were: (1) to retain HURIDOCs as known and approved format for collecting human rights violation data, and (2) to put thousands of cases of violations into statistically sound format in order to sensitise public opinion and legislature to certain human rights issues. The research project: Violence against Women in Croatia (2000)⁷ has been selected as the testing ground, for two reasons: firstly, there was certain continuity in collecting data and analysis during the war and after the war period; secondly, this kind of violence became recognised, in public, as typical post-war “new” kind of violence.⁸ The targeted group – women – was perceived as a kind of “neutral” population, which means without any of politically ambiguous markers like ethnicity, religion or sexual preferences.⁹

The main body of data consisted of 6000 cases of violence against women between 1993–1999; all cases were taken from judicial and police records. They were all published in daily newspapers. They were first recorded according to HURIDOCs standards; the sample of files (310 cases) were then coded and translated into SPSS formats. The translatability between HURIDOCs documents and SPSS data matrix has been retained. Individual narratives were codified, in accordance with HURIDOCs standard documents (EVSYS).

The main problem was how to put the main body of data, individual accounts of violence against women within the existing HURIDOCs framework. After the analysis of 309 sample cases of violence against women in post-war Croatia (1993–1997) we came to some 15 inclusive categories of incidents. They cover the area between the worst cases of premeditated murder to trafficking and prostitution. We developed also new categories of perpetrators and typology, which follows from there, shows that two crucial areas concerning specificity of violence against women – type of acts and methods of violence and types of perpetrators – still lack exhaustive qualities. From the point of view of violence against women, particularly after the war, these two points are the most important drawbacks for collecting and processing data on violations of women human rights.

Majority of our cases involved several types of violence belonging to one EVENT. The problem is that in generating statistics within HURIDOCs format, it is not clear which incidents are related to one particular case (in EVSYS 4.1 format). For example, if woman was first raped and then killed (rather frequent event in the Balkan wars) we would like to have statistics which would show the NUMBER of occurrences related to these particular connections. What would be a solution for cases when several types of violence – connected with one person – occurred? Is the solution to use only one – the most severe type – of violence (in these cases: murder), thus providing for basic statistical formats (one to one relation: one person – one incident)? The new format – Winevsys method of Violence found the solution for the relational problems (one type of act/one victim, plus several separate entries for method of violence or incidents), though the question remains: how to get statistics which would connect all possible (or: available, detected) methods of violence and human rights abuse directed against ONE person? Or: who were the perpetrators (structure) in a particular type of violence (par example, use of hand granates in family home)?¹⁰

By translating narratives into statistical formats, we obtained the framework for future statistics on violence against women. Currently, there is no official statistics about violence against women in Croatia. Criminal and judicial records contain detailed data files about a perpetrator/convict, while very few data about victims. We found that in Croatia:¹¹

Violence against women includes physical, sexual and psychological violence; the most widespread violence is homicide.

Violence occurs mainly in domestic environment and within close interpersonal relationship.

Perpetrators are mostly sharing the same residence with victims.

Diversified typology of violence includes (coded by EVSYS format): murder, assault, rape, sexual abuse, mutilation, torture, forced prostitution (also: video production), trafficking, sexual harassment.

Domestic violence is growing dramatically. One of possible causes is PTSD, among veterans, refugees and displaced.

Majority of victims experiences more than one form of violence; therefore, the problem we raised in the case of HURIDOCs (one case – several incidents) would persist and should be solved “statistically”.

“Context” of concepts and its boundaries appear to be less than clear. Universal validity of categories/variables is questionable. There are forms of violations which are tolerated, culturally, even in modern urban settings.¹²

Conclusions

Violence against women is *under-reported* and *under-recorded* new phenomenon in Europe. It is becoming a serious problem in Europe, particularly in former war zones (the Balkans). The application of existing interfaces (HURIDOCs) in collecting individual data cannot support growing concern for recording, reporting and researching the issue. More developed interfaces and official statistics is needed to make the issue socially visible.

The first step in beginning to tackle violence against women is to name it, unequivocally as violation of the **persons human**

rights. This step begins to create a climate in which women are able to publicly name their own experience

Without official statistics on reported cases and research findings, violence against women will continue to be grounded on massive under-estimates of the problem. Moreover, general awareness of the problem will continue to be low, tolerance towards violence high, public knowledge full of stereotypes and some form of violence will continue to be trivialised.

In designing further steps in recording violence, legitimacy and believability in projecting violence should be paid particular attention. More so in former or acute conflict zones in Europe. There is always possible threshold of increasing uncertainty (Lutz, W. and alt., 1996:31) therefore we should not leave out the different sources of it. Migration, structural changes, political turmoils triggered by sudden events like ethnic conflicts create violations of all forms.

How to face the future of possible violence and violations of human rights?

(1) (By expanding substantive knowledge about the process and structure of violations.

(2) (By improved insight into the past of violations and how they were recorded and analysed; past will inform us about the variability of the emergencies, approaches, possible drawbacks and errors. It will also inform us about professional ethics and standards of either data producers or users,

(3) (By integrating exterior knowledge (universal standards) and local information on the culture of violence.

These points are vital for statistics and other data on violence of human rights to become user oriented. This has been recognised by the Council of Europe as well; its basic document (Group of specialists, 1997:25) concerning scheme for action against violence against women stated: "The revelations of 'war-rape', forced pregnancy and 'ethnic cleansing' in former Yugoslavia raised the question of organised violence against women by the military, police and armed forces. The prevalence of this form of violence **is yet to be adequately addressed**. Within this area, however, are also included incidents of individuals using the institutional power invested in them by the state as a form of access in order to perpetrate violence against women".

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SVRSISHODNOST STATISTIKE:

ŽRTVE RATNOG I POSLIJERATNOG NASILJA U HRVATSKOJ I BOSNI (1991–1999)

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Ratna i poslijeratna nasilja te politike etničkih čišćenja na području bivše Jugoslavije uzrokovala su prinudne migracije stanovništva. U razdoblju 1991 – 1997 stotine tisuća ljudi promijenile su prebivališta. Ti su tokovi bili popraćeni nasiljem i ratnim zločinima, te zlouporabom i ugrožavanjem ljudskih prava. Tijekom sukoba i poslije njih najistaknutija su tri problema: a) kako detektirati, prikupiti i pohraniti podatke o učestalosti i brojnosti raznih tipova nasilja i zlouporabe ljudskih prava, b) problem tipologije, klasifikacije nasilja, c) pouzdanosti i vjerodostojnosti prikupljenih podataka. Kao i u dosada poznatim slučajevima velikih sukoba i civilnih žrtava pokazalo se da vladine statističke službe nisu u stanju pouzdano i vjerodostojno odigrati svoju ulogu. Rat u Hrvatskoj i Bosni (1991–1997) bjelodano je pokazao da u vrijeme najveće potražnje za statističkim podacima o nasilju i zlouporabi ljudskih prava, mjesto vladinih službenih statističkih agensa zauzimaju nevladine udruge i međunarodne organizacije koje, svaka iz svog ugla, pribiru i klasificiraju te obrađuju podatke upitne pouzdanosti. Na taj se način nastavlja i u poslijeratnim prilikama: temeljni parametri stabilizacije ljudi u prostoru – mehaničko i prirodno kretanje stanovništva, prijelaz na mirmodopske migracije i planirane dislokacije stanovništva – rezultat su heteronomnih izvora i mitova o brojkama. Stabiliziranje društva pak traži vjerodostojne i pouzdane podatke o poslijeratnom nasilju. Prikupljanje, klasifikacija i tipologija takvih podataka državu zanima prema prilikama: ako tome i pristupi, službena joj statistika u tome ne pomaže.

U ovom se radu prikazuje studij slučaja jedne od takvih akcija: kako se, kojim instrumentarijem i na kojoj razini pouzdanosti nevladine udruge specifičnog profila suočavaju s ratnim nasiljem te novim i raširenim tipom poslijeratnog nasilja u Hrvatskoj – nasiljem nad ženama. Osnovna teza rada je da je nevladina udruga, ako je opremljena ekspertnim znanjem i temeljnom mrežom međunarodnih kontakata, u stanju za neko vrijeme preuzeti funkcije službenog vladinog statističara. Nevladina udruga ima prednost u inicijativi, fleksibilnosti, brzom stjecanju i proliferaciji ekspertnih sistema u stvaranju specifičnih baza; no u fazi primjene to jest planiranja politika, suočava se neminovno s prirodnim granicama svoje kompetentnosti. U toj bi se točki morao dogoditi prijenos znanja i djelovanja na zakonodavca.

Ključne riječi: RAT, NASILJE, LJUDSKA PRAVA, STATISTIKA, EKSPERTNO ZNANJE, NEVLADINE ORGANIZACIJE.

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1 Rather poorly documented reports based on guesstimations and exaggeration were not very useful in arguing that rape should qualify as a war crime.

2 Before, during and after the Balkan wars “population” comprised not only the object of statistical observation; it meant, also, the history of particular collectivity. In almost all counting, numbering, divisions – the origin or statistical continuity of attributes (“markers”) like ethnicity, faith or sex became decisive for actual or future standing of whole regions and collectivities. Thus “population” became defined as “the effect of its past, and the cause of its future” (Cole, 1994:7).

3 Just how far the assessment of “hard statistical data” could be manipulated by official statistics in emergency situation, see in Taylor and Orkin (1998) analysis of South Africa’s apartheid Census data.

4 These NGOs started to use HURIDOC format for human rights violations evidence; it came out, though, that this format is rather unsound, not only from the standpoint of aggregation of data. The question of protection of highly sensitive data became crucial. Therefore, the main NGO dealing with human rights violations in Croatia – Helsinki Committee – abandoned, for the time being, this way of documenting altogether.

5 For known reasons, narratives are irrelevant to the goals of quantitative analysis; nonetheless, as Cole wrote: “Behind the calculations... statistics are haunted by the absence of individual narratives, the untold stories of each particular case” (1994:3). And vice versa: individual narratives of human rights violations are haunted by the lack of generalization. It would be more than useful, then, to help to those two ghosts in negotiating their common space.

6 Sources: interviews with persons responsible for data processing and analysis in Helsinki Committee Croatia. HURIDOC format for violation of human rights data, according to them, is designed for collecting and storing narratives and basic data on victim, alleged perpetrator and event, with low performance when criss-crossing data and weak security parameters.

7 Kovacevic, S. and Meznaric, S. (2000) *Nasilje nad zenama 2000*. Zagreb: Centar za zene zrtve rata. Research report. See also: Belamaric, J., Kovacevic, S. and Neuner, P. (2000) *Violence against women*. Zagreb: Center for Women War Victims.

8 Recent research *Stop Violence against Women Croatia (2000)* done by feminists in Center for Women War Victims in Zagreb showed that many taboos and misperceptions, concerning this issue, exist in post-war Croatian society. Research addressed the problems like awareness of the general public of the intensity and extent of violence, personal experiences with this form of violence, the most common forms of it, differences in opinion and knowledge about violence among social groups, etc. The basic finding could be summarised in the statement that the best way to advocate the issue is to go public, with statistical data – now and then corroborated with (provable) narrative.

9 In translating narratives into aggregates we were rather concerned about reductionism thus being inserted into the variant data on human rights violations. Yet we would agree with Borgatta (1980:8) that concerning relation between aggregated data and individual level “it became evident that (1) while always suspect, aggregate data could suggest findings that exist at the individual level; (2) the analysis of aggregate data could be of interest in itself; (3) comparison of different levels of aggregation and individual – level data could provide interesting findings; and (4) it requires a particular brand of reductionism to attribute some characteristics associated with geographical and other aggregation units to individuals”.

10 When asked, HURIDOC reply (May 2000): adaptation of winEvsys for monitoring violence against women is under way; partner of HURIDOC is Coalition against trafficking in Women based in Manila, Philippines. Their opinion was that, concerning our main “relational” problem (one victim, several acts and statistics), the solution we proposed which was to enter just one act of violence (the most severe one) when in fact there were several acts, would be the wrong one. They reminded us that: “a person may be arrested, tortured and murdered. Thus, the person’s case should be counted when getting the sum of all arrested persons, and again the sum of all tortured persons, and then again included in the sum of all murdered persons. The principal thing is, when presenting statistics, to indicate the total number of events we have had documented.

11 Data we obtained are compatible with findings of Council of Europe special group for combating violence against women (1997).

12 Research in Zagreb, capital of Croatia (Belamaric, J. and others, 2000:29) stated that “even though we live in a culture with a high tolerance towards violence against women, the percentage of people who do agree with the statement: “There are some situations when it is acceptable for a husband/partner to hit his wife/partner” (25.8%) was still quite surprising to us”.