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NA PROSTORU BIVŠE JUGOSLAVIJE**

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BETWEEN LEGAL RECOGNITION AND SOCIAL INCLUSION: WAR VETERANS IN THE POST-YUGOSLAV SPACE

Abstract: More than three decades after the armed conflicts that accompanied the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the social position of war veterans remains an important legal, social, economic and public health issue in the successor states. Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina have developed different mechanisms for recognising veteran status and providing material, pension, health and social rights. However, formal recognition does not necessarily result in substantive social inclusion. This paper examines the relationship between legal recognition, social protection and social acknowledgment of war veterans in the post-Yugoslav space. The analysis is based on a qualitative comparative review of legal frameworks, institutional policies and relevant academic literature concerning Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Three interconnected dimensions of veteran protection are distinguished: legal and status recognition, material and institutional protection, and social recognition and inclusion. Particular attention is devoted to the long-term consequences of war-related trauma, perceived social acknowledgment, quality of life and the changing needs of an ageing veteran population. The analysis indicates that contemporary veteran policy should gradually move beyond a predominantly compensatory model towards an integrated approach combining legal security, accessible health and psychosocial services, economic participation, family support, social inclusion and preservation of dignity. Such an approach does not diminish the importance of veteran status. Rather, it provides a framework through which formal recognition can be transformed into sustainable social citizenship.

Keywords: war veterans; social inclusion; legal recognition; social protection; post-Yugoslav space; social acknowledgment; PTSD

1. Introduction

The social consequences of war do not end with the formal termination of armed conflict. War produces long-term transformations of institutions, communities, families and individual biographies. Among the social groups in

which these consequences remain particularly visible are former combatants. Their transition from military to civilian life raises questions that cannot be reduced to financial compensation for military service or war-related disability. Veteran status is simultaneously a legal category, a social identity and a particular relationship between the individual and the state. This multidimensional character is especially evident in the post-Yugoslav space. The wars of the 1990s created large populations of veterans, disabled veterans, civilian victims and families of killed and missing persons. More than three decades later, the successor states continue to address the social, economic, health and symbolic consequences of these conflicts. At the same time, their systems of veteran protection have developed within different political, legal and institutional contexts. Historical research demonstrates that the relationship between veterans and welfare institutions has deeper roots in Yugoslav history. Newman and Lendák-Kabók (2024) show that war, disability and veteran status were closely related to the development and transformation of welfare provision at several decisive points in twentieth-century Yugoslav history. Veteran status was therefore never exclusively an administrative category. It also represented a particular form of social citizenship and a claim for recognition based on sacrifice and military service. Following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, this relationship became substantially more complex. Different successor states institutionalised different interpretations of the conflicts and created different mechanisms for determining veteran status and associated rights. Such policies affect not only the allocation of resources but also the construction of citizenship categories. Wiegink et al. (2019) argue that veterans constitute a specific category of citizens whose claims involve both recognition and resources and whose relationship with the state remains subject to political negotiation and contestation.

The broader post-Yugoslav context additionally demonstrates that citizenship itself can function as an instrument of inclusion and exclusion following the fragmentation of a federal state (Džankić & Keil, 2021). Veteran policy represents a particularly visible expression of this process because access to rights is simultaneously connected with legal classification, wartime participation and collective interpretations of the past. This paper starts from the assumption that legal recognition is necessary but insufficient for substantive social inclusion. Formal veteran status may provide access to pensions, disability benefits, health care, housing programmes or employment measures. Yet a veteran may remain socially isolated, economically inactive, psychologically burdened or institutionally marginalised despite the existence of such rights. Conversely, strong symbolic recognition cannot substitute for adequate health care, material security or accessible social services. The central research question is therefore: To what extent do contemporary legal and social protection frameworks in the post-Yugoslav space transform formal veteran status into substantive social recognition and inclusion? The analysis focuses comparatively on Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Rather than attempting an exhaustive commentary on every statutory entitlement, the paper examines the broader relationship between legal status, welfare protection, health and psychosocial needs, and social acknowledgment.

2. Methodological and Conceptual Framework

The study adopts a qualitative comparative approach based on the analysis of relevant academic literature, legislation and institutional frameworks concerning veteran populations in Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. These three cases share the institutional legacy of Yugoslavia and the experience of the wars of the 1990s while displaying significantly different post-war political and welfare structures. The comparative method is appropriate because the objective is not to establish a hierarchy between national systems but to identify similarities and differences in the mechanisms through which veteran status is translated into social rights and lived social inclusion. The analytical framework distinguishes three dimensions of veteran protection. The first is legal or status recognition. It concerns the formal determination of who qualifies as a veteran, military disabled person or other beneficiary and which rights follow from this status. The second is material and institutional protection. It includes pensions, financial allowances, disability protection, health services, rehabilitation, housing, employment measures and support for family members. The third is social recognition and inclusion. This concerns the veteran's position within the wider community, perceived acknowledgment of wartime experiences, participation in social life and the possibility of maintaining dignity and meaningful social roles. The distinction is important because veteran welfare is not identical to veteran inclusion. Material transfers can reduce economic insecurity but cannot automatically produce social belonging. Similarly, symbolic recognition can strengthen collective identity but cannot replace adequate institutional care. The concept of social acknowledgment provides an important bridge between these dimensions. Maercker and Müller (2004) conceptualised social acknowledgment as the degree to which survivors of traumatic experiences perceive recognition and understanding from their social environment. Their research indicates that social responses are relevant to psychological recovery and the severity of post-traumatic symptoms. For veteran populations, this relationship is particularly important. War trauma is simultaneously an individual experience and a socially interpreted historical event. Through legislation, welfare institutions, public narratives and everyday interactions, society participates in determining how veterans interpret both their previous military role and their contemporary position.

3. Veteran Status, Recognition and Social Citizenship

Veteran rights occupy a distinctive position within welfare systems. Unlike universal social rights, they are generally connected to a status acquired through military participation, injury, captivity, disability or the death of a family member. They consequently contain both redistributive and recognitional dimensions. The state provides resources but simultaneously communicates that military service and sacrifice possess public significance. Veteran legislation can therefore be interpreted as an institutional form of recognition. The Yugoslav experience illustrates this relationship particularly clearly. Newman and Lendák-Kabók

(2024) demonstrate that welfare responses following major conflicts reflected both immediate social needs and the political values of successive Yugoslav states. Veterans and their families were among the groups through which wider questions concerning disability, labour, social security, health and citizenship were negotiated. After the wars of the 1990s, veteran status became embedded in newly established national and subnational political frameworks. The resulting systems created different categories and hierarchies of recognition. This does not mean that special veteran rights are inherently problematic. Societies may legitimately conclude that people exposed to military service, disability or war trauma deserve particular forms of protection. The analytical problem arises when formal status becomes disconnected from actual social and health needs or when different categories of war-affected citizens obtain substantially different access to welfare institutions. A useful distinction can therefore be made between recognition of status and recognition of personhood. The first asks whether the state formally recognises a person as a veteran. The second asks whether institutions provide the conditions necessary for that person to live with security, dignity and meaningful participation.

The distinction is also relevant to contemporary discussions of institutions and technologically mediated societies. Baltezarević and Battista (2025) emphasise the continuing importance of human contextual understanding in environments increasingly structured by technological and institutional systems. Similarly, Battista et al. (2025) point to the ethical importance of protecting human identity and agency during periods of rapid institutional and technological transformation. Although these studies address a different substantive field, their emphasis on human-centred institutional arrangements is applicable to the present analysis: administrative efficiency cannot substitute for the recognition of individual experience.

4. Serbia: From Ambiguous Recognition to a Consolidated Framework

The Serbian case is historically distinctive because the political relationship between the state and the wars of the 1990s produced ambiguities concerning veteran recognition. Newman and Lendák-Kabók (2024) identify the rump Yugoslav period after 1991 as a particularly important crisis point in the historical relationship between veterans and welfare provision. Contemporary Serbian legislation represents an important institutional change. The Law on the Rights of Veterans, Military Disabled Persons, Civilian Disabled War Victims and Members of Their Families consolidates a broad range of status and material rights. Particularly significant for the present analysis is the connection between veteran protection and the principle of national recognition. Recognition is therefore incorporated into the normative logic of veteran protection rather than treated solely as an informal cultural issue. However, the existence of legislation cannot by itself resolve questions of accessibility and inclusion. Formal entitlement must be translated into effective institutional practice. Veterans must be able to understand procedures, prove status, access services and exercise rights without disproportionate administrative burdens. The Serbian system should therefore be

evaluated not simply according to the formal number of entitlements but according to its capacity to respond to changing veteran needs. Those needs increasingly concern ageing, chronic illness, reduced work capacity, social isolation and the long-term psychological consequences of wartime exposure rather than only immediate post-demobilisation reintegration. This life-course transformation requires a corresponding development in policy orientation.

5. Croatia: Extensive Institutional Recognition and Persistent Psychosocial Needs

Croatia has developed an extensive institutional system of veteran recognition. Its contemporary framework provides numerous rights relating to pensions, disability, health care, rehabilitation, housing, employment and family protection.

The Croatian case demonstrates how veteran status can become strongly institutionalised within welfare policy and public memory. Yet extensive formal recognition does not automatically eliminate the psychological and social consequences of war. Research among Croatian veterans provides particularly valuable evidence. Ljubotina et al. (2007) followed 152 Croatian war veterans participating in group psychotherapy for PTSD. Their results showed very low perceived social acknowledgment, especially from the wider social environment. A particularly important finding was that 92.9% of participants perceived insufficient acknowledgment from governmental institutions and 95.4% from the state in general. These results reveal an important paradox: a society can possess extensive formal mechanisms for veteran protection while individual veterans continue to perceive insufficient acknowledgment. This distinction between institutionalised recognition and experienced recognition is central to the argument developed here.

Earlier research on secondary victimisation similarly suggested that insufficient institutional response and inadequate social recognition could represent an additional burden for veterans already suffering from PTSD (Vukušić et al., 2003). The problem therefore extends beyond the initial traumatic event to the quality of the post-war social environment.

Long-term health outcomes reinforce this conclusion. Braš et al. (2011a) examined 248 Croatian veterans with chronic combat-related PTSD and found substantial associations between PTSD symptoms and reduced quality of life. In a related study involving 369 participants, Braš et al. (2011b) demonstrated that the coexistence of PTSD and chronic lower-back pain produced an especially substantial deterioration in quality of life. Lončar et al. (2014) further showed that traumatic war experiences, material status and subjective quality of life contributed differently to specific PTSD symptom clusters among Croatian veterans who survived wartime imprisonment. More recent evidence confirms the persistence of these problems. Braš et al. (2019) compared 277 Croatian veterans with and without PTSD. Veterans with PTSD reported lower health-related quality of life across almost all domains and perceived less social support from family, friends and significant others. The authors consequently emphasised

the need for person-centred interdisciplinary health programmes. These findings suggest that extensive veteran legislation should not be interpreted as the endpoint of social protection. Its effectiveness must ultimately be evaluated through the lived outcomes of veterans and their families.

6. Bosnia and Herzegovina: Fragmentation, Status and Distribution

Bosnia and Herzegovina represents the most institutionally complex of the three cases. Veteran protection developed within a decentralised post-Dayton political system characterised by multiple administrative levels, different wartime military formations and overlapping categories of beneficiaries. Obradović (2017) demonstrates that veteran policy in Bosnia and Herzegovina developed as a strongly status-based form of social policy. The system has been shaped by political mobilisation, veteran organisations and the institutional structures that emerged after the war. The challenge is therefore not reducible to the amount of public expenditure. It also concerns the distributional logic of welfare provision. Obradović and Filić (2019) place war-related benefits within a broader analysis of inequality and welfare-state clientelism. They argue that unequal access to benefits and services is connected with status-based welfare arrangements and political structures created after the conflict. War-related benefits are especially significant because access can depend upon military service affiliation and the institutional jurisdiction in which a beneficiary resides. Two implications follow: First, recognition can become stratified. Different wartime affiliations and administrative structures can generate different opportunities for accessing rights. Second, extensive categorical spending does not necessarily produce an inclusive welfare state. The psychological dimension is equally important. Kučukalić and Džubur-Kulenović (2009) found significantly lower satisfaction across quality-of-life dimensions among Bosnian veterans with chronic PTSD compared with combat-exposed veterans without PTSD. Related research on Bosnian Army veterans similarly emphasised the interaction between PTSD and the post-traumatic social environment (Džubur Kulenović et al., 2010). A sustainable model must therefore reconcile two legitimate objectives: recognition of war-related sacrifice and equitable protection based on contemporary social and health needs.

7. Social Acknowledgment, Trauma and the Limits of Compensation

One of the strongest conclusions emerging from the literature is that veteran wellbeing cannot adequately be explained through income or formal legal status alone. Maercker and Müller (2004) demonstrated the importance of social acknowledgment as a recovery-related factor following traumatic experiences. Their model distinguishes recognition from the social environment from experiences of general or family disapproval. This concept is especially applicable to veterans because military trauma occurs within a collective historical context. Veterans encounter social interpretations of the war throughout their subsequent civilian lives. Ljubotina et al. (2007) demonstrated this connection directly

in the Croatian context. Even years after wartime exposure, PTSD symptoms remained intense among many participants while perceived acknowledgment from society and institutions was very low. Research throughout the former Yugoslav space confirms the long-term nature of war-related psychological consequences. Priebe et al. (2009) examined 264 individuals from the former Yugoslavia who had experienced war-related PTSD but had not received appropriate psychiatric or psychological treatment. Interviews were conducted on average more than ten years after the traumatic experiences. PTSD remained present in a large proportion of participants, while older age, combat experience, unemployment, living alone and other post-war social factors were associated with poorer subjective quality of life. The significance of the social environment is also visible beyond formally defined veteran samples. Başoğlu et al. (2005), in a study of 1,358 war survivors from Belgrade, Rijeka, Sarajevo and Banja Luka, demonstrated associations between war-related traumatic exposure, perceptions of redress and justice, and post-traumatic psychological reactions. This suggests that the relationship between recovery and recognition is embedded in broader post-conflict social conditions. These findings have direct policy implications. A model centred exclusively on compensation risks treating veteran protection as a completed transaction: military service occurred, status was recognised and financial rights were allocated. Chronic trauma, however, does not follow an administrative timetable. Social inclusion therefore requires continuous access to appropriate mental health services, rehabilitation and community support. It also requires attention to families. Frančisković et al. (2007) documented secondary traumatisation among wives of war veterans with PTSD, illustrating that the psychological consequences of military trauma may extend beyond the individual veteran. Research on the quality of life of Croatian veteran families similarly indicates that wartime injury, PTSD and loss can have lasting consequences for spouses and household wellbeing.

Veteran policy should consequently treat the family not merely as a derivative beneficiary category but as an integral component of the veteran's social environment.

8. The Ageing of the Post-Yugoslav Veteran Population

Time introduces an additional transformation that is becoming increasingly important for public policy. More than thirty years have passed since the major conflicts of the 1990s. Individuals who participated in those wars as young adults are increasingly entering later middle age and older age. The social and health needs of the veteran population are consequently changing. The classical post-war policy question concerned reintegration: how can former combatants return to employment, family life and civilian society? The contemporary question is increasingly different: how can societies provide dignity, health, economic security and social participation to veterans as they age? This transition requires closer integration between veteran policy, pension systems, health care, mental health services, rehabilitation and long-term social care. Existing research demonstrates why this is necessary. Chronic PTSD may coexist with physical illness and

chronic pain. Braš et al. (2011b) identified a particularly strong deterioration of quality of life when PTSD and chronic lower-back pain were simultaneously present. Braš et al. (2019) found that PTSD continued to influence both health-related quality of life and perceived social support almost three decades after the beginning of the Croatian war. Priebe et al. (2009) identified older age as one of the factors associated with persistent PTSD and lower subjective quality of life in people exposed to the wars of former Yugoslavia. This finding acquires increasing policy relevance as the entire cohort affected by the conflicts ages. The implication is significant. A fragmented system in which pension rights, mental health treatment, physical rehabilitation and social care operate independently may be poorly suited to an ageing veteran population with interconnected needs. The future of veteran protection therefore increasingly lies in integrated, life-course-oriented support.

9. Discussion: From Compensation to Substantive Inclusion

The comparison of Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina demonstrates that there is no single post-Yugoslav model of veteran protection. Serbia illustrates a movement from historically ambiguous recognition towards a more consolidated statutory framework. Croatia demonstrates extensive institutionalisation of veteran rights and public recognition, accompanied nevertheless by persistent psychosocial problems among parts of the veteran population. Bosnia and Herzegovina illustrates the consequences of institutional fragmentation and strongly status-based welfare allocation. Despite these differences, the cases reveal a common conceptual problem: formal status cannot be treated as a sufficient indicator of successful veteran policy. Based on the comparative analysis, we propose a three-level model for evaluating veteran protection.

Level 1: Legal recognition.

Is veteran status clearly defined, accessible and legally secure?

Level 2: Material and institutional security. Does recognised status provide effective access to income security, health care, rehabilitation, housing, employment and appropriate social services?

Level 3: Social inclusion and acknowledgment.

Can veterans participate meaningfully in family and community life, and do they perceive that their experiences and contemporary needs are recognised by institutions and society? The three levels are cumulative. Failure at the first produces legal invisibility. Failure at the second produces formally recognised but materially insecure veterans. Failure at the third can create materially protected yet socially isolated citizens. This model also permits a more balanced discussion of veteran privileges. Public debate can become polarised between two positions: veterans as a population to whom society owes a permanent debt and veterans as privileged welfare beneficiaries whose entitlements place pressure on public finances. Neither position is sufficient. Rights related to military service, disability and war trauma can represent legitimate forms of social recognition. At the same time, public policy has a responsibility to evaluate whether those benefits address

contemporary social, economic and health needs. The appropriate question is therefore not simply whether veteran benefits are generous or insufficient. It is whether the structure of veteran protection produces security, dignity and inclusion. This approach is consistent with the broader understanding of social citizenship as more than formal legal membership. Recognition must become visible through institutional accessibility and through the capacity of individuals to participate in social life.

10. Policy Recommendations

The comparative analysis supports several recommendations. First, post-Yugoslav states should further develop integrated veteran support models connecting legal assistance, primary health care, specialist treatment, psychological support, physical rehabilitation and social services. Veterans with complex needs should not be required to navigate multiple unrelated institutional systems. Second, regular assessment of contemporary veteran needs should complement status-based entitlement systems. Historical recognition and present social need are different dimensions and should not be treated as mutually exclusive. Third, psychosocial support should remain available throughout the life course. Evidence concerning chronic PTSD demonstrates that the need for treatment may persist or re-emerge decades after war. Fourth, policy should explicitly address the ageing of veteran populations. Coordination between veteran institutions, pension systems, primary health care, mental health services and long-term care will become progressively more important. Fifth, families should be incorporated systematically into support programmes. Veteran wellbeing is embedded within family relationships, while prolonged psychological distress can affect spouses and other family members. Sixth, governments should evaluate not only administrative outputs, such as the number of recognised beneficiaries and the value of financial transfers, but also substantive outcomes including health-related quality of life, economic security, social participation and perceived institutional acknowledgment. Seventh, administrative digitalisation should not create new barriers for older or disabled veterans. Digital services may improve institutional efficiency, but accessible personal assistance and non-digital routes for exercising rights should remain available. A human-centred approach to technological transformation is particularly important when users may face age, disability, health or digital-literacy barriers (Baltezarević & Battista, 2025; Battista et al., 2025). Finally, regional academic and professional cooperation should be strengthened. Comparative research does not require a uniform historical interpretation of the wars of the 1990s. It requires recognition that successor states face overlapping contemporary problems involving ageing, disability, trauma, economic insecurity and long-term social inclusion.

11. Conclusion

Three decades after the wars accompanying the dissolution of Yugoslavia, veteran policy is entering a new historical phase. The immediate problems of

demobilisation and post-war reintegration have gradually been supplemented, and in many cases replaced, by long-term questions of health, ageing, social security, family wellbeing and dignity. Legal systems in Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina have responded differently to veteran populations, reflecting different institutional structures, welfare traditions and political histories. Yet the comparative analysis presented in this paper indicates a shared principle: legal recognition represents the beginning rather than the completion of social protection. A veteran who possesses recognised legal status but lacks adequate health care, economic security, psychosocial support or social participation is formally recognised but incompletely included. Similarly, symbolic celebration without accessible institutional support cannot constitute substantive recognition. Contemporary veteran policy should therefore develop from a predominantly compensatory paradigm towards an integrated model of social citizenship. Such a model should preserve legitimate status rights while connecting them with health and psychosocial care, economic security, family support and active social participation. The ageing of the post-Yugoslav veteran population makes this transition increasingly urgent. The question facing Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina is no longer only how to compensate the consequences of wars that ended three decades ago. It is how to construct sustainable institutions capable of responding to the changing needs of the people who participated in them. The fundamental objective of veteran policy should therefore not be merely to determine what society owes veterans because of the past. It should also determine what institutional conditions are necessary for veterans and their families to live with security, recognition and dignity in the present and in the decades to come.

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