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Transnational Activism against Genocide Denial: Protesting Peter Handke's Nobel Prize in Literature

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Abstract

This article addresses the protest against the 2019 Nobel Prize in Literature to Peter Handke as an example of transnational memory activism. It analyzes from a transnational mobilization perspective how activists achieved a globally visible protest in Stockholm and what role memory played in the protest mobilization and framing. Genocide survivors and former refugees, human rights activists, journalists, and academics formed a transnational protest coalition. In this way, they drew international attention to their outrage at the honoring of an author who is criticized for denying the Bosnian genocide. The analysis shows that memories of the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia and genocide united the diverse protesters as a “memory community” and shaped their framing. The protesters warned of the potential repercussions of the Nobel Prize to Handke for the internationalization and normalization of genocide denial. They argued that locally, Serb nationalist politicians can find legitimation in it for divisive politics. Moreover, they put the prize in a larger context of globally rising right extremism and islamophobia that find inspiration in the very Serb nationalist ideology and its propagators of the 1990s conflict.

Keywords: Memory activism; genocide denial; diaspora; Peter Handke; Nobel Prize

Introduction

On October 10, 2019, the Swedish Academy announced the Nobel Prize in Literature to Peter Handke “for an influential work that with linguistic ingenuity has explored the periphery and the specificity of human experience” (Swedish Academy 2019). Outrage that this choice was inappropriate immediately accompanied the breaking news. Critics intervened to remind the public that the Austrian writer has been condemned for denying genocide and minimizing the atrocities committed during the violent break-up of former Yugoslavia. A heated debate over the honoring of the popular but contested author unfolded over the two months until the Nobel Prize Award Ceremony on December 10, when the protest culminated in a rally in Stockholm.

In fact, it was a re-emergence of an “old debate” about Handke’s literary work and other activities related to the violent dissolution of the former Yugoslavia. This debate began in the 1990s and was most intensively led in a German-speaking context. It was triggered when Handke published two travelogues in 1996, in which he was seeking nothing less than “Justice for Serbia.” In a first essay “A Journey to the Rivers: Justice for Serbia” (“Eine winterliche Reise zu den Flüssen Donau, Save, Morawa und Drina oder Gerechtigkeit für Serbien”), he wrote about his travel to Serbia in late 1995, shortly after the Srebrenica genocide. Critical of what he perceived as one-sided Western media reports on the conflicts and against Serbia, he set out to see with his own eyes. However, what he could witness was limited, given that he only travelled the Serbian side of the Drina River, distant from the violence. Instead of providing evidence for his claims, he cast doubt over “guilt,” war

crimes, and genocide committed by Serb forces during the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia. This continued in his essay on a trip to eastern Bosnia in the immediate post-war period entitled “Summer Postscript to a Winter Journey” (“Sommerlicher Nachtrag zu einer winterlichen Reise”). The essays and later provocative texts and statements sparked indignation. A large range of intellectuals, including individuals coming from the former Yugoslavia, spoke out against his assertions, which lacked substantive evidence, and his pejorative commentary about the victims and those who reported about them. Given the seriousness of the issue, they were shocked by his cheeky style of “just asking” if this could have really happened the way it was reported (today often referred to as “whataboutism”). Others defended him. The dispute filled the pages of German main print media, and among others, led to two separate collections of texts that reflect the polarization (Zülch 1996; Deichmann 1999). The controversy re-emerged whenever Handke published new works concerned with the former Yugoslavia. He also fell into disgrace for maintaining contact with Serb war criminals and his harsh reactions to readers asking why he did not travel to Bosnia in 1995 or does not recognize the July 1995 events in Srebrenica as genocide despite legal judgments. Prizes to the author were also accompanied by protest (e.g., 2006 Heinrich Heine award, 2014 Ibsen Prize).

This time, with the author winning what arguably is the most prestigious international prize in literature, the debate took place on an international stage. A range of people from around the world voiced their opposition. They used this event to raise pressing questions concerning the international extent of the denial of genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina (hereinafter Bosnia or BiH) and addressed the role of the Swedish Academy in fueling it through its choice. This again demonstrated the political dimension of the debate about this author. Members even left the Nobel Committee for Literature or boycotted the Nobel Week because of the public pressure (Flood 2019). Several politicians and ambassadors from post-Yugoslav countries condemned the prize, while Serb politicians congratulated; Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and Kosovo sent no ambassadors to the Award Ceremony or declared Handke *persona non grata* (Ristić 2020 summarizes political reactions).

In this article, I address the transnational mobilization against the Swedish Academy’s choice of Peter Handke as laureate as an example of transnational memory activism. I analyze how activists used the global event of the Nobel Prize Award Ceremony as a political opportunity to stage a globally visible protest in Stockholm and what role memory played in their mobilization. To this end, I draw upon a transnational mobilization perspective. I focus on how they formed a broad transnational coalition composed of genocide survivors and former refugees, human rights activists, journalists, and academics, and how they framed their opposition to the highly renowned prize to the author. This shows well the strategic choices in the protest organization. Moreover, it shows what makes this an interesting case for scholars of diaspora activism. It represents activism that is not exclusively driven by diasporic actors (or with some sympathizers). Rather, it is activism with considerable involvement of diaspora actors, who foreground a civic instead of particularistic (e.g., ethnoreligious) identity. They stood side-by-side with a large variety of other civil society actors to make the case for dignified public discourse grounded in human rights and against revisionist perspectives on recent Balkan history. Regarding the role of memories, I address two aspects relevant for the mobilization and framing. On the one hand, collective and individual memories of the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia and genocide united the diverse protesters as a “memory community.” They have long been engaged in seeking transitional justice and recognition of the Bosnian genocide. On the other hand, driven by these memories, the protesters warned of the potential repercussions of this Nobel Prize and its political instrumentalization for the internationalization and normalization of genocide denial. Regarding the local context, they pointed out how Serb nationalist politicians in BiH and Serbia can find legitimation in it for their divisive politics. But they also underlined why it is disconcerting far beyond the local context. They pointed at globally rising right extremism and islamophobia that find inspiration in the very Serb nationalist ideology and its propagators of the 1990s conflict (e.g., the terrorist attack in Christchurch, March 2019). This research is based on participant observation during the protests in Stockholm in

December 2019, interviews and conversations with organizers and participants, and complemented by articles published in the context of the debate.

I first present the theoretical underpinnings that inform this analysis and provide an overview on genocide denial. I then turn to the analysis of the protests. I propose that the development of the contestation can be described in three, partly overlapping stages that resulted in the formation of a transnational protest coalition. I then address the protest framing and the critical issues that the protesters discussed. Following the elaborations on the eventual protest events in Stockholm, I finally examine the role of memories in the coalition-building and framing. Based on the analysis of the protest and its echo in the continuing debate on the denial of the Bosnian genocide, I close with remarks pointing at the significance of the contestation of Handke's Nobel Prize. It can be said that this award has been a critical event that encouraged the intensification of efforts against the internationally rising denial of the Bosnian genocide.

Theoretical Underpinnings

I approach this protest as an instance of transnational memory activism. I draw upon insights from three research fields that are increasingly brought into dialogue with each other, namely memory studies, social movement studies, and diaspora studies. Studying linkages between these fields helps to disentangle the interrelationship between memory and activism and to explore how diaspora and other actors mobilize in transnational space for a certain interpretation of the past.

In recent years, researchers of both memory and social movements engage in an interdisciplinary exploration of the nexus between memory and social movements (Daphi and Zamponi 2019) or memory and activism (Rigney 2018). They systematize research on the interrelationship between memory and activism along three, empirically overlapping dimensions: research on *memories of activism* is concerned with how society recollects/forgets past activism; research on *memories in activism* asks how memories of the past or memories of previous struggles inform the practice of activism in the present; and *memory activism* describes activism that is concerned with the way the past is remembered.

Two dimensions are relevant in the here discussed case. First, it is a case of *memory activism*. This research strand addresses the practices of activism that have memories of the past as their object of contention. It asks *how activists try to engage in the construction of public memory about the past* (Daphi and Zamponi 2019, 402f). Memory studies point to the selectivity of what is officially remembered/forgotten and pay attention to the actors, processes, and factors involved in this selection (Daphi and Zamponi 2019, 402f). Protest groups and movements can be such actors in memory struggles who offer an alternative or counter-memory that challenges hegemonic narratives of the past promoted by more powerful actors. Second, it is a case where *memories* had a strong *influence on collective action*. Research along this dimension explores *how memories and memory work affect the mobilization by shaping a certain context or condition for it* (Daphi and Zamponi 2019, 405f). This dimension highlights the empowering effects of memories (of historical events, previous protests) on practices of activism (not necessarily about mnemonic goals). For instance, memories of traumatic events can be a critical incentive for collective action aimed at raising awareness of injustices. Memories can also shape the dynamics of contention. Activists can use them to legitimate collective action and influence strategic decisions, identity formation, and framing processes. Collectively shared narratives of the past thus act as symbolic resources. Activists can appropriate them to strengthen solidarity among activists, encourage identification with the movement, and generate symbols representing the protest.

A considerable involvement of diaspora actors characterizes the present case. In recent years, research flourishes that explores the engagement of conflict-generated diasporas geared towards positive contributions to post-war processes, including peacebuilding, dealing with difficult pasts, and transitional justice (e.g., Haider 2014). This research challenges earlier held notions that portrayed a negative influence of diasporas (Hall and Swain 2008). Indeed, the Bosnian diaspora

involved in the present example has considerable potential to make such positive contributions (e.g., Karabegović 2014; Koinova and Karabegović 2017; Halilovich et al. 2018; Karabegović 2019; Paul 2021). To explore transnational mobilization processes by diaspora entrepreneurs, researchers taking a constructivist approach to diasporas often employ canonical concepts developed by social movement studies (e.g., Sökefeld 2006; Adamson 2012; Quinsaat 2013; Koinova 2016; Koinova and Karabegović 2019). The here discussed example contributes to this literature. It represents a case of transnational mobilization against genocide denial that is not exclusively driven by diasporic actors (or with some sympathizers) but with considerable involvement of diaspora actors. They are one “category” of actors among others and furthermore foreground a civic identity and a universal human-rights cause rather than particularistic and exclusionary ethnonational identity markers. They stood side-by-side with a large variety of other actors, such as writers, journalists, and human rights activists.

Social movement studies conceptualize a range of processes and mechanisms to study the dynamics of (transnational) political contestation (e.g., McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996; Tarrow 2005). I suggest that particularly two concepts – coalition building and framing processes – help to identify features specific to this protest regarding strategic choices in the mobilization process and the role that memories played in it.

The discussed protest represents an instance of mobilization against a global event, the annual awarding of the Nobel Prizes. Previous research on transnational and diaspora activism showed how global events, such as the Olympic Games, can provide a political opportunity structure that can be used as a global stage to draw attention to past injustices (Koinova and Karabegović 2017; Catić 2015). To mobilize protest related to such temporarily limited events, activists with a shared vision of a joint political influence can engage in coalition-building (Tarrow 2005, 164). Protest coalitions are collaborative and means-oriented arrangements through which distinct organizational entities can pool resources and coordinate efforts to work towards change (Levi and Murphy 2006, 654; Tarrow 2005, 166). Most often, and especially in cross-border settings, coalitions form ad hoc around short-term threats and opportunities and are not meant to endure (Tarrow 2005, 165). Corresponding to the character of a global event taking place at a distinct point in time, the present protest was largely limited to episodic action organized by an event-based coalition. A short duration but high degree of involvement characterize such coalitions and they have a potential for future collaboration if the involved activists can identify shared identities (Tarrow 2005, 167). A transformation into sustained collective action depends on the ability to identify an opportunity in international politics to transform the target that sparked the episodic outburst into a long-term strategic objective (Tarrow 2005, 168; Koinova 2016).

Scholars of contentious politics argue that for protesters to act, they need to maintain a vision that collective action can redress an identified problem (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996, 5). Framing processes describe the strategic efforts to identify and articulate shared worldviews, grievances, and identities that motivate and justify collective action (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, 6). To communicate their intentions, gain attention, and attract supporters, activists need to relate their worldviews and programs to general claims that resonate with culturally shared understandings (“common sense”) of their target audiences (Tarrow 2005, 61). This is even more difficult in transnational campaigns. In these, activists attempt to insert global themes (e.g., human rights), symbols, and forms of action from abroad to orient their claims-making in a domestic political culture (Tarrow 2005, 60f). They need to construct frames that are relevant to local issues and resonate with global themes, and to develop a unified repertoire of collective action (Tarrow 2005, 75).

Finally, the people who voiced their shared disagreement with the Nobel Prize laureate were dispersed widely. Therefore, the role of digital connectivity and social media (especially Facebook and Twitter) in the international discussion of the matter and the quick mobilization and organization of the protest merits consideration. This underlines the importance of modern communication technologies for short-term mobilization. Especially the 2011 Arab Spring sparked

interest in how these technological advancements changed social movements and their perception. Research discusses that as organizational resources that involve low costs, they make connecting, exchanging, organizing, and outreach easier and more efficient (e.g., Della Porta and Mosca 2005; Smidi and Shahin 2017). Moreover, they enable movements to “signal power and signal to power,” as Tufekci (2017) nailed down their strength to achieve more visibility and to display their capacity to voice their protest as a mass.

The Muddy Waters of Genocide Denial

The protesters intended to raise awareness of the intricacy of genocide denial and thus sharpen a public understanding of the problematic nature of Handke’s statements. I therefore outline what the denial of genocide and other mass atrocities entails. Denial is most commonly a constitutive part in the commitment of genocide (Bosnia being a case in point). In his model of the “Ten Stages of Genocide,” Gregory Stanton (2016) includes denial as the final stage of genocide. This model is often used for educational purposes and the protesters also referred to it. As a stage model, it suggests a certain sequencing. But Stanton recognizes that denial takes place simultaneously with previous stages, that is, during the perpetration of atrocities and in their aftermath. This is also emphasized by recent genocide scholarship that debates the stage model (for a critical discussion, see e.g., Theriault 2022). For instance, it criticizes the preoccupation with denial after atrocities. Researchers explore how denial as an ideological underpinning drives perpetrators to commit genocide and how the manifestations of denial develop in an ongoing process (e.g., Massey 2022).

Most obviously, denial can involve acts like the burning of evidence and covering up of human bodies in mass graves. However, genocide denial comes in diverse manifestations and discursive strategies. This also applies to the writings of Peter Handke, in which he casts doubt and relativizes crimes by means of rhetorical questioning. Some of them might not immediately be understood as such and might therefore themselves be downplayed or “relativized.” This is also evident in commentaries defending Handke, including those by members of the Nobel Committee for Literature defending the decision. They highlight the literary quality of his texts and stylize him as an unpolitical writer. Sharply put, they claim that he might just have been a bit confused and naïve but is an innocent anti-fascist who is nostalgic about Yugoslavia and has become a victim of attacks (e.g., Struck 2019; BBC 2019; see also Herzinger 2019).

Even if seemingly less aggressive, such forms of denial are easily inserted into public discourse and their consequences are not less harmful. Israel Charny (2012) identifies common templates for discursive strategies of denial besides outright denial. Such strategies that confuse or cloud the events and their context are: the claiming that deaths were inadvertent in a conflict situation or that political leaders did not authorize the massacres; the minimizing of death tolls; the reversing of victim-perpetrator roles and claiming that killings were committed only in retaliation or self-defense (victim blaming); and the occasional acknowledging that “something” has happened, but immediately embedding it in narratives that relativize and revise the historical events.

Regarding the genocide in Bosnia, all of these strategies can be identified. They are promoted in Serb nationalist discourse, in international and scholarly circles by both the political right and the left (e.g., Bećirević 2014; Massey 2022), and in Handke’s literary work. Emir Suljagić (in Hanson-Green 2020, 6) therefore claims that a genocide has rarely been as normalized as the Bosnian genocide. This process began simultaneously with the genocide, for instance, through the perpetrators’ expansive cover-up campaign, but also the international community’s downplaying of the crimes in its hesitant reaction to the atrocities. The Srebrenica Genocide Denial Report 2020 identifies the most frequently deployed strategies of denial in Serb nationalism, especially in relation to the Srebrenica genocide that culminated in the events of July 1995. These are: the questioning of established facts, death tolls and identities of victims; claims of an international anti-Serb

conspiracy; and nationalist historical revisionism and glorification of war criminals (Hanson-Green 2020). Emphasizing the latter, and based on the Bosnian genocide, Hariz Halilovich even suggests extending Stanton's model, with "triumphalism" as an additional phase. In this, "the politics behind genocide do not deny the killings any longer, but rather they glorify them, celebrate their deeds, humiliate the survivors, build monuments to the perpetrators at the sites of the massacres, and create a culture of triumphalism" (Halilovich 2018, 2498). This pervades politics and mainstream popular culture and increases the likelihood that violence recurs (Karčić 2022).

Three Stages of International Contestation

Turning to the protest mobilization against the Nobel Prize in Literature to Peter Handke, I suggest that the international contestation took place in three, partly overlapping stages. It began with immediate individual condemnations, followed by first collective actions. Eventually, the protest was elevated to a global level of visibility through the formation of a transnational protest coalition and a manifestation on the day of the Nobel Award Ceremony. I briefly outline the development of the protest, focusing particularly on the latter.

Immediate Responses and the Public Debate(s)

Immediately after the Swedish Academy's announcement of the 2019 winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, numerous reactions appeared in the media and on social media. Critics expressed their incomprehension and dissent given the contested nature of Handke's work on the former Yugoslavia, which they deemed inconsistent with the aims of the Nobel Prize in Literature (for a chronology of reactions, see Nachtkritik 2019; an analysis of the reactions, see Ristić 2020). A controversially led debate about Handke flared up again. While the arguments remained largely unchanged, this time, the debate had a far greater reach given the international attention to the award of the Nobel Prize and its discussion on social media.

There are three observations that I find noteworthy about the media debate(s) and its participants on side of the critics. First, many of them reflected upon their positionality in this debate and shared memories – for instance, of the war or encounters with the author. Second, the debate made visible a large number of individuals from the former Yugoslavia, many of whom fled the violence during the war in BiH and are now located in Europe and North America. They tried to bring their concern closer to the public by sharing their experiences of genocidal violence and displacement. Additionally, many of them now appeared as successfully established intellectuals, writers, and literary scholars equipped with the knowledge and familiar with relevant questions discussed in the debate. For example, they took a stand against the possibility of separating an author and her/his literary work and for the educative role of the Nobel Prize in bringing literature closer to the people. Some were quick to provide in-depth analyzes of Handke's writing and activities in relation to former Yugoslavia, past debates, and the consequences of the Swedish Academy's choice (e.g., Bremer 2019; Hemon 2019; Mahmutović 2019a; Preljević 2019b). Third, even though this was an international issue, to a large extent, the debate(s) took place in national contexts and with partly different foci shaped by domestic discourses. For instance, in the German-speaking context, which might be most familiar with Handke's work, the debate was strongly focused on the role of morals in literature. The most prominent voice was Saša Stanišić, when he received the German Book Award only a few days later. In a very personal speech, he took a strong standpoint for "a literature that is not cynical, not dishonest, and that does not aim to take its readers for mugs by dressing up the poetic in lies" (Stanišić 2019, author's translation). It kicked-off the German-speaking debate and was recognized beyond Germany. In Sweden, with its Nobel tradition, the already conflict-ridden Swedish Academy and the ambivalent track record of past Nobel Prizes in Literature (e.g., Knut Hamsun, who supported the Nazi regime) were at the center of the political debate.

Moving towards Collective Action

Collective responses from civil society in several locations soon followed, including letters, petitions, and street actions. We can understand these as first attempts at (partly transnational) coordination to make victim-centered claims targeting the Swedish Academy. I mention some of them.

In an exceptional instance of criticism of a literary prize, the writers' association PEN International (and its American and German branches) took an uncompromising stand. It argued that the Nobel Prize in Literature "does not only recognize the literary works and prowess of a writer, but also legitimizes the entire body of a writer's work, including any works which comment on current affairs. [...] At a time when leaders and public figures sow division and intolerance, and court populism, we must celebrate the works and voices of those among us who seek to do the opposite" (PEN International 2019).

In Sarajevo, the Mothers of Srebrenica and the Association of Victims and Witnesses of Genocide rallied in front of the Swedish Embassy to demand from the Swedish Academy to withdraw the award for the first time. They timed their first rally ahead of a visit by the Swedish Crown Princess and Prince to BiH, to hand them a letter to the Swedish Royal Court (Kovačević 2019). At another rally, they expressed their anger about the Nobel Committee's defense in a letter to the BiH Community of Publishers, in which it argued that it would celebrate an extraordinary literary work and not a person (Dizdarević 2019). Shortly before a delegation of the Mothers set out for the protests in Sweden, it pleased them to receive a letter from the Royal Family (NI 2019a). It expressed that they know what happened in Srebrenica and what pain the mothers suffer. They supported the Mothers' struggle and court judgments, but have no influence on the selection of Nobel Prize laureates. Other street actions took place in front of the Swedish Embassy in Pristina (ORF 2019), and Bosnian concentration camp survivors rallied in Gothenburg (Duračak 2019).

The Germany-based NGO Society for Threatened Peoples (Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker) has a conflictive relationship with Handke since the 1990s. This time, it initiated a protest letter signed by human rights organizations from post-Yugoslav countries (GfbV 2019a). They urged the Swedish Academy to ask Handke to apologize in his Acceptance Speech to the genocide victims for having used his literary skills to deny their experience. Otherwise, it should insist that he relinquish the Prize. The NGO also urged his publisher Suhrkamp to "appeal to Handke to take moral responsibility for his words" (GfbV 2019b).

Just hours after the Nobel Prize laureate became known, a Kosovo-born IT entrepreneur based in Canada, launched an online petition. It demanded the Nobel Prize Committee to "Revoke Nobel Prize for literature awarded to Peter Handke" (Shushka 2019). More than 60,000 individuals from around the world signed it, and it drew regional and international media attention, and served as a platform to mobilize for the protests in Stockholm (Abadžija 2019).

Organizing a Transnational Protest Coalition

Parallel to these first protest actions, members of the Bosnian community in Stockholm came together to plan a demonstration on the day of the Award Ceremony. They understood that the overwhelming criticism of the Swedish Academy and the reactions to it by the Swedish Academy and some of its members provided a window of opportunity to further increase the public pressure by taking the streets. They saw in the Award Ceremony as a globally observed event a political opportunity to elevate the protest to a global level of visibility. At this third stage of contestation, the activists worked towards the unification of the diverse critics. They formed a transnational protest coalition that gave the protest a truly international character adequately modeled to underline their shared concern about the morally inappropriate signal that the choice of the laureate sends.

Sweden is not only home to the Swedish Academy. It also accommodates one of the largest conflict-generated Bosnian (primarily Bosnian Muslim/Bosniak) diasporas (estimated at 80,000, Halilovich et al. 2018). Conditions for the organization of the protest through Bosnian Swedish

networks were favorable and shaped the nature of the protest mobilization in terms of the organizational networks through which it took place. Largely welcoming policies helped Bosnian refugees, who arrived in the 1990s, to integrate quickly into Swedish society and to develop an extensive and well-organized network of community and victim organizations across Sweden. Overwhelmingly Swedish citizens today, they largely maintain conciliatory attitudes towards the conflict in their country of origin and are socially and politically very active, with several Bosnian Swedes pursuing political careers (Karabegović 2014, 462). They simultaneously maintain ties to Bosnians elsewhere and “back home.” In Sweden, like in several other countries of settlement (e.g., USA, Netherlands), Bosnians became very involved in public genocide commemorations. In this way, they remember their losses, maintain their identity, and engage with the society and political institutions (e.g., Halilovich 2015). Moreover, they closely monitor and react to Serb nationalist propaganda and numerous instances of historical revisionism and genocide denial in their countries of settlement and called upon relevant institutions to counter these. This has become a focal point of unified Bosnian diaspora activism that shows their increased capacity to act within and across countries.

In early November, a handful of Bosnian activists teamed up to coordinate the protest organization and mobilize for it (e.g., on Facebook, see Šabanović, Mahmutović, and Kadirić 2019). All of them were active in community organizations and as organizers of genocide commemorations, but they organized the protest independently. Encouraged by the observation that they were not alone in their anger, the organizers felt they could not remain silent but had a historical responsibility emanating from their origin and experiences. They aimed to insert their perspectives and shift the foci of the discourse beyond world literature to a greater concern with the history of genocide and how its denial hampers reconciliation processes in the post-Yugoslav societies. Adopting a long-term perspective beyond the actual award, they saw a need for a democratic discourse about how to prevent dehumanizing ideologies from gaining traction in and beyond the region.

The organizers’ motivation was a mix of biographic experiences and professional competence to take a substantiated stand on the matter. For instance, Teufika Šabanović aimed to pay tribute to her father, who went missing in the Srebrenica genocide and whose remains were found after twelve years. She took a stand for a dignified treatment of genocide victims, whom Handke mocked and the Committee members hurt when suggesting the possibility to weigh the worth of literature against truth and morals (Šabanović 2019). Adnan Mahmutović, a Bosnian-Swedish writer and literary scholar, “always believed that the Nobel Prize in Literature makes all people winners. Unfortunately, this year’s award made us all losers. When convicted war criminals are described in literary works as victims, when Milošević becomes a martyr, when literature is used for historical revisionism, then art and freedom of speech are abused, and human rights are violated” (Mahmutović 2019b, author’s translation).

It was of strategic importance for the organizers to underline that this is not “a Bosnian thing” but an affair that should be of international concern and to therefore give the protest an adequate character by having as many different participants from civil society as possible. They reached out to writers, journalists who covered the wars, academics, and human rights organizations (including those mentioned above), who have long been engaged in seeking genocide recognition and raised their voice against Handke’s attitudes.

Quickly, the growing web of actors located in different countries gained the character of a movement driven by the aim of raising awareness of the dangers of genocide denial. Existing transnational links helped to speed up the organizational process and to forge many new connections. Only some could travel to Stockholm (see below), but the emerging protest coalition included many more individuals and groups who were in exchange with the organizers and other protesters. They amplified the protest in their countries by writing about it, giving interviews, and discussing it on social media.

Through the building of a transnational coalition, the protesters united the previous protest activities under a joint roof and made all contenders part of something bigger. The coalition

represented their shared view that the Swedish Academy's attitude reveals a lack of respect for the Nobel legacy and established facts about genocidal atrocities in the violent break-up of Yugoslavia. They demanded that the award "truly follows the foundations of Nobel's will and its legacy and be awarded to someone who leads humanity forward in a positive direction, not to someone who distorts history and truth" (Mahmutović 2019b, author's translation). They wanted to make the Academy members understand how much their decision dehumanizes and offends survivors and encourages those who have been working to sabotage coexistence for decades (Mahmutović 2019b).

Framing Dissent against Handke's Nobel Prize

In the following, I pay closer attention to the protest framing. To articulate their concerns and demands, the protesters linked two existing frames. That is, a frame bridging "ideologically congruent but structurally unconnected frames regarding a particular issue" (Tarrow 2005, 62) can be identified. On the one hand, the protesters emphasized the widely shared cultural understanding of *what the Nobel tradition stands for*. Indeed, the outrage demonstrated a widespread respect for the Nobel Prize as worth safeguarding, despite the current and past politically contested choices that threaten the credibility of this institution. By contrast, Handke himself once called for the prize to be abolished because it was a "false canonization" of literature (DPA 2014). The protesters appealed to a global audience that the Swedish Academy's choice to honor this author is at odds with its ethical mandate. Namely, it was Nobel's will to honor "those who [...] have conferred the greatest benefit to humankind," and to give the Nobel Prize in Literature to "the *person* who, in the field of literature, produced the most outstanding work in an idealistic direction" (Nobel 1895, emphasis added). They challenged the Academy's claim that it would only evaluate aesthetics and comply with Nobel's will. By espousing a disputed separation between the work and political opinion of an author, the Academy dismissed criticism as an "opinion" about the author or as "interpretations" of his literary work. It "believes that in an open society there must be room for different opinions about authors."¹ But to the protesters it appeared that rather than defending an "open society" it used this argument of "free speech" to shield itself against criticism. They argued this prize sends a morally inappropriate message (Mahmutović 2019a). It canonizes in world literature someone who, in his literary work and public activities, repeatedly cast doubt over war crimes and genocide and insulted victims. Therefore, awarding a Nobel Prize to someone who denies genocide would represent a reward for genocide denial.

On the other hand, they drew upon the frame of "Never again" as the imperative lesson from WWII and the Holocaust and related to the need to remember to prevent the recurrence of violence. The activists connected the claim for genocide remembrance with the claim that the award to Handke was incompatible with the mandate of the Nobel Prize. In this way, they were able to point out that this choice threatens how the past violence should be remembered in order to move towards a more peaceful and stable future in former Yugoslavia. Awarding Handke, by contrast, would contribute to a lowering of the socially acceptable threshold of what could legitimately be said or written and thus undermine this very promise of "Never again" (Hemon 2019). Consequently, the protesters aimed to sharpen public sensitivity of the need to fight any denial of mass atrocities (in line with the above-outlined explanations) and accompanying dehumanizing ideologies, historical revisionism, and notions of collective guilt.

These frames were reflected in the symbolism deployed on social media and during the protests. For example, a redesigned Nobel medal often appeared on social media. Like the original, it depicted Alfred Nobel, but instead of his name to the left and his dates of birth and death to the right, it stated, "not in my name – Alfr Nobel" and "Peter Handke – MMXIX". It was often used in combination with the hashtags #NotSoNobel and #NotInMyName (or in BCS #neumojeime). Referring to his will, it raised the question of whether Nobel would have agreed with this choice. During the protest days, the protesters wore symbols of the transnational commemoration of genocide in Bosnia. These are the knitted Srebrenica memorial flower and the White Armband in memory of the

violence in Prijedor. Both locations became synonymous with the systematic persecution of non-Serbs (Halilovich 2015; Paul 2021). For the organizers in Stockholm, who are very engaged in genocide remembrance, it was self-evident to use both symbols that signified their continuous commitment to this cause. This indicates the diffusion of commemorative practices through the diaspora and how they encouraged the recent protest.

The protesters made clear that their protest was not about Handke, and not (only) about Bosnia, but about the legitimization of genocide denial by the Swedish Academy as an internationally renowned institution. Based on their historical experiences, they worried about the potential ramifications of this prize and its political instrumentalization. Locally, this relates to the destabilizing effects of Serb nationalism and a culture of denial in the post-Yugoslav region that is still struggling to come to terms with the recent past. Beyond the region, this also concerns increasing islamophobia and right extremism in Western democratic countries, inspired by the very Serb nationalist ideology and its propagators of the 1990s conflict. In their eyes, the Swedish Academy made itself complicit in the normalization of genocide denial on an international level by endorsing Handke's oeuvre. They warned that the commotion about this prize does not remain a feuilleton debate among elitist circles of a literary world. It is grist to the mills of those who find motivation in it to turn dehumanizing language into action, even physical violence. To substantiate their warnings, the protesters recalled known issues. They pointed at Handke's proximity to members of the Serb nationalist elite involved in the 1990s conflicts and numerous honors he received from their institutions. His contact to former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milošević and the eulogy at his funeral is a prominent example (Lendvai 2019). For them, these were sufficient indications that Serb nationalist elites might further instrumentalize the poet for their political projects (Preljević 2019b). Moreover, they contributed to the recent debate with two critical talking points. They drew attention to lesser-known cues showing Handke's troubling position vis-à-vis the Srebrenica genocide and how easily his ambivalent stance feeds into a manifestation and normalization of extreme ideologies in popular culture.

First, the protesters discussed how Handke remains ambivalent, intentionally or not, and avoids calling the events in Srebrenica in July 1995 by its judicially recognized name: genocide. They argued he was not "just asking" and criticizing war reporting but sowing the seeds of doubt. To underpin this claim, they recalled two non-literary statements that provide cues for how to interpret his literary texts and the impossibility of separating the author from his work. In 2006, reacting to allegations against his earlier utterances, Handke published an article in *Libération and Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Handke 2010[2006]). In the eyes of the critics, it remains ambivalent and contained a rhetoric of denial (Bremer 2019). It relativizes the crimes by minimizing their severity, distorting facts, and pointing at crimes committed by the other side (which the protesters do not ignore) in an attempt to equate crimes of incomparable scale. Consequently, it fails to acknowledge actual responsibility. Moreover, Handke provides his very own definition of genocide (even suggesting he might err, "Vielleicht irre ich mich in den juristischen Termini"), which he applies to other crimes with the result of reversed victim-perpetrator roles. To the critics, this does not look like an innocent mistake in passing (in the same text Handke calls for attention to 'nuances'). The editors did not annotate the text to inform the reader about the actual definition of genocide. This article might have appeased audiences that are not familiar with the context because he referred to "Srebrenica" as the "most abominable" crime against humanity since World War II. But the protesters now drew attention to another, less-known source that defies any allegation of an "intentional misreading" of the author (for a discussion, see Bremer 2019; Preljević 2019a). In 2011, Handke gave an interview for *Ketzerbriefe*, a magazine produced by a far-right publishing house, which in its entirety distorts and disregards historical facts, spreads conspiracy, and mocks victims (Dorin and Priskil 2011). For example, Handke declares he would not buy into the grief of the "so-called" Mothers of Srebrenica. Despite his mistrust of journalists, Handke apparently did not see a need to authorize this interview. The protesters were

strumming the right cords when they drew public attention to this interview. It created pressure on the Academy and Handke's publisher Suhrkamp, via whom Handke issued a public statement (Handke 2019; Der Standard 2019).

Second, they discussed similarities between Handke's stances and patterns of recent right extremism that become apparent through a meme that widely circulates in different versions on social media, called "Remove Kebab" or "Serbia Strong." While the story behind it recalls Handke's acquaintance with war criminals, its popularity points at the influence of Serb nationalism and its political project of "Greater Serbia" on white supremacy ideology. The meme is based on a war-time music video "Karadžić, lead your Serbs" ("Karadžić, vodi Srbe svoje") that was recorded to cheer Serb soldiers to slaughter "balije" and "ustaše" (derogatory for Bosnian Muslims and Croats) (Coalson 2019). It entered a discourse of anti-Muslim hatred far beyond the Balkans and exemplifies how the Bosnian genocide has become "a rhetorical and conceptual pillar" of international far right networks (Mujanović 2021). The meme shows the face of an accordionist in paramilitary uniform – it is Novislav Đajić. In 1997, a German court convicted him to five years' imprisonment for complicity in a 1992 murder of 14 Muslim civilians in Foča. The court could not establish if he was shooting and acquitted him of the charge of genocide (ICRC n.d.). In 1999, Handke wrote a theater play ("Die Fahrt im Einbaum," translated as "Voyage by Dugout") to rehabilitate Đajić, and was his best man in the same year (*Die Zeit* 1999). Because of such instances, critics previously warned against the disquieting risks emanating from such ideological "derailments," which Handke conveys in subtle ways by literary means (Brokoff 2010). This warning turned into bitter reality when in March 2019, the terrorist from New Zealand attacked a mosque and killed 51 civilians in Christchurch. On Facebook, he livestreamed the car ride to his bloody attack, the mentioned song playing in the background. He had inscribed "Remove Kebab" on his gun, next to the names of historical and mythical figures glorified by Serb nationalists. Before turning his hateful fantasies into bloody action, he published a manifesto called "The Great Replacement" online, in which he declared that "more recently I have been working part time as a kebab removalist" (Halilovich 2019). Discussing these connections, the activists did not blame Handke for inciting such deeds. They argued that "[w]hile nationalism, racism and conspiracism are growing in Europe, the Nobel Prize is handed to a man who traffics in the ideology that helped fuel the worst crimes on European soil since the second world war. The very Serb nationalist tropes Handke propagates in his public statements and his literary works also inspire the international far right today" (Delalić 2019). Several critics, especially from Bosnia and its diaspora, raised the question of whether the Academy's downplaying of this issue compared to the literary aesthetics in Handke's writing was a sign of an underlying anti-Muslim sentiment (Hemon 2019; Mahmutovic 2019a). They pointed to a continued lack of concern for Bosnian Muslim victims and prevailing perceptions of Bosnian Muslims as "non-European others" in "white," "Christian" Western countries. This would place the Academy on a par with Handke, who in his texts addresses Bosnian Muslims as a collective and with suspicion, but not as individuals, thus "othering" or even denying their identity.

Staging a Globally Visible Protest

In this section, I outline the protest activities in Stockholm on December 9 and 10, 2019. I demonstrate that for the activists, these two days were not only relevant to show the world what they think about the choice of the 2019 Nobel Prize in Literature. Beyond this, the activists created a space to come together, exchange experiences, discuss the consequences of the decision, and develop a wider perspective on the issue. Many of them knew each other but never met in person. This was thus a valuable opportunity to deepen and extend networks of like-minded activists instrumental beyond this protest.

The Panel Discussion

On the eve of the Award Ceremony, the organizers kicked off the protest events with a well-attended public debate on the consequences of Handke's Nobel Prize. It took place at a central Stockholm venue and was livestreamed on Facebook to extend the reach of their messages. Jasenko Selimović, a former EU parliamentarian, theater director, and active diaspora member, chaired the evening program. At one point, he clarified that following a long discussion, the organizers had decided not to invite speakers defending the laureate. They believed it would be "indecent" to have speakers who saw no issue with questioning genocide in literature standing side-by-side with those who deem it disrespectful vis-à-vis the victims.

The program comprised two consecutive panels. The first panel addressed the perspective of literary critics and international witnesses on Handke's Nobel Prize against the background of their work. The first speakers were Alida Bremer, a literary critic, writer, and translator of Croatian origin living in Germany, Vahidin Preljević, professor of German literature at the University of Sarajevo, and Elke Schmitter, journalist and writer working for the German magazine *Der Spiegel*. They discussed some of the gravest offenses in Handke's writings on former Yugoslavia and the problematic nature of his method of rhetorical questioning that casts doubt over established facts. Then the journalists Roy Gutman, who wrote the first reports about the concentration camps in North-western Bosnia for *Newsday*, and Florence Hartmann, who reported for *Le Monde* and later was a spokesperson at the Hague Tribunal, discussed the conditions of war reporting. The physician Christina Doctare, who received the Nobel Peace Prize as part of the 1988 UN peacekeeping forces and was stationed in former Yugoslavia from 1992, spoke about her documentation of mass rapes and destruction of medical infrastructure as violations of the Geneva Convention. All three gave very personal accounts of their efforts to find out the truth, and explained how Handke's claims stood in stark contrast to what they had witnessed.

The second panel provided perspectives of those working on the ground. Survivors and representatives of human rights organizations discussed what a blow this Nobel Prize dealt to the fragile transitional justice process in the region and for their own work. Representatives of Bosnian victims' associations expressed how they felt further marginalized in their struggles and perceived once again as "less European." The speakers were Mirsad Duratović, a concentration camp survivor who heads a local association of former camp detainees, Emir Suljagić, director of the Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial Center, and representatives of the Mothers of Srebrenica. Finally, Enver Djuliman (Norwegian Helsinki Committee on Human Rights), Belgrade-based human rights lawyer Goran Miletić (Civil Rights Defenders), and Jasna Čaušević (Society for Threatened Peoples) discussed what needs to be done to strengthen human rights and genocide prevention work in the region.

A strong sense of solidarity that tied the activists together characterized the atmosphere during that evening and the following day. Despite the need for translation, they spoke the same language. There were many touching moments, for instance, when concentration camp survivors thanked journalist Roy Gutman. If he had not reported about the camps, they might not have been at this protest. For the international journalists and human rights activists, it was self-evident to be there, not only in their professional capacity but as a personal commitment.

#BosniaWarJournalists: Amplifying the Protest through Hashtag Memory Activism

The activists used social media to complement the on-site protest in Stockholm and amplify its messages. Several protesters shared impressions on Facebook and Twitter, which were also taken up by the media (NI 2019b). This involved what Orli Fridman (2019, 68) terms "hashtag memory activism" to describe how activists utilize social media as strategic sites of activism in advocacy campaigns. They employ hashtags as a mnemonic practice to create alternative platforms for remembrance and spread alternative knowledge about a contested past.

This was most coherently pursued through the #BosniaWarJournalists, initiated on December 9 by Peter Maass, which drew considerable media attention. Maass had covered the war for *The Washington Post* and writing for *The Intercept* was a protagonist in the debate about Handke's Nobel Prize. He invited correspondents who reported from Bosnia during the 1990s war to share with the world what they saw in order to challenge Handke's relativization and denial of the crimes and the Swedish Academy's choice. Many foreign correspondents participated, most of them ahead of the Award Ceremony, some more following in subsequent days. They shared memories of what they witnessed (many of them also gave testimonies at the Hague Tribunal) and their works (e.g., newspaper articles, books). Maass (2019b) retweeted many of them in a long thread. With this initiative, they showcased it is not only the facts but their very own reports of violence and civilian losses that Handke denies. They sent a powerful message of condemnation of Handke's Nobel Prize and solidarity with the protesters. This created a sense of a memory community dispersed in space but united in taking a stand for the truth.

The Rally

When the Swedish King Carl XVI Gustaf presented Handke with his Nobel medal at the Award Ceremony in the Concert House in the late afternoon of December 10, some 1,000 protesters gathered on the central Normalmstorg. They held their rally under the icy conditions of a Swedish winter night, but heated by their outrage. Earlier that day, the Society for Threatened Peoples held a vigil in front of the Concert House while the Nobel laureates were arriving, calling upon Handke to apologize to the victims of Srebrenica. For the central manifestation, human rights activists, Swedish citizens, and Bosnian and other ex-Yugoslav diaspora activists from Sweden and other countries came to demand "No Nobel for Handke, no Nobel for genocide denial." The manifestation involved addresses by several of the above-mentioned international guests in multiple languages. Adnan Mahmutović welcomed the gathered protesters to:

a demonstration of our right to use words to speak up against those who make us less than human. We are defined by our languages, and we seek to elevate ourselves through languages. [...] And this is why Alfred Nobel once thought that literature should have a prize equal to that of the sciences. [...] In 1993, on this day, six months after I became a refugee of war, a noble woman who knew the burden of history [Toni Morrison], said in her Nobel Prize speech: "Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge." [...]. Tonight, we have invited you to bear witness to a diversity of voices that will speak against this continuing degrading of the Nobel legacy. These voices don't have a common nationality or religion, ideology, but they have one thing in common: dignity.

One of the most memorable moments that made headlines (e.g., *Aljazeera* 2019) was the gesture by Christina Doctare. Expressing her shame, she symbolically returned her Nobel Prize under the amazed cheers of the protesters. Moved by her act, the concentration camp survivor Satko Mujagić (2019) later wrote that she demonstrated the service to humanity Alfred Nobel sought to honor, whereas Handke did what Nobel tried to distance himself from by founding this award. Like Mahmutović, he expressed what kind of accomplishment they believe merits the honor of the Nobel Prize. It was also a gesture that the protesters were missing from any official side but received from Swedish citizens. For example, one man approached the organizers stating, "You made it easier to be Swedish tonight."

Mobilization of and through Memory

In the following, I reflect upon the mobilizing power of memories in the formation of a protest coalition and the framing of the protest to show why this is an interesting case of transnational

memory activism. As a protest opposing the Swedish Academy widening the space for genocide denial, it had a mnemonic goal and reflected the protesters' commitment to dignified genocide remembrance. At the same time, memories had an important influence on and shaped the protests in manifold ways, thus representing a resource. This was reflected in the motivation to organize a large protest, the strategic choices during the mobilization process (e.g., the selection of a diversity of speakers), or identity building. During the protests in Stockholm, it became apparent, and the activists became aware of, the powerful memories that united them in a transnationally composed "memory community." The activists shared and reflected upon these diverse memories.

First, for many of the protesters, these were painful personal memories of witnessing, documenting, and surviving the war, be it as survivors, foreign correspondents, or human rights activists. These experiences have been an important driver for them throughout the past three decades to seek justice, i.e., holding perpetrators accountable, seeking redress for the harms inflicted upon the victims, and challenging historical revisionism. Consequently, it was a critical concern for them to contest the Nobel Prize to Handke. In their eyes, it disrespected fragile advancements to establish peace in the region by honoring literary work that defies judicially established facts. For instance, Roy Gutman and Florence Hartmann reminded audiences of their experiences in Eastern Bosnia in places that Handke visited, too – but only after the violence subsided. Both felt troubled by his discrediting of foreign correspondents covering the 1990s wars in his 1996 travelogues. Gutman explained the quality that distinguishes his journalistic work from Handke's writing. He is guided by the aim of authentic and truthful witnessing by listening to the people, double-checking facts, and trying to obtain a larger picture of the events. By contrast, Handke did not make an effort to check facts before making such severe accusations. This essentially signifies his lack of a sense of historical responsibility. It also implies that he failed to meet the stated purpose of his journeys, namely, to offer the perspectives of those not represented in the reporting of the time, i.e., civilians of Serb ethnicity. Hartmann dismantled Handke's claim that reporting was intentionally one-sided anti-Serbian, and that journalists were manipulating or themselves manipulated (e.g., by the politics of their countries). She pointed out how difficult it actually was for her and others to draw attention to the severity of crimes against the Bosnian Muslim population in Western countries. Likewise, the human-rights workers Goran Miletić and Enver Djuliman criticized Handke, saying that for someone who claimed to be seeking "Justice for Serbia," he disregarded all those citizens who suffered from and protested the Milošević regime. He thus did not take a "pro-Serbian," but a pro-regime standpoint.

Second, many participants shared memories of reading Handke's texts on former Yugoslavia and the emotions it evoked in them. For instance, during the panel discussion, speakers pointed out how Handke's travelogues appalled them and how troubling it was that the discussion had changed little since the 1990s. Schmitter argued that it appears irrelevant "whether he is manipulated or if he is manipulating himself" when he dodges calling the events in Srebrenica in July 1995 genocide. Instead, it is important to recognize when and how he switches and confuses roles. For instance, he memes the unknowing poet when he comes up with his very own "definition" of genocide. For the protesters, his attitude suggests "a deliberate decision to be ignorant," as Gutman stated. However, they agreed that while he might be free to do so as an artist, "there is someone who cannot disregard the facts, and that is the Nobel Academy" (Hartmann's words).

Third, many of the protesters have for a long time been following or actively engaging in the debate about the contested writings and activities of the author. They recalled memories of personal encounters with the author and of past scandals and protests against Handke and his not so noble statements and insults of victims, journalists, and decent audiences whenever he was confronted with critical questions. One such notorious incident was a public reading at Vienna Akademie Theater in 1996. He performed his very own "Publikumsbeschimpfung" (public insult, referring to the author's 1966 play) when someone in the audience asked why he did not go to Bosnia during his winter journey. He replied: "Go home with your concerns! Stick them up your arse!" ("Gehen Sie nach Hause mit Ihrer Betroffenheit, stecken Sie sich die in den Arsch!") Puzzled how someone who

is appraised for his ability to use language can make such staggering comments and trivialize large-scale atrocities, the activists diagnosed a continuity of scandals. At the Nobel Prize Press Conference, US-journalist Maass asked Handke why he does not acknowledge the documented facts that Serb fighters killed thousands of Muslim boys and men in the Srebrenica genocide and if he is willing to accept them now. Handke still evaded the question. Instead, he “described receiving an anonymous letter that he said included toilet paper with a ‘calligraphy of shit,’ and he added, ‘I tell you, I prefer the anonymous letter with toilet paper inside to your empty and ignorant questions’” (Maass 2019a). Working with the Society for Threatened Peoples that was continuously involved in the debate from the beginning, Jasna Čaušević remembered similar encounters. Florence Hartmann also shared that “my story with Handke is a personal story with him even though we never met.” She referred to his allegations in his “Winter Journey” against a “Serb-hating” *Le Monde* reporter that led her to engage in a letter correspondence with him.

In essence, this reveals that from sharing their experiences, the protesters understood: it is their very own memories and testimonies of large-scale atrocities that Handke – and by extension the Swedish Academy that honored him and his work – denies. These powerful memories united them in a transnational “*memory community*” and stood at the core of the formation of a shared identity as a protest coalition. By voicing these memories, they resisted the denial of their testimonies, expressed their dissent with the Swedish Academy’s choice, and inserted their concerns into public discourse.

Concluding remarks

In this analysis of the protests against the 2019 Nobel Prize in Literature to Peter Handke as a case of transnational memory activism, I highlighted two aspects. First, I addressed how genocide survivors, former refugees, human rights activists, journalists, and academics formed a transnational coalition to stage a globally visible protest at the Award Ceremony in Stockholm. Second, I discussed how shared memories related to the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia shaped this protest. Memories united the diverse protesters in a “memory community” and informed the framing of their opposition to this Nobel Prize laureate who they criticize for denying genocide.

While Handke still holds his Nobel Prize, the protesters and many more critics made clear how this choice left a stain on the Swedish Academy. Their contestation opened an avenue for a popular discussion over the question of whether literature and its author can be rid of moral responsibility in light of massive atrocities. They took a stand by arguing that literature does not take place in a historical and socio-political vacuum. The echo of the Nobel Prize to Handke and the outcry against it confirm that this was a critical event. It gave a strong impetus to reinforce efforts to counter the disquieting extent of historical revisionism on a regional and international level. I close with two remarks.

Episodic protests face the challenge of sustaining mobilization once the event around which contestation crystallized subsides. This was no different in the case discussed. However, the activists achieved a lasting effect in terms of transnational networking and keeping the issue on the agenda. This suggests an increased capacity to raise their voice to oppose genocide denial. I pointed out that the protest was an opportunity to deepen and expand connections among the diverse like-minded actors in and beyond the post-Yugoslav region. They utilized these for further intellectual exchange and collaboration in the form of conferences and publications. This refers to a review of Handke’s work against the background of the political and historical context of former Yugoslavia (Preljević and Ruther 2022). Also, it encouraged further exploration of the overarching issue of rising genocide denial, its origins, and consequences for the region and beyond (Karčić and Turčalo 2021). In public discourse, the implications of the Nobel Prize remained topical. It was taken up to illustrate contemporary challenges posed by islamophobia in Western societies, for instance, in the European Islamophobia Report 2019 (Bayraklı and Hafez 2020). 2020 marked the 25th anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide. Bosnian diaspora groups drew attention to this important anniversary

with commemorative events and thereby reminded of Handke's Nobel Prize to give weight to their remembrance claims (e.g., ACBiH 2020). They called upon their countries of settlement to continue a responsible engagement supporting the victims and a democratic transition process in BiH. This involves not to ignore how instances like the Swedish Academy's decision counteract these intentions.

In May 2021, the protesters' worst nightmare turned into reality: Peter Handke inaugurated his own monument, a 2.20m larger-than-life sculpture, in Banja Luka, the administrative center of the BiH entity Republika Srpska. His recent visit to BiH and Serbia again caused sensation (e.g., Bursać 2021; Kovačević 2021; Martens 2021). He was warmly courted by the Serb nationalist elite and accepted three awards whose previous receivers were promoters of Greater Serbia and war criminals (including Biljana Plavšić, Radovan Karadžić, Ratko Mladić, and Momčilo Krajišnik). For the protesters, it left no more doubt about how to read his texts and confirmed what they had warned against but felt the Swedish Academy ignored: namely, the misuse of the laureate for political purposes that undermine political stability in a region that struggles with the creation of a memory culture. While Handke is being memorialized, the victims of the very genocidal politics are not. This reflects what Halilovich (2018) describes as "triumphalism." Praised by the current Serb member of the BiH tripartite presidency Milorad Dodik as a "man dedicated to the truth" (N1 N1 2021), the poet appears like a marionette used to further incite local memory struggles. There were even proposals to rename Srebrenica's main street into Handke Street, and counterproposals to dedicate the street to the genocide victims (Klix 2021).

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Note

- 1 Letter to Community of Publishers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, signed by Anders Olsson, chair of the Nobel Committee for Literature, November 15, 2019. www.documentcloud.org/documents/6553911-Swedish-Academy-Letter-to-Bosnian-Publishers.html. (Accessed June 30, 2022)

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