

Owning  
the Past:

*political  
apologies*



# OWNING THE PAST: POLITICAL APOLOGIES

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**Dear Reader,**

You are about to read a publication that explores political apologies - an essential resource for young politicians and all those eager to understand their transformative power. Political apologies are milestones in healing historical wounds, fostering reconciliation, and building a future rooted in tolerance, unity, and shared humanity.

We hope that after reading **“Owning the Past: Political Apologies,”** you will get inspired and motivated to take action by the information and examples ahead. This publication will take you through various approaches to political apologies, their significance, the messages they carry, and their impact - not only on victims but on entire societies. You will explore some of the world’s most powerful political apologies, including: The UK’s apology for Bloody Sunday, The Netherlands’ apology to Indonesians for colonial injustices, Germany’s apology for the genocide against the Herero and Nama peoples and many more.

You will also discover key political apologies from the areas affected the Yugoslav wars- a region still grappling with the painful legacies of the 1990s. Among the rare apologies issued, we highlight: Montenegrin Prime Minister Milo Đukanović’s

apology for the bombing of Dubrovnik, the historic apology between Serbian President Svetozar Marović and Croatian President Stjepan Mesić, Serbian President Boris Tadić's apology to Bosnia and Herzegovina and many more.

These apologies highlighted in this publication, though significant, are just the setting stone of the many more apologies needed. Reconciliation requires ongoing efforts, especially from younger generations. In time where radicalization and division are on the rise, the need to build bridges has never been more urgent. We must equip ourselves with the knowledge and tools to promote peace by confronting the past rather than fueling hatred through nationalism and division. As we have seen, the recent events of student movement in Serbia in the end of 2024 and beginning of 2025 have proven that young people have the collective power to drive positive change and reshape the world for the better. Because of that, this publication serves as part of encouragement for everyone. We must dare to confront the past, challenge our own nations' wrongdoings, and embrace the courage to apologize. By doing so, we send a powerful message - one of solidarity, responsibility, and an unwavering commitment to a more just and peaceful future.

***Let's build that future together!***

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A little over two decades ago, Roy L. Brooks described a rising “age of apologies” in his book, describing a period when states worldwide began intensifying their efforts toward reparations and transitional justice mechanisms (Brooks, 1999). His thesis highlighted how political and international communities started addressing the consequences of past injustices. Notably, public apologies delivered by state officials have become increasingly common since the end of the Cold War, particularly in liberal democracies (Zoodsma and Schaafsma, 2022: 438).

A political apology is often characterized as a public speech act serving the purpose of symbolic reparation (Tavuchis, 1991: 47; Thompson, 2008: 32). It is delivered by a state representative on behalf of the collective or the state for injustices committed by its members and is addressed to victims, their families, or descendants. While political apologies are primarily viewed as verbal acts, some researchers also consider nonverbal gestures to possess strong symbolic power. For example, the act of kneeling by German Chancellor Willy Brandt at the Warsaw Ghetto Memorial in 1970 can be seen as a profound expression of apology. This nonverbal act raises the question of whether an apology must explicitly include the words “I apologize” or “I’m sorry” to be valid. Horelt (2019) expands the definition of political apologies beyond the confines of verbal acts, arguing that nonverbal gestures, such as Brandt’s, can serve as acts of reconciliation and symbolic apology. This perspective views an apology as a performative act occurring in a symbolic setting and often as a part of a staged event, such as a commemoration (Horelt, 2019: 23).



From this theoretical point of view, both verbal and nonverbal forms of apology can play a significant role in reconciliation. It is crucial to emphasize that even in the absence of the explicit word "sorry," certain elements can help ensure that an apology is still meaningful (Zoodsma and Schaafsma, 2021: 438). The act of apology itself has an essential function of making the apologizer representing the collective vulnerable. This vulnerability results from the risk that the apology will not be accepted (Daase et al., 2015: 3). Through the act of apology, political or other representatives of a collective assume responsibility for past injustices committed in its name. This makes an apology significant, as it carries emotional and political vulnerability for the apologizer. Thompson (2008: 34) argues that an apology is not merely an act of speech but also an act of respect. Ultimately, a crucial factor in determining the acceptance of an apology is how the victimized group perceives and interprets the act and whether they are willing to give forgiveness (Daase et al., 2015).

The act of offering a political apology can, though to a limited extent, reduce political tensions and mutual accusations while encouraging constructive dialogue for building a community of shared future (Carranza et al., 2015). This kind of perspective contributes to establishing the foundations for a society that promotes sustainable peace and dialogue in the long term. In this sense, political apologies symbolize an effort to set up a fairer foundation for relations between the two sides.

Brooks' reflection not only pointed out the increasing number of public apologies and commemorative practices but also opened a broader discussion on the role of apology in reconciliation and dealing with the past. This awareness is also present in international law. There are several mechanisms for the legal protection of victims and their right to reparations, including the UN's Resolution on Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparations for Victims of Serious Violations of Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law. According to the Resolution, civilian victims of war have the right to proper, effective, and prompt compensation, while it also recommends that states provide public apologies to victimized groups (United Nations, 2005). Even more than that, the UN Human Rights Council created the position of Special Rapporteur on the Promotion of Truth, Justice, Reparations, and Guarantees of Non-recurrence.

The 2005 UN Resolution lists key principles and guidelines that offer a broad categorization of reparation measures:

### **1. RESTITUTION**

Measures that restore the victim to the original situation before serious violations of international human rights law occurred (restoration of liberty, enjoyment of human rights, identity, family life, and citizenship, return to the place of residence, restoration of employment, and return of property).

## **2. COMPENSATION**

Providing support for any assessable damage, in accordance with appropriate and proportional to the gravity of the violation and the circumstances of each case, arising from serious violations of international human rights law and serious violations of international humanitarian law (lost opportunities, loss of income, and moral damage).

## **3. REHABILITATION**

Providing medical and psychological care, as well as legal and social assistance.

## **4. SATISFACTION**

Measures aimed at ending violations, the search for truth, the search for missing persons, return and reburial of remains, public apologies, judicial and administrative sanctions, commemoration and memorialization, and human rights training.

## **5. GUARANTEES OF NON-REPETITION**

Includes measures essential for preventing further human rights violations and ensuring that past violations do not repeat in the future (institutional reforms focused on civilian control of military and security forces, strengthening judicial independence, protecting human rights workers, ensuring accountability and oversight over state authorities).

Reparations are considered an important tool for achieving justice in post-conflict and transitional periods. These mechanisms show victims that their experiences are recognized. Reparations can take material forms (e.g., the return of property) or symbolic forms (e.g., public apologies and measures that guarantee non-repetition of crimes). It is recommended that the focus shifts from material to symbolic reparations, including political apology and the commemoration, while educating decision-makers about different forms and practices of reparations to prevent the perception of mainly material compensation (Bužinkić, 2012: 73).

Symbolic or non-monetary reparations are directly aimed at victims and can be divided into two levels: individual reparations, which aim to restore the victim to the state before the injustice by helping to repair the damage, including physical, psychological, and social consequences; and group reparations, which focus on rehabilitating and empowering communities through projects that improve living conditions and strengthen social cohesion contributing to long-term stability (Brooks, 1999: 9). Unlike individual reparations, group reparations aim to create lasting changes in the social structure. Through these measures, affected groups can restore trust in the broader community and surrounding institutions, thus laying the foundation for cooperation and mutual growth. In this context, group reparations help strengthen social solidarity and create an atmosphere focused on the shared future.

Political apologies fall under the category of collective apologies, as the state leadership acts as the representative of the wrongdoers and offers an apology to another group that has suffered crimes. Such apologies carry special weight because they are public and often under the attention of both domestic and international audiences. In this context, it is important to understand the difference between private and public apologies. When a private, interpersonal conversation shifts into the public sphere, it changes the basis of interaction and the negotiating positions of the main actors (Tavuchis, 1991: 70). Private apologies often allow for greater intimacy and directness in expressing regret, while public apologies, aimed at a broader audience, require careful formulation due to political and social implications. Public apologies typically involve formal elements, and a careful choice of words, as they are subject to various interpretations. The person apologizing must accept responsibility while maintaining the society's image (Tavuchis, 1991). In other words, society's image refers to the self-perception of the group of the wrongdoers, where a space is created for accepting the negative events that occurred in the past.

Given the specifics of public apologies, Kampf (2013) identifies three key principles that distinguish the act of a public apology from an interpersonal apology:

1. *Informing various audiences of the apologisee's mindset*
2. *Documenting intentions and feelings*
3. *Fulfilling political expectations*

## THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN INTERPERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE APOLOGIES

The first principle of informing various audiences emphasizes how verbal acts carry a clear purpose and meaning. In this way, apologies not only communicate the speaker's direct intentions but also inform various social groups about the importance of the act. Documenting intentions of an apology and embedding it in collective memory refers to the fact that a verbal apology can become a permanent record. This record serves as a reference for future generations so that the intentions of political leaders in making the apology are not forgotten. Also, documenting public apologies helps shape collective memory by making the recorded statement a foundation for future interpretations of past events.

The final principle, in the context of public apologies, relates to fulfilling political expectations, highlighting the social function of speech acts. Fulfilling political expectations mainly satisfies socially accepted communication norms and standards.

Reactions to political apologies can vary. The public exposure of political apologies and the variety of reactions also sets them apart from interpersonal apologies, which occur in a more intimate setting between individuals. Public responses to political apologies add to their complexity. Positive reactions can help build trust between groups, while negative reactions can reflect deeper divisions in society, especially if there is disagreement about the interpretation of historical events or the justification of the apology itself. However, there are certain key elements that various authors highlight as necessary for the validity and success of political apologies.

Although political apologies can have transformative power, it is not always guaranteed that the apology will be accepted. However, the possibility that the apology will not be accepted should not be a reason to withhold it. Therefore, the apology should not demand that the victim grant forgiveness, but rather leave the apology as an expression of regret. Tavuchis (1991: 23) explains that an apology is a speech act made by the offender in the presence of the victim, and such an act is driven by and directed toward actions that enable the realization of other elements of reparation. A political apology must be publicly made in front of relevant stakeholders, especially in the presence of victims and their families, as well as the media, so that the act of apology is transparent and recognized as a public acknowledgment accompanied by a clear condemnation.

From a linguistic perspective on apologies, Horelt (2019: 28) states that the speech act should address:

1. *Acknowledgment of historical responsibility*
2. *A factual description of the crime in question*
3. *Public condemnation of the wrongdoing*
4. *Expression of regret for the crimes*
5. *Request for forgiveness (Löwenheim, 2009)*

By acknowledging responsibility, political leadership demonstrates a willingness to create the foundation needed for a constructive confrontation with the past. A political apology should unambiguously take responsibility, which includes directly admitting guilt, expressing regret for committing or failing to prevent the crime, and ultimately requesting forgiveness from the community to which the apology is addressed. In this way, the apology becomes a form of reparation provided to the victims of human rights violations. The crime committed against a specific community must be clearly described, along with the consequences that the community still faces. It is important to avoid downplaying the severity of the crime or relativizing the wrongdoing (YIHR, 2018).

Public apologies can be roughly divided into three types: *Denial*, *Excuse*, and *Apology* (Daase et al., 2015: 4).

*Denial* of guilt represents the weakest form of regret, where the offender acknowledges the harm but does not take responsibility or promise that the act will not be repeated. In the case of *Excuse*, the *Denial* is extended, as *Excuse* involves accepting responsibility for the actions and promising that the crime will not happen again, but it still does not include a request for forgiveness or an initiative for any active atonement. The strongest form of public regret, or *Apology*, involves acknowledging involvement in the crime, accepting responsibility, promising not to repeat the act, requesting forgiveness, and offering concrete measures for atonement to the victims.



Table I: Three reactions to political guilt and accusations  
(Daase et al., 2015: 4.)

	<b>DENIAL</b>	<b>EXCUSE</b>	<b>APOLOGY</b>
<b><i>Identification of harm</i></b>	-/+	+	+
<b><i>Acknowledgement of involvement</i></b>	-/+	+	+
<b><i>Expression of regret</i></b>	-/+	+	+
<b><i>Acceptance of responsibility</i></b>	-	-/+	+
<b><i>Promise of non-repetition</i></b>	-	-/+	+
<b><i>Asking for forgiveness</i></b>	-	-	+
<b><i>Active atonement (compensation, memorialisation, etc.)</i></b>	-	-	+

It often happens that public apologies leave out key elements, avoiding the acceptance of responsibility. Such apologies fail to achieve their goal, which is primarily to restore broken relationships and give dignity to the victims. Lazare (2004) calls these pseudo-apologies noting that they can further insult the harmed party. According to Lazare (2004), the basic elements of failed apologies include:

1. *Vague and incomplete acknowledgment*
2. *Use of passive tone*
3. *Conditioning the crime*
4. *Questioning the harm suffered by the victims*
5. *Downplaying the crime*
6. *Using the empathetic expression "I'm sorry" without further explanation*
7. *Apology to the wrong side*
8. *Apology for the wrong offense*

For a public apology to act as a means of reparation and convince victims that the victimized groups are not responsible for the crimes committed, it is not enough to simply say "I'm sorry." According to the UN Resolution, alongside a public apology, there must also be an acknowledgment of the facts and acceptance of responsibility (United Nations, 2005). An apology without a clear context of the committed crimes leaves room for free interpretation of the circumstances in which the crimes happened. The lack of concrete acceptance of responsibility sends a message of no understanding of the relationship between the offender and the victim.

The increase in the number of political apologies accelerated in the 21st century, signaling a growing awareness of the importance of confronting the past and recognizing the victims of historical injustices (Zoodtsma and Schaafsma, 2021). This shift highlights the global acknowledgment of the need to address past wrongs. However, when political leaders fail to offer apologies or refuse to recognize the crimes committed, it suggests a lack of readiness or willingness to engage with the past.

This reluctance can be attributed to the fact that political apologies are not always well received by the group associated with those who committed the crime. Such apologies may be seen as a sign of weakness that damages the country's reputation or even as a betrayal of its past (Schaafsma et al., 2024: 2). This perception can influence political leaders' decisions about whether to offer an apology at all, as they may fear backlash or loss of support.

Furthermore, collective apologies can be effective when made by a political figure with symbolic authority. When the collective trusts the individual making the apology, the response can be affirming and contribute to healing. However, difficulties in delivering public apologies remain significant, especially in countries with particularly troubled history (Reisigl, 2018: 373).

Strong national identification often complicates reconciliation, acting as a barrier to supporting public apologies (Bilewicz, 2016; Reisigl, 2018). This is because acknowledging responsibility for past crimes may threaten the positive image of one's own collective. Additionally, the absence of political apologies may be explained by a lack of political will, as leaders may feel that there will be no serious political or legal consequences if an apology is not made (Thompson, 2008: 31).

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**SOME EXAMPLES OF POLITICAL  
APOLOGIES AROUND THE WORLD**

On Sunday, January 30th 1972, Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association held a demonstration that gathered over 10,000 people following growing British government' discrimination against the Roman Catholic Irish population. One of the reasons for this civil rights march was the decision made five months earlier, a law which granted power to the authorities to imprison people without trial. Such a decision posed a disproportionate threat to the members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), but even more so to those suspected to be its members. While thousands gathered to protest the law, troops were deployed to police the march previously banned by the Stormont government. The march was peaceful at first but soon the violence broke out between demonstrators and the police, resulting in troops opening fire and consequently killing 14 people, as well as injuring and detaining hundreds. The day became known as Bloody Sunday.

Following years of denial and whitewashing, Saville Inquiry, set up in 1998 and reporting back in 2010, posed a turning point in the acknowledgement of the massacre. With the report of the Inquiry citing 2,500 testimonies and findings described on over 5,000 pages, this longest-running inquiry in British legal history concluded that none killed had been armed or done anything to pose a serious threat. They were given no warning by the soldiers before the shooting commenced and the Inquiry found that nothing could justify their killing. On 15th of June, the newly-elected Prime Minister of the UK David Cameron, offered a formal public apology to the people of Northern Ireland while speaking in the House of Commons of the British Parliament.

### DAVID CAMERON'S SPEECH

*But the conclusions of this report are absolutely clear. There is no doubt, there is nothing equivocal, there are no ambiguities. What happened on Bloody Sunday was both unjustified and unjustifiable. It was wrong.*

*There is no point in trying to soften or equivocate what is in this report. It is clear from the tribunal's authoritative conclusions that the events of Bloody Sunday were in no way justified.*

*But what happened should never, ever have happened. The families of those who died should not have had to live with the pain and the hurt of that day and with a lifetime of loss. I would also like to acknowledge the grief of the families of those killed.*

*Some members of our armed forces acted wrongly. The government is ultimately responsible for the conduct of the armed forces and for that, on behalf of the government, indeed, on behalf of our country, I am deeply sorry*

*Mr Speaker, while in no way justifying the events of January 30th, 1972, we should acknowledge the background to the events of Bloody Sunday. (...)*

*Everyone should have the chance to examine its complete findings and that is why it is being published in full. Running to more than 5,000 pages, it is being published in 10 volumes.*

*But neither will we hide from the truth that confronts us today. Those are words (Ed. report of the Saville Inquiry) we cannot and must not ignore. But I hope what this report can also do it is mark the moment where we come together in this House and in the communities we represent to acknowledge our shared history, even where it divides us.*

### ANALYSIS

Undisputed acknowledgement of the unjustifiability of the events in question.

No whitewashing of what was done.

A call for preventing such an event happening again, as well as addressing and expressing compassion for the victims and their families.

Taking responsibility for the decisions of the government at the time, the state as such, and using words that unequivocally represent an apology.

Describing the socio-political circumstances that preceded and led to the events in question.

The public release of detailed findings of the research inquiry (Saville Inquiry), making it accessible for everyone to review the conclusions and study the investigation.

Awareness that it is impossible to build a future without dealing with the past.



In 2020, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte issued an official apology for the “excessive violence” used by Dutch forces during Indonesia’s war for independence between 1945 and 1949. The apology marked a significant shift in the Netherlands’ acknowledgment of its colonial past, as previous Dutch governments had largely minimised or justified the violence. Rutte delivered the apology during a state visit to Indonesia, emphasising the importance of reflecting on the Netherlands’ colonial past and expressing regret for the suffering inflicted on the Indonesian people. Furthermore, he added that “the government takes full responsibility for the collective failure”.

However, some observers noted that Prime Minister Mark Rutte’s apology was perceived as “half-hearted”, as it focused solely on the 1945-1949 independence war and did not address the broader context of over 350 years of Dutch colonisation of Indonesia. While many Indonesians welcomed the gesture, some viewed it as insufficient, noting that no reparations were offered and that the apology did not fully address centuries of colonial exploitation.

The apology was part of broader efforts made by the Netherlands with an aim to confront its colonial legacy, including debates about education, public memorials, and returning stolen cultural artifacts to Indonesia.

In 2021, Germany made a long-awaited progress in acknowledging the genocide committed in its former colony, Namibia, at the beginning of the 20th century. However, even though largely anticipated, the acknowledgment fell short of a formal apology avoiding legal and reparative responsibility.

Between 1904 and 1908, in what is today the Republic of Namibia, German soldiers massacred approximately 50,000-65,000 Herero and 10,000 Nama people, members of ethnic groups which resisted settler colonialism on their land. While Germany's response to the Holocaust is often seen as a model of accountability, it took over a century for the country to recognise the atrocities committed in Namibia — an acknowledgment that only came after the descendants of the victims raised the issue following Namibia's independence in 1990. In 2021, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas issued a statement calling the events that occurred a genocide, and asked Namibia and the descendants of the victims for forgiveness. Moreover, the German government promised 1.1 billion euros as a part of a reconstruction and development programme.

While the apology was viewed as a pioneering step towards reconciliation, it was quickly followed by critics that argued how Germany's apology fell short, as the financial package was agreed upon between governments without adequate consultation with Herero and Nama communities, leaving many descendants feeling excluded from the process. The apology has also been criticised for lacking the moral and legal weight of formal reparations, with some viewing it as an insufficient gesture compared to the scope of the atrocities. Moreover, while an apology has been drafted, it has been negotiated, rather than made upfront. Germany also decided to issue the apology at a location of their choice, which further puts the sincerity of it in question. German officials, including President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, emphasised that the apology was long overdue, but many Namibians believe it is "too little, too late" given the historical and economic injustices that persist today.

During his presidency, Nicolas Sarkozy made multiple statements addressing France's colonial past in Algeria, sparking widespread debate. During his state visit to Algeria in December 2007, Sarkozy described the colonial system as "deeply unjust" and acknowledged the suffering inflicted on the Algerian people during over a century of French colonial rule. He stated that the tragedies of the colonial era left deep wounds on the Algerian nation and referred to the violence, repression, and displacement caused by the colonial system as "inexcusable".

However, Sarkozy consistently refused to issue a formal collective apology, arguing that such an act involved "religious notions" that were inappropriate in state-to-state relations. While his rhetoric included a sensitive acknowledgment of Algerian suffering, Sarkozy's simultaneous reference to the grief and pain experienced on "both sides" diluted the impact of his statements.

Algerian officials, including President Bouteflika and the ruling FLN party, considered Sarkozy's statements a step in the right direction but deemed them insufficient and lacking the full acknowledgment Algeria sought. Other commentators criticized Sarkozy's "ambiguous" approach, describing his statements as a "double discourse" that acknowledged colonial crimes rhetorically, while avoiding any substantive responsibility or reparations.

Despite these criticisms, Sarkozy's visit and remarks marked a slight shift in French rhetoric about its colonial past, though the lack of an official apology left many Algerians unsatisfied.

On August 15, 1995, marking the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II, Japanese Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi delivered what was considered one of Japan's most significant apology statements for its wartime actions. Representing a coalition government of the Socialist Party and the Liberal Democratic Party, Murayama acknowledged Japan's "mistaken national policy" and expressed "deep remorse" and a "heartfelt apology" for the "tremendous damage and suffering" caused by Japan's colonial rule and aggression, particularly to Asian nations. While the statement was praised as a progressive acknowledgment of Japan's wartime actions, especially considering the lack of development in political apologies throughout Japan's history, it faced significant criticism for its semantic ambiguities and omissions.

Murayama's use of vague phrases like "a certain period in the not too distant past" and "the people of many countries" avoided directly naming specific atrocities, such as the Nanjing Massacre or the suffering of Korea. Critics also noted the absence of terms like "war crimes" or "crimes against humanity," which would have directly acknowledged the gravity of Japan's actions. Furthermore, the use of the first-person singular throughout the speech raised doubts about whether Murayama was apologising as an individual or on behalf of the nation. The credibility of the apology was further undermined when half of Murayama's cabinet visited the controversial Yasukuni Shrine on the same day, signaling conflicting messages about Japan's acknowledgment of its wartime past.

# SOME EXAMPLES OF POLITICAL APOLOGIES AROUND THE WORLD - SOURCES

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Human rights violations were widespread and systematic during the conflicts following the breakup of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) which lasted from 1991 to 2001. It is estimated that the total number of fatalities in the wars exceeds 130,000 across all states. More than 18,000 people died during the war in Croatia while Bosnia and Herzegovina reports human losses at 100,885, Serbia and Montenegro (Federal Republic Yugoslavia until 2003) at 2,051, and Kosovo at 13,617.

As above-mentioned, transitional justice mechanisms represent a response to the widespread conflict-related violence with the goal of enabling societal recovery, establishing lasting peace, and providing satisfaction for the victims. One such mechanism, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), convicted 93 individuals for crimes committed during that period, making a significant contribution to the pursuit of justice.

However, criminal justice has only a limited role in facilitating societal recovery. Symbolic elements of transitional justice, such as apologies from top state leaders, can play a crucial role in fostering societal reconciliation, acknowledging the suffering of survivors and victims' families, and restoring their dignity.

According to the Political Apology Database, most recently updated in 2022, the number of political apologies offered by Croatian politicians since the '90s comes up to 6, with only 2 of them referring to the 1990s wars. Serbian representatives and heads of state offered 5, with all of them referring to the war crimes during the 1990s in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Montenegro offered one apology for the shelling of Dubrovnik in 1991.

In 2004, Montenegro's Prime Minister, Milo Đukanović, made a significant political gesture by apologising to the Croatian people for the pain and suffering caused by Montenegro's involvement in the Yugoslav wars, particularly in Dubrovnik. In an interview with a Croatian newspaper, he acknowledged the potential for Montenegro to pay war reparations if necessary, underscoring the nation's commitment to taking responsibility for its actions. Đukanović expressed regret not only for the human losses but also for the material destruction caused by Montenegrin forces during the war, particularly in the Dubrovnik region. His apology came alongside a broader declaration of Montenegro's intention to cooperate with the Hague Tribunal.

In his speech, Đukanović accused the Serbian leadership of manipulating Montenegrin forces during the 1990s in the name of the Yugoslav ideal, asserting that such a subordinate Montenegro no longer exists. This approach not only downplayed Montenegrin involvement in the wars and destruction but also provided an avenue to evade responsibility for the crimes committed. Moreover, some critics argued that Đukanović's apology was driven more by pragmatism than genuine remorse, particularly since he referenced highway construction in his speech within the context of strengthening ties with Croatia

**MAROVIĆ  
AND MESIĆ  
- FIRST APOLOGY  
BETWEEN  
SERBIA AND  
CROATIA**

In September 2003, Croatian President Stjepan Mesić and President of Serbia and Montenegro Svetozar Marović exchanged symbolic apologies during Mesić's official visit to Belgrade, marking a significant moment in the reconciliation process between the two nations. Marović was the first to express regret, stating, "I want to apologise for all the harm any citizen of Montenegro or Serbia caused or committed against anyone in Croatia." In response, Mesić accepted the apology and declared, "I apologise to all those whom Croatian citizens have caused pain or harm at any time by acting unlawfully or abusing their position." This exchange occurred during a time when numerous unresolved issues stemming from the wars of the 1990s still strained relations between the two countries.

While the apologies were a step towards easing the tensions and improving bilateral relations, their vagueness and lack of substance opened more questions than they have given answers. Mesić's apology was broad and non-specific, addressing "all those" harmed, but failing to name specific victims, events, or crimes. Moreover, neither apology was made in the presence of victims or their families, nor at a location of symbolic significance to them. This absence of concrete acknowledgment diminished the potential for the apologies to fully satisfy victims' rights or contribute meaningfully to confronting the past.

**MAROVIĆ  
AND MESIĆ  
- FIRST APOLOGY  
BETWEEN  
SERBIA AND  
CROATIA**

Furthermore, Mesić's statement avoided assigning responsibility to the Croatian state or its institutions for crimes committed, which some viewed as limiting its sincerity and impact. Similarly, Marović spoke of an "obligation" to cooperate with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) but did not specify the crimes or perpetrators for whom justice should be pursued. Neither apology included a pledge to prevent such crimes in the future or a commitment to fostering tolerance and coexistence.

Despite their shortcomings, the apologies were historically significant as the first public acknowledgments of wrongdoing by the leaders of Croatia and, at that time, Serbia and Montenegro. While symbolic, they represented an initial step towards opening dialogue and rebuilding trust between the two nations after a history of conflict and atrocities.

Serbian President Boris Tadić issued a formal apology to Bosnia and Herzegovina for Serbia's role in the atrocities committed during the Bosnian War in the 1990s during his visit in December 2004. Tadić's apology was delivered during a visit to Sarajevo, marking the first time a Serbian president openly expressed remorse for the suffering caused during the conflict: "I apologise to all those that have suffered crimes in the name of the Serbian people." He acknowledged the pain endured by the Bosnian people and extended condolences to the victims and their families, emphasising the need for reconciliation and peace between the nations.

However, Tadić's apology failed to address fully and explicitly the state responsibility for the crimes committed, maintaining that individuals, not nations, were accountable for these crimes.

Moreover, downplaying the importance of apologising for Serbian war crimes, he stated that "the same crimes were committed against our people as well, and in this sense we all owe an apology to each other. If it is necessary, I will begin." Tadić emphasized that facing the truth about the past was essential for healing and for building trust among the countries of the former Yugoslavia.

His statement was considered significant as it came from the highest level of Serbian leadership, signaling a shift in the country's approach to acknowledging its wartime past. However, the apology was met with mixed reactions; some welcomed it as a positive step towards reconciliation, while others criticized it as insufficient, particularly for the failure to explicitly address the state's responsibility for the Srebrenica Genocide. Tadić also used the opportunity to call for cooperation with the ICTY and emphasised the importance of bringing war criminals to justice.

# JOSIPOVIĆ APOLOGISES FOR CROATIAN CRIMES IN BOSNIA

In 2010, Croatian President Ivo Josipović made a political apology in Bosnia and Herzegovina, expressing deep regret for Croatia's involvement in the crimes committed during the Bosnian War in the 1990s. During his address to the Bosnian parliament, Josipović acknowledged that parts of the Croatian policy in the 1990s contributed to the suffering of Bosniaks and supported actions that violated Bosnia's sovereignty: "Policies that, in the 1990s, saw solutions in division and separation, in the supremacy of one over others, in the exclusion of the other, in the disregard for human rights, in force and violence, in injustice, and the deliberate spread of fear must be abandoned once and for all. A new era requires a new kind of politics."

This apology was particularly significant as it addressed the crimes committed by the Croatian Defence Council (HVO), a military force supported by Croatia, which was involved in war crimes against Bosniaks. At the time, the ICTY had already passed several judgments regarding Croatian presence and role in Bosnia during the 90s. Although Josipović made a remarkable gesture by expressing sorrow and regret for the crimes committed, he did not use the words "I'm sorry" or "We're sorry", nor did he admit to war crimes and took responsibility on behalf of Croatia.

Josipović also laid a wreath in Ahmići, the site of a 1993 massacre in which 116 Bosniak civilians were killed by HVO forces, symbolising Croatia's acknowledgment of this particular crime. He made the apology in the presence of representatives from victim organizations, religious groups, and the local community, which enhanced its sense of inclusion, sincerity, and the potential to promote reconciliation. The apology was generally welcomed in Bosnia, but it was met with criticism from a large number of Croatian politicians who accused Josipović of undermining Croatia's interests. Therefore, upon returning to Croatia, Josipović emphasised that he had not issued an apology but merely expressed regret. This could have had a profoundly negative impact on the victims, as they might have perceived the entire gesture as lacking sincerity.

**PLENKOVIĆ  
IN KNIN,  
2020**

In 2020, during the 25th anniversary of the Operation "Storm" in Knin, Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković delivered a speech that marked a significant moment in relation to the Croatian war crimes committed during the 90s on Croatian soil. Plenković acknowledged the suffering caused to innocent Serb civilians during and after the military operation, stating that the crimes committed in the aftermath were neither justified nor part of Croatia's legitimate struggle for independence.

Plenković emphasised that acknowledging the injustices committed against Serbs does not diminish the heroism of the Croatian defenders but strengthens Croatia's moral and democratic foundation. This gesture was widely seen as a breakthrough in relations between Croats and Serbs, fostering the potential for a more constructive dialogue about the war's legacy.

However, in the same speech, Plenković emphasised that he expects Croatian society, especially representatives of the Serbs, to clearly condemn all crimes against Croats. This approach somewhat diverted attention from what the acknowledgment was meant to be - a clear and unequivocal condemnation of war crimes and ethnic cleansing, and particularly of their perpetrators.



**ADDITION:  
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT  
OF SUFFERING**

**PLENKOVIĆ  
IN KNIN,  
2020**

On the other hand, he highlighted the fact that many Serbs shared the same fate as their Croatian neighbors and expressed a desire for the return of displaced Serbs who have not yet made that decision. He also demonstrated political will to ensure they can lead lives worthy of human dignity in the 21st century. Taking the event into consideration and the place where such a speech was delivered, its significance lies in the fact that it was one of the most important acknowledgments of civilian suffering of Serbs during the war in Croatia.

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***Tadić apologises to Bosnia and Herzegovina:***

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***Plenković in Knin, 2020:***

- Klauški, T. (2020, August 5). Zašto je Plenkovićev govor u Kninu bio prekretnica. I zašto mu je bilo lako govoriti o Oluji. 24 sata. Retrieved February 2025, from <https://www.24sata.hr/kolumne/zasto-je-plenkovicev-govor-u-kninu-bio-prekretnica-i-zasto-mu-je-bilo-lako-govoriti-o-oluji-709575>
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Political apologies as symbolic reparations are key to the process of transitional justice which can bring about lasting changes in the social structure. Through these measures, affected groups can restore trust in the broader community and surrounding institutions, thus laying the foundation for cooperation and mutual growth. This is particularly important for young politicians and activists - those who aspire to be drivers of positive change in the world and the society around them.

The overview of political apologies outlined in this publication can serve as examples of good practice in building bridges of reconciliation. We hope these examples will resonate with you - politically active young people by enhancing your understanding of how much political apologies mean, both to victims and to the nation itself.

We should all be aware that not many politicians - whether to preserve their personal image or due to the ideological stance of their party and regardless of its political orientation - will have the courage to publicly issue a political apology. However, such actions can encourage a productive dialogue between states, fostering cooperation and mutual support that not only aids in reconciling past conflicts but also nurtures a forward-looking vision for the future.

To ensure that an apology is truly effective, politicians must recognize that such steps should be taken and advocated for with genuine sincerity, transparency, and accountability. A well-structured and meaningful apology has the potential to mend broken relationships, rebuild trust, and contribute to long-term reconciliation. However, when apologies are vague, half-hearted, or politically motivated, they risk deepening mistrust rather than fostering healing.

We have seen instances where ambiguous and incomplete apologies—such as those by Japanese Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi or, on a regional level, Boris Tadić’s apology have failed to achieve their intended impact. This is because not all fundamental components of a proper apology were fulfilled. In order for political apologies to be effective, they should adhere to the following key recommendations:

1. ***Explicit Acknowledgment of Wrongdoing*** – The apology must clearly recognize the specific harm or injustice that was committed. Avoiding vague language and refraining from downplaying past actions are crucial, as they prevent the apology from seeming insincere or lacking in accountability.

2. ***Expression of Genuine Remorse*** – A sincere apology should convey empathy and regret for the suffering caused. This must go beyond diplomatic phrasing and reflect a deep understanding of the historical or personal trauma experienced by the affected communities.

3. ***Taking Responsibility Without Justification*** – Politicians should avoid shifting blame, making excuses, or using conditional statements (e.g., “if anyone was offended”). A strong apology requires owning up to past actions without attempting to minimize their impact.

4. ***Commitment to Concrete Reparative Actions*** – Words alone are not enough. An effective apology should be accompanied by tangible measures such as legal reforms, financial reparations, educational initiatives, or policies aimed at preventing similar injustices from occurring again.

5. ***Engagement with Affected Communities*** – Apologies should not be top-down declarations but rather involve meaningful dialogue with the people who have suffered. Consulting victims, listening to their perspectives, and addressing their needs can enhance the credibility of the apology.

6. ***Ensuring Continuity and Institutional Support*** – A genuine apology should not be a one-time political statement but rather a part of a broader commitment to justice and reconciliation. Successive governments should uphold the principles of the apology rather than treat it as a symbolic gesture that can be reversed or forgotten.

## **CONCLUSION: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR YOUNG POLITICIANS**

By incorporating these elements, political apologies will serve as powerful tools for healing and bridge-building. When done properly, they help nations and communities move forward with a shared sense of justice, understanding, and mutual respect.

In order to assist you on your path as young politicians and advocates, we hope that we have contributed to your better understanding of important concepts associated with transitional justice, dealing with the past, human rights, and navigating political conversations. We hope that we have helped you better comprehend one of the important concepts related to Transitional Justice Mechanisms - official state or political apologies. As politically active youth, we encourage you to view political apologies as a powerful tool for healing and reconciliation. By advocating for sincere apologies, you can show empathy, accountability, and a commitment to justice. Political apologies not only foster trust within communities but also pave the way for a more inclusive and unified future. Remember, apologies aren't signs of weakness—they're opportunities to lead with integrity and vision.

***YIHR Croatia team***

**DO YOU  
KNOW OTHER  
EXAMPLES  
OF POLITICAL  
APOLOGIES?**





