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**Regional stability and reconciliation policy in Croatian-Serbian relations; perspectives and challenges for Croats and Serbs in Croatia, exemplified by tourism development**

**Abstract**

This paper analyzes the importance of strengthening the capacities of the Serbian minority for building a stable and inclusive society in the Republic of Croatia. Special emphasis is placed on the challenges faced by Serbs in returnee areas, including reconstruction, economic development and integration, highlighting the importance of projects that encourage return and coexistence. The paper also points to the significance of cooperation through a policy of regional stability and reconciliation, which, in addition to political apologies and strengthening inter-parliamentary ties, involves enhancing capacities for local-level collaboration and promoting joint projects and education. Such initiatives contribute to regional stability, reduce prejudices, and build mutual trust. The conclusion emphasizes the need for a balance of rights, opportunities and mutual respect to ensure sustainable peace and long-term regional stability.

**Keywords:** regional stability, reconciliation, Serbs in Croatia, Croats in Serbia, returnee areas, sustainable development, coexistence.

**The Importance of Political Apologies and Regional Stability Policies for Minorities**

The desire to rectify historical injustices is increasingly present in the modern world, affecting our lives on both personal and collective levels. This sentiment occupies a central position in the moral self-perception of individuals and entire communities. In the post-Cold War world, moral responsibility has become pivotal in shaping international relations. Opposition to genocide, ethnic cleansing, support for human rights, and the fear of involvement in crimes against humanity are no longer lofty ideals but practical foundations of modern politics<sup>1</sup>. In

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<sup>1</sup> Elazar Barkan, *Krivica Nacija*, Novi Sad, 2007., page 9.

1970, German chancellor Willy Brandt knelt before the Warsaw ghetto monument, acknowledging Nazi crimes and paving the way for reconciliation with Poland, but also deeper and more personal ask for forgiveness from Jews and Poles as victims of German aggression. This symbolic act profoundly influenced European politics, inspiring not only broader stabilization efforts in global reconciliation but also embedding peace processes in the region and also in the relationships between Germans, Poles, and Jews. Moral rhetoric gained momentum in the late 1990s as international institutions and states increasingly used moral arguments to resolve conflicts, enforce justice, and pursue reconciliation. Political apologies, as a component of this rhetoric and an initial step toward comprehensive reconciliation, symbolize the acknowledgment of historical injustices and the assumption of responsibility. They open pathways to building trust and ensuring long-term stability. Such symbolic gestures have triggered a wave of similar apologies worldwide. From Queen Elizabeth apologizing to the Sikhs and Maoris, to the U.S. government's apology to Native Hawaiians, and Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's apology to Indigenous Australians, these apologies have not only sought forgiveness for historical wrongs but also conveyed a commitment to lasting peace and stability. However, they represent only an initial step, insufficient on their own to address entrenched hatred and injustice<sup>2</sup>. During the 1980s and 1990s, presidential apologies, intergovernmental commissions, interparliamentary bodies, non-governmental organizations and restitution initiatives, but also financial compensation for suffered fears and victims became integral to reconciliation and redress efforts worldwide. Everything mentioned, as well as many other examples, confirm that political apology and institutional measures can advance minority rights and stability. For instance, in Canada, Prime Minister Stephen Harper's 2008 apology to indigenous peoples for abuses in residential schools was accompanied by financial compensation and the establishment of a Truth and reconciliation commission, laying a foundation for rebuilding relations between indigenous communities and Canadian society. That already was a meaningful step in the process of righting the wrongs and reconciliation attempts.

In the context of Croatia and Serbia, political apologies carry special significance due to the heavy legacy of the conflicts of the 1990s. They represent the first and often most challenging step in the process of reconciliation and trust-building between these two historically burdened nations. Recognizing historical injustices and assuming responsibility for past crimes through presidential apologies symbolically creates space for reconciliation between

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, page 27.

Croats and Serbs, between the two states, and within their majority and minority populations. For Croats and Serbs, the process of apologizing began in the early 21st century. The history of political apologies between Croatia and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and later Serbia, is marked by a series of significant events contributing to reconciliation and normalization of relations after the 1990s conflicts. For instance, in 2004, Croatian Prime Minister Ivo Sanader visited Belgrade, where, together with Svetozar Marović, the President of Serbia and Montenegro, he adopted a joint declaration focused on the future. The following year, the Serbian Prime Minister visited Zagreb, and Sanader made an official return visit to Serbia in 2006. Those meetings marked a progress in relations and mutual dedication towards solving of open questions<sup>3</sup>. The period of best relations between Croatia and Serbia occurred during the presidencies of Serbian president Boris Tadić and Croatian president Ivo Josipović. In 2010, their joint apologies for war crimes significantly propelled the reconciliation process. A crucial event for relations between Croatia's majority and its Serbian minority in Croatia occurred in 2020, when Boris Milošević, as a representative of Serbs in Croatia, attended the anniversary of "Oluja" in Knin. This was followed by a joint commemoration of Serbian victims in Grubora, attended by political representatives of both nations. These events underscored the importance of joint political initiatives in fostering peace and tolerance. The Croatian government, led by Prime Minister Andrej Plenković and the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), has consistently sent messages of reconciliation in partnership with the Independent Democratic Serbian Party (SDSS), reaffirming a commitment to peaceful coexistence and the rights of minority communities.

In addition to the political tone that insists on the peaceful development and coexistence of the majority Croatian population and minority communities, especially the Serbian one, the minority policy of the Government of the Republic of Croatia has repeatedly shown through examples how political apologies and institutional measures can improve the rights of minorities and stability.

Indeed, this sequence of events in Croatian-Serbian relations is somewhat similar to the improvement of minority rights of Danes in Germany and Germans in Denmark. In this Northern European context, the German-Danish model today provides us with an inspirational example. The Bonn-Copenhagen Declarations of 1955 ensured the rights of the German minority in Denmark and the Danish minority in Germany, including cultural autonomy,

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<sup>3</sup> Davor Pauković, *Hrvatsko-srpski odnosi u sjeni trauma 20.stoljeća: sjećanja na operaciju „Oluja“, zbornik „Hrvatsko-srpski odnosi u 20.veku“*, Novi Sad, 2021., pages 7-9.

education in the mother tongue, and political participation. These agreements reduced political tensions, "buried the war axes" that had stemmed from past mutual wars, and allowed minority communities to become bridges of cooperation rather than sources of conflict. Today, these two minority communities are taken as a successful example of overcoming wartime trauma, forgiveness, and the successful implementation of minority rights<sup>4</sup>. In part, the good relations between the two minorities in Germany and Denmark are similar to the relationships of the Serbian minority in Croatia and the Croatian minority in Serbia. These relations are the result of years of joint work and negotiations by senior representatives of both minorities. The famous "Golubić Declaration between the representatives of Serbs from Croatia and Croats from Serbia"<sup>5</sup> signed at the Traditional international symposium „Croatian-Serbian relations“ in Golubić (Obrovac) in 2022, represents not only a bridge of cooperation between the two minorities but also the basis for mutual protection and support within their majority populations. In this way, minorities have, figuratively, taken the initiative into their own hands when it comes to the protection of minority rights, deciding on mutual assistance and protection through the development of cooperation and understanding at all political levels. However, this would have been difficult to achieve without major regional political moves made by Croatian and Serbian politicians, as well as the long-standing regional initiative of the Center for history, democracy, and reconciliation (CHDR) and the Association for history, cooperation, and reconciliation (AHCR), which for seventeen years has gathered high representatives of these minorities and encouraged their cooperation through the organization of the Traditional scientific and professional conferences in Golubić (Obrovac).

When it comes to Croatia and Serbia, the building of regional stability and reconciliation is based on political leadership, legislative initiatives, and cooperation with civil society at all levels. In this process, the head of state (or prime minister) plays a crucial role in promoting tolerance and peace policies, while parliamentary groups, such as the Interparliamentary friendship group between the Croatian Parliament and the National assembly of Serbia, which was most effective during the mandates of Neven Mimica and Janko Veselinović, ensure systematic support. On the local level, joint projects and initiatives that promote cooperation,

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Klatt, *Minorities as secondary foreign policy agents in peace-building and reconciliation? The case of Denmark and Germany. Regional & Federal Studies*, 27(3), 2017., 239-259; M. Klatt, *Mobilization in crisis – demobilization in peace: protagonists of competing national movements in border regions. Studies on National Movements*, 4, 2019., 30.

<sup>5</sup> The author of that Declaration is a politician and professor Janko Veselinović, one of the two main organizers of scientific conferences in Golubić (Obrovac).

such as commemorations attended by representatives of both the majority and minority populations and cultural events, significantly contribute to building trust. Serbs in Croatia receive strong support from the Croatian government through the work of the Serbian National Council (SNV), which provides funding for cultural and educational programs and represents the interests of the Serbian minority, thus strengthening their capacities. Similarly, support for the cultural and educational institutions of Croats in Serbia, such as the Croatian National Council (HNV), as well as the participation of Croatian representatives in the Serbian government and state bodies, demonstrates how strengthening minority communities enhances social cohesion. These steps not only reduce ethnic tensions but also foster long-term peace and create opportunities for the prosperity of minority communities within the majority society.

However, without economic prosperity, there is no progress for minorities. After the political will for reconciliation has been expressed, with changes in education aimed at creating content free of prejudice, and the necessary personal desire for reconciliation among a greater number of individuals, the economy becomes the area in which the integrity of reconciliation and the sustainable development of Serbs in Croatia and Croats in Serbia can be successfully demonstrated. If economic conditions that allow for sustainable development are not ensured, minorities will remain marginalized, which will create a sense of insecurity, isolation, and mistrust toward the majority community. In this regard, it is clear that economic inequality further deepens social and political tensions, making stability and reconciliation unsustainable. Therefore, it is necessary for minorities to have greater access to economic resources. Without it, they face unemployment, poverty, and limited opportunities for development, which results in emigration, weakening the demographic and cultural presence of minorities, and contributes to social inequality. Despite positive political and economic progress, Serbs in Croatia and Croats in Serbia still face these historical challenges, which hinders their integration into broader societies and reduces their contribution to regional stability. Also, it should be noted that, financially speaking, the position of Serbs in Croatia is more favorable than that of Croats in Serbia. Nevertheless, both groups, regardless of political progress, suffer the consequences of stigmatization by the majority populations, which also affects their economic status and prospects. One thing is certain, their economic prosperity would enable them not only to preserve their identity but also to become active participants in local and regional development. If Serbs in Croatia and Croats in Serbia had more effective access to resources and greater opportunities to participate in economic life, they would

become bridges of cooperation between majority communities and neighboring states, thereby strengthening trust and stability.

### **The economic prosperity of minorities as a key of regional stability; the case of Serbs in Croatia**

So far, this paper has explained how the policy of regional stability and reconciliation between Croatia and Serbia begins with apologies from political leaders and presidents, continues through the cooperation of political representatives between the Croatian Parliament and the National assembly of the Republic of Serbia, and extends to local collaboration efforts. This process must be supported by the media and accompanied by appropriate advancements in education, fostering content that strengthens mutual understanding. However, minorities ultimately face survival challenges, as outside urban areas, their members predominantly depend on agriculture, limited jobs, and small local economies. This highlights that prosperity for minorities is unattainable without strengthening their economic capacities.

Serbs in Croatia predominantly reside outside urban areas, particularly in rural and returnee regions such as Banija, Lika, Kordun, parts of Northern Dalmatia, as well as in Slavonia, western Srijem, and Baranja, areas experiencing significant population decline and emigration. In the micro-communities of these regions, the policy of regional stability and reconciliation often resonates only through messages from politicians who, from their central positions, frequently overlook actual local issues. In these areas, Serbs and Croats must face their neighbors of different ethnicities, with whom they "only yesterday" were at war and with whom they now need to live in a community. Building reconciliation between Serbs and Croats at the local level is particularly challenging due to specific historical, social, and psychological factors deeply rooted in the everyday lives of communities affected by conflict. At the local level, many residents have personal experiences of loss and suffering during the conflict, whether through the loss of family members, property, or experiencing violence. Such experiences often result in deep mistrust and hostility towards the other community. Unlike at the national level, where history may seem more abstract, at the local level, memories are often fresh and tied to specific individuals, events, or places. Members of one community often feel pressure not to "deviate" from the dominant narrative of their ethnic group. Acts of tolerance or attempts at cooperation can be perceived as "betrayal" of one's

own community, further complicating the reconciliation process. This is where nationalist rhetoric, often propagated through media and political platforms, plays a role, exerting a strong influence on local communities. Such rhetoric reinforces prejudices and conflict narratives, hindering the process of building understanding and tolerance. Therefore, a broad range of initiatives supported by authorities at all levels is required. Reconciliation at the local level demands organizing joint projects, cultural events, and educational workshops that bring together members of both communities, fostering mutual trust and coexistence. For young people, it would be essential to introduce educational programs that promote tolerance and shared history to reduce interethnic tensions. Additionally, it is crucial to empower local political and social leaders willing to publicly support reconciliation and address property and social issues. One of the brightest examples of such a community in Croatia is Obrovac, where leaders of the HDZ and SDSS parties have been in charge for over twenty years, during which no ethnically motivated conflicts have been recorded.

Beyond these efforts, economic development holds particular significance. Investments in local communities create new jobs, reduce poverty, and encourage joint work among people of different ethnic backgrounds, gradually diminishing economic and social disparities. The economy plays a significant role in regional stability and reconciliation because, in many rural areas affected by conflict, economic recovery is slow or nonexistent. Poverty and lack of opportunities can exacerbate frustrations, with extremist politicians exploiting these issues to fuel tensions between communities, blaming the "other" for their problems. Thus, apart from the need for personal forgiveness and a desire for shared living, which are prerequisites for peace, sustainable sources of income are crucial for long-term stability. In other words, reconciliation, while essential for stabilizing relations, is insufficient if people lack opportunities for a dignified life and economic survival. Without sustainable income sources, ensuring long-term stability, retaining the population in rural areas, and achieving peace becomes challenging, especially for Serbs and Croats in areas where they lived before the war. Today, areas with larger Serbian communities are marked by war destruction, demographic decline, and economic stagnation. The population, predominantly older, faces limited access to modern services and poor infrastructure, while younger generations often leave due to a lack of opportunities. Economic activities in these areas are often based on agriculture and livestock farming, but without significant investments or market access.

Nonetheless, there is a glimmer of hope. A growing number of local projects for developing agriculture and rural tourism, supported by the Government of the Republic of Croatia, particularly through the SNV, are opening avenues for development. Given these geographic and demographic factors, Serbs are increasingly seeking sustainable development opportunities linked to nature, agriculture, and tourism, which offer prospects for economic growth through rural, cultural, and ecotourism.

Tourism plays a vital role in Croatia's economic development, leveraging the country's rich natural and cultural resources to attract millions of visitors annually, contributing significantly to revenues and employment, especially in underdeveloped regions, often where larger Serbian communities reside. At the local level, tourism can encourage reconciliation between Croats and Serbs. Collaborative work on tourism projects, such as cultural events, heritage preservation, and rural tourism initiatives, creates opportunities for mutual cooperation, reduces social barriers, and fosters trust. Tourism cooperation can also revitalize depopulated areas through economic recovery and population retention, thereby supporting sustainable living and stability in the long term. Joint ventures in tourism provide employment opportunities, promote local heritage preservation, and deliver authentic experiences that attract visitors, bringing income to these communities. Sustainable tourism development in these areas not only strengthens the economy but also offers a practical dimension to reconciliation through shared efforts and economic growth. Joint tourism projects allow Croats and Serbs to work toward common goals and build trust, fostering an environment for coexistence and sustainable community growth.

For this reason, the scientific papers included in this collection, as well as those that have been published over the years in CHDR's proceedings, offer a broad scientific perspective on the possibilities for economic survival and development in rural areas of Croatia, such as Banija, Lika, Kordun, and Northern Dalmatia. They not only examine the possibilities for a sustainable economy but also lay the foundations for a shared life and development of Croats and Serbs in these regions. Through examples of sustainable models in policies for regional stability and reconciliation, analyses of tourism and agroecology development, and by providing suggestions to the local community in that direction, space is created for deeper understanding and long-term reconciliation in similar communities that share a rich but complex history.



In the Croatian-Serbian context, tourism has yet to overcome longstanding tensions and the consequences of wartime conflicts. In these rural areas, there is potential for joint projects by Croats and Serbs tied to cultural and natural heritage — such as preserving local traditions, creating shared tourist routes, and offering authentic experiences — but with additional efforts to build mutual trust and stability. Therefore, tourism, which should be jointly developed by the majority and minority populations in the mentioned parts of Croatia, could serve as an opportunity for reconciliation through development, revitalization, and the involvement of local residents in economic growth, with an emphasis on preserving diversity and strengthening the economy of rural communities.

In these areas, the interconnectedness of nature, agriculture, and tourism comes to the forefront, opening up new opportunities for employment and development through sustainable rural, cultural, and eco-tourism. The natural resources of these regions, which include untouched forests, rivers, and mountain trails, offer ideal conditions for eco-tourism, while agriculture and traditional crafts provide authentic tourist experiences through local products and souvenirs. In this way, tourism becomes a means not only for economic recovery but also for the preservation of cultural heritage, the cooperation of Croatian and Serbian populations, and the long-term improvement of the quality of life in Croatia's rural areas.

These areas are rich in natural beauty, cultural-historical monuments, and authentic traditions, presenting vast opportunities for developing rural, cultural, and eco-tourism. Monasteries, traditional houses, old churches, and local customs can attract visitors seeking tranquil environments, while natural resources, such as those in Northern Velebit National Park, Plitvice Lakes, or Krka National Park, offer potential for eco-tourism. Collaborative efforts by Croatian and Serbian communities on joint tourism projects, such as guided tours, homestay accommodations, offerings of local organic products, and the creation of souvenirs, can contribute to preserving nature and cultural heritage, increasing economic activity, and encouraging the return of the population. Initiatives like organizing local events, such as ethnographic fairs and traditional food festivals, foster interaction and exchange between communities, breaking down social barriers through shared efforts. The demand for authentic products, such as cheese, wines, and handicrafts, allows local communities to profit from their traditions and knowledge while strengthening economic ties through clusters and

collaboration<sup>6</sup>. Clustering initiatives in beekeeping, livestock farming, or traditional crafts create networks of small producers who jointly market their products, reducing costs and increasing competitiveness, which further strengthens the local economy<sup>7</sup>. These products become an essential part of the tourism offer, directly linking the local economy to the tourism sector. Such initiatives reinforce a shared identity while simultaneously generating economic benefits from tourism that help build trust and stability in the region. Beyond utilizing natural resources, tourism can facilitate joint tourism initiatives linking key cultural landmarks from shared histories, such as the "Tesla Routes" of renowned American scientist Nikola Tesla, of Serbian origin but native of Croatia, or fortification sites tied to resistance against the Ottoman Empire which are associated with famous figures from the common history of Croatia, such as Stojan Janković's tower. These projects could significantly boost tourism development in returnee areas, presenting the rich heritage of both communities to broader audiences and reducing prejudices while enhancing mutual understanding through joint cultural and historical promotion.

Sustainable tourism development in these areas not only strengthens the economy but also provides an opportunity for reconciliation and the creation of stable communities through joint work and economic progress. Joint projects in the tourism sector enable Croats and Serbs to collaborate on shared goals, fostering trust. These tourism initiatives connect the Serbian minority and the Croatian majority, as well as other communities in Croatia, ensuring the conditions for sustainable survival in rural areas through preserving cultural heritage, stimulating economic activity, and promoting mutual understanding. With a strategic approach and targeted development of tourism and agriculture, rural communities in Croatia can become examples of successful coexistence and economic progress, contributing to the broader goal of long-term stability and reconciliation in the country.

Based on numerous works related to tourism and agro-economic development presented at the Traditional scientific conferences „Croatian-Serbian relations“ in Golubić (Obrovac), several measures are suggested for the economic development of minorities:

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<sup>6</sup> Veselinović, J., & Njegovan, Z. *Klasteri kao mogućnost efikasnog udruživanja kozara u Obrovcu*. From <https://chdr-ns.com/pdf/Janko-Veselinovic-Zoran-Njegovan-Klasteri-kao-mogucnost-efikasnog-udruzivanja-kozara-u-Obrovcu.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Veselinović, J., & Njegovan, Z. *Klasteri kao mogućnost efikasnog udruživanja kozara u Obrovcu*. From <https://chdr-ns.com/pdf/Janko-Veselinovic-Zoran-Njegovan-Klasteri-kao-mogucnost-efikasnog-udruzivanja-kozara-u-Obrovcu.pdf>

1. Encouraging investments in minority areas: The state should develop programs to promote economic investments in regions with minority populations, such as providing subsidies to entrepreneurs and ensuring favorable conditions for job creation.
2. Improving infrastructure: Poor infrastructure is often the main reason for the lagging development of rural areas with predominantly minority populations. Investments in transportation, digital, and energy infrastructure can improve connectivity and open new opportunities for economic growth.
3. Financial support for agriculture and small enterprises: Many minority areas depend on agriculture. Subsidies, expert assistance, and support for local cooperatives are vital for the sustainability of these communities. Additionally, promoting small and medium-sized businesses owned by minorities strengthens their economic position.
4. Ensuring education and vocational training: Access to education in minority languages, alongside vocational training programs, enables minority youth to acquire skills necessary for the modern labor market, reducing unemployment and increasing economic contributions.
5. Incentives for returnees and community development: Programs should be developed to encourage minorities to return to their places of origin, providing funds for home reconstruction, business start-ups, and community revitalization.

Towards the end of the chapter, the question arises: what are the benefits of the economic development for minorities? The answers can be summarized in four key points:

1. Self-sufficiency: Economic self-sufficiency ensures greater autonomy and stability for minority communities, reducing dependence on state assistance.
2. Strengthening identity: Economic security allows minorities to invest more in preserving their language, culture, and traditions, strengthening their identity and sense of belonging.
3. Political and social integration: Prosperity enables minorities to participate equally in social life, reducing feelings of marginalization and increasing mutual trust.
4. Bridges of cooperation: Economically active and stable minorities become key actors in fostering cross-border cooperation, contributing to stability between Croatia and Serbia.

Finally, let's list the majority population's benefits that come from strengthening the capacity of minorities:

1. Social stability and cohesion: Reducing tensions between communities and building trust contributes to a more peaceful and secure social environment.
2. Cultural enrichment: Promoting minority cultures, languages, and traditions enriches the cultural offerings and diversity of the community.
3. Economic development: Integrating minorities into economic processes and developing tourism and cultural projects creates new jobs and brings economic benefits to the entire community.
4. International reputation: Respecting minority rights and promoting inclusive policies enhance the country's international credibility, opening doors to cooperation and financial support abroad.
5. Reduced emigration: Better conditions for minorities stabilize the demographic picture and help retain populations in shared regions.

In conclusion, without systematic investment in the economic development of minorities, the policy of regional stability and reconciliation remains incomplete. The Serbian minority in Croatia and the Croatian minority in Serbia need strengthened support for development in order to become equal partners in social, political and economic life, thereby contributing to long-term peace and cooperation in the region.

## **Conclusion<sup>8</sup>**

Strengthening the capacities of Serbs in Croatia and Croats in Serbia is crucial for building stable and inclusive societies in both countries. Promoting the rights of these minority communities, including access to education, culture, and the economy, reduces social tensions and fosters mutual trust. In that context, this paper places particular emphasis on the situation of Serbs in Croatia due to their larger presence in returnee areas, where challenges related to return, reconstruction, and economic development are especially pronounced, but also because CHDR has long promoted roundtable discussions and educational programs in Golubić (Obrovac), encouraging not only the return process but also coexistence and cooperation among all residents of Northern Dalmatia especially through addressing past conflicts, scientifically eliminating prejudice, and providing education and opportunities for

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sustainable development in tourism and agro-economics. Ultimately, the paper aims to offer insights into how cooperation on joint projects contribute to mutual understanding between majority communities and minorities, strengthening regional stability. Sustainable peace and coexistence can only be achieved through a balance of rights, opportunities, and mutual respect among all communities in the region.