

## Operation Storm's 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in Croatia: Narratives and Counter-Narratives

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### Abstract

State elites have often used wars as a source to advance selective narratives promoting national unity and state legitimacy. In Croatia, the dominant narrative about the August 1995 Operation Storm, which led to Croatia's victory in the War of Independence against Serbia-supported Croatian Serb secessionists, is a case in point. This narrative, however, has been challenged by counter-narratives that draw attention to crimes against Serb civilians and the exodus of Serbs in the context of the operation. This article analyzes these conflicting narratives on the occasion of Storm's 30th anniversary in 2025, focusing on commemorations carried out by the Croatian government and Croatia's Serb National Council. It argues that the 2025 events show the enduring strength of the dominant narrative and the continuation of the aforementioned divergences, amplifying the challenges to Croatian Serbs' social position in the face of issues like the mainstreaming of nationalist elements in Croatia's public sphere.

**Keywords:** Croatian War of Independence, Operation Storm, Croatian Serbs, Serb National Council, memory

### Introduction

The beginning of August 2025 marked the 30th anniversary of Operation Storm, which led to the end of the 1991-1995 Croatian War of Independence with Croatia's military victory over the secessionist, Serbia-supported Republic of Serbian Krajina (*Republika Srpska Krajina*, RSK).

Due to the operation's role in the war, Storm commemorations have become one of the main events in Croatia's political calendar. In 2025, the state commemoration, in addition to a large military parade in Zagreb, featured the traditional gathering of Croatia's political leadership in the Dalmatian city of Knin, which served as the RSK's capital during the war. Croatian leaders, foremost among them Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, once again used

the commemoration to advance a national narrative about a glorious, just, and legitimate action that consolidated the Croatian state and ended the aggression against the Croatian people.

This narrative, however, has problematic elements for most of Croatia's Serb community (3.2% of the population according to the 2021 census). For Croatian Serbs, Operation Storm has been mostly associated with the traumas of exodus and violence, leading to the articulation of alternative memory narratives.

These divergences have led to much controversy in Croatia. Taking into account this history, this article analyzes the different narratives surrounding Operation Storm's anniversary in 2025, considering their implications for Croatian politics, national identity, and Croat-Serb relations. To this end, the analysis concentrates on state commemorations of Operation Storm, as well as Storm commemoration activities carried out by the Serb National Council (*Srpsko narodno vijeće*, SNV), the main organization of Croatia's Serb community.

### **The Croatian War of Independence and Operation Storm: context and contentious issues**

The Croatian War of Independence (known as the Homeland War, *Domovinski rat*, in the country) was part of Yugoslavia's breakup. In 1991, Croatia, under the leadership of President Franjo Tuđman and his party, the Croatian Democratic Union (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica*, HDZ), proclaimed its independence, gaining wide international recognition by the end of 1992 and becoming a UN member state in May that year. However, a large share of Croatian Serbs (12.2% of the population according to the 1991 census) rejected Croatia's independence.

With Serbia's support, a Croatian Serb secessionist movement, instigated by the Serbian nationalist wave emanating from Belgrade, established autonomous state structures in regions where Serbs were the majority or a significant part of the population, controlling about a quarter of Croatia's territory. In late 1991, the establishment of the RSK was declared in these regions. This process resulted in the war with the nascent Croatian state. After the failure of peace negotiations, Croatia launched Operation Storm on 4 August 1995. In a matter of days, Croatian forces managed to militarily defeat the RSK in the latter's political center, including Knin.

The war was characterized by acute civilian suffering. Facing a hostile environment, including killings, an estimated 300,000 Croats and other non-Serbs fled frontline regions and territories under Serb separatist control until the end of 1991. About 200,000 Serbs, in turn, fled from Croatian-controlled regions.<sup>1</sup> Regarding Operation Storm specifically, according to estimates, between 100,000 and 200,000 Serbs fled the regions targeted by the operation.<sup>2</sup> During the operation and its aftermath, several Serb civilians were killed. Most generally accepted estimates place the number of such victims in the hundreds,<sup>3</sup> while new research, with broader methodology, puts the number of killed Serb civilians at about 1,000.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pauković, Davor. 2021. *Hrvatsko-srpski odnosi u sjeni trauma 20. stoljeća: Sjećanja na operaciju „Oluja“*. In *Hrvatsko-srpski odnosi u XX. veku*, edited by Pauković, Davor / Petrović, Nebojša, and Ranka Gašić. Petrovaradin: Maxima Graf, 7–28.

<sup>2</sup> Klempić Bogadi, Sanja. 2024. *Zajednica zaslužuje budućnost. Demografska slika i budućnost Srba u Hrvatskoj*. Zagreb: SNV and Jesenski i Turk; Pauković, *Hrvatsko-srpski odnosi*, 12-13.

<sup>3</sup> Pauković, *Hrvatsko-srpski odnosi*, 14; Žunec, Ozren. 2023. Minderwertigkeitsgefühl pobednika: Prilog povjesnici hrvatskih moralnih panika. *Polemos* 26(52), 205–220.

<sup>4</sup> Documenta – Centar za suočavanje s prošalošću. 2025. *Istraživanje ljudskih gubitaka u ratu u Republici Hrvatskoj. Vojna operacija Oluja i poslije – preliminarni rezultati*. *Documenta*, 28 July 2025.

In addition, there was widespread looting and destruction of property.<sup>5</sup> Despite some measures taken to restrain such crimes, the Croatian state did not act fiercely enough to deter, investigate, and punish these actions.<sup>6</sup>

Heated debates remain over these episodes. On the one hand, the very establishment of the RSK was to a large extent premised on a fierce rejection of life under the Croatian state. The RSK leadership also prepared and carried out civilian evacuation plans. On the other hand, although the Croatian leadership made public calls for Serbs to remain and declared its commitment to respect Serbs' rights, Tuđman saw the Serb exodus as beneficial for Croatia's long-term political stability, by decreasing potential Serb secessionist challenges.<sup>7</sup> Also, some legislation in practice significantly hindered the return of Serbs and reduced Croatian Serbs' collective political rights in the post-war period.<sup>8</sup> Critics of Croatia's wartime leadership argue that the factors mentioned above cast a shadow on Storm, giving rise to debates over the operation's goals, effects, and legitimacy.

### **The War of Independence and Operation Storm in Croatian memory narratives**

Wars have played and continue to play a key role in states' ideological foundations and the development of national identities. Upon state formation in the wake of violent conflict, elite and other social actors have often sought to legitimize state authority and foster national identity through selective memory narratives centered on aspects such as heroism, justice, victimization, and sacrifice.<sup>9</sup>

The spread of such homogenizing narratives has been associated with state involvement in the creation and dissemination of national symbols, memory, and cultural standards.<sup>10</sup> In this regard, remembrance ceremonies, such as war-related commemorations, continue to serve as an important tool for promoting memory narratives and instilling a sense of national unity.<sup>11</sup>

However, the existence of different historical experiences means that efforts to promote unifying national narratives, embodied in various types of memory policies, can hardly achieve full representativeness or social acceptance.<sup>12</sup> While the state and segments of society attempt to ensure the prevalence of dominant narratives, other social actors seek the recognition of their own experiences and views,<sup>13</sup> articulating counter-narratives.<sup>14</sup>

Along these lines, historical memory has been an important factor in the politics of Yugoslavia's successor states, including Croatia. The 1990s war became a sort of foundational myth of contemporary narratives of Croatian national identity and state legitimacy. In this regard, the dominant, state-supported narrative about the War of Independence has

<sup>5</sup> Nikolić, Kosta. 2023. *Krajina 1991.-1995*. Zaprješić: Fraktura and SNV; Pauković, *Hrvatsko-srpski odnosi*, 13-14.

<sup>6</sup> Barić, Nikica. 2005. *Srpska pobuna u Hrvatskoj 1990.-1995*. Zagreb: Golden Marketing–Tehnička knjiga; Pauković, *Hrvatsko-srpski odnosi*, 14; Opačić, Tamara, and Nikola Bajto. 2020. *Evidencija nepravde*. *Novosti*, 6 August 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Barić, *Srpska pobuna*, 535-563; Nikolić, *Krajina*, 10-12, 545-571.

<sup>8</sup> Klempić Bogadi, *Zajednica zaslužuje*, 13, 112-120, 140-162; Nikolić, *Krajina*, 545-571; Škiljan, Filip. 2014. Identitet Srba u Hrvatskoj. *Politička misao* 51(2), 111–134.

<sup>9</sup> Edkins, Jenny. 2006. *Remembering relationality: Trauma, time and politics*, in *Memory, trauma and world politics: Reflections on the relationship between past and present*, edited by Bell, Duncan. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 99–115.

<sup>10</sup> Tilly, Charles. 1994. States and nationalism in Europe 1492–1992. *Theory and Society* 23(1), 131–146

<sup>11</sup> Hutchinson, John. 2009. Warfare and the sacralisation of nations: The meanings, rituals and politics of national remembrance. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 38(2), 401–417.

<sup>12</sup> Rahman, Smita. 2015. *Time, memory, and the politics of contingency*. New York: Routledge.

<sup>13</sup> Hutchinson, *Warfare and sacralisation*, 411-412; Edkins, *Remembering relationality*.

<sup>14</sup> Banjeglav, Tamara. 2012. Conflicting memories, competing narratives and contested histories in Croatia's post-war commemorative practices. *Politička misao* 49(5), 7–31.

described Croatia as both the victim and winner in a defensive war against rebel Croatian Serbs and Serbia. In line with the ethnic-centered victimization narratives present in the region, crimes committed by Serb forces have been highlighted. Crimes perpetrated by Croatian forces, in turn, have not received much attention, being described mostly as isolated cases.<sup>15</sup>

Several actions illustrate elite actors' efforts to consolidate this dominant narrative. In October 2000, the Sabor, Croatia's parliament, defined the war as "just and legitimate, defensive and liberating, not aggressive and conquering", while emphasizing the individual nature of any war crimes. The 2000 Sabor declaration also called on state institutions and society as a whole to protect the legacy of the war.<sup>16</sup> This message was reinforced by a similar Sabor declaration regarding Operation Storm in 2006.<sup>17</sup> Official commemorations, with speeches by Croatian leaders, have also been a key feature of the Storm narrative. They have traditionally centered on ceremonies held in Knin on 5 August, the holiday known as the Victory and Homeland Thanksgiving Day and Day of Croatian Defenders.

The dominant narrative, however, has been contested by other actors in Croatia's society and political elite, both those demanding a more uncompromising approach in celebrating Croatia's victory and those seeking greater recognition of Serb suffering.<sup>18</sup> In the latter case, the role of the SNV stands out. Founded in 1997, the SNV advocates Croatian Serbs' culture, identity, and political rights, while also stressing multiethnic cooperation as one of its goals.<sup>19</sup> For most of its history, the SNV was led by Sabor MP Milorad Pupovac, the most renowned Serb politician in Croatia and also leader of the main Serb party in the country, the Independent Democratic Serb Party (*Samostalna demokratska srpska stranka*, SDSS). In March 2025, Pupovac was succeeded in the SNV presidency by Boris Milošević, another SDSS member.

The SNV has been advancing a counter-narrative of the 1990s war through various means, such as sponsoring monuments, publishing, research, and exhibitions. Regarding Storm, the SNV has published Remembrance Statements (*Izjave sjećanja*) on the occasion of the operation's anniversaries. In the statements, the SNV has drawn attention to Serb civilian victims and demanded punishment for perpetrators of crimes against them. Importantly, the SNV has also expressed solidarity with civilian victims of all nationalities, calling for a multiethnic remembrance culture - a position that certainly reflects not only the organization's views on the war and inter-ethnic relations themselves, but also the awareness, as a representative of a still largely stigmatized minority, that demonstrating inter-ethnic empathy can facilitate the engagement with the majority and therefore consolidate reconciliation and broaden the social recognition of Croatian Serbs. Commemoration ceremonies organized by the SNV have been held in sites of crimes against Serb civilians, such as in the Strmica village (Knin region) in 2024.<sup>20</sup>

The accommodation of these elements into the dominant narrative has been limited and influenced by external and domestic factors. Under the influence of the EU integration

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<sup>15</sup> Banjeglav, *Conflicting memories*; Jović, Dejan. 2017. *Rat i mit. Politika identiteta u suvremenoj Hrvatskoj*. Zaprješić: Fraktura; Pauković, *Hrvatsko-srpski odnosi*; Pavlaković, Vjeran. 2020. *Memory politics in the former Yugoslavia*. *Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej* 18(2), 9–32.

<sup>16</sup> Narodne novine – službeni list RH. 2000. *Deklaracija o Domovinskom ratu*. *NN 102/2000*, 17 October 2000.

<sup>17</sup> Narodne novine – službeni list RH. 2006. *Deklaracija o Oluji*. *NN 76/2006*, 10 July 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Banjeglav, *Conflicting memories*.

<sup>19</sup> Srpsko narodno vijeće (SNV). *Statut Srpskog narodnog vijeća – Nacionalne koordinacije vijeća srpske nacionalne manjine u Republici Hrvatskoj* (accessed: 4 August 2025).

<sup>20</sup> Srpsko narodno vijeće (SNV). *17. Izjava sjećanja Srpskog narodnog vijeća* (accessed: 4 August 2025).

process, which took into account good neighborly relations, prosecution of war crimes, and reconciliation as accession criteria, the governments led by both the HDZ and the Social Democratic Party of Croatia (*Socijaldemokratska partija Hrvatske*, SDP) started to acknowledge crimes against Serbs during and after Storm.<sup>21</sup>

However, many Croatians saw the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia's (ICTY) acquittal of Croatian generals Ante Gotovina and Mladen Markač in 2012 as a decision that confirmed the views according to which Storm was a just and righteous operation. This interpretation strengthened support for a more uncompromising memory narrative in Croatia's society. In the following years, some Croatian officials and politicians even suggested bans on alleged public disrespect of the legacy of the war.<sup>22</sup>

Serbia's memory policies have also been an important external factor influencing war narratives in Croatia. Since Aleksandar Vučić came to power in 2012, state commemorations of Storm became high-profile events in Serbia. More adept at nationalist discourse, the Serbian leadership since then has been using Storm commemorations to advance an ethnic-centered victimization narrative and criticize Croatia, contributing to further turn Storm anniversaries into tense periods in Zagreb-Belgrade relations.<sup>23</sup>

In the domestic realm, the role of political leaders' worldviews and perceptions, as illustrated by SDP-linked President Ivo Josipović (2010-2015), has also influenced a more conciliatory memory approach.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, the support or participation of the SDSS in ruling coalitions since the 2000s has also contributed to the recognition of Serbs' experience. In 2020, when the SDSS joined the government led by HDZ Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, then Deputy Prime Minister Boris Milošević even attended the Knin Storm commemoration – the first such move by a high-positioned Croatian Serb leader at the national level. Plenković's 2020 Knin speech was marked by a stronger emphasis on reconciliation and solidarity with Serb civilian victims. Significantly, Plenković stated that crimes committed by Croatian forces presented an “ugly scar” of the war.<sup>25</sup>

The importance of the SDSS factor is further suggested by the changes in government discourse after the end of the HDZ-SDSS partnership in 2024, the year which also marked the beginning of the HDZ's alliance with the right-wing nationalist Homeland Movement (*Domovinski pokret*, DP). Plenković's 2024 Knin speech showed signs of adaptation to these new political circumstances. For example, the Premier's speech, while containing some hallmarks of the dominant narrative, also vowed to oppose “any attempt to distort historical facts”. Plenković affirmed Croatia's commitment to protect minorities' rights, but unlike the 2023 speech, did not explicitly mention Croatian Serbs. There was also no mention of Serb civilian victims.<sup>26</sup>

Views that depart from the dominant narrative have been seen by many in Croatia as challenges to the very foundations of the Croatian state.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, commemorations of

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<sup>21</sup> Banjeglav, *Conflicting memories*, 20-21; Krstić, Milan. 2021. Međusobna izvinjenja Srbije i Hrvatske: Uzroci i efekti izvinjenja i razlozi njihovog ograničenog uticaja. *Tragovi* 4(2), 146–173.

<sup>22</sup> Jović, *Rat i mit*, 213.

<sup>23</sup> Krstić, *Međusobna izvinjenja*; Pauković, *Hrvatsko-srpski odnosi*.

<sup>24</sup> Krstić, *Međusobna izvinjenja*.

<sup>25</sup> Vlada Republike Hrvatske. 2020. Oluju obilježavamo u znaku pobjede, zahvalnosti i ponosa, uz osjećaj pomirbe i pijeteta. *Vlada Republike Hrvatske*, 5 August 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Vlada Republike Hrvatske. 2024. Oluja je bila oslobodilačka, legitimna i pravedna operacija, suprotstaviti ćemo se svakom pokušaju izvrtanja činjenica. *Vlada Republike Hrvatske*, 5 August 2024.

<sup>27</sup> Banjeglav, *Conflicting memories*, 20-21; Goldstein, Ivo. 2010. *Dvadeset godina samostalne Hrvatske*. Zagreb: Novi Liber; Jović, *Rat i mit*; Žunec, *Minderwertigkeitsgefühl pobjednika*.

Serb victims have often been targets of criticism, threats, and attacks by Croatian nationalists.<sup>28</sup> These tensions are embedded in a context in which, despite the existence of a developed - albeit in some cases inconsistently implemented - legislative framework in Croatia protecting minorities' rights and interests, cases of intolerance, discrimination, violence, and hate speech towards Serbs persist, contributing to the fear of stigmatization and the occurrence of identity mimicry among Croatian Serbs.<sup>29</sup> In addition to its demographic impact, by contributing to reducing the percentage of Serbs in Croatia's population to just over a quarter of the 1991 figures, the legacy of the 1990s war continues to have a major influence on the social position of Serbs in the country.

### **The 2025 Storm commemorations**

In addition to the three-decade milestone itself, Storm's 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary occurred in a very particular situation. On 5 July, after a period of relative absence from the spotlight, controversial nationalist singer Marko Perković Thompson held a massive concert that was attended, according to the show's organizers, by 500,000 people in Zagreb. Thompson's work is known for the cult of Croatia's 1990s war victory and seeming sympathy for the Ustaša organization and the fascist Independent State of Croatia (*Nezavisna država Hrvatska*, NDH), which carried out a genocide of Serbs, Jews, and Roma during World War II.

The concert sparked a lot of controversy due to Thompson's and part of the crowd's chanting of the "For the Homeland – Ready!" (*Za dom – spremni!*) salute used by the Ustaša/NDH. As usual in Thompson's concerts, other Croatian ultranationalist symbols were present among the crowd. Some Croatian authorities, including Plenković, downplayed this episode, denying that the concert promoted Ustaša ideology.<sup>30</sup> Defense Minister, HDZ member and war veteran Ivan Anušić even proudly admitted to having chanted the salute, claiming it was actually linked to the War of Independence.<sup>31</sup> On 4 August, another large Thompson concert was held in the Dalmatian city of Sinj. These episodes drew renewed attention to the mainstreaming of nationalist discourses in Croatia and its implications for Croat-Serb relations.

When it comes to state commemorations, a large military parade in honor of Storm, the first since 2015, was held on 31 July in Zagreb. The parade itself was preceded by the mourning of fallen Croatian soldiers, as well as musical performances and the recitation of poems praising the homeland and wartime bravery and sacrifice. War veterans, wearing military-style apparel, took part in the parade, symbolically handing a Croatian flag to current officers.<sup>32</sup>

It is worth pointing out that the parade was marked by the portrayal of Croatia's armed forces as forces capable of ensuring the country's security amid the tense geopolitical situation in Europe following Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In this context, the Plenković government has positioned Croatia as a committed NATO ally, modernizing its armed forces. About 3,400 members of Croatia's armed forces, police, and other security-

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<sup>28</sup> Milekić, Sven. 2024. *Službeno obilježavanje ratne 1991. u Hrvatskoj: Analiza i preporuke*. Belgrade: Fond za humanitarno pravo; Pavlaković, Vjeran. 2018. *Croatia's contested memoryscape*. Novi Sad: Center for History, Democracy and Reconciliation (CHDR).

<sup>29</sup> Drača, Vinko K. 2024. *SNV Bulletin #26. Historijski revizionizam, govor mržnje i nasilje prema Srbima u 2024.* Zagreb: Srpsko narodno vijeće (SNV); Jović, *Rat i mit*, 233-239; Klempić Bogadi, *Zajednica zaslužuje*, 13-14.

<sup>30</sup> Damčević, Katarina. 2025. *Half a million voices: Mainstreaming the Ustaša legacy at Thompson's Zagreb concert.* *Ostblog*, 9 July 2025.

<sup>31</sup> *Jutarnji list*. 2025. *Anušić: Kad je Thompson rekao 'Za dom', odgovorio sam sa 'spremni'.* *Jutarnji list*, 8 July 2025.  
<sup>32</sup> Hrvatska radiotelevizija (HRT). 2025. *Svečani vojni mimohod u povodu 30. obljetnice VRO Oluja.* *HRT*, 31 July 2025.

related bodies, joined by representatives of some NATO countries, took part in the Zagreb parade, with an additional about 200 participating in a simultaneous naval parade off the Dalmatian coast. About 500 military vehicles and 40 aircraft were displayed in Zagreb, with particular attention paid to new equipment of Western origin.<sup>33</sup>

Current military strength, spending, and modernization in line with NATO standards were also the focus of Premier Plenković's statements to the press,<sup>34</sup> while SDP-linked President Zoran Milanović, in his turn, put more emphasis on self-reliance. Neither the Premier nor the President, however, mentioned war crimes and Serb civilian victims, although Milanović stated that "we celebrate our victories, we don't hate anyone".<sup>35</sup> In general, the 2025 parade and the speeches accompanying it made the Storm commemoration somewhat depart from previous years' events, as militarism – embodied in features such as military parades and protocols - had lost ground in state commemorations over time.<sup>36</sup>

After the 31 July parade, the main Storm state commemoration ceremony was held in Knin on 5 August. Plenković's speech demonstrated some hallmarks of the dominant narrative. For example, the Premier described Storm as the key action to bring peace, security, justice, and freedom to Croatia. Plenković also praised the bravery and sacrifice of Croatian soldiers, and stated that the freedom won in the war was the work of a unified nation, including Serbs who fought for the Croatian state. Importantly, unlike some past speeches, there was no mention of war crimes and Serb civilian victims. It is also worth noting that Plenković implicitly denied accusations of ethnic cleansing by stating that Croatia had allowed the return of Serbs after the war.<sup>37</sup>

Milanović did not attend the main part of the Knin commemoration. Instead, presidential envoy Marijan Mareković, a former general and Storm veteran, made a speech. Mareković praised the heroism and sacrifice of Croatian soldiers, while also stressing Storm's role in bringing peace and territorial integrity to Croatia. Like Plenković, Milanović's envoy also stressed Croatia's current military strength and ability to ensure its own security, but did not mention war crimes and Serb civilian victims.<sup>38</sup> Both speeches, therefore, showed a less accommodating stance in the way the dominant narrative was employed, avoiding elements that could bring it into question while at the same time emphasizing the links between past and present military strength.

The SNV, in its turn, published its 18<sup>th</sup> Remembrance Statement and held a Storm commemoration ceremony on 3 August in the Donji Žirovac village, in the Dvor municipality (Banovina/Banja region). Donji Žirovac and two other nearby villages were sites where fleeing Serbs were attacked by Croatian (and the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina's) forces, with at least 48 civilians killed.<sup>39</sup> In addition to the SNV leadership, the Donji Žirovac ceremony was attended, among others, by members of victims' families, human rights organizations, Serbia's embassy in Croatia, and opposition parties from Serbia. Pupovac and

<sup>33</sup> Hrvatska radiotelevizija (HRT), *Svečani vojni mimohod*.

<sup>34</sup> Vlada Republike Hrvatske. 2025. [Neka svi vide koliko je snažna hrvatska država](#). *Vlada Republike Hrvatske*, 31 July 2025.

<sup>35</sup> Ured predsjednika Republike Hrvatske. 2025. [Predsjednik Milanović sudjelovao na vojnom mimohodu kojim je svečano obilježena 30. obljetnica VRO "Oluja"](#). *Ured predsjednika RH*, 31 July 2025.

<sup>36</sup> Milekić, *Službeno obilježavanje*.

<sup>37</sup> Vlada Republike Hrvatske. 2025. [Plenković: 5. kolovoza je zavjet našoj Domovini, dan našeg ponosa, zajedništva i snage](#). *Vlada Republike Hrvatske*, 5 August 2025.

<sup>38</sup> Ured predsjednika Republike Hrvatske. 2025. [Predsjednik Milanović položio vijenac ispred Spomenika hrvatske pobjede "Oluja 95" u Kninu i odao počast hrvatskim braniteljima](#). *Ured predsjednika RH*, 5 August 2025.

<sup>39</sup> Srpsko narodno vijeće (SNV), [18. Izjava sjećanja Srpskog narodnog vijeća](#) (accessed: 4 August 2025).

the two other SDSS MPs, Anja Šimpraga and Dragana Jeckov, were also present.<sup>40</sup>

The 2025 SNV statement remembered victims of all nationalities – mentioning both Serbs and Croats - who were killed, injured, or fled their homes in the war. In this regard, the organization demanded the equal treatment of victims and called on Croatian authorities to investigate and punish crimes against Serb civilians, such as the one in Donji Žirovac. As in previous years, the SNV also called for a pacifist and multiethnic remembrance culture, lamenting what the organization described as a decreasing remembrance of victims of other nationalities in Croatia and Serbia.<sup>41</sup>

In this regard, the SNV distanced itself from state memory policies in both Croatia and Serbia, which the organization deems as not conducive to good relations between the two states and peoples.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, the SNV's 2025 message had a strikingly different tone in comparison not only with the Croatian government's discourse, but also with the Serbian government's, pointing to the limits of Vučić's efforts to position himself as the regional Serbs' leader in the case of Croatian Serbs. On 3 August, Serbian government members, as well as Serb politicians from Yugoslav successor states, gathered in Sremski Karlovci for the 2025 state commemoration of Storm. Vučić's speech was once again characterized by an ethnic-centered victimization narrative. Serbia's President also used the occasion to assert that under his leadership, the country became strong and capable of defending itself and the Serbs in the region, repeating his traditional "Never again Storm" vow.<sup>43</sup>

It is worth stressing that Pupovac in Donji Žirovac lamented that there was a growing distance from the efforts of the HDZ-SDSS partnership period to build a common memory culture with the recognition of Serb suffering.<sup>44</sup> In a reference to Thompson's Zagreb concert, the SNV also denounced the public use of symbols associated with the Ustaša and the NDH.<sup>45</sup> In 2025, therefore, the SNV continued its counter-narrative efforts along traditional lines, intensified by the perception of a political environment that is increasingly receptive to discourses and symbols associated with radical Croatian nationalism.

### **Conclusion**

The 2025 state commemoration of Operation Storm attests to the enduring mnemonic centrality of the operation as a source for the prevailing national unity and state legitimacy narrative in Croatia. In this regard, the 2025 events also show that Storm remains very prominent in public discourse, receiving more attention than other milestones in the formation of the Croatian state, such as the 1991 independence acts, the May 1990 constitution of the multi-party Sabor (Statehood Day) and, perhaps more importantly for Croat-Serb relations, the November 1995 Erdut Agreement, which enabled the peaceful transfer of the remaining separatist-held territories in eastern Croatia to Zagreb's control, with the return of Croatian refugees and no mass exodus of Serbs. The mnemonic prominence of the military victory represented by Operation Storm suggests that Croatian elite actors still attribute high importance to symbolic affirmations of state power and legitimacy in a region where state- and nation-building processes remain contested.

As seen in this article, the dominant narrative still set the tone for the 2025 Storm state

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<sup>40</sup> N1 Hrvatska. 2025. [Komemoracija Srpskog narodnog vijeća: "Stradanja Srba u izbjegličkoj koloni nisu istražena"](#). *NI*, 3 August 2025; Lasić, Igor. 2025. [Trebalo se kloniti isprazne rutine](#). *Novosti*, 3 August 2025.

<sup>41</sup> Srpsko narodno vijeće (SNV), 18. *Izjava*.

<sup>42</sup> Srpsko narodno vijeće (SNV), 18. *Izjava*.

<sup>43</sup> YouTube. [Vučić: Ogromno je krajiško srce](#) (accessed: 4 August 2025).

<sup>44</sup> Lasić, *Trebalo se kloniti*.

<sup>45</sup> Srpsko narodno vijeće (SNV), 18. *Izjava*.

commemoration. Through means like speeches, artistic performances, and the military parade, the operation was once again framed by Croatian elite actors as a foundational, unifying action in defense of the homeland, as well as an inspirational example of military prowess. As a characteristic that stood out in relation to Storm state commemorations in recent years, particularly regarding the period of the 2020-2024 HDZ-SDSS partnership, the lesser attention dedicated to the issues of the Serb exodus and crimes against Serb civilians can be mentioned. Additionally, the military parade brought renewed attention to the militaristic dimension. At the same time, the military parade represented a show of force meant to be an answer to current security issues.

On the other hand, the SNV's commemoration actions show that the dominant narrative continues to face resistance. The SNV's search for a more open remembrance culture, with greater recognition of Serbs' wartime experiences, still faces enormous challenges. In this regard, it is worth noting that the 2025 state commemoration, by reinforcing the Croatian government's change of approach after the end of the HDZ-SDSS partnership, reveals that short-term political considerations can still override efforts to promote reconciliation and integration of the Serb community on a stable, long-term basis in Croatian leaders' historical memory approach.

For the SNV and the Croatian Serb community in general, these challenges are further amplified in a setting in which state actors show greater tolerance towards radical Croatian nationalist symbols as elements of Croatian national and state identity, as illustrated by Croatian authorities' ambiguous stance<sup>46</sup> towards the "For the Homeland – Ready!" salute.

Finally, in the broader regional context, the 2025 events indicate that the SNV's counter-narrative efforts face another challenge in the form of the implicit competition represented by the Serbian government's memory discourse under Aleksandar Vučić. As illustrated by the Sremski Karlovci commemoration, Vučić continues to claim the role of leader of the Serbs in the region, largely relying on ethnic-centered narratives that can contribute to perpetuating nationalist discourses that strongly differ from the SNV's memory approach.

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<sup>46</sup> Slobodna Dalmacija. 2025. Plenković: 'Zlouporabu poziva 'Za dom spremni' treba kazniti. Debilno je ovo što govore SDP-ovci. *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 14 August 2025.

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