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RECONCILIATION AND OFFICIAL MEMORY POLITICS:

COMMEMORATIONS OF THE VICTORY AND OF THE VICTIMS OF OPERATION STORM IN CROATIA AND SERBIA



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## THE RECOGNITION OF VICTIMS IS THE FOUNDATION OF RECONCILIATION

*Nataša Kandić*

As in previous years, the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the “Storm” military and police operation was for Croatia the celebration of a war victory and of the recovery of sovereignty in the whole state territory. Contrary to previous years, extremists were no longer part of the official programme, nor did they have access to the celebration. A novelty was the new messages. The just formed government, led by the previous but significantly stronger prime minister, opened a conversation about the differences in the interpretation of Operation Storm, and advocated the acknowledgement of the perspective of others. For Croats, Storm was a war victory, and the departure of Serbs was a forced escape organised by the Knin rebels, while for Serbs, it was a tragic exodus, the Croatian prime minister said. He invited Croats to accept that Croatian Serbs in the free territories shared the destiny of their Croat fellow citizens, and he asked Croatian Serbs not to look at Operation Storm as only the exodus of their own people, but also as the end of the war that created conditions for the return of all those who want it or will want it in the future. He pledged to genuine reconciliation based on the facts, and to a joint cooperation in the search for missing persons, in justice for victims and in war crimes prosecutions, regardless of the nationality of victims and perpetrators. The prime minister of Croatia promised to pass the Law on Civilian Victims of War, and to remove the obstacles to Croatian Serbs feeling equal. Messages were also heard about pious mourning for all victims - the innocent, the civilians, all Croat, Serb and other victims. The President of the Croatian government expressed remorse for victims of war crimes committed by the Croatian side, looking at them as “an ugly scar on the righteous face and defensive character of the Homeland War”. The newly elected deputy prime minister from the Serb minority also transmitted a strong message, explaining to journalists and the public that his presence at the Operation Storm commemoration represented “a pledge for the future”, and a determination to fight for the public memory of the suffering of Serbs from Croatia. The celebration was marked by its commemorative aspect - the reading of the names of the Homeland War defenders who died or disappeared in Operation Storm.

On the other hand, the commemoration of victims of Operation Storm, jointly organised by the President of Serbia, the Serb member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church, was first marked by the old message about the continuity of injustice against Serbs, with the President of Serbia condemning

“the invitation” to celebrate the killing of Serbs with Croatia, “so that Europe could consider us good”. Regarding war crimes, the Serbian President argued that Serbia has acknowledged all acts committed by Serbs anywhere, and that “Serbian officials will go to every killing site and lay flowers”. His words echoed ominously his personal pride that Serbia is “a free and independent state that can rise to the defence of Serbian graves and the Serbian future”. The President apologised to Serbs from Krajina that, during Operation Storm, Serbia “was shamefully silent and did not let the tractors enter Belgrade”, forgetting that the Serbian Radical Party used some of the refugees for organised intrusions into Croat homes in Vojvodina.

Croatia surprised us with its good messages about reconciliation, the significance of facts, the expressions of piety and mourning for victims of war crimes committed by the Croatian forces, and the invitation to an open conversation about different views on Operation Storm. In my view, this was an indirect acknowledgment that it was wrong to give up on leadership in regional cooperation for determining the facts about all the war crimes. Taking into consideration the political sectarianism of the local officials in Vukovar, the extremism of a segment of the veteran associations and the support of voters for the extreme right-wing in the recent parliamentary elections, there is reason for caution about these good messages being turned into reality and the national media starting to follow the new memory politics. This the sword that, on the one hand, brings acquittal for generals Gotovina and Markač but, on the other, warns that Croatia has not yet been liberated from its responsibility and burden for the crimes committed during and after Operation Storm. From the perspective of the victims, if, in 2021, the names of all citizens of Croatia killed or disappeared in relation to the military-police operation Storm are read at the Knin fortress, it will be a new page in the war legacy - an opening of a door to regional reconciliation.

## COMMEMORATION OF OPERATION STORM IN CROATIA IN 2020

*Sven Milekić*

The 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the military-police operation Storm was marked with the attendance of Boris Milošević, the deputy prime minister from the Independent Democratic Serb Party (SDSS). Although he did not give a speech, Milošević became the first political representative of Serbs at the commemoration.

Milošević's attendance is interesting because he brings together the two dominant views of Operation Storm, as the son of a Croatian veteran who took part in Storm in

the Croatian army and the grandson of a killed Serb civilian (his grandmother was killed by a demobilised Croatian soldier in the territory of Krajina, where she had lived a month after Operation Storm). One view is linked to the memory of most Croats and other citizens of Croatia who lived under Croat control, who experienced Operation Storm as a victorious moment, and a legitimate military operation for the liberation of the country, establishment of state sovereignty and territorial integrity – the *raison d'être* of the significantly limited ideology of Tuđman. On the other side, we encounter the memory of the Serb community in Croatia, which perceives Operation Storm as a major trauma, where their family members, friends and fellow citizens were killed. During Operation Storm and in the months afterwards, lawlessness dominated the former Republic of Serbian Krajina (RSK), and Serb civilians were harassed and killed, while their property was looted and destroyed, and any return was systematically aggravated. All this left serious consequences among both Serbs and Croats, disabling any kind of trust between the two communities. Moreover, the Croatian political community commemorates Operation Storm with almost no reflection on the crimes committed during and after the operation, and the difficulties of the return of the Serb population during the following decade. The lack of awareness about Serb victims, as well as the unsatisfactory prosecution of the war crimes committed during the operation, has de facto condemned the Serb community to a symbolic exile within the dominant Croatian politics of memory.

The commemoration of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary was mostly deprived of concrete content. The impression given was that the government had attempted to isolate the commemoration from the wider population as much as possible, in order to avoid the incidents and radicalised atmosphere that surrounded the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2015. In this way, a banal commemoration of Operation Storm was promoted, with the ubiquitous markers of Croatian nationalism, such as Tuđman, anti-Yugoslav anticommunism and the myth of the nine centuries long struggle of Croats for a nation-state. It was about the promotion of “civilised” or “civic” nationalism, as opposed to the primordial and primitive version that often turns into open ethnic chauvinism.

Prime Minister Andrej Plenković dedicated particular attention to reconciliation at this year’s commemoration. He referred to Tuđman’s words from Vukovar in 1997, about “how a victor who does not know how to forgive plants the seed of future conflicts”. In this way, he clearly portrayed Croatia as a righteous winner who “extends the hand of reconciliation”, emphasising the victims of “the Greater Serbia aggression” and also mentioning “the victims of the war crimes committed by the Croatian side”. He added that “the legitimate right to defence cannot be a justification for a misdeed” and represented “an ugly scar on the righteous face and defensive character of the

Homeland War”. Plenković argued that “the victory in Operation Storm was traumatic for many Croatian Serbs”, who relate it to the mass exodus of the Serbian people confronted by the Croatian forces. Croats see the same event as a forced escape organised by the Krajina leadership. He mentioned the blatant untruth that Croatia invested enormous efforts in the return of Serbs, explaining that Serbs should not look at Operation Storm as an exodus, but as the end of the war that made their return to Croatia possible. He subsequently made respectful and pious reference to all innocent victims, listing the places where Croat and Serb civilians had been killed.

Taking all rhetorical traps and nationalism into account, this speech still represents a progress in the oratorical sense. However, it still follows the line of the official narrative about the Homeland War as a legitimate and defensive war where crimes were incidents, not the rule.

Zoran Milanović, on the other hand, talked less about reconciliation in his speech, but focused rather on the attempt to summarise the Croatian position in the “imposed” war of the 1990s. In doing that, he tried to justify his action on the day before the ceremony in Knin, when he decorated Mijo Jelić, the general of the Croatian Defence Council (HVO) and a fugitive from the prosecutors of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Milanović mentioned crimes in the context of the price to its *diplomatic reputation* that Croatia had to pay because of its committing but not prosecuting the crimes. One of these consequences was the argument of the prosecutors of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) about the existence of a joint criminal enterprise which, according to Milanović, “does not deserve a more detailed rational analysis”.

As a symbolic hand of reconciliation from the Croatian side, it was decided that Tomo Medved, the minister responsible for Croatian veterans’ affairs and deputy prime minister, much respected within veteran circles, would attend the commemoration in Grubori, sending a strong message by attending it. In the village of Grubori on 25 August 1995, during the so-called “clean-up operations”, members of the anti-terrorist group (ATJ) Lučko killed six elderly Serb civilians. The crime was immediately covered up and later depicted as the confrontation of ATJ Lučko and remaining Serb forces. Plenković himself attended the commemoration in Varivode, where Croatian police and army members executed nine elderly Serb civilians on 28 September 1995. Although there are court judgements for reparations to the family members of the victims, no one has been punished for this crime.

The participation of Boris Milošević at the commemoration of Operation Storm, as the representative of the Serb community, even though not officially, with the support of the leader of the SDSS Milorad Pupovac and the attendance of Plenković and Medved, the



minister for veterans' affairs, at the commemoration in Grubori, could be characterised as a certain step forward in commemorations of Operation Storm. Every commemoration of Operation Storm, and especially its victims, which goes without an incident and is accompanied with respect for "the other side", is a gain for Croatian society at large and the region. The fact that the highest state representatives symbolically acknowledged both sides of Operation Storm – the liberation and the crimes – is a positive development in memory politics. Every lowering of the emotional temperature and separation from ethnic chauvinism and exclusivist narratives helps, to a certain extent, to raise the level of interethnic trust and coexistence.

However, there are several problems that should not be overlooked. First, it needs to be said that the Croatian government has to show its readiness for reconciliation that does not stop at symbolic gestures. Croatia should depart from what remains of chauvinist memory politics and reject indulgence of extreme segments among the veterans. Medved, who organises state funerals for Ustasha soldiers as a radical right-winger, must stop financing obscure researchers of the Jasenovac concentration camp who minimise the Ustasha crimes and upset the Serb community in Croatia.

Furthermore, there is the danger of reducing all crimes committed during Operation Storm to Grubori and Varivode, strengthening the narrative of "isolated incidents" committed without any involvement of the state. Although the ICTY determined that the crimes had been committed, the fact is that the state has not prosecuted them sufficiently. There is also the danger that the focus on the crimes in Grubori and Varivode, committed 20 and 50 days after Operation Storm, could symbolically separate the crimes from the operation itself.

If it wants to integrate the Serb community fully, Croatia should separate itself from the Tuđman narrative about the Homeland War and its accompanying hypocritical mourning for the Serb civilian victims. This narrative cannot be fully accepted within the Serb community, because it depicts a whole nation as the aggressor, painting it with a broad brush. The chauvinism coming from the Croatian side is entirely forgotten, as well as the discriminatory treatment of the Serbs who stayed in the territory under Croatian control. This is why Milošević must be careful as to what extent he takes part in Croatian nationalist celebrations, because they were established in hostility to Serbs. Any hand of reconciliation is welcome and good, but maintaining the nationalist and militant matrix is surely not.

At a time of the rule of law, it is necessary for Croatia to prosecute all the crimes committed during Operation Storm that are possible, to compensate the victims and

acknowledge their suffering. The knowledge about the crimes should be built into the educational system, and freedom of scientific research into the wartime period allowed. Finally, the Serb community needs a full integration into Croatian society, in addition to all symbolic concessions, war crimes prosecution and reparations. All villages affected by Operation Storm, where people benefited from an infrastructure for decades, need to receive electricity and water and have roads, schools and hospitals built. In the regions with a larger Serb community, the laws should be respected with regard to the proportional employment of members of minority communities in the public service. All this should help ensure that Serbs start to feel like Croatian citizens, not through assimilation, but through normalisation in everyday life.

## **THE POSITION OF OPERATION STORM IN THE OFFICIAL POLITICS OF MEMORY AND CULTURE OF REMEMBRANCE IN CROATIA**

*Dr. Vjeran Pavlaković*

We can say that there are two main strands of memory of the Homeland War in Croatia. The first strand is that Croatia was attacked and that it was a victim, and the other is that it was victorious. Because of that, Knin represents an important site of authentic memory, and of emotions that should not be perceived as artificial. Politics has naturally made use of it and built its narratives. Sometimes, victims from the other side have been mentioned, though usually with a big “but”. Now, however, there has been a change.

We cannot deny that every new state has its own myth which aims at building something positive, whether we are talking about France, the United States or Yugoslavia. In Serbia, the Day of the Army of Serbia is celebrated, regardless of the war crimes that some of its units committed across the whole of former Yugoslavia. Every state strives for the loyalty of its citizens through a number of positive narratives and selective remembrance.

It is always easier to commemorate one's own and ignore someone else's victims, and to ignore one's own perpetrators while emphasising those from the other side. This is a common phenomenon in some other parts of the world too. The problem is victimisation, often used to justify new violence. The question is what kind of culture or politics of memory we want to promote as a state, as a religious community, as media, as intellectuals.

Culture of remembrance is not only created through celebrations or commemorations. There are textbooks, media, popular culture, films, documentaries, memorials, public spaces, street names, etc. Of course, crimes and all their dark consequences should be discussed; but if we look at it in terms of *realpolitik*, it is difficult to expect that any state would build memorials to all victims immediately after a war. In reality, this is much harder to do than to talk about doing; which is why the story about Operation Storm is emphasised exclusively as a Day of Victory.

The Declaration on the Homeland War in 2000 was an attempt to make the narrative about the 1990s accepted in the whole society. Also, there were attempts to turn the declaration into a law. The idea was to make it mandatory for all state representatives to follow the Declaration when commenting on historical events, which is completely senseless in a democratic society. In fact, it is rather dangerous when there is an official truth one must not depart from. A good thing, for now, is that it is only a declaration which is not legally binding. I think it is good that such declarations have not been used so far to decrease the space for dialogue.

The ICTY judgments are accepted very selectively. Very often, when the Gotovina judgement is quoted, it is emphasised that he was innocent, that Čermak and Markač were acquitted and Operation Storm was declared completely “pure”, while the judgement for Herzeg-Bosnia is ignored. The acquittals serve promotional purposes and narratives are based on them; but when someone from the Croatian side is declared guilty, then the court is deemed politicised. Court judgements are used in this way throughout the whole region, and there are many of those everywhere who have been found guilty, but have returned to their countries as heroes.

One aspect of Operation Storm commemorations is the high level of the attendee politicians who give the commemorative speeches, but another aspect is the nationalist festivity. This is the part which is not on camera, where not everything is visible, where certain songs are sung, certain symbols worn, and where controversial souvenirs are sold. It was interesting to observe one celebration in Knin and the counter-celebration in Čavoglave. Then, at some moment, Čavoglave came to Knin, in 2015 and 2016, when nationalism and negation of the other side were perhaps at their most horrible. We can see now that such aspects have disappeared. It is possible that the crisis caused by the corona virus has made this particular commemoration possible, at a time when it has been much easier to control those other aspects of the commemoration. It will be interesting to see whether it is possible to ensure that everything happens here again like it did this year.

Čavoglave became an important counter-commemoration to the official ceremony in Knin. Knin seemed like an official and dry protocol, and the protocol is not a real festivity. I was there doing fieldwork research with a team in 2014. We were in Knin in the morning, and then we left for Čavoglave. All the way to Čavoglave there was a long traffic queue and buses with license plates from all parts of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. By bringing sentenced war criminal Dario Kordić to the stage, the problematic message was sent that crimes can be justified if they are committed by our own. In 2015 and 2016, this became official in Knin as well. Afterwards, Marko Perković Thompson started moving. He went to Slunj and Glina, and Knin was no longer the only site of war memory. The culture of remembrance consists not only of the official commemorative speech and the government's programme, but also of popular culture and everything else we call "banal nationalism". This is accepted; and it is not only about the music - it is politically very powerful, there is a lot in the symbolism, choreography and discourse.

Although the dominant narrative in Croatia is nationalist, the Serb National Council organises commemorations for victims of Operation Storm. There were attempts at banning these commemorations, but there are also several memorials to civilian Serb victims. The first one was in Varivode in 2010, when former President Ivo Josipović attended. This was a big step forward. At that time, official Croatia built a memorial to Serb civilian victims. Few of them exist now. Of course, some of these memorials were outlawed, some were attacked or defaced with paint, and in Golubić near Knin a memorial was destroyed. This means that not everything is perfect yet; but, on the other hand, official Croatia did admit that these victims exist.

When it comes to this year's commemoration of Operation Storm and the commemoration in Grubori, it represents a large step forward. This is only at the symbolic level, and it remains to be seen how this step will translate into politics and develop further; but it was a really important event. Some kind of tension has always been on the rise at the beginning of August every year, but here we saw the whole state leadership together with Deputy Prime Minister Boris Milošević.

It is interesting that President Zoran Milanović raised the question of the definition of this political ritual as either celebration or commemoration, emphasising that it is a celebration. However, the Day of Victory and Homeland Thanksgiving and the Day of Croatian Defenders have always been a kind of a commemoration, because the names of the dead are read at the beginning and there are many symbols that belong to a commemoration, although the event is officially referred to as a celebration. There has always been a commemorative aspect to events in Knin surrounding Operation Storm.

It is possible that relations have reversed when it comes to the general culture of remembrance in Croatia. Regardless of the different styles of political speeches, the messages coming from the state leadership are very positive. It is the responsibility of the state leadership to send messages of tolerance, coexistence and dialogue. It is most important to provide the possibility of remembering all victims. We saw, however, many negative reactions coming from Serbia. This demonstrates that both Croatian and Serbian nationalists do not want reconciliation or changes, because they profit politically from tensions in our societies. It is important that we emerge from the state of war after 25 years, and start work on building a state which is legal for all its citizens. In addition to the symbolic aspect, concrete acts should be supported, such as returning water and electricity to villages. This is another real way to transform memory into concrete action; instead of merely prosecuting war crimes, which is also important, but not the only way forward.

## **THE COMMEMORATION OF OPERATION STORM IN 2020 AND ITS POSITION IN THE OFFICIAL MEMORY POLITICS IN SERBIA**

*Dr. Jelena Đureinović*

Operation Storm constitutes one of the central sites of memory in Serbia, and it is commemorated through large-scale state events. The memory of Operation Storm is about the abuse and instrumentalisation of victims for political purposes, based on a selective approach to the past that sees the Serbian nation as either heroes or innocent victims. In opposition to the central position of Operation Storm in memory politics and the overall focus on honouring the victims, the state institutions of Serbia deny the right to the status of civilian victims of war to Operation Storm victims, many of whom are socially vulnerable today.

Official commemorations of the events of the 1990s wars are not a long tradition in Serbia. Their establishment begins in 2012 with the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) coming to power. Another important factor for understanding memory politics is the position of the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) as the second most important political party. The Ministry of Defence, led by Aleksandar Vulin, is a key agent of the state work on the memory of the 1990s wars, because of the general militarisation of commemorative practices and the publishing work of his ministry, which encompasses the memoirs of the 1990s wars commanders, including those by convicted war criminals. Additionally, the Ministry of Defence is a logical actor in commemorative practices that glorify the army and its role in the wars in former Yugoslavia.

For state officials, the focus on the 1990s wars represents the demarcation line with the previous government and a source of legitimacy. Accusing their political predecessors, primarily the Democratic Party, for turning their heads away from Serbian heroes and victims, the state's representatives claim that the time of shame and silence is over and, as Aleksandar Vulin has said, the time of silent pride has come.

Operation Storm pertains to one of the two main dimensions of official memory politics in today's Serbia. The heroism and victimhood of the Serbian people are the two interpretive lenses through which the armed conflicts of the 1990s are observed, and on the basis of which modern historical myths are built. This dichotomy of dominant narratives is similar to the discourses of the 1990s; which is not surprising, as many of today's officials were politically active back then too, supporting the armed conflicts. The narrative of the return of pride through the celebration of heroes and commemorations of victims is a populist discourse that is supposed to speak to people and be accepted in Serbian society.

The anniversaries of -Operation Storm have been officially commemorated in Serbia since 2015, through state ceremonies under the slogan "Storm is a Pogrom", that are held at various locations on the territory of Serbia and in cooperation with Republika Srpska. The Day of Killed and Expelled Serbs was established as a day of mourning in both Serbia and Republika Srpska, and commemorated on 5 August at noon with a minute of silence, sirens and church bells. Radio Television of Serbia (RTS), the main media partner for official commemorations, which organises the live broadcast, invites the citizens of Serbia to honour the expelled and killed Serbs at noon, to the accompaniment of the sounds of sirens and church bells.

Until 2015, the only commemoration of Operation Storm was a religious memorial service in St. Mark's Church in Belgrade organised by the "Suza" (Tear) Association of Families of Missing and Killed Persons, attended by some state officials. The former President of Serbia Boris Tadić gave short statements and demanded a public apology from Croatia and investigation into the destiny of missing persons. Vojislav Koštunica argued in public that Operation Storm was the greatest ethnic cleansing in Europe since the Second World War. The Serbian Radical Party (SRS) also made appearance at these commemorations. After the memorial service for the victims, a protest march has followed, ending with the laying of flowers at the memorial plaque to Serb victims of the 1990s wars in Tašmajdan Park. The "Suza" association still organises the religious memorial service today.

Official commemorations of Operation Storm take place on 5 August in the evenings, with several thousands in the audience. Every year, President of Serbia Aleksandar

Vučić and Serb member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina and President of Republika Srpska Milorad Dodik speak at these commemorations. Patriarch Irinej holds the memorial service. Alongside that, a testimony by a so-called “girl from the convoy” about her path from Krajina to Serbia in 1995 is an integral part of the commemorative programme.

The travelling commemorations started with the symbolic meeting of Aleksandar Vučić and Milorad Dodik at the middle of the bridge in Sremska Rača on 5 August 2015. In the following years, the Storm commemorations travelled to the community of Busije near Zemun, Veternik near Novi Sad, Bačka Palanka and Krušedol Monastery. The biggest gathering ever had long been announced for the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2020. It would have taken place on the Square of the Republic in Belgrade and, as Vučić announced, it would bring together Krajina Serbs, or *Krajišnici*, from the whole world. However, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, a smaller gathering was organised on the bridge in Sremska Rača that connects Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

This year’s cultural programme accompanying the speeches of the presidents of Serbia and Republika Srpska and the religious memorial service, was at the very least inappropriate and kitschy. A re-enactment of the convoy of refugees from Krajina was installed on the bridge, with actors in cars and trailers standing motionless during the entire programme. This performance was written and directed by Dragoslav Bokan, former commander of the “White Eagles” paramilitary formation.

The recital of the poem “On the Petrovac Road” (*Na Petrovačkoj cesti*) by Branko Ćopić is a constant in the official commemorations of Operation Storm. It is not accidental that a poem that speaks about the crimes of fascism during the Second World War has become the central motif of the memory of Serb victimhood during the war in Croatia. Namely, one of the main features of the dominant narratives about Operation Storm is the claim that there was historical continuity between the genocide against the Serbian population in the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) and Operation Storm. Storm becomes a part of a 75-years-long historical process – the process of the disappearance of Serbs in Croatia. At the same time, Ćopić’s poem is a way of presenting the Croatian army and police forces as fascist, which was also a dominant discourse in Serbia during the war in Croatia.

Emphasising the continuity of the Serbian nation as an innocent victim and of the Croatian forces as perpetrators and fascists, Aleksandar Vučić compared Operation Storm with the persecution of Anne Frank and her family in his speech of 2018, because “the final solution” was being sought in both cases. In the television broadcast of this year’s commemoration, RTS compared the bombings of the convoy of Serb refugees

with the 1937 bombing of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War, illustrating it with the famous painting by Pablo Picasso and with the sounds of weeping and screaming women and children in the background.

The main message of Vučić and Dodik is that they will not allow anyone to humiliate the Serbian victims or that people suffer again “in the Serbian ethnic space”. While the state institutions provide public support for convicted war criminals, who are completely normalised and accepted in society at large, and celebrate the role of the army in the 1990s wars, the state representatives depict Serbia as the state most dedicated to regional reconciliation. In this way, Aleksandar Vučić emphasises that Serbia has confessed its crimes, and that it has condemned the perpetrators of crimes committed in its name and is ashamed of them; while respecting the other victims and expecting respect for Serbian victims from the other sides in return.

Official commemorations of the Operation Storm anniversaries in Croatia are constantly subject to criticism in Serbia, and perceived as celebrations of crimes against the Serbian people. The attendance of Boris Milošević, the representative of Croatian Serbs, at the commemoration in Knin caused very negative reactions in Serbia. In his speech at Rača, Vučić condemned this gesture as forcing Serbs to celebrate the tragedy of the Serbian people and the killings of Serbian civilians and children, sending the message to Croatia: “Reconciliation - yes! But humiliation - never”.

One of the main characteristics of state-sponsored commemorations of Operation Storm in Serbia is giving precedence to emotions over facts. The victimhood narrative is built on the basis of the selective exclusion of everything that led to Operation Storm in Croatia, as well as of the fact that refugees from Krajina were not made welcome in Serbia, and that thousands of men were mobilised by force upon their arrival to Serbia and sent to the frontlines. The commemorations promote the idea of the one Serbian nation, with Serbia and Republika Srpska united in pain and mourning, and the Krajina Serbs, who used to be completely invisible, being called the best part of Serbia. This year, the commemoration included a collage of “the children of the convoy” who grew up to become successful people in Serbia. While praise and a tardy welcome are extended to them on one day in a year, *Krajišnici* are invisible to the state institutions, and do not have the right to the status of civilian victims of war. Many of them are socially vulnerable, and have unsolved housing issues even today.



## CONCLUSION

At this year's commemoration of the Storm military and police operation, the leaders of the Republic of Croatia took a positive step forward and sent good messages to the victims, the public and the neighbouring countries. A more difficult step remains to be taken, however – to transform these messages into reality with concrete deeds. On the other hand, the commemoration of the victims of Operation Storm in Serbia, organised by the presidents of Serbia and Republika Srpska, was dedicated to Serbian victims, without any critical engagement with Serbia's own responsibility for depriving the Serb refugees of protection, and for forcibly mobilising them.

In order to prevent further discrimination against victims, both states need to pass laws on civilian victims of war as soon as possible, which would include victims of Operation Storm, and they need to get involved jointly in the investigation of the destinies of missing persons. Also, both states should participate in a regional documentation of the victims of the wars on the territory of former Yugoslavia.

Prosecution of the war crimes committed during and after Operation Storm is necessary, as well as of the crimes committed by the JNA and armed formations of rebel Serbs; and this needs to be supported by Serbia.

For the advancement of the reconciliation process, it is urgently necessary to start the dialogue about the past and accept and nurture a pluralism of historical interpretations based on facts and respect for victims' personal experiences. When it comes to Operation Storm, the reading of the names of all killed and disappeared persons at future commemorations in Knin would confirm the seriousness of the new memory politics that the highest officials of the Republic of Croatia announced with their gestures and words this year.



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