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The Serbian State and Church: Competing Narratives of Memory on the NATO Aggression Against Yugoslavia

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Abstract. The 1999 NATO aggression on Yugoslavia represents a major trauma in modern Serbian society. This article examines the public narratives and commemorative practices surrounding this event employed by the Serbian state governments and the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), tracing their evolution from the conflict’s end until 2024, with a focus on the years between 2015 and 2024. In the early 2000s, a clear divergence emerged. Post-2000 governments, focused on integration into Western-dominated institutions, like the European Union, downplayed and sidelined the remembrance of the NATO aggression. Conversely, the SOC consistently upheld a narrative of injustice and victimhood. After 2015, the Serbian government began adopting a more assertive commemorative policy. The state narrative became increasingly complex, oscillating between calls for reconciliation and outright defiance. Throughout this period, the SOC’s discourse remained steadfast, emphasizing victimhood and heroic sacrifice. Ultimately, the state’s narrative has converged with the Church’s, forming a symbiotic relationship. This partnership combines the state’s organizational power with the public trust enjoyed by the Church, particularly among younger generations, skeptical of government officials. This relationship has made the narrative of victimhood increasingly prominent within Serbian public consciousness.

Keywords: Serbia, Yugoslavia, Serbian Orthodox Church, NATO, narratives of memory

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Сербское государство и церковь: конкурирующие нарративы памяти об агрессии НАТО против Югославии

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Аннотация. Агрессия НАТО против Югославии в 1999 г. стала серьезной травмой для современного сербского общества. В работе рассматриваются публичные заявления и практики коммеморации, связанные с этим событием, используемые сербскими государственными органами и Сербской православной церковью (СПЦ), прослеживается их эволюция с момента окончания конфликта до 2024 г., с акцентом на период с 2015 по 2024 г. В начале 2000-х гг. наметилось явное расхождение дискурсов. После 2000 г. правительства, сосредоточившиеся на интеграции в институты, в которых доминировали западные страны, такие как Европейский союз, преуменьшили значение агрессии НАТО и отодвинули ее на второй план. И наоборот, Сербская православная церковь последовательно отстаивала идею несправедливости и жертвенности. После 2015 г. сербское правительство начало проводить более жесткую политику в отношении памятных дат. Государственная политика становилась все более сложной, колеблясь между призывами к примирению и открытым неповиновением. На протяжении всего этого периода дискурс СПЦ оставался неизменным, подчеркивая роль героического самопожертвования. В конечном счете позиция государства совпала с позицией Церкви, сформировав симбиотические отношения. Это партнерство сочетает в себе организационную мощь государства с общественным доверием, которым пользуется Церковь, особенно среди молодого поколения, скептически относящегося к государственной бюрократии. Благодаря этим отношениям в сербском общественном сознании все более отчетливо проявился образ жертвы.

Ключевые слова: Сербия, Югославия, Сербская православная церковь, НАТО, нарративы памяти

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Introduction

The narratives of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) and the Serbian government have not always been aligned. Following the political change in 2000, a clear divergence emerged. The new governments were focused on integration into Western-dominated institutions like the European Union. Consequently, they

downplayed the memory of the 1999 NATO aggression,¹ frequently attempted to sideline public reminders of the event, and sometimes attempted to shift the blame onto the former socialist government of Yugoslavia. However, such a significant event is not easily ignored. Throughout this period, the Serbian Orthodox Church consistently found ways to remind the population, upholding a narrative of injustice and victimhood.

After 2015, the Serbian government began to change its narrative, crafting a more assertive commemorative policy. This article demonstrates how the state's narrative has since evolved, oscillating between calls for forgiveness and reconciliation and short, but clear, outbursts of defiance. In contrast, the discourse of the SOC remained more consistent, continually emphasizing victimhood and heroic sacrifice.

In conclusion, the state's narrative has converged with that of the Church. The result is a symbiotic relationship that combines the state's organizational power with the high level of public trust enjoyed by the Church, particularly among younger generations who are the least likely to trust government officials.

The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) is a religious organization that is well known as a protector of Serbian identity and spirituality [Tsibizova 2024]. Yet in many works by foreign authors, it is portrayed as a tool of either the Russian Federation, or the Serbian government. In his 2020 study, Mitic analysed 20 analytical centres and noted that the SOC is frequently characterized as “an agent of Russia” [Mitić 2020: 158]. This perspective can be exemplified in texts published a year earlier, such as those from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace² [Stronski, Himes 2019] and the German Marshall Fund of the United States³ [Metodieva 2019]. The actions of the Serbian Orthodox Church can be more readily explained by the fact that its narrative, which is critical of NATO, aligns with that of other entities, such as the Russian government and the Russian Orthodox Church, with which the SOC has maintained traditionally strong relations for centuries. The author does not believe this proves the SOC is a “foreign agent”, but rather that its views simply coincide with those of certain organizations beyond Serbia's borders.

On the other hand, while the ideal of a church-state “symphony”, as discussed by authors like Morozova [Morozova et al. 2022: 680], does influence the SOC, the Church does not always act in accordance with the Serbian government's interests. This was also the case more recently in the case of Serbia. For example, in the last

¹ NATO operation “Allied Force” against Yugoslavia is classified as an aggression in accordance with UN definition of the term, written in article 1 of resolution 3314 (XXIX). The resolution can be accessed on the website of the electronic library of UN in several languages. Retrieved May 20, 2025, from https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/190983/files/A_%20RES_3314%28XXIX%29-RU.pdf?ln=ru

² The Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation has added the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (foreign agent) to the register of undesirable organizations (Министерство юстиции РФ внесло «Фонд Карнеги за международный мир» (иноагент) в реестр нежелательных организаций).

³ The Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation has added German Marshall Fund of the United States to the register of undesirable organizations (Министерство юстиции РФ внесло Германский фонд Маршалла Соединенных Штатов (иноагент) в реестр нежелательных организаций).

decade of the 20th century, the SOC has not always supported the government.⁴ In fact, during the first several years of the 21st century, the Church's narrative of the NATO aggression often outright contradicted the state's actions. And, unlike most state institutions and the political officials, the SOC has been among the top two institutions most trusted by the citizens of Serbia.⁵ These trends continued after 2015. And, what is even more interesting, Serbians under the age of 30, who are a demographic traditionally distrustful of government officials and institutions, consistently place more trust (or the least mistrust) in the SOC than in all government institutions, excluding the army. According to the research conducted by a youth organization KOMS (National Youth Council of Serbia), one of the few organizations in Serbia to have conducted these polls annually since 2017, the SOC has consistently maintained this position since 2020 [Stojanović, Ivković 2021: 114], which can also be seen in their reports in 2022⁶ and 2024.⁷ Another interesting finding is that, since he was included in the poll in 2021 as an individual, the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church has consistently been the most trusted figure (or the least mistrusted figure), ranking higher than any high-ranking Serbian state official on the list⁸.

This article analyses the narrative of senior Serbian government officials and Serbian Orthodox Church representatives, alongside their commemorative actions of the NATO aggression against Yugoslavia. Focus of the article will be on the period between 2015 and 2024, as the research of the previous period is already available. Our study will draw upon relevant works and public speeches delivered by these officials during commemorative events, prioritizing sources from official state and Serbian Orthodox Church channels. However, media reports will also be used when official sources are unavailable, or when the media provides a more detailed information. As our goal is to show evolution of the narrative of the SOC and the governments of Republic of Serbia, we will mention the period between 2000 and 2014, but focus will be on key changes in narrative and commemorations from 2015 to 2024. We will conclude that the Serbian Orthodox Church, while at first the only major organization with the narrative of victimhood and injustice inflicted by NATO, mostly kept promoting this view. The state, however, slowly changed it's narrative, especially

⁴ Watson, Paul. Serbian Orthodox Church Issues Formal Call for Milosevic to Quit, *Los Angeles Times*, 12. 08. 1999. Retrieved May 20, 2025, from <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1999-aug-12-mn-65100-story.html>

⁵ Srbi veruju u vojsku i crkvu. *VestiOnline*. 23.11.2010. Retrieved May 20, 2025, from <https://arhiva.vesti-online.com/Vesti/Srbija/98859/Srbi-veruju-u-vojsku-i-crkvu>

⁶ Stojanović, B., & Ivković, A. (2022). Alternativni izveštaj o položaju i potrebama mladih u Republici Srbiji — 2022. *Krovna organizacija mladih Srbije (KOMS)*. Beograd: Krovna organizacija mladih Srbije — KOMS. Retrieved May, 20, 2025, from <https://koms.rs/wpcontent/uploads/2022/08/Alternativniizves%CC%8Ctajopoloz%CC%8Caju-i-potrebama-mladih-za-2022.-godinu.pdf>

⁷ Stojanović, B., Ivković, A., & Kalićanin, B. (2024). Alternativni izveštaj o položaju i potrebama mladih u Republici Srbiji — 2024. *Krovna organizacija mladih Srbije (KOMS)*. Beograd: Krovna organizacija mladih Srbije — KOMS. Retrieved May, 20, 2025, from https://koms.rs/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Alternativni_izvestaj_2024.pdf

⁸ Ibid. p. 121.

in the years after 2015. In the end, this lead the two narratives to being at the very least complementary. This, in turn, lead to a previously mentioned symphonic relationship between the Church and State, at least when it comes to remembering this event.

State and Church Narratives on NATO Aggression (2000–2014): Diverging Paths

Right after the NATO aggression in 1999, the government of Serbia lead by the socialists has started commemorating the victims. The state organized a one-year anniversary and constructed memorials across the country. However, after the radical change of government in late 2000, this practice waned due to the new administration's pro-Western policy. Except for the 2005–2008 period, when Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica was in office, there were no major state-led efforts to commemorate the NATO aggression. Kostunica was one of the few prominent leaders critical of the collective West, which is also cited as a key reason why the government lead by him collapsed in 2008. [Vučković, Petrović 2022: 65] After his term, the subsequent government made few attempts to continue serious commemoration. The only major event was a ten-year anniversary, during which state officials, such as Prime Minister Mirko Cvetkovic, gave speeches that carefully avoided blaming NATO. This trend continued until 2013, with commemorations being carried out primarily by citizen groups, the army, police, and the Serbian Orthodox Church. This was the case despite the presidency of Tomislav Nikolic, which began in 2012. His Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) had joined the government that same year, with its new leader (and next president of Serbia), Aleksandar Vucic, holding the position of First Deputy Prime Minister. Notably, the fifteenth anniversary in 2014 saw no central state ceremony either. Instead, Serbian officials laid flowers at various memorials with only moderate media coverage. During this period, as in years prior, the primary commemorative acts were performed by institutions like the Serbian Orthodox Church, which held religious services and documented the events through its official channels. Despite the lack of a central event, the 2014 commemorations revealed a more deliberate strategy compared to previous years. Unlike earlier practices, state officials travelled to various localities across Serbia that had been directly affected by NATO bombs [Mandić 2016: 463–476].⁹ The same year, a memorial fountain dedicated to Milica Rakic, a three-year-old girl killed by a NATO cluster munition, has been unveiled.¹⁰ This will establish a potent symbol that the Serbian president and other officials would frequently invoke in subsequent state-led commemorations.

During this period, the Serbian Orthodox Church was a principal major actor in commemorating the NATO bombing, consistently organizing memorial services

⁹ Дан сећања на страдале у НАТО агресији. *Official website of the Ministry of defense of Republic of Serbia*, 24.03.2014, Retrieved May 20, 2025, from <https://www.mod.gov.rs/cir/6349/dan-secanja-na-stradale-u-nato-agresiji-6349>

¹⁰ Чалија, Јелена. Спомен-чесма за вечно сећање на Милицу Ракић. *Политика*, 05.09.2014. Retrieved April, 19, 2026, from <https://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/304319/spomen-cesma-za-vecno-secanje-na-milicu-rakic>

for the victims and documenting these events through its official channels.¹¹ The state's inconsistent commemorative practices reflected a strategic avoidance of narratives critical of NATO, aligning with its pro-EU stance. This created a space for the Serbian Orthodox Church to establish itself as a primary major organization that was reminding the population of what happened, and guarding the narrative of victimhood and Serbian (traditional) heroism. The SOC advanced a consistent counter-narrative that explicitly condemned the collective West's actions as unjust and illegal, while simultaneously glorifying the bravery, heroism and sacrifices made by the Serbian people.

State and Church (2015–2024): Converging Narratives

Beginning in 2015, Serbian governments demonstrated more deliberate attempts to commemorate the NATO aggression and promote a narrative that aligned more closely in tone with that of the Serbian Orthodox Church. This period is marked by a noticeable shift in the rhetoric of government officials, contrasting with the SOC's stable and long-established discourse, which had been critical and opposed to NATO for over fifteen years. This change was formalized when, according to media reports, the Serbian government officially declared March 24th the “Day of Remembrance for the Victims of the NATO Aggression.”¹² The official adoption of the term “aggression” itself signalled the government's shifting intent, as state officials had previously mostly used more neutral terms like “bombing”. This shift was further emphasized by the erection of a monument dedicated to Milica Rakic, and all children killed by the NATO bombs.

Notably, a similar monument had been erected by the socialist government in the year 2000 on the same site, but was removed under unclear circumstances after the fall of the government, and never replaced by subsequent governments, making the new-old monument a powerful act of symbolic restitution.¹³ This move represented a major step by the government, signalling a shift in its commemorative policy. The symbolism was particularly potent, as the narrative of victimhood had long been cultivated by the SOC. Years earlier, a fresco depicting the before mentioned Milica Rakic as a saint had appeared in a monastery of the Serbian Orthodox Church

¹¹ Practically every year, the SOC has reported on the memorial service it held for the victims of NATO, which can be seen in the archives of the official website of SOC: Retrieved May 20, 2025, from <http://arhiva.spc.rs/sr/arhiva.html>

¹² The author has not found any official government document in the electronic databases confirming this. However, since 2015, media, as well as state officials and institutions, are reporting on it as an official commemoration day. Searching for “day of remembrance” and similar phrases in the Serbian language on the official websites of government institutions, the author was able to find an announcements of the commemoration event on the website of the president of Serbia, officially calling it “day of remembrance of victims of NATO aggression” dating back to 2019. Retrieved May 20, 2025, from <https://www.predsednik.rs/pres-centar/najave-obavestenja/najava-za-medije-za-24032019-obelevavanje-dana-secanja-na-stradale-u-nato-agresiji>

¹³ По трећи пут откривен споменик Милици Ракић. *PTC*, 24.09.2015. Retrieved April 19, 2026, from <https://www.rts.rs/vesti/drustvo/2048392/po-treci-put-otkriven-spomениk-milici-rakic.html>

in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and calls for her official canonization had been voiced within the Church as early as 2004.¹⁴ One year later, state representatives have been present on the central Church ceremony, dedicated to the victims of NATO.¹⁵

This, however, was not without precedent. Previous prime ministers, such as Vojislav Kostunica in 2008¹⁶ and Mirko Cvetkovic in 2009,¹⁷ had also attended Serbian Orthodox Church ceremonies while in office. That same year, the government also announced plans to fund a film about the Battle of Kosare, a famous conflict from 1999 hailed for preventing a NATO land invasion. The Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs also stated its intention to fund a monument for the soldiers who died in that battle.¹⁸ In a symbolic move during the following year, the government chose to hold the central commemoration in Leskovac, specifically at the bridge where a civilian train had been struck by two NATO bombs.¹⁹ Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic used the event to deliver a stark historical comparison, stating that the NATO aggression had been more destructive for Serbia than the Second World War, and calling it “the most brutal aggression in the history of human civilization.” The ceremony included poignant symbolism, such as children holding balloons marked with bullseyes. It was also attended by the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church and other religious leaders, underscoring the event’s national significance.²⁰

The bullseye symbol itself was deeply resonant, having been used throughout Serbia during the 1999 aggression as an act of defiance, with citizens gathering and displaying it on bridges and town squares. Earlier that same day, President Tomislav Nikolic had inaugurated a memorial dedicated to the mothers and women who contributed to the nation’s defence throughout Serbian history, further framing the commemoration within a long narrative of national resilience.²¹ Prime minister Vucic, together with a mother of a fallen soldier, unveiled a monument dedicated

¹⁴ SPC: *Žrtvu bombardovanja za sveca*. B92. 01.12.2004. Retrieved May 20, 2025, from https://www.b92.net/o/info/vesti/index?nav_id=156970

¹⁵ Грачаница: Парастос жртвама НАТО агресије. *Official archive of the website of the Serbian Orthodox Church*, 25.03.2016, Retrieved May 20, 2025, from http://arhiva.spc.rs/sr/grachanica_parastos_zhrtvama_nato_agresije.html

¹⁶ Обележена осмогодишњица од НАТО бомбардовања CPJ 1999. *Official archive of the website of the Serbian Orthodox Church*, 26.03.2007. Retrieved May 20, 2025, from <http://arhiva.spc.rs/old/Vesti-2007/03/26-03-07-c.html>

¹⁷ Агенције, Србија неће заборавити. *Политика*. 24.03.2009. Retrieved May 20, 2025, from <https://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/80340/vesti-dana/scsbija-nece-zaboraviti>

¹⁸ Споменик и филм за хероје са Кошара. *Спутник*. 15.06.2016. Retrieved May 20, 2025, from <https://sputnikportal.rs/20160615/Kosare-VojskaSrbije-Spomenik-Film-Kosovo-1106497226.html>

¹⁹ Дан сећања на stradale у НАТО агресији obeležen у Grdelici. *Juzne Vesti*, 24.03.2017. Retrieved May 20, 2025, from <https://www.juznevesti.com/drustvo/dan-secanja-na-stradale-u-nato-agresiji-obeleden-u-grdelici/>

²⁰ Обележавање Дана сећања на жртве НАТО агресије. *Official website of the Ministry of defense of Republic of Serbia*. 24.03.2017. Retrieved May 20, 2025, from <https://www.mod.gov.rs/cir/10810/obelezavanje-dana-secanja-na-zrtve-nato-agresije-10810>

²¹ Откривено спомен-обележје српским мајкама. *Official website of the Ministry of defense of Republic of Serbia*, 24.03.2017. Retrieved May 20, 2025, from <https://www.mod.gov.rs/cir/10813/otkriveno-spomen-obelezje-srpskim-majkama-10813>

to her son, stating that the people of Serbia are obliged to remember the fallen hero and his fellow soldiers who defended the country side by side with him.²² By 2018, the official messaging had shifted. In contrast to the defiant symbolism of previous years, the Serbian president struck a more measured tone. While he described the NATO bombing as a deliberate campaign against both military and civilian targets — a crime that “cannot and should not be forgotten” — he simultaneously emphasized that Serbia’s primary goal was now to preserve the lives and secure the future of its citizens.²³ The 2018 commemoration marked a clear shift in focus, centring on the victims with a notable reduction in the defiant symbolism of previous years. Despite this softer public tone, the state continued to advance its historical narrative through other means; that same year, filming reportedly began on the state-funded film about the Battle of Kosare.²⁴

Government ceremonies, which often included church representatives conducting religious services, maintained their focus on civilian casualties (particularly children), as well as the soldiers and police who defended the country. Next year, in 2019, the rhetoric had softened further. At the central commemoration event, the Patriarch framed the 1999 bombing as a profound tragedy made worse by the fact it was perpetrated by “former allies and friends.” Echoing this conciliatory tone, the Serbian president stated that while Serbia would not forget the victims, it was now “ready for reconciliation.”²⁵ The Serbian Orthodox Church’s commemorative approach, rooted in Christian teachings, has consistently emphasized the victims and heroic defenders while outlining the injustice of the NATO aggression. This focus appears to have influenced the state’s strategy following the highly symbolic defiance of the 2017 commemoration. The government’s subsequent shift toward a victim-centered narrative can be seen as a strategic move to avoid directly provoking NATO member states, which is pragmatic given Serbia’s unchanged formal goal of joining the European Union, an organization whose membership overwhelmingly overlaps with NATO.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic led to restrictive measures, resulting in shorter, smaller-scale commemorations. This primarily involved government

²² Откривен споменик Тибору Церни хероју са Кошара. *Политика*. 14.06.2017. Retrieved May 20, 2025, from <https://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/382877/otkriven-spomenik-tiboru-cerni-heroju-sa-kosara>

²³ Вучић на церемонији у Алексинцу: Хоћемо од непријатеља да postanemo пријатељи, само нас не терајте да заборавимо; Додик: Српски народ никада неће опростити НАТО бомбардовање. НСПМ. 24.03.2018. Retrieved May 20, 2025, from <http://www.nspm.rs/hronika/vucic-na-ceremoniji-u-aleksincu-povodom-godisnjice-nato-bombardovanja-hocemo-od-neprijatelja-da-postanemo-prijatelji-samo-nas-ne-terajte-da-zaboravimo-dodik-nato-je-smatrao-vrhuncem-dostignuca-da-nam-nanese-gubitke.html?alphabet=c#yvComment193962>

²⁴ Снима се филм о биткама на Кошарама и Паштрику. *РТВ*. 06.07.2018. Retrieved May 20, 2025, from https://www.rtv.rs/sr_ci/drustvo/snima-se-film-o-bitkama-na-kosarama-i-pastriku_932681.html

²⁵ Сирене и мрак — centralna manifestacija Dana сећања на stradale у НАТО бомбардовању: Spremni на жртву, али и на помirenje. *Insajder*. 24.03.2019. Retrieved April 19, 2026, from <https://www.insajder.net/najvaznije-vesti/sirene-i-mrak-centralna-manifestacija-dana-secanja-na-stradale-u-nato-bombardovanju-spremni-na-zrtvu-ali-i-na-pomirenje>

officials laying wreaths at memorials across Serbia. Despite the scaled-back events, President Vucic still addressed the nation. In his speech, he reiterated that NATO had committed a crime, but notably added that the Serbian people have also “learned from their own mistakes,” continuing the more conciliatory yet resilient tone of recent years.²⁶ Simultaneously, the state signalled its enduring commitment to the previous narrative, by unveiling a major monument to the “Heroes of Kosare” in a prominent Belgrade park, etching the names of all 108 fallen soldiers into the capital’s memory.²⁷

The Serbian Orthodox Church continued its annual religious ceremonies, with the Patriarch’s anniversary speech consistently promoting messages of peace. However, in 2021, he introduced a significant new element by proposing that soldiers killed while defending Serbia in 1999 be included in the Church’s calendar. He specifically singled out for veneration those who perished in the prolonged Battle of Kosare.²⁸ This development made the state of “symphony” between the Serbian government and the Serbian Orthodox Church, at least concerning the narrative of the NATO aggression in 1999, particularly evident in 2021. The government’s commemorations continued the pattern established in 2015, with President Vucic’s central ceremony speech focusing on child victims. However, his rhetoric intensified again; rather than invoking only the symbolic figure of Milica Rakic, he now listed the names of several slain children, personalizing the loss and amplifying the emotional weight of the narrative.²⁹

The following years largely continued the established pattern, with the president’s rhetoric remaining closely aligned with that of the Serbian Orthodox Church. In 2022, President Vucic explicitly recommitted to this path, vowing that Serbia would “support a policy of remembering the NATO aggression” and reiterating that the nation’s duty was “to forgive, but never to forget.” The ceremony itself physically embodied this consensus, being attended by the Patriarch and other high-ranking church officials alongside the Serbian government’s leadership.³⁰ This year, the title of the commemoration was: “We

²⁶ Председник Вучић обратио се нацији поводом 21 године од почетка НАТО агресије. *Official website of the president of Serbia*, 24.03.2020. Retrieved May 20, 2025, from <https://www.predsednik.rs/pres-centar/vesti/predsednik-vucic-obratio-se-naciji-povodom-21-godine-od-pocetka-nato-agresije>

²⁷ Три скулптуре српских војника на савском венцу: Споменик херојима са Кошара, један од новијих симбола Београда. *Official website of the mayor of city of Belgrade*. 21.10.2024. Retrieved April 19, 2026, from <https://www.beograd.rs/cir/zivot-u-beogradu/beogradska-riznica/a87354/Spomenik-herojima-sa-Kosara-jedan-od-novijih-simbola-Beograda.html>

²⁸ Govor Његове Светости Патријарха српског г. Порфирија на академији поводом годишњице НАТО бомбардовања. *Official archive of the website of the Serbian Orthodox Church*. Retrieved May 20, 2025, from http://arhiva.spc.rs/sr/govor_njegove_svetosti_patrijarha_srpskog_g_porfirija_na_akademiji_povodom_godishnjice_nato_bombardo.html

²⁹ Обележавање Дана сећања на страдале у НАТО агресији. *Official website of the president of Republic of Serbia*. 24.03.2021. Retrieved May 20, 2025, from <https://www.predsednik.rs/pres-centar/vesti/obelezavanje-dana-secanja-na-stradale-u-nato-agresiji>

³⁰ Обележавање Дана сећања на страдале у НАТО агресији. *Official website of the president of Republic of Serbia*. 24.03.2022. Retrieved May 20, 2025, from <https://www.predsednik.rs/pres-centar/vesti/obelezavanje-dana-secanja-na-stradale-u-nato-agresiji-30912>

will forgive, if we can. We will forget, only if we are no more.”³¹ It should be noted that this directly contradicted the President’s message of a “duty to forgive.” The Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church, as in previous years, condemned the NATO aggression as an unfair use of force, yet simultaneously called for peace.³² This consolidated trend continued into 2024. At the central memorial ceremony, again attended by the Patriarch of SOC and senior state officials, President Vucic’s rhetoric fused the themes of victimhood and defiance. He explicitly referred to the “villains who killed a child”, which was a clear allusion to NATO, and solemnly declared it Serbia’s duty never to forget its “murdered children and heroes” tying this memory to the Serbian national identity.³³ Notably, the Patriarch was even more restrained than usual, not even mentioning the word “aggression”, but still referring to it as a “Cainian crime.”³⁴

Conclusion

The Serbian Orthodox Church has consistently worked to preserve its narrative of the 1999 NATO aggression against Yugoslavia, regardless of government support. It has done so, at a minimum, by organizing religious services for the victims every year.

Initially, the Serbian government made little effort to commemorate the aggression. This was likely because the new administration, which came to power in 2000, had an official policy of seeking membership in the European Union, as most of the members were overwhelmingly either in NATO or aspired to join. Still, some government figures, such as Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica, demonstrated symbolic support for the Church’s efforts by increasing publicity through their own attendance and that of their cabinet members. Following the shifts in 2015, this issue gradually returned to the state’s agenda. Official commemorations expanded beyond the mere laying of flowers and wreaths. The government’s rhetoric however often appeared cautious, as if seeking to establish a narrative of NATO aggression without alienating its member states. The state’s “new” approach primarily emphasizes the victims of the airstrikes, particularly children and the members of security forces who died defending the country.

³¹ The author did not find the full speech of the Serbian President on the official websites, nor in online media. Instead, there was only an announcement about the event and an article with photos of the event. Retrieved May 20, 2025, from <https://www.predsednik.rs/pres-centar/galerija/obelezavanje-dana-secanja-na-stradale-u-nato-agresiji-1999-godine-31818>

³² Дан сећања на страдале у НАТО агресији 1999. године. *Official website of the Serbian Orthodox Church*. 24.03.2023. Retrieved May 20, 2025, from <https://spc.rs/sr/news/patrijarh//9084.dan-secanja-na-stradale-u-nato-agresiji-1999-godine.html>

³³ Обележавање Дана сећања на страдале у НАТО агресији 1999 године. *Official website of the president of Republic of Serbia*. 24.03.2024. Retrieved May 20, 2025, from <https://www.predsednik.rs/pres-centar/vesti/obelezavanje-dana-secanja-na-stradale-u-nato-agresiji-1999-godine-32547>

³⁴ Патријарх Порфирије: Сећање на наше страдање јесте настојање да се пројави пуноћа живота у сваком добру и у свакој врлини. *Official website of the Serbian Orthodox Church*. 24.03.2024. Retrieved May 20, 2025, from <https://spc.rs/sr/news/patrijarh//10829.patrijarh-porfirije-secanje-na-nase-stradanje-jeste-nastojanje-da-se-projavi-punoca-zivota-u-svacom-dobru-i-u-svakoј-vrlini.html>

In contrast, the Serbian Orthodox Church has maintained a consistent discourse: It focused on the victims, the injustice suffered, and the heroes who defended Serbia and its people. As the state has gradually introduced and took a leading role in organizing central commemorative events, the SOC has become integrated into them. This reflects a relationship that is much closer to the ideal of a “symphonic” partnership between church and state, than in the years prior to 2015.

Leveraging its superior financial and organizational capacity, the state can promote these commemorations more effectively. Meanwhile, public opinion polls indicate that the Church commands greater trust than the government, especially among younger generations who are sceptical of politicians but express significant confidence in the Patriarch(s) of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Our work suggests that, at least until 2024, this trust has not been significantly diminished by the Church’s participation in state-led events that commemorate NATO aggression. By combining the state’s resources with the trust the population has in the SOC, this narrative of victimhood and injustice gains greater reach and influence, more effectively embedding itself within Serbian public consciousness.

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