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A. Vučić and M. Dodik with Patriarch Irinej and Holy Synod of the SPC

Foto: Dimitrije Goll/Tanjug

SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH: ROLE AND SIGNIFICANCE

The very fact that Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić has informed the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church /SPC/ about negotiations on Kosovo (and their outcomes up to now) before letting the Parliament and domestic public know anything about it testifies of SPC's standing over the past decades. And it also testifies of the Church's traditional ambitions to crucially influence social, political and governmental decisions.

In the early 1980s SPC imposed itself on the society as a major player. By insisting on the Greater Serbia project together with Serbia's nationalistic political and intellectual elites it became a major pillar of the regime's plans before and during the wars.

Following on Milošević's ouster and in the period of transition from socialism to a multi-party system such a "credit" made it possible for SPC to strengthen its position and role. Given that its strategic goals considerably overlap with

those of Serbia's elites, after 2000 all regimes treated Church dignitaries with respect. Occasional discrepancies would only play into the hands of SPC to get another concession from the regime.¹

And so, shortly after 2000 the Synod demanded that religious teaching should be incorporated into school curricula. Religious teaching and then priests preaching in military institutions were requests directly influencing many other and more important issues. Vojislav Koštunica, the then SRY president, was and remained a politician closest to the Church whom Bishop Amfilohije recently named as "politician truly mirroring the very being of this nation."² He enabled SPC to occupy the public space and gave it a free pass to all institutions, including educational.

Ever since 2000 SPC has been actively involved in resolution of the status for Kosovo. It has been strongly arguing that "the state should call for international guarantees for the legal status of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the province, and its temples and facilities."³ It has been the only Serbian institution that functions in Kosovo and is hugely trusted by Kosovo Serbs. It is also the only institution, in Kosovo and in other neighboring countries, that sticks to the delusion about pan-Serbian unification. Namely, it bases the unity of the Serbian nation on the so-called "Serbian spiritual space." It argues that there can be no state of Serbia without Kosovo because "Serbia is a temple, and Kosovo its altar." "Without an altar the very existence of a temple is meaningless. Serbia is a body and

Kosovo is the body's heart. Only a cadaver is left when a heart is torn off."

SPC has also been assigned a major role in the Strategy for the Safeguard and Strengthening Relations with Diaspora and Serbs in the Region (2001) that states, "Diaspora is best organized in church-educational municipalities. Ever since Serbs began migrating all over the world till this very day, the Serbian Orthodox Church has been assembling our people. The Serbian Orthodox Church has eparchies in all bigger Serb-populated areas worldwide. It has been mostly shaping our national identity in Diaspora. Throughout the 20th century it has practically been the only integrative institution and a bridge between the mother country and Diaspora. Apart from religion the Church has been preserving the national culture and language of the Republic of Serbia."⁴

SPC AND THE KOSOVO ISSUE

Patriarch Irinej says in his Christmas epistle (2019) that a lasting solution to the problem of Kosovo and Metohija cannot be found without a society based on the rule of law, given that "unless this precondition is fulfilled is the same as acceptance of a state of war and post-war ethnic cleansing and plunder as a fait accompli and renouncement of all the values Christian Europe and the entire world are based on, at least in principle."⁵ "This is the question of survival of our people, clergy, monkhood and especially of our ancient holy places without which we would no be what we are."⁶

- 1 When Zoran Đinđić extradited Slobodan Milošević to ICTY, helped to have construction of the St. Sava Temple in Belgrade finalized as rependence for that "anti-Christian act," and introduced religious teaching into elementary school curricula.
- 2 Danas, May 17, 2019.
- 3 Večernje Novosti, February 6, 2013, <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/aktuelno.290.html:418599-Crkva-nece-ugovor-sa-Kosovom>.

- 4 <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/dokument/45678/strategije.php>.
- 5 http://www.spc.rs/sr/bozhitsna_poslanica_srpskepravoslavne_crkve_7.
- 6 Ibid.

SPC has been living in harmony with the state most the time. But this harmony was disrupted in 2018 when the idea about demarcation between Serbs and Albanians, as a possible compromise solution of the status of Kosovo, began circulating.⁷ Namely, presidents Vučić and Thaci, and Albanian Premier Rama were negotiating a border change, that is Kosovo's partition. Besides local players the proposal found an echo in a rather large circle of international officials (including a part of American administration) and in a much bigger circle of informal, though influential actors and lobbyists on both sides.

SPC was the most influential opponent to the idea at home. In the past 150 years it has been arguing that Kosovo is a foundation of its identity. Its highest dignitaries backed up their counterparts in Kosovo, Bishop of Raska-Prizren Teodosije and Abbot of the Visoki Dečani Monastery Sava (Janjić). Mutual accusations and harsh words followed.

The demarcation idea is shelved for the time being. Key international factors helmed by Germany and Chancellor Merkel turned it down as unacceptable and made this clear to Vučić at the Berlin Summit in late April. Vučić was visibly crestfallen and frustrated, and shared his feelings with the public at home.

His visit (in tandem with Milorad Dodik who spends more time in Serbia than in Bosnia) to SPC dignitaries during the May Session of SPC Synod came as a surprise. Observers speculate that was an attempt at patching things up, "redemption," "sharing the burden of common anxieties," "ensuring support," etc.

7 "Demarkation" or partition (of Kosovo) is the only option Serbia has had in the matter of Kosovo in the past half a century. Namely, for excluding Kosovo from its sovereignty Serbia would be compensated with four municipalities in Kosovo North where Serbs are in majority.

Although Patriarch Irinej obviously sided with him and praised him for "heroic struggle for Serbia and Kosovo alike, and everything connected with Serbian name,"⁸ the Synod said as one that it would not give up its strong stance about Kosovo. "Any change in the status of Kosovo and Metohija leading either to recognition of Kosovo's independence or any variant of territorial partition, a precondition to a possible demarcation, is unacceptable to the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church. All such solutions would surely result in exodus of the remaining Serbian people that lives in majority Albanian populated areas and inflict unforeseeable damage on our spiritual and cultural heritage," quotes the Synod's release.⁹ The Synod not only invokes the UNSC Res. 1244 but also the fact that neither Russia and China nor five other EU member-states have recognized Kosovo up to now.¹⁰

SPC's staunch stance was interpreted as its refusal to give the head of the state a free hand for any of his options for Kosovo. According to commentator Cvijetin Milivojević, the release is "painful" for the regime, which means that it will go one with its showdown with bishops critical of Vučić's Kosovo policy.¹¹

And yet, it is possible in the context of some new developments that Vučić and Church dignitaries could find some "common ground." Namely, if after his demarcation idea failed Vučić decides to put off the issue of Kosovo until some future time, Serbia's Presidency and the Patriarchy will find themselves together in a "frozen conflict."¹² True, the Synod release claims that SPC opposes

8 Politika, May 14, 2019.

9 Danas, May 18-19, 2019.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 One of the President's unbecoming statements given following on is meeting in the Patriarchy – "Everybody plays dead and so I will be playing dead too," indicates such possible scenario. TVN1, May 18, 2019.

a frozen conflict and stands for continuation of the dialogue freed from “pressures and blackmails,” but considering the stance it has had up to now that would be a quite unexpected turn of the tide.¹³

The biggest part of Serbia’s cultural and intellectual elite shares SPC’s stance on Kosovo as evidenced during the “inner dialogue” the President had launched. “With the helping hand from the Church, science and culture Serbia should not give way because we could not give up that region (Kosovo),” says academician Ljubodrag Dimić.¹⁴

However, President of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences (SANU) Vladimir Kostić says that the only option will be to leave Kosovo “with dignity” given that it is in Serbia’s hands no more, either de facto or de jure, and someone must go public with this. In an interview with Radio Belgrade (2015), he said that SANU has not yet articulated its stance about the issue, adding, “Kosovo implies a bunk of our cultural heritage and we should struggle for it tooth and nail. This is an attempt to take away from us a substrate of our history and psychology, and just name it. But to be honest, if any minister, premier of president has to ask for a permit to enter this territory, we evidently have neither human, economic nor any other resources to have our way. We can be fooling one another but an alternative is more than clear.”¹⁵

13 Politika, May 18, 2019.

14 Pravoslavlje, May 15, 2019.

15 <http://mondo.rs/a840148/Info/Srbija/Predsednik-SANU-Vladimir-Kostic-Kosovo-nije-deo-Srbije.html>.

VISIT TO SPC: A TRY TO REACH AN AGREEMENT

Many controversies accompanied President Vučić’s visit to bishops during the session of the Holy Synod, most of all because governmental and Church top brass to not meet that often.¹⁶ The word had it that not all bishops were glad to see him in their seat, and some were making no bones about it.¹⁷ The latter were quite at odds with him about the Kosovo issue.

Open conflicts between the Church and the regime broke out in the summer of 2018 once the idea about Kosovo’s partition was “semi-legalized.” Of all opponents to it are bishops “in the field,” Bishop Teodosije and Abbot Sava. By saying that regimes in Belgrade and Pristina were provoking a violent conflict in Kosovo North in order to establish a “new reality” in the field along a planned demarcation line, Bishop Teodosije was turned into a target of a smear campaign by tabloids close to the regime and TV Pink throughout August and September. Belgrade’s yellow press was calling him “a traitor,” while their Pristina counterparts “a cigarette smuggler” and a priest who had blessed Arkan¹⁸

During the December 2018 session the Synod publicly supported Kosovo bishops under the fire, and stand against any form of Serbia’s giving up Kosovo. “What is most troubling under the veil of demarcation between Serbs and Albanians is the possibility of having the most important and biggest, if not the entire, part of Kosovo from Serbia cut off, and having it

16 Before Vučić only Slobodan Milošević paid such a visit in the 1990s. .

17 Quoting its sources among bishops, the Danas daily reported this and other developments going on behind closed doors. The media close to the regime attacked it for it, while officials such as Vučić’s secretary Nikola Selaković, who was in the delegation, tried to negate and deny such reporting.

18 Danas, August 25-26, 2018.

recognized as a part of independent Kosovo or the so-called Greater Albania,” says a release.¹⁹

Vučić’s advocacy for Kosovo’s partition as an act of “historical compromise” between Serbs and Albanians turned out as a fiasco in the Berlin Summit. His has been obviously inspired by the stance first launched by Dobrica Ćosić. Ćosić had said on several occasions, “A compromise between historical and ethnic rights was for me a solution to the centurial antagonism between Serbs and Albanians. Such compromise implies the right of Albanians in the territories where they are in majority to unite with their mother land, Albania. Territorial partition and demarcation between Serbs and Albanians should not be imbued with aspirations after ethnically clean territories, but with reciprocity when it comes to national and civil rights for minorities. Kosovo within Serbia that is biologically exhausted and demographically depressed will in two decades only turn it into a federation of two constantly antagonized nations. Life in such a community would be hard, and progress slowed down.”²⁰

Disappointed with the international community and his own people (“Which has not given me a hand”) Aleksandar Vučić decided to pay a visit to the Patriarchy at the time of its major spiritual session; aware that unlike the Patriarch many church dignitaries do not respect nor support him, he probably wanted to smooth mutual differences.

After the talks behind closed doors that lasted more than two hours, he told the press that he had spoken truly and sincerely “about everything that troubles our people” and warned that “we paid dear once when we behaved in discord with realities.”²¹ “It is our duty to fight, not to succumb to blackmail and give up what we

cannot give, nor are we entitled to hand over anything to others,” he also said while emphasizing that he wanted get maximum for Serbia while safeguarding peace and stability.²²

The atmosphere in which the talks were held was much speculated about. According to Danas’ sources, Vučić retorted “furiously and insultingly” to criticisms of some bishops, Teodosije of Raska-Prizren, Metropolitan Amfilohije, Grigorije of Dusseldorf and Germany, and others.²³ The sources claimed that he even threatened some of them with “intelligence files.”²⁴ Whether or not Amfilohije accused him of “having planned a coup d’état in tandem with Milo Đukanović,” finally having a photo of him and Bishop Teodosije taken (or was it a photomontage), etc., remained unclear.²⁵ Nikola Selaković was trying to deny all those speculations and guesses, and harsh exchanges claiming all that took place was a well-argued debate.²⁶ And yet, one of few authentic testimonies confirmed that harsh exchanges had taken place. In an interview with the Vreme weekly Bishop Grigorije said, “Later on (after a normal conversation) everything turned into an assault at Bishop of Raska-Prizren Teodosije.”²⁷

SCHISM IN THE EASTERN ORTHODOX WORLD

Constantinople-seated Patriarch Bartolomeo’s decision (2018) to acknowledge the “schismatic” Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UPC) raised hue and cry among the Eastern Orthodox world in general, and especially in Russian and Serbian churches. In the former because it concerns

19 NIN, May 16, 2019.

20 Interview with Dobrica Ćosić, Večerke Novosti, March 20, 2008.

21 Politika, May 14, 2019.

22 Ibid.

23 Danas, May 15, 2019.

24 Ibid.

25 TV Nova, May 19, 2019.

26 TV Prva, May 15, 2019.

27 Vreme, May 23, 2019.

it directly – as the Ukrainian church has been under its and Moscow Patriarchy’s canonic jurisdiction for long – and in the latter because of a possible precedent in the cases of Orthodox churches in Montenegro and Macedonia that are also aspiring towards independence.

This church problem – accompanied by major political repercussions – emerged in the 1990s following on disintegration of complex federations, the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. When their states became independent some domicile churches raised the question of their autonomy. This resulted in the foundation of new churches – precisely in Ukraine and Montenegro – considered “schismatic” by their former “headquarters.” Macedonia is here a unique case – its domicile church began calling for autonomy at the time of the federal state, in 1967. Its action was a part of the strategy for strengthening of Macedonian identity. Yugoslavia used to invest huge resources in Macedonia’s cultural scene (National Theater, language standardization, etc.).

Even before Patriarch Bartolomeo took this step SPC dignitaries had been strongly against it and hoping he would never say yes, since, as Bishop of Backa Irinej put it, “that would a bigger and deeper schism than all the previous ones in history of the Church, quantitatively bigger even than the schism in 1054.”²⁸ He was aware at the time that in the future the “Ukrainian scenario” could take place in the closest neighborhood.²⁹

28 Politika, September 24, 2018.

29 “Just imagine this so as to better understand what it is all about: a delegation from Bosphorus arrives in Skopje to examine a mode and procedure for giving autocephalic status to the local church that is disunited with all other churches, while silently bypassing the canonic church and its head...One can imagine even a bigger oxymoron: a similar delegation arrives in Cetinje and begins developing a procedure for assigning auto-cephalic status to Miraš Dedeić and his schismatic sekt.” Ibid.

All the time until Patriarch Bartolomeo decided in favor of the Ukrainian Church, SPC dignitaries were busy mediating between Constantinople and Moscow patriarchies. Only Patriarch Irinej met with both Moscow Patriarch Cyril and the Constantinople Patriarch but all that was in vain.³⁰

Moscow Patriarchy broke every tie with Constantinople (Istanbul is still so named by Eastern Orthodox terminology), and SPC sided with Moscow. To reaffirm its attitude, SPC Synod stressed out in its final release that it “recognizes not the newly established para-religious structure in Ukraine.”³¹

SPC AND AUTOCEPHALIC STATUS OF THE UKRAINIAN CHURCH

The May SPC Synod discussed Patriarch Bartolomeo’s decision to assign autocephalic status to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

In the ensuing dispute between Constantinople and Moscow patriarchies SPC sided with the Russian Church. Such solidarity was to be expected given that SPC fears that the Patriarch of Constantinople could do the same for churches in Macedonia and Montenegro. Ongoing turmoil in the Eastern Orthodox world is another challenge to SPC dignitaries.

The Synod also discussed “the inner misunderstanding” arising from the decision on the Ukrainian Church. Unlike his counterparts in Serbia Bishop of America West Maxim showed more understanding for Bishop Bartolomeo’s move. In an interview he reminded his “spiritual brothers” that 800 years ago St. Sava managed to get autocephaly for the Serbian Orthodox Church in a “non-canonic way.” His attitude and

30 Politika, October 2, 2018.

31 Politika, May 19, 2019.

the polemic he had over it with SPC spokesman Bishop of Backa Irinej heated the atmosphere in the hall. Some speculated that Bishop Maxim could be seriously punished. How all this ended remained unclear. According to some, Bishop Maxim got a pardon after demurely saying that he was sorry for giving “a tactless and inappropriate statement,”³² while others claimed that a paragraph about a pardon to Bishop Maxim was taken out from the release.³³

MACEDONIA: RENEWAL OF A DIALOGUE BETWEEN SPC AND MPC?

SPC denies Montenegrin (CPC) and Macedonian (MPC) Orthodox churches that once they get autocephaly round off their identities and thus make a clear break with Serbhood, which negates both Montenegrin and Macedonian nations. SPC misses no opportunity to criticize not only SPC but also Podgorica’s attitude towards Russia and its course towards EU and NATO.

At the session of “the Church government” SPC decided to renew a dialogue with the canonically unrecognized MCP. Relations between the two churches fit in the corps of Serbia-North Macedonia relationship wherein the state (Serbia) stands by “its” church. Although not so explosively as in the case of Montenegro (for Skopje Belgrade prefers some other methods of destabilization, mostly of intelligence nature), the church issue between Serbia and Macedonia has been simmering for more than half a century.

As of 1967 two parallel churches have been operating in Macedonia: the self-proclaimed and unrecognized Macedonian Church and canonic Ohrid Eparchy of the Serbian Orthodox Church. On several occasions have SPC and MPC tried

to find some common ground. Ever since 2003 there has been no direct dialogue between the two.

In the meantime, Bishop Jovan of Ohrid has been sentenced for crime in Macedonia and imprisoned. Belgrade claimed no dialogue would take place as long as the Bishop is “in dungeon.” Still, dialogue was not renewed although the Bishop was released in 2015.

Therefore, MCP, trying to obtain independence, opened up another front. In late 2017 its highest dignitaries sent a letter to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BPC) asking it to become its mother church (which the latter accepted) and help it to have its independence canonically confirmed.³⁴ Belgrade-seated media were commenting at the time that a political agreement between Bulgarian Premier Bojko Borisov and North Macedonian Zoran Zaev prepared the terrain for the two respective churches.³⁵

In mid-May 2019 Patriarch Bartolomeo initiated discussion about MPC and Macedonian government’s request for settlement of MPC canonical status. The moment the news broke out in the media,³⁶ SPC Synod signaled its readiness to renew the dialogue.³⁷ Although a renewed dialogue is good news as such, one can barely expect SPC to make a U-turn in its policy for MPC and say amen to its independence.

34 Helsinški bilten, br. 142.

35 Ibid.

36 Politika, May 15, 2019.

37 Politika, May 19, 2019.

32 Ibid.

33 Danas, May 20, 2019.

MONTENEGRO: SPC AND ITS DESTABILIZING POLITICAL ROLE

Unlike in Macedonia where the Ohrid Eparchy is not exactly engaged in underclerical activities, SPC – acting through its “man No. 1” Metropolitan of Montenegro-Adriatic Coast Amfilohije – stands for a major factor of destabilization at Montenegro’s political and social scene. Pro-Serbian opposition in Montenegro is its trusted ally in the business, along with political and ecclesiastical elites in Belgrade still opposing Montenegro’s independence.

As of 2000 the non-canonic Montenegrin Orthodox Church Belgrade-seated media pejoratively label “a non-governmental organization,” adding occasionally that it “was established in a police station in Cetinje” has been operating in parallel with SPC.³⁸ It has to be noted that the once autocephalic Montenegrin Orthodox Church has placed its independence on the altar of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians in 1918. Ever since it has been a part of SPC’s canonic structure.

Montenegro would surely want to crown its independence with independence of its domicile church. “I take we should go on working wisely on the renewal of autocephalic Montenegrin Orthodox Church, and the state will be engaged in this as it is its responsibility,” said Montenegrin President Milo Đukanović.

This is why SPC dignitaries have been permanently strongly accusing Đukanović and mincing no words about him.³⁹ “Now they are

founding even their own churches,” said Amfilohije, adding, “Can you imagine what a shame it is for Montenegro, for St. Vasilije Ostroški and St. Peter Cetinjski, when heathens and mercenaries found some churches of their own.”⁴⁰

The Law on Religious Freedoms and Legal Position of Religious Communities triggered off yet another hot dispute between civilian and church authorities. The said law has been drafted ever since 2015 and the Montenegrin regime has been under SPC’s fire all the time. The heart of the matter is that all church properties acquired (that is, constructed) before 1918 and is now used by the Montenegrin-Adriatic Coast Metropolitan seat would be transferred to the state of Montenegro (probably with the plan to have it entrusted to the MCP later on).

Now that the government approved the draft it has entered parliamentary procedure and is in its final stage. SPC thus reprehends Montenegro for having committed three “sins” – established a false church, recognized a false state in Kosovo and imposed sanctions on Russia. To this it now adds another one – “placing a sect on bishopric throne.”⁴¹

The May SPC Synod also had its say about the situation in Montenegro. Having reaffirmed that animosity for and discrimination of SPC were more or less characteristic of all the states emerging from Yugoslavia, it stresses out that this mostly refers to Montenegro that has “recently said yes to an anti-European and anti-civilization law on churches and religious communities.”⁴²

38 Politika, July 25, 2018.

39 Politika, December 23, 2018.

40 Politika, January 8, 2019.

41 Politika, December 26, 2018.

42 Politika, May 19, 2019.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Ever since the Middle Ages the Serbian national identity has been closely connected with SPC. As the sole organized safekeeper of national memory, SPC has been preserving and passing on the myth about the medieval Serbian state lost in Kosovo, and preaching for its renewal. The Serbian people have entered the modern era, the era of establishing a national state of its own without modern political and cultural institutions. Religious identification has been transformed into national, and followed by the struggle for a nation-state. This makes the sum and substance of the traditional trinity – church, nation and state – SPC is even now promoting as a formula of Serbs' cultural and political identity.

Since it perceives a Serbian nation-state as a pan-Serbian state, and the Serbian nation as an ethno-confessional community, SPC has never recognized the so-called AVNOJ borders: Serbia's borders within the post-war Yugoslavia. It takes that revision of these borders as a matter of existence of the Serbian people and the most important duty of its army. Not even after the Greater Serbian project suffered defeat has SPC made a minimal change in its position; and this is also reflected in its attitude towards Kosovo.

With its communicative dimension and some readiness for dialogue religion becomes more and more important. The dialogue has to be based on human rights and human dignity – on major messages of Biblical tradition. To become an actor of productive mediator between religion and modern age SPC has first to face up its own role in past decades, admit its responsibility for supporting the war, the Greater Serbia project and ignoring crimes committed in the name of the devastating ideology.