

HELSINKI COMMITTEE FOR HUMAN
RIGHTS IN SERBIA



Report of the Helsinki
Committee, 2023.

SERBIA: GEOPOLITICAL AND VALUES-BASED ALIGNMENT



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PROLOGUE

This year's report is a continuation of the previous one (<http://www.helsinki.org.rs/doc/Report2022.pdf>) which aims to focus on certain topics that are considered crucial by the Helsinki Committee for the transformation of society and the adoption of values that will lead to the democratization of society. Bearing in mind its devastation, radical nationalism, captured institutions and media, ethno-confessional culture and education, as well as revisionism, this process will be long and demanding. In addition, it will imply the involvement of all segments of society, because the key issue is what we are and where we are aiming to?

The report covers the topics that must be taken into account when considering the tactics for Serbia such as, among other things, state identity policy, security policy, armed forces, health care, education, media, political alternatives, decentralization and, finally foreign policy and religion.

All these topics, including those from the previous report, define a value system which fosters patriarchalism and conservatism.

Like the previous report, this one also offers some insights that must be taken into account in the social debate with a view to defining the credible platform for a turnabout.

SERBIA ON THE BRINK

As pointed out by the President of the Republic, Aleksandar Vučić, Serbia is “on the EU path”, although it does not meet the key criteria and standards for membership. The current government is not even trying to speed up this path by implementing the necessary reforms, but only as much as is necessary to continue receiving EU funds and investments. Belgrade is aware that the Western policy towards Serbia rests on several important premises and hopes that it will not be changed despite its “democratic recession” and autocracy that is slowly turning into a one-man rule.

The West bases its policy on the fact that Serbia is the central and largest country in the Balkans, that it is the country that holds an important place (migrants, drug trafficking, weapons...) due to the new geostrategic shifts and that it is the area of geopolitical competition among Western countries and Russia and China.

Serbia is aware of that and this is why Vučić has been skillfully balancing among the four pillars of foreign policy (Russia, China, the EU and the US) for ten years. However, that space has considerably shrunk, but it still exists for the mentioned reasons. The armed conflict in the village of Banjska in the north of Kosovo (24 September 2023) was a trigger for new thinking and new approaches on the part of the West, especially when it comes to the prevention of tensions regarding Kosovo which could destabilize the wider region. All Western actors marked Banjska as the red line and that any similar attempt would not be tolerated.

In the elections, held in December 2023, President Vučić demonstrated the essence of his rule. The Irregularities, which were registered and reported not only by the international observation commission but also by the local NGO CRTA, as well as the theft of elections in Belgrade, showed that they would not hesitate to use any possible means to stay in power. Populism, the dissolution

of all institutions and society, corruption, the state's ties with organized crime, media control and a toxic social atmosphere block the society from being more effective, despite huge dissatisfaction, Vučić has developed such a system that allows him to have full social control.

He enjoys the support of the authoritarian regimes such as Putin's, Orban's, Xi's, Erdogan's... All of them await the elections in Europe in 2024 and, in particular, in the United States, hoping for the return of Donald Trump and thus the definitive dissolution of everything left from the liberal order.

The collapse of the international liberal order has facilitated the revival of extreme nationalism in Serbia. The "Serbian world" – as the concept of the alleged defence of the Serbian people in the region – was identified as a threat in the West only after the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

All of the above indicates that Serbia is far from being committed to EU membership and the question arises as to whether Belgrade really wants it.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Bearing in mind that Serbia has not desisted from the revision of the borders and that it still has not (or will not) clearly demonstrated (or will not demonstrate) its readiness for EU membership (despite the official rhetoric), the Helsinki Committee believes that it is necessary to change the policy towards Serbia.

This implies as follows:

- Abandoning the policy of pandering Serbia, which has not achieved results. As the most important country in the Western Balkans. Serbia must take the responsibility for regional stability. In the opposite, the European Union must resort to the consequences.
- The need for the US and the EU to primarily put a stronger diplomatic and i political pressure on the current government.
- The need to formulate a *Roadmap* for enlargement as soon as possible in order to remobilize the region for Euro-Atlantic integration.
- The need for a more active involvement of the European Commission in the international structures in order to help reforms, especially those envisaged in Chapters 23 and 24.
- It is necessary to take a more active attitude towards the society which, after the tragic events in May, moved on and is slowly articulating its European orientation, but the EU support is also needed.
- The current government, namely the President of the Republic must be faced with the choice either to implement the Ohrid Agreement or Serbia will be denied access to European funds.
- The new media law did not meet the expectations of media workers, because it did not establish the guarantees for free and impartial reporting, especially when it is a

question of the Public Service (RTS) and TV stations with national frequencies.

- Civil, democratic and parliamentary control of the security services, which is one of the conditions for progress towards the EU.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR KOSOVO

- The EU moderated Serbia–Kosovo dialogue did not produce the expected results after 10 years, Serbia did not show the readiness to recognize the new reality in Kosovo and thus does not participate constructively in the dialogue.
- Through the Serbian List (the political organization of Kosovo Serbs under the patronage of Belgrade), Serbia not only controlled Kosovo Serbs, but also underpinned the consolidation of the Kosovo state by disputing its sovereignty.
- The division of Kosovo is the only option advocated by Belgrade (which is contrary to the Brussels and Ohrid Agreements). This was demonstrated by the incursion into the north of Kosovo. Serbia (with Russia’s support) prefers a frozen conflict that can be activated at any “convenient moment”, as the case of Banjska showed.
- The incursion into the north of Kosovo showed the fragility of the region and Serbia’s destructive potential to destabilize the region as well as Europe.
- The strategy of supporting the biggest “players” in the Western Balkans (Albania and, in particular, Serbia) as the pillars of stability failed to produce results. The expectation that Serbia will say *no* to Russia is not on the horizon. The policy of “immediate solution” and economic development is not sufficient, because the roles of religion, identity policy and beliefs are neglected.

- Identity policy should become part of the social integration process, which would overcome the ethnic tensions produced by the narrowly defined ethno-identities over a long term. It is necessary to define a broader national identity with the integrative potential that will take into account not only diversity but also liberal democratic values.
- The decontamination of Serbia can be performed within the scope of the changes of the media, educational and cultural policies. The judgements of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) should be the framework for the establishment of the rule of law as well as the starting point for a dialogue about the past and the prevention of impunity.
- In order for the West to be credible in Serbia, it must adopt the strategies and policies that penetrate into the core of the society that has been devastated by war policies, populism, corruption and crime.
- The current government, namely President Vučić must be faced with the choice – either to implement the Ohrid Agreement or Serbia will be denied access to European funds.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SERBIA'S FOREIGN POLICY

- So far, the current government has not demonstrated a convincing orientation towards Euro-Atlantic integration despite the efforts of the EU and the US, coupled with full political and financial support.
- President Vučić emphasizes that the EU is Serbia's biggest investor, but he does not promote the liberal values on which the European Union rests, including specifically liberal democracy, rule of law and human rights.

- Serbia does not engage in the reforms that will bring it closer to the European Union, primarily when it comes to Chapters 23 and 24. Contrary to the expectations of the West, Belgrade keeps accusing it of pressure and blackmail
- So far, the government has not changed the media's anti-Western policy, which requires support to independent media as well as their more significant engagement on the European agenda.
- From this perspective, Serbia is trying with its current international policy to compensate for the loss of Kosovo with the Republic of Srpska, Montenegro and the division of Kosovo.
- With the strengthening of "authoritarian" repression and propaganda, Serbian citizens have been marginalized as a collective political force in the politics of Serbia. Its atomized society is unable to overcome the power of Vučić's authoritarian state.
- In a geopolitical sense, the presence of China in recent years, especially after the Russian aggression against Ukraine, also represents one of the most significant geopolitical changes in the Western Balkans.
- Bearing in mind the complexity of the global situation, it is necessary to stabilize the Western Balkans as fast as possible in order to prevent new conflicts. That is why it is also necessary to remotivate the public in the Western Balkans for EU membership by making the enlargement policy more certain and more concrete.
- It is necessary to strengthen the civil sector in order to break the political blockade and open space for the alternative that will be ready to distance itself from the previous disastrous policies, especially those related to hegemonic aspirations.

I – INTRODUCTION

The erosion of fragile democratic values continued during 2023, showing a marked tendency towards authoritarianism. Since the coming of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) to power (2012), Serbia has been in a constant state of tension and some kind of state of emergency. Serbia is in constant turmoil without success in stabilizing and democratizing itself politically. There is still no critical mass that will oppose the policy and rule of Aleksandar Vučić. Apart from controlling the situation in Serbia, Vučić also managed to present himself to the West as the only factor on which it can rely with certainty. Serbia has never been further away from the EU, while its attitude towards Russia is the key test for its accession to the EU, because this is primarily about the value issue.

Keeping the Serbian national question as the central national policy issue during the last 35 years, with no ability to take stock of such policy, impeded the society and political life. Insistence on that policy led to civilizational decline, primitivization and destruction of the 20th century achievements, especially the second Yugoslavia as well as the efforts made after 2000.

Due to the ties of crime, church and politics, all the moral values on which a society should rest were destroyed, which led to the total collapse of the political, social, cultural and media spheres.

The conservative and anti-European right triumphed in the elections held on 17 December 2023, thus rounding off one stage that has now firmly aligned Serbia with Putin and Orban. Serbia acts as a Russian proxy in the Balkans.

Although the opposition achieved significant results in the most recent elections despite all its weaknesses, it faces a great challenge to finally formulate its programme and vision of European Serbia that it advocates for. Its key problem is its position on

Kosovo, so that the West does not perceive it as the force that will guarantee the normalization of relations with Kosovo.

Serbia is a defeated country, but its hegemonic ideology is not. Precisely thanks to the West's condescension policy this ideology survives and waits for the moment to be realized. The West perceives it as being irrational (which it is), but it still exists in Serbia's political life. That is why it is necessary for the West to publicly condemn all such policies at the top level and abolish the ethnic principle in solving regional problems. Nationalism and chauvinism have been imposed from the top down, as is the case with the mantra that the Balkan peoples cannot live together.

Identity policy influences the adoption of political decisions, cultural policy and social dynamics in the Balkans. Nationalist sentiments and ethnic tensions still exist, albeit to varying degrees, in different countries in the region. Serbian ethno-clericalism still mobilizes Serbs (as it did in the early 1990s), primarily on the basis of the thesis about their endangerment, as well as the need for Serbia to revise its defeats. Such revisionism can have significant consequences for regional relations, the understanding of history and efforts to achieve reconciliation and stability.

Identity policy should become part of the integration process that would overcome ethnic tensions, produced by the narrowly defined ethno-identities, over a long term. It is necessary to define the broader national identity that has an integrative potential which will take into account diversity as well as liberal democratic values.

The decontamination of Serbia can only be performed within the scope of the changes of its media, educational and cultural policies. The judgements of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) should be a framework for the establishment of the rule of law as well as the starting point for a dialogue about the past and the prevention of impunity.

In order to be credible in Serbia, the West must adopt the strategies and policies that penetrate into the core of the society that has been devastated by war policies, corruption and crime.

The two events that defined the year 2023 significantly changed the situation in the country and its image abroad. The first, tragic event took place on 3 and 4 May when nineteen (mostly young) people were killed in the Vladislav Ribnikar Elementary School in Belgrade and in two villages near Mladenovac. This caused the eruption of citizens' discontent and spontaneous "Serbia Against Violence" protests which, in essence, drew attention to the verbal and physical violence dominating the social and political scene. These events also crystallized numerous issues being a burden to society for a long time. The absence of the value a system and morals, as well as the collapse of education are all the causes that have been neglected by state institutions. The toxicity of the social and political atmosphere was the cause of these two tragic events that set the society in motion.

The second event took place in the village of Banjska in the north of Kosovo on 24 September. Namely, one Serbian paramilitary group carried out an armed attack during which one Kosovo policeman and three Serbs who participated in it were killed. The Western international community reacted promptly, not only by issuing with condemnation announcements and statements, but also by immediately increasing the KFOR forces by 1,000 soldiers. NATO and other relevant factors made it clear in their statements that this was the red line beyond which Serbia would no longer be tolerated.

Although Serbia opted for EU membership and cooperation with NATO back in 2006, during the last decade, since the Serbian Progressive Party came to power, it was sliding towards autocracy, which stopped all reform processes and thus progress towards the EU.

The phenomenon of Aleksandar Vučić and his rule, it regardless of his position, inevitably encouraged thinking about it – what kind of society is this which does not resist it and shows no interest in a paradigm shift which would turn Serbia towards Europe. One of the characteristics of traditional and conservative societies, to which Serbia belongs, is certainly a strong attachment to the

nation and national politics which did not change during the last 40 years. The aspiration to revise the defeat of the 1990s has been articulated by constantly referring to the right to unify the Serbian people, which is best evidenced by the “Serbian world” project, which the West only belatedly understood after the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Namely, based on the similar arguments and mechanisms, the Russian world warned that Serbia was still a strong centre of destabilization of the entire region and that the case of Banjska was its manifestation.

Incitement to ethnic tensions in the region is constantly present in the media discourse. As an authoritarian leader, Vučić is unprepared for compromise solutions, both in the country and in the region. Thus, there are no potential solutions on the horizon, especially because the belief in the righteousness of one’s own group is prevalent in society. The cherishing of the myth of the victim and promotion of a new identity, based primarily on religion and belonging to a certain ethnic group prevent the normalization of regional relations, which is the key to the progress of all post-Yugoslav states. Serbia has not yet distanced itself from the war legacy and Slobodan Milošević’s politics, so that regional relations will stagnate until it faces its own responsibility for the brutal disintegration of Yugoslavia.

In essence, nationalism and the thesis about the endangerment of Serbs serve as a cover for the capturing of institutions and the plundering on a huge scale for ten years already. It exceeds all plunders that were immanent to all previous governments. However, it should be noted that the society that has adapted to it is also responsible. Lawyer Zdenko Tomanović points out that “a group of immature and irresponsible individuals abducted Serbia, abducted its budget, tore up its Constitution, discredited the legal restrictions and obligations, made the responsibility unclear and many other bad things”.¹

¹ Intervju advokata Zdenka Tomanovića, *Danas*, 30 December 2023.

The Serbian elites have not settled the Serbian national question, which is the source of constant tension in the region and, at the same time, a strong support for staying in power. Such a situation is inevitably reflected in the country's foreign policy and all dilemmas faced by its society.

Serbia has not established a legal state, which guarantees the rule of law and respect for human rights and tolerance. Although some basic documents have been adopted, there is still no readiness to use them in practice. In this sense, the reforms envisaged in Chapters 23 and 24, the basic criteria for EU membership, have not been implemented. In the report of the European Commission (EC) for 2023 it is emphasized that the Revised Action Plan for Chapter 23, adopted in June 2020, and the justice development strategy for the period 2020–2025, adopted in March 2022, represent the main strategic documents. The Government is still behind schedule in implementing a comprehensive analysis of the influence of the country's reforms based on the World Bank's 2014 functional survey, including the implementation of its recommendations and the recommendations from the previous functional surveys.² The practice of protecting organized crime stems from the character of the government. According to the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (September 2023), Serbia is the third in Europe and the regional leader when it comes to organized crime. As for crime perpetrators, it was explained in the Index politicians protect organized crime groups in Serbia, which mostly cooperate with crime groups from Montenegro. According to the Index, there is a developed criminal market for narcotics, illegal weapons and human smuggling/trafficking in Serbia. The overall fight against organized crime in Serbia was assessed as being ineffective, especially in politically sensitive cases. Serbia is still at the very top of the European countries in terms of the organized crime and, compared to 2021, the situation is now worse.³

² https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_695_Serbia.pdf

³ Zašto Srbija prednjači u kriminalu u regionu?, *Danas*, 29 December 2023.

Corruption is one of the most serious problems which has trapped institutions and which destroys the potential for serious reforms. In its report, the European Commission points out that there is a very limited progress with respect to the previous year's recommendations. As for the recommendations by the Group of States Against Corruption (GRECO), Serbia has taken the measures towards implementing the remaining five recommendations from the fourth evaluation round, involving the prevention of corruption among members of parliament, judges and prosecutors, and reported this to the GRECO in March 2023. Serbia should still adopt the national strategy for its anti-corruption fight and the accompanying action plan. Serbia has presented its draft strategy for the period 2021–2028, including the accompanying first action plan for the period 2023–2024, to the European Commission. Most of the reviewed anti-corruption measures for Chapter 23 as well as most of the GRECO recommendations from the fourth and fifth evaluation rounds have also been included in these documents.⁴

Serbia has not yet decided which direction to take, all questions are open and, in particular, the state and society concept. Although Serbia has formally adopted the European concept of institutions, which were established after 2000, it is nominally a society where institutions do not function and procedures are not respected. Its unsettled relations with Kosovo, threatened democracy and constant political tensions, the abandoned rule of law and increasingly pronounced autocratic ambitions generate instability both in Serbia and the region. The case of Banjska also signalled the potential for greater security disruptions.

4 https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_695_Serbia.pdf

STATE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

The new identity is being established on an anti-communist, anti-Yugoslav and fascist mantra, which led to the promotion of extreme ideologies, those from, before and during the Second World War. It is primarily about the return to Chetnikdom as the dominant ideology that shapes the value system, culture of memory and revision of history within the framework of such ideology. The public opinion is shaped by launching the theses about the endangerment of Serbs, their deprivation in both Yugoslavias and the promotion of Russia as the sincere protector of the Serbian people.

After the war, when the “Serbian territories” were marked (northern Kosovo, the Republic of Srpska and Montenegro), the identity was systematically constructed using cultural policies and revisionism, which had to prove historically how much the Serbian people was the victim in both Yugoslavias, while at the same time relieving it of the responsibility for all crimes, especially those of the 1990s.

That is why all previous efforts to reform and Europeanize Serbia proved to be unsuccessful. Because democracy can be introduced more or less immediately, while the culture of liberalism needs generations to develop, because it will not emerge spontaneously. In Serbia, like in most post-socialist countries, roads, stadiums, airports and highways were modernized, but not its society. This requires the education of the population and identity construction based on completely different premises, including specifically the civic values that are not a priority or central issue of the Serbian political elite.

SECURITY SYSTEM

For more than two decades after the changes (2000), Serbia has not achieved the proclaimed goals in the security sector – to ensure the supremacy of the civilian authorities over security politics and make the security sector accountable to legal and legitimate democratic and parliamentary control.

It is an established practice that secret service pensioners work as political analysts and interpreters of the current and geostrategic developments. They consistently advocate an anti-Western and anti-EU discourse, which became increasingly more dominant, especially after the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

Serbia controls its society precisely through these old and new security networks. It does the same thing in the region. It sends experienced persons from the security sector, who are mainly engaged in the “Serbian world” project as ambassadors to Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

THE ARMED FORCES IN THE SERVICE OF PROMOTING THE GOVERNMENT

The Serbian Armed Forces are a strong support of the government in creating a positive public image in the country. This has been achieved by a very frequent presentation of the military power in the presence of the top leadership with live TV broadcasts. Regular activities are focused on the presentation of the prestige of the government, primarily President Aleksandar Vučić.

The modernization of the Serbian Armed Forces has been put in the foreground, but there is no information about the real situation in the defence system. Serbia is the only country in the wider region which does not publish the data on the total number of people in the Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces and the ratio of filing by formation and actual filling.

The Ministry of Defence launched the initiative to reinstate mandatory military service which, as emphasized by Defence

Minister Miloš Vučević, will not be given up on. In the explanatory statement it is said that the proposal is made “after a detailed consideration of the general security situation and contemporary challenges faced by Serbia as a militarily neutral country”.⁵ According to numerous analysts, this initiative has so far been launched several times but, “as a rule, without a detailed explanation, analyses and consequences” and that all this points out that the Serbian Armed Forces are “faced with the accumulated problems with filling their ranks, which implies that the current management is unable to solve the problem”.⁶

THE CASE OF BANJSKA – SECURITY CHALLENGES

The armed attack by the Serbian paramilitary group in northern Kosovo (24 September 2023) dramatically changed the atmosphere and the attitude of the Western international community towards the Western Balkans and, in particular, Serbia. The prompt response of the West to the terrorist act in the village of Banjska laid bare Serbia’s duplicitous policy, as well as the failure of the Western policy of pandering and tolerating Serbia. In a way, this event had a sobering effect on the EU, the US and NATO.

Although official detailed reports on this event are not yet available, judging by the intensive diplomatic activity that followed, it is clear that it was a serious attempt by Serbia to use a fluid international context and threaten the security of not only the region but also Europe. It was an attempt to create conditions for the forcible annexation of northern Kosovo.

As security is a priority, especially if one bears in mind that that Russia has repeatedly been behind destabilization attempts in the Balkans (and is still there), the prompt response of the West

5 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-obavezni-vojni-rok-inicijativa/32762793.html>

6 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-obavezni-vojni-rok-inicijativa/32762793.html>

was expected in view of the fact that this was the red line and the warning to no longer tolerate Belgrade's manipulations and lies.

After the thwarted operation in Kosovo, official Belgrade is trying to distance itself and to shift the responsibility to Kosovo Serbs, claiming that they have the right to combat continuous discrimination against them. Milan Radoičić, who admitted that he had organized the operation, was apprehended, and then released and there are no indications that he will be tried in due course. The West publicly tolerated that narrative but did not give up the demand that those responsible be brought to justice.

The terrorist act in "Radoičić's organization" intensified discussions on EU enlargement, especially to the Western Balkans, which has obviously become the most vulnerable region when it comes to the new security framework of Europe in the making. Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission (EU), already said in her annual address on 13 September that the EU "with 30 plus" is its strategic interest. She also stated that the enlargement would be the best investment in the peace, security and prosperity of the EU, and that it would be a "catalyst of progress". The President of the European Council, Charles Michel, announced in August that the EU should be ready to receive new members "by 2030".

At all conferences and meetings that were held after 24 September (the murder of a Kosovo policeman in Banjska) it was discussed about EU enlargement, but it is still not clear what dynamics is in question. However, as indicated by President Macron, the set goal – 2030 – is not achievable without necessary changes in the EU itself.

EDUCATION SYSTEM

In the Strategy of Education and Upbringing Until 2030, as the fundamental document aimed at operationalizing education policy on an empirical level, there is a serious discord between the proclaimed goals and reality. There is also a continuous process of

implementing the contents that do not correspond to or are even contrary to the projection of the “desired state”.

Instead of the proclaimed position that the “education system must successfully develop the capacity of young people, so that after leaving the education system they are competent for life and work in the 21st century”, the current education system testifies exactly to the opposite. And the state that devalues its education system inevitably handicaps and degrades its citizens, condemning them to a second-class role in both the present and tomorrow’s world.

HEALTH SYSTEM: THE COLLAPSE OF A WELFARE STATE

The Serbian health system is a strong and irrefutable indicator of the ruined idea about a welfare state. Instead, citizens have been brought into an even more unequal position, the gap between the rich and the poor has been widened and the overall social inequality and discrimination have been normalized. Therefore, it is not surprising that Serbia has been among the countries with the highest death rates in the world for years. A way out is not seen in our current socio-political circumstances.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH ON THE NARROWING OF HUMAN RIGHTS

The relationship between the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) and the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) is characterized by cooperation and synchronized action, which seriously threatens the secular character of the state and peace in the region. Regular and intensive communication between the Church and the state has been established, including various forms of financial and

institutional cooperation. The ideological and diplomatic support of the Serbian Orthodox Church has been strengthened and a high level of harmony between secular and spiritual authorities has also been achieved. A great contribution to this synergy has also been made by Patriarch Porfirije who has been holding this position since February 2021.

The ideology of the Serbian Orthodox Church is in agreement with the ideology of the Moscow Patriarchate which, in essence, does not conduct religious but paranational policy. This is the doctrine used by Russian President Vladimir Putin to attack Ukraine. The rhetoric of “just war”, which at one time had a very strong and institutionalized theological base among the “Justinians” (students and followers of the conservative Archimandrite Justin Popović, one of the most powerful theological authorities within the Serbian Orthodox Church), was reactivated in the case of the war in Ukraine.

The Serbian Orthodox Church has a strong influence on the narrowing of human rights by imposing the “traditional Christian values”, which especially affects minority groups, LGBT and women.

It is difficult to determine the financial power of the SPC, since the sources of its funding are diverse, including several lines from the state budget. The law exempts religious communities from submitting annual financial statements, so that it is not possible to determine precise details about the SPC's transactions.

ELECTIONS: ELECTORAL ENGINEERING

The V-Dem Institute evaluates the health of democracy on the basis of five principles: electoral, liberal, participative, deliberative and egalitarian. None of these principles were satisfied in the Serbian elections held on 17 December 2023. The conservative and anti-European right wing achieved a very great success, thus rounding off the stage that has placed Serbia firmly alongside Putin and

Orban. Aleksandar Vučić covered all right-wing radical options and returned to the position from which he began his political career in the 1990s.

The elections were primarily advocated by the opposition. Vučić agreed to them and called them at the moment when he was under great pressure from the Western community due to the non-implementation of the Ohrid Agreement and the terrorist act in northern Kosovo on 24 September. He certainly would not have announced them if he had not secured victory in advance. That is why the elections were a test of electoral engineering and the autocrat's willingness to stay in power, resorting to various machinations and abuses, instead of being a test of democracy.

Vučić skillfully closed the national space, prevented the unification of several parties on the strongly pro-Russian right and blocked the media for their presentation. In doing so, he published the list of 2,000 intellectuals and celebrities who support him, thus countering ProGlas, the initiative of 14 independent personalities, known to the public and signed by 190,000 supporters by the end of the campaign. By monopolizing the media with national frequency, Vučić maximally exploited the Kosovo issue as well as the Serbian issue in the region. Thus, he marginalized the patriotic presentations of other parties and even kicked some of them out of the race (Dveri, Oathkeepers).

Aleksandar Vučić's convincing victory in the parliamentary elections puts Serbia under the unquestionable domination of his Serbian Progressive Party. It additionally strengthens the absolute rule of Aleksandar Vučić who is responsible, not his party, for the victory, although he is not formally at the head of the SNS. Regardless of the fact that these were not presidential elections, Vučić was the holder of the electoral list.

The outcome of the parliamentary elections will not only set Serbia further backwards, but will also continue to play a destabilizing role in the region. The presence of Milorad Dodik, President of the Republic of Srpska (RS), and Andrija Mandić, President of the Parliament of Montenegro, in the election headquarters of the

Serbian Progressive Party during the announcement of the election results was a kind of message that the “Serbian world” is functioning and, at the same time, that Vučić is the leader of all Serbs in the region and that he controls the processes both in Montenegro and in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Vučić marginalized the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) and Ivica Dačić, an important coalition partner, and skillfully combined the policies of Milošević and Šešelj. The bringing of Serbs from the Republic of Srpska and their voting, primarily at the polling stations in Belgrade, caused the anger of the citizens. Vučić stated that they did not decide on the outcome of the elections, but that it was very important that they were here.⁷ He prepared for months in advance to secure every vote, especially in Belgrade, being aware that it is here that the opposition was the strongest.

Despite the thefts, frauds and abuse of state resources and media monopoly, the Serbia Against Violence coalition achieved the greatest opposition success for the last 11 years, that is, since the SNS and Vučić have been in power. The opposition was much better organized, although not enough and, thanks to that, it managed to win more than 20 percent of the votes in the republican elections and significantly more than 30 percent in the Belgrade elections, as well as to expose the theft by the SNS.

The greatest surprise of these elections was certainly We – The Voice of the People movement, headed by the well-known Belgrade doctor Branimir Nestorović. He got media space and was also a frequent guest on the YouTube channel, where he promoted various conspiracy theories. The movement is pro-Russian oriented and one of its members, Branko Pavlović, clearly presented their commitment: “We – The Voice of the People’ – expose the fetters in which the West maintains the economic and financial state and the system that must be demolished if Serbia does not want to ‘demolish’ itself, that is, to disappear”.⁸

7 Politika, “Apsolutna podrška politici Aleksandra Vučića”, 18 November 2023.

8 Pečat, Mere, 22 December 2023.

Vučić was also strongly supported by the Serbian Orthodox Church during the campaign. It is no accident that Bishop Irinej, otherwise the main advocate of the pro-Russian line in the Church and Patriarch Porfirije's mentor, congratulated Vučić on the victory of the "fatherland option", as well as his "success in the mission of preserving Serbdom and Serbia in the difficult circumstances" and "the enormous challenges and temptations faced by our Motherland and the Serbian people as a whole."⁹

Vučić's – convincing victory will also pose a problem for the West which still tolerates him, although after the armed conflict in Banjska it trusts him less and less. Although Vučić claims that he is still on the European path, this is not confirmed by his policy and controlled media. He will try to balance in a much narrower space, because he will certainly not miss the financial support announced at the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Brussels.

These elections have also shown that Serbia does not have the human potential for a serious opposition party as well as the leader capable of challenging the monopoly of the current government. In view of the fact that the elections were largely won through skillful manipulations, the question is how long the monopoly will last. President Vučić, destroyed the political dialogue with his destructive policy and constant media campaigns against all political opponents and effectively reintroduced a one-party system in the country. By controlling the media, he closed the space for critical thinking and disabled the society from thinking critically.

HUMAN RIGHTS

International human rights law and the mechanisms anticipated for the promotion of state compliance with those rights are increasingly being challenged. Resistance comes from various sources, including the countries that have historically supported the global human rights project. New trends strengthen resistance,

9 <https://novimagazin.rs/vesti/311703-predsednistvo-episkop-irinej-cestitao-dragom-prijatelju-vucicu-na-pobedi-otadzbinske-opcije>

especially among those who have always resisted the human rights norms (Russia, Turkey and many other countries).

The “golden age” of international human rights law is over, at least for now. Primarily due to the increased number of authoritarian governments, the dismantling of the architecture of international human rights enforcement, the growing influence of China and Russia, as well as the rise of nationalism and populism. According to the new geopolitical reality, international law is undergoing the period of transition, which is the consequence of the weakness of the international liberal order established after the Second World War.

Stability has become the most important and hence the frequent complaints that the EU, when it comes to Serbia, opted for a stabilocracy, but not for respect for human rights. The consequence of the new reality is that human rights remained under the radar of the international community during the last decade, as is also evidenced by the case of Serbia as well as the Western Balkans in general. However, it should be noted that the European architecture for human rights still persists, but the Western Balkan countries reluctantly adhere to the European standards, except when collective rights are in question.

The social and political circumstances largely determined the state of human rights in Serbia. A negative trend was also recorded during the previous years. However, the year 2023 was characterized by several events that point to the increasing brutality and violence that dominate in society. This is also reflected in the decreasing tolerance not only towards “others”, but also towards all dissenters. The tragic events of 3–4 May when 19 young people were killed exposed the state of society and resulted in protests on the streets of major cities in Serbia (especially in Belgrade) under the slogan “Serbia Against Violence”. The executive power, which took primacy over other branches of government, destroyed the credibility of institutions and called the rule of law principle into question.

In addition, the international context has also been changed, the liberal order has also lost its primacy, and the resulting vacuum is being filled with antiliberal leaders. The international Western community, especially the United States, no longer prioritizes democracy and human rights (it is also exposed to negative trends in this regard), and the pressures that were crucial for the beginning of transition from the post-conflict authoritarian society. After 2000 they are missing. It was the absence of their advocacy for the sustainability of democracy that led to the collapse of all values that had just begun to be respected, thus opening up the space for radicalism, nationalism and the promotion of the concept of human rights which exclusively deals with the collective rights of Serbs and whose main promoter is the Serbian Orthodox Church.

The legal framework, laws and numerous strategies related to solving the problems of human and minority rights are more or less in line with the European standards. Serbia is a member of the Council of Europe and the signatory of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the Convention on Human Rights. Nevertheless, Serbia has not yet established such social relations that guarantee the equality of minority groups (not only ethnic ones) and thereby eliminate discriminatory practices. When it comes to ethnic minorities, taking into account the war legacy, various discriminatory policies exert influence on their position, especially when Roma, Bosniaks, Albanians and Croats are in question.

The legacy of the wars of the 1990s has not yet been resolved and is the constant source of tensions that often have the potential for conflict, which did not occur thanks to the presence of the international community. Because the preservation of stability is the main criterion by which the international Western community is guided when it comes to the Western Balkans. In the meantime, the West was faced with several critical events, such as the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, which also contributes that the stability of the Western Balkans is the only relevant factor under the circumstances. This provides room for authoritarian leaders to

establish rule without control, which has just happened in Serbia. Aleksandar Vučić is not only tolerated, but he also has an advantage due to the fact that Serbia is an important factor in the Balkans, so that its appetite is constantly satisfied.

Serbia did not distance itself from Milošević's policy and the concept of an ethno-confessional state. Instead, it continued to realize this project within the framework of various policies not only in Serbia, but also in the neighbouring countries where there are Serbian communities. The dominant media promote very toxic narratives. Including negative stereotypes about all minorities, thus making the, insecure and isolated. This also contributed to the emigration of minority groups (Hungarians, Croats Slovaks...) to their home countries or other European countries. The LGTB community and the Roma are still the most discriminated against.

Roma are a vulnerable group due to a low percentage of them being highly educated and organized, as well as those having the basic living conditions. That percentage lags considerably behind other national communities. At the conference titled "Through Cooperation and Good Practice to Sustainable Solutions", the Minister for Human and Minority Rights, Tomislav Žigmanov, said that Serbia achieved the good results related to the position of Roma people in all the areas covered by the Strategy for Social Inclusion especially in the fields of employment, education, health and housing of young Roma. According to him, these are the "important components when it comes to the Roma community as a marginal and sensitive social group that requires additional efforts for its inclusion".¹⁰

However, Brankica Janković, Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, points out that the largest number of complaints received by her institution refers to the discrimination of the Roma national minority and that the Roma are a social group that is most often discriminated against in almost all areas of life – for example, in the area of education which should be the basis for their

¹⁰ <https://euractiv.mondo.rs/drustvo/a855/Sta-su-najveci-problemi-Roma.html>

further life and economic empowerment during employment, as well as in the case of various procedures for exercising rights before the public authorities".¹¹

Commissioner Janković goes on to point out that Roma women are in a particularly difficult situation. They are mostly discriminated both as Roma and as women. One of the serious current problems in the Roma community is the frequency of early marriages and common-law unions in which one half of Roma girls is aged between 14 and 19. Roma are in an unequal position when enrolling in school, during further education, when it comes to health care, housing, obtaining personal documents, employment. According to her, the number of complaints to the commissioner is increasing from year to year and among those whose nationality cited as the basis of discrimination there are mostly Roma."¹²

The LGTB community is under attack from all radical right-wing groups as well as the SPC, which publicly promotes its negative stance. Patriarch Porfirije has declared that for Orthodox Christians "the LGTB ideology is unacceptable they ravish our minds and souls".¹³ The LGTB community was also the subject of certain right-wing campaigns. The representatives of the National Gathering coalition, formed by the Dveri and Oathkeepers, repeatedly stated during the campaign that they condemn the LGBT ideology and propaganda".¹⁴

The Law on Same-Sex Unions in Serbia, which has been in the process of adopting the National Strategy for the Prevention of Discrimination (2013–2018) for years, highlights the need for the adoption of the Law on Same-Sex Partnerships, while the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue was supposed to encourage the preparation of the draft until February 2021. Despite the established consensus of civil society organizations and the executive power the adoption of the law was stopped.

¹¹ <https://n1info.rs/vesti/a191972-jankovic-romi-najvise-diskriminisani/>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ <https://www.021.rs/Info/komentari/316702>

¹⁴ <https://beta.rs/content/190063-dveri-protiv-parade-ponosa>

During the latest elections (17 December), numerous denials and manipulations of electoral rights were recorded. YUCOM assessed that the pre-election campaign in Serbia was marked by the violation of freedom of expression and association, as well as the violation of the right to privacy, coupled with the absence of reaction from the institutions that should be control mechanisms in case of violation of voting and human rights related to the campaign. The reports points out that the pre-election period was marked by the “atmosphere of disproportionate responses to criticism directed at political actors in power, not only at representatives of opposition parties, but also at citizens’ associations”.¹⁵ The negative campaign and the violation of freedom of association and expression, which was ongoing during the election campaign, was worrying. It was aimed at intellectuals, including actors, professors and judges, who were part of the ProGlas initiative, whose aim was to invite citizens to go to the polls”.¹⁶

The competent institutions did not react to numerous violations of voter and human rights. The “most visible inactivity was observed in the case of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM) which, according to YUCOM, also remained passive even in the case of objections to the behavior of media during the election campaign”.¹⁷

Bearing in mind the poverty of citizens in Serbia, economic and social rights are increasingly coming into focus. The number of citizens, especially the most vulnerable ones, whose social and economic rights are systematically violated is increasing on a daily basis. More than half of the complaints submitted by citizens to independent bodies such as the Protector of Citizens and the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality refer to economic and social rights. The system of protection of these rights before domestic courts and administrative bodies is ineffective, judgements and

15 <https://www.yucom.org.rs/yucom-krsenje-slobode-izrazavanja-i-udruzivanja-i-povrede-prava-na-privatnost-obelezili-kampanju-2/>

16 Ibid. WH

17 Ibid.

decisions of administrative bodies are delayed for a very long time. The economic crisis and reduced investments in the areas that are important for the realization of economic and social rights have an additional negative impact on this aspect of human rights.

The analysis of the status of economic and social rights in the Republic of Serbia, following the structure of the provisions of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, points to shortcomings in standardization, wrong practice, insufficient protection of vulnerable categories of the population, as well as the total collapse of the standards of enjoying these rights, which leads to a dramatic distortion of the position not only of the most economically vulnerable, but also of the wider strata of the population which are affected by new social policies while at the same time being the victims in the area of work and employment..¹⁸

18 <https://pescanik.net/ekonomska-i-socijalna-prava-u-republici-srbiji/>

II – FOREIGN POLICY: EXPECTATIONS AND REALITY

Russian aggression against Ukraine has accelerated geostrategic realignments, which has also inevitably led to the refocusing of the Western international community on the Western Balkans, primarily Serbia as the key destabilizing factor in the region. The changed international context has also determined the priorities which, among other things, anticipate Serbia's shift away from Russia, namely the neutralization of Russia's influence in the Balkans, and the normalization of relations between Belgrade and Pristina.

However, a more active approach taken by the United States and the European Union towards the Western Balkans did not produce visible results even after two years. Despite all efforts, Serbia still remains the focal point of regional instability. The expectations that it will impose sanctions against Russia (as one of the preconditions set out by the West) have not been fulfilled and there are no indications that this will happen.

It has been precisely this Western policy which has encouraged Russia to radicalize the situation in the region through its exponents. This refers, first of all, to Milorad Dodik, who has additionally strained the relations not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also in the region (Montenegro, Kosovo).

Serbia's cooperation with the East is increasingly intensive, so that the nationalist bloc more and more often openly supports its joining BRICS, while at the same time looking for other non-European partners as well. Serbia has signed the Friendship and Cooperation Agreement with the ASEAN countries.¹⁹ In addition,

19 "Srbija potpisala Ugovor o prijateljstvu i saradnji sa zemljama ASEAN", *Politika*, 5 September 2023.

President Vučić has signed a contract with the United Arab Emirates for the purchase of suicide drones.²⁰

The attitude towards the neighbours has also been radicalized, especially when it comes to Kosovo. In Montenegro, Belgrade acts intensively through the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) and tries to prevent the exclusion of the Democratic Front (a distinctly pro-Serbian and pro-Russian bloc) from the future government. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Milorad Dodik systematically represents the pro-Russian interests (*status quo*) and, together with President Vučić, uses every opportunity to impose the interpretation of the wars of the 1990s according to which the Serbs were the main victims.

Serbia's attitude towards Ukraine is unconvincing, regardless of its support for Ukraine's territorial integrity. With its support it actually "reminds" the West of the "illegal seizure of Kosovo" and raises the question of compensation for its loss (primarily in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro).

In the meantime, Belgrade's attitude towards the Western countries was radicalized. Anti-Americanism has been present for decades and has largely been fuelled by Russia and its media in Serbia. As of recently, negative articles about Germany and, traditionally, the United Kingdom (which "supports Greater Albania") have also started to appear.

The attitude towards Russia has remained unchanged. Serbia refuses to impose sanctions against it, arguing that it has already experienced the effects of such a policy during the 1990s. Serbia also continues to depend on Russian energy products. Due to media spinning, 80 per cent of Serbian citizens support Russia, believing that the war in Ukraine was started by the West. Despite the official commitment to EU membership, the media are primarily anti-Western.

²⁰ <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2023/2/21/vucic-srbija-kupuje-dronove-samoubice-od-emirata>.

The majority of citizens (not only in Serbia) believes that EU membership is a long way off for which the unclear EU enlargement policy is largely responsible.

By its vocation, Serbia belongs to the East, that is, the authoritarian bloc, but actually depends on the West, primarily the EU, due to its real interests and affiliation. However, historically speaking, the Serbian elites have been inclined towards the West only in short intervals and the opposite side has always prevailed, because the line, which also implies the acceptance of liberal values, has never been crossed. This also refers to the current autocratic government in Serbia.

Due to very small changes in Serbia's foreign policy orientation, despite all the measures taken by the West, many actors in the West are increasingly and more frequently criticizing the US and EU policies of pandering to Serbia. During the last few months, all leading media in the world pointed to the criminogeneity of the Serbian political elite, its ties with the Russian mafia and its destabilizing potential in the region. There have been numerous hearings in the Congress, the Senate and the Bundestag, as well as debates in the European Parliament. So far, however, the Western countries' policies towards Serbia have not been changed.

This is why understanding Serbia requires a deep insight into the essence of all decisions made by Vučić and his predecessors. Western politicians will not be able to predict Serbia's political trajectories by using the current approaches.

BELGRADE'S POLICY TOWARDS THE REGION

Belgrade's policy towards its neighbours continues to destabilize the Western Balkans. The Serbian world is a project that is implemented within the scope of various influences in the relevant countries, primarily through the Serbian Orthodox Church and pro-Serbian political parties. Despite the Western monitoring of the regional processes, Belgrade is still viewed as a disruptive

factor that makes this involvement meaningless. This especially refers to the American efforts that have always been the most effective.

President Vučić's strict attention not to cross the boundaries regarding the affection towards the United States and the European Union, so that Russia does not get upset, is also evident these days and allows him to keep a room for manipulation.

When it comes to Kosovo, there have been no significant changes despite all the US efforts. At the same time, the blame for the blockade is shifted to Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti. In Montenegro, faced with increasing pressure from the Quint, Prime Minister Designate Milojko Spajić adheres to the requirements set by the West that the Democratic Front (DF), a pro-Serbian and pro-Russian bloc, cannot be part of the new government. Belgrade is not satisfied with the development of the situation and has tried to push the DF into it by organizing new "litanies" (which have not succeeded) and referring to the electoral will of citizens.

Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine Milorad Dodik has been systematically suspending the authority of the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the Republic of Srpska (RS) and paving the way for its secession. The Serb lawmakers have voted for the suspension of the rulings of the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which some experts interpret as a "legal secession" and the violation of the Dayton Agreement. Numerous anti-constitutional actions of the Republic of Srpska continuously reduce the state functions including the rule of law and security.

Therefore, the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina has reached a critical point despite the sanctions imposed by the West not only against Dodik, but also against other officials of the Republic of Srpska.

Political radicalization in the Republic of Srpska is not free from the influences of Belgrade and Moscow. This is also confirmed by the fact that Dodik and Vučić participate, on an almost daily basis, in joint actions and events in Bosnia and Serbia and especially in those which, based on the interpretations of the wars

of the nineties, consider the Serbs to be the biggest victims and that they waged the war of independence. The effort to reinterpret the wars of the nineties also includes a media offensive about Serb suffering always and everywhere, laying special emphasis on the crimes against Serbs in the Independent State of Croatia (not only in Jasenovac).

In addition, the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Bosnia and Herzegovina declares all foreign policy actions that do not have the support of the Republic of Srpska as an act of hostility. The politics of the Republic of Srpska is subordinated to the Russian vision of global politics. Russian Ambassador Kalabukhov has particularly criticized two members of the State Presidency (Željko Komšić and Denis Bećirović) for visiting Ukraine.

Despite numerous statements issued by the Western community in support of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, there has been no more comprehensive action that will stand in the way of the formation of the pro-Russian Dodik-Orban-Vučić axis which, under the given circumstances, can have an important influence on the further dynamics in the Western Balkans.

SERBIA'S POLICY TOWARDS UKRAINE AND RUSSIA

Serbia has refused to participate in all EU packages of sanctions against Russia, continuing to pursue its own interests in the region with less and less responsibility and instigate conflicts beyond its borders in order to divert attention from discontent at home, being sure that the West will not resent it.

Vučić has justified the decision not to impose sanctions against Russia by the fact that it was “the only country that did not impose sanctions against us in the nineties”.

Such a stance is illustrated by the Serbian President's meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in Athens, where he signed a joint declaration, and by the Prime Minister's address at

the Crimean Platform Summit. As President Vučić informed the public, during the debate on the content of the Athens Declaration, he allegedly insisted on the removal of the parts being contrary to the interests of Serbia and Russia, including the imposition of sanctions against Russia and war crimes.²¹ The same applies to the news that Serbia has joined the Crimean Platform, that is, the Ukrainian Government's initiative to help with the liberation and reincorporation of Crimea. The truthfulness of this information was rejected by Ivica Dačić on Pink TV. As he pointed out, the Platform "is beyond the framework that is acceptable to us".²² Immediately thereafter, he met with the Russian Ambassador in Belgrade and announced that he "must visit Moscow" before the end of the year.²³

Despite Serbia's constant repetition of its support for Ukraine's territorial integrity, none of its officials attended the celebration of the Independence Day of Ukraine at Trg Republike in Belgrade.

Despite the EU efforts to support Serbia's energy transition, it remains largely dependent on Russia, since a majority stake in its oil company has been to Gazprom.

In September 2022, Ministers Nikola Selaković and Sergey Lavrov signed the Consultation Plan between the Russian and Serbian Ministries of Foreign Affairs for the next two years during the session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York. The Western countries reacted to this, while the American Ambassador in Belgrade, Christopher Hill, said: "I saw the plan, there's not much in it. The question is why Russia wanted this and obviously Russia wanted a plan to justify its war in Ukraine."²⁴

21 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/srpska-spoljna-politika-korak-napred-nazad-dva-ukrajina-jedino-tamari-vucic-moze-biti-zahvalna/>

22 Ibid.

23 <https://n1info.rs/vesti/ivica-dacic-o-poseti-rusiji-moracu-da-odem-do-kraja-godine/>

24 <https://www.021.rs/story/Info/Srbija/318188/Hil-Niceg-posebnog-u-sporazumu-koji-su-potpisali-Selakovic-i-Lavrov-ali-ocigledna-je-namera-Rusije.html>

According to Josep Borrell, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Serbia has failed to comply with the EU Council's two decisions on the restrictive measures relating to the sanctions against Russia. This refers to the EU Council's decision (CFSP) 2023/1517 of 20 July, which prolongs the sectoral restrictive measures for six months, until 31 January 2024, due to Russia's actions that destabilize the situation in Ukraine. It has also failed to comply with the EU Council's decision (CFSP) 2023/1566 of 28 July adding seven individuals and five entities to its sanctions list due to their undermining or endangering Ukraine's territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence. Serbia is the only EU membership candidate country in the Western Balkans which has not complied with these two decisions.²⁵

Although the United States and the European Union tolerate Belgrade's behaviour in the expectation of a turnabout, this has not yet happened. The analysts close to the Serbian government, such as Vuk Velebit, argue that the Serbian-Russian relations have been spiralling downward "for several years already".²⁶ He also points out that "the official relations are not at the level they used to be" and that the Russian print media write negatively about Aleksandar Vučić and the Serbian Government. He points out that since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, Serbia's position has been changing and the critical assessment of Serbian-Russian relations has started to appear not only in tabloids, but also in mainstream media.²⁷

25 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/srbija-se-opet-nije-uskladila-sa-novim-odlukama-saveta-eu-o-restriktivnim-merama-zbog-ukrajine/>

26 <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/balkan-srbija-rusija-sad-rat-ukrajina-rusija-spoljna-politika-tribina-libek/6975787.html>

27 Ibid.

SERBIAN MEDIA AND THEIR ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE WEST AND THE EAST

If the media are viewed as a policy change indicator, it can be stated that there is still no change when it comes to Russia. The Report on Media Monitoring by the non-governmental organization CRTA shows that such a change has not yet happened. According to this report, a positive tone is prevalent even when Russia is mentioned in the context of the crises with which it is associated, thus outweighing the negative views. A positive tone is also noticeable when the most dominant topics and subtopics are in question – the war in Ukraine, Kosovo, energy and economy. Apart from Russia, China is also positively presented in dealing with these topics. Although it is less visible in media, China is the foreign actor that is predominantly presented in a positive light.²⁸

Russia and the actors associated with Russia have a rather unique position in the Serbian media. This is supported by the data showing that Russia is dominant in the media as it was covered more than 16,000 times during the past 12 months. Television channels, which are still the most influential and most used medium of communication, accounted for the highest share of pro-Russian and anti-Western media reports. Consequently, the media with a larger number of mentions as well as the fact that they predominantly present Russia in a positive light, foster closeness with Russia.²⁹

The CRTA report points to the events that have prompted the more drastic presentations of foreign actors. The positive coverage of Russia reached its peak after its annexation of four Ukrainian territories in September 2022 and the meeting between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin in March 2023. Similarly, during the period

²⁸ <https://crt.rs/crta-monitoring-medija-prica-protiv-zapadne-strane-monitoring-stranog-uticaja-jul-2022-jun-2023/>

²⁹ <https://crt.rs/crta-monitoring-medija-prica-protiv-zapadne-strane-monitoring-stranog-uticaja-jul-2022-jun-2023/>

from February to April 2023, China was most positively presented due to its peace initiative for Ukraine.³⁰ Although anti-Russian reporting increased during 2022, pro-Russian reporting strongly exceeds the more critical portrayals of Russian actors. Even after the beginning of the war in Ukraine, Russia is still mostly favourably viewed.³¹

Although the media reporting on the EU and the USA is mostly neutral, negative reports are more frequent than positive ones. As for the EU, it received the most negative media coverage in October 2022, especially due to the new pressures associated with the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue and alleged energy crisis in the EU, which was presented in the media as the result of sanctions against Russia. As for the United States, the most negative views were recorded in March and April 2023, in the light of the ongoing war in Ukraine and international politics in general and, to a lesser degree, with respect to the Serbian internal policy.³²

Western actors are predominantly concerned about the Kosovo problem. The most watched television channels with nationwide coverage present the West most negatively. For example, the negative TV coverage of the EU is almost nine times more frequent than the positive one. TV channels, online portals and daily newspapers contribute to the fostering of negative feelings and animosity towards the West.³³

One of the most watched television channels, TV Pink, has allegedly reoriented itself towards the promotion of the West. However, everything has come down to the statements by its owner, Željko Mitrović, which is not observed, for example, in daily reporting.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² <https://cрта.rs/cрта-monitoring-medija-prica-protiv-zapadne-strane-monitoring-stranog-uticaja-jul-2022-jun-2023/>

³³ <https://cрта.rs/cрта-monitoring-medija-prica-protiv-zapadne-strane-monitoring-stranog-uticaja-jul-2022-jun-2023/>

SERBIA'S POLICY TOWARDS THE WEST

Serbia's attitude towards the West is two-faced. On the one hand, it emphasizes its commitment to European integration and, on the other hand, it lags behind in aligning its foreign and security policy with the European Union in comparison to other candidate countries from the Western Balkans. The analysis of the ISAC Fund shows that in the first half of 2023 Serbia had a compliance rate of 52 percent, while Montenegro, North Macedonia and Albania fully complied with the EU. In contrast to these countries, during the mentioned period, Serbia aligned with only 34 of the EU's 65 declarations and restrictive measures.³⁴

Igor Novaković (ISAC Fund) believes that “this position will create a problem over a long term, because it promotes a negative image of Serbia in a large number of EU member countries”.³⁵ Emmanuel Joffre, head of the EU Delegation to Serbia, said that, after Russian aggression, foreign policy became increasingly more important and that they wish to count on Serbia as a sincere partner. Therefore, it is expected from it to progressively align its foreign policy with the EU. Foreign policy alignment has been part of the negotiating network since day one and is even more important today.³⁶

Serbia's balancing has already been met with a sharp reaction from the West. So, Thijs Reuten, a member of the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament, has asked the European Commission to explain “its inexplicable policy” towards Serbia and has stated that President Vučić uses the EU as a cash machine.³⁷

34 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-eu-spoljna-politika/32544201.html>

35 Ibid.

36 <https://beta.rs/content/185356-zofre-eu-nije-bankomat-vec-najveca-mogucnost-za-srbiju>

37 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-koristi-eu-kao-bankomat-evroposlanik-strazi-od-ek-da-objasni-nerazumljivu-politiku-prema-srbiji/>

All the efforts of the EU (Miroslav Lajčák) to encourage the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue have failed. Serbia has not yet signed the Brussels and Ohrid Agreements, agreed upon in 2023, nor is it working on their implementation. These agreements would not have been possible without the presence of a US representative.

The largest investor in Serbia is the EU and Germany as an individual country. During the past year, Serbia received the largest foreign direct investment – more than 4 billion euros. According to the National Bank of Serbia, one third of this investment made during nine months of 2022 came from the European Union. Over the past 10 years, EU companies have been the leading investors in Serbia with the share of 68 per cent.³⁸

Serbia is the beneficiary of IPA funds and numerous other sources of finance. Thus, it received 160 million euros from the EU in order to overcome the energy crisis. According to Tanja Mišćević, Minister of European Integration, Serbia is now using the third generation of the Instruments for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA 3) and that, as a candidate country, it was granted the assistance of 1.4 billion euros during the period 2021–2027.³⁹

Despite all indicators that the West is helping Serbia the most, the CRTA Report on Media Monitoring shows that the Serbian media space is unfavourably inclined towards the European Union, the United States and NATO. Anti-Western rhetoric is increasingly pervading public discourse. The European Union and the United States receive more media attention, which is mostly negative. NATO is predominantly presented in a negative light.⁴⁰

38 <https://www.rts.rs/lat/vesti/srbija-danas/5188119/kompanije-iz-eu-najveci-investitori-u-srbiji-.html>

39 <https://europeanwesternbalkans.rs/miscevic-srbija-za-sedam-godina-dobija-14-milijarde-iz-ipa-3-fondova/>

40 <https://cрта.rs/cрта-monitoring-medija-prica-protiv-zapadne-strane-monitoring-stranog-uticaja-jul-2022-jun-2023/>

HOW REALISTIC IS EU MEMBERSHIP?

It is possible to mobilize the Serbian public for EU membership and its values only by coming up with a clearer and more precise EU offer concerning enlargement policy. Until now, this policy has been fluid and lacked clear goals. The facts that Albania, North Macedonia and Montenegro have become NATO members and that the KFOR is present in Kosovo, have provided the illusion of security, which has also contributed to the EU's unconvincing enlargement policy.

However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has put enlargement back on the European agenda for existential security reasons. The Athens summit, which was held in August, certainly hinted at such considerations, although concrete solutions were avoided. Many questions remain for the EU to answer in the coming months and years.

After the Athens summit, High Representative Josep Borrell stated that the EU should prepare itself for a new enlargement, implying the admission of another 10 states and that it should negotiate a time frame for their entry in order to speed up changes".⁴¹ The President of the European Council, Charles Michel, also actualized the enlargement issue, stating that the EU should be ready for enlargement by 2030.⁴²

Amid a series of statements about the need for EU enlargement, President Macron's statement is also indicative. According to him, the EU needs to reform itself if it wants to integrate new nations and build consensus with more than 30 member countries. He has emphasized: "We'll need audacity to accept more integration in some areas and maybe even a multi-speed Europe".⁴³

41 <https://www.rtrs.tv/vijesti/vijest.php?id=524849>

42 <https://dnevnievropskiservis.rs/7-eu-i-zapadni-balkan/36-vesti/18876-gardijan-proirenje-eu-bilo-kliniki-mrtvo-a-sada-meu-glavnim-temama-za-lidere>

43 <https://n1info.ba/svijet/macron-eu-treba-da-se-reformise-ako-zeli-da-integrise-nove-nacije/>

President Macron has even threatened with the introduction of a visa regime in case of the failure of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue.

Hesitations, which reflect both the real relations and problems within the EU, are used by the anti-Western bloc which claims that “the illusion of the so-called European path is maintained by media, but objectively one cannot expect any concrete decision at the EU summits at the official level”.⁴⁴ Journalist Siniša Ljepojević said for *Russia Today* that 20 years ago there might have been some enthusiasm in the European Union, but in the meantime the EU “has negatively transformed itself to such an extent in the process of destruction that there is no one left to make decisions”.⁴⁵ It is noted that, as an integration, the EU is in a deep crisis and that the situation in Ukraine has called its existence into question, because officials “say all sorts of things but, in essence, they no longer know what to do”.⁴⁶ These and similar assessments are receptive and skillfully presented in the media on a daily basis.

The pro-European bloc also doubts that Serbia will become part of the EU in the near future. Some, like journalist Boško Jakšić, believe that this is so because Serbia like this does not deserve to be in the European Union and that the story about EU enlargement is meaningless if there are no reforms, while the government does nothing to prepare Serbia for the moment of its joining the EU.⁴⁷ Others believe that “the European Union must not shy away from this part of Europe, because this will create a huge space for numerous other problems, especially security ones”.⁴⁸

44 <https://lat.rt.rs/srbija-i-balkan/47254-evropska-unija-eu-srbija-zapadni-balkan/>

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/jaksic-ovakva-srbija-ne-zasluzuje-da-bude-u-evropskoj-uniji/>

48 Ibid.

THE CRITICISM OF WESTERN POLICY TOWARDS SERBIA

Although it is declaratively committed to EU membership, since the beginning of the war in Ukraine Serbia has not shown a readiness to impose sanctions on Russia and recognize the independence of Kosovo, which are the two main priorities for the West.

The manipulative behaviour of President Vučić is increasingly irritating the Western public and politicians and there are more and more calls for changing the policy towards Serbia. One of the first articles to deal with the criminal nature of the Serbian regime appeared in *The New York Times*. It was followed by *Deutsche Welle*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Guardian* and CNN. All texts pointed to the authoritarianism of the Belgrade regime, criminogeneity of the Serbian political elite as well as its destabilizing potential in the region. CNN was the most precise in its criticism, emphasizing that “The West’s ‘see no evil’ approach to Serbia’s Vučić risks destabilizing the Balkans”.⁴⁹

The United States House Committee on Foreign Affairs has expressed serious concern regarding the situation in the Balkans. One after the other, the members of the Committee have presented various problems. They have expressed concern over the growing ethnic tensions and instability, Russian malign influence, Chinese influence, non-fulfilment of the Serbia-Kosovo agreement, non-implementation of judicial decisions, secessionist movements in Bosnia and Herzegovina, endemic corruption and weak economies. The withdrawal of Serbs from Kosovo institutions and their boycott of local elections (despite Belgrade’s promise to the United States that they would participate), as well as the conflict of Serbs with KFOR are only some issues that have been raised. The anti-Dayton behaviour of Milorad Dodik has also been criticized and it has been pointed to the need for the imposition of EU sanctions against Dodik and the strengthening of the EUFOR forces.

49 <https://www.danas.rs/svet/zapad-zlo-vucic-balkan-cnn/>

Thereafter, 56 high parliamentarians from Europe and the United States Congress and Senate signed the letter demanding the change of a “soft policy” towards Serbia with respect to Kosovo. They want a dramatic change in the current approach towards Serbia. It is also stated that Kosovo is a sovereign and functional democracy and that this fact should be a basis for the future common policy in the current crisis. It has been emphasized that Serbia’s attempts to interfere with the democratic elections in Kosovo should be criticized as foreign interference and certain measures should be applied if they continue to do this... The diplomacy of deterrence should be applied if the crisis is to be resolved.⁵⁰

So far, however, there has been no indication that the policy is changing along those lines. Edward Joseph, a professor at the Johns Hopkins University and connoisseur of the situation in the Balkans, told CNN that the “see no evil” approach to Vučić’s regime may be starting to crack. “The question here is: Who in the Biden Administration still believes that Vučić is this partner.”⁵¹ He has pointed to the sanctioning of Aleksandar Vulin, Director of Serbia’s Security Information Agency, as an evidence that the Biden Administration “is no longer captive to fear and illusion about Vučić”.⁵²

The US policy starts from the fact that Serbia is the central country in the Western Balkans and that its goals, primarily the stabilization of the Balkans, can be achieved only with it. It also starts from the fact that Vučić has no alternative in the country, and hence the expectation that they can attract Serbia to Euro-Atlantic integration by working with him. That policy has been carried out for more than a decade. Apart from the United States, this approach has also been supported by the EU, especially Germany which has invested the most in Serbia.

50 <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/pismo-zaostravanje-politke-zapada-prema-srbiji-menendez-rot/7214653.html>

51 <https://www.danas.rs/svet/cnn-zapad-zmuri-dok-vucic-destabilizuje-balkan/>

52 <https://www.danas.rs/svet/cnn-zapad-zmuri-dok-vucic-destabilizuje-balkan/>

The United States have imposed sanctions against Aleksandar Vulin, head of Serbia's intelligence service (BIA), on whose removal they have insisted and with whom they have not cooperated so far. President Vučić keeps postponing this decision and there is a speculation that he will be replaced by Miloš Đurić, the current Ambassador of Serbia in Washington, who is loyal to Vučić like Vulin.⁵³ The statement by Defence Minister Miloš Vučević that North Macedonia and Montenegro "have made a mistake by recognizing Kosovo, that it will backfire on them and that they have opened Pandora's box",⁵⁴ has caused stormy reactions in the region. On this occasion, however, the US Ambassador said that he does not see Vučević's statement as an attempt to destabilize the region and that he does not think that he wanted to be understood that way.⁵⁵

Ambassador Hill consistently repeats the American position that everyone should impose the sanctions against Russia, especially the countries aspiring to join the EU. The problem is that Serbia has so far not shown that it really wants it.

53 <https://direktno.rs/politika/487761/marko-djuric-aleksandar-vulin-bia.html>

54 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/vucevic-crna-gora-makedonija-priznanje-kosova/32555915.html>

55 <https://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/hil-ne-vidim-izjavu-vucevica-kao-pokusaj-destabilizacije-regiona-ne-mislim-da-je-htio-da-ga-tako-razumiju>

III – SERBIA: STATE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

Identity politics already became relevant in the former Yugoslavia in the 1980s, in the new historical circumstances created by the country's deep political crisis that ultimately led to its brutal breakup. The homogenization of the Serbian people already began at that time, primarily due to the Kosovo problem and alleged endangerment of the Serbian people in Yugoslavia. As stated by Ivan Čolović, it was demanded that the Serbs return to their authentic identity, become nationally aware and be “what they are”, so that they can gather as a homogeneous and strong national community, freed from the illusory communist ideology of Yugoslav brotherhood and unity, and capable of creating a new Serbia, stronger and bigger than the existing one, at the time of the breakup of Yugoslavia.⁵⁶

The breakup of Yugoslavia was accompanied by the rise of nationalism and the affirmation of ethno-national identities. As the new states were created, there was a tendency to define citizenship and belonging in ethno-national terms, often tied to religion. Identity politics played a significant role in shaping the political landscape of the region. Thus, it is deeply associated with the issues of ethnicity, religion and historical narratives.

Serbia has embarked on the construction of a new identity as an independent state following the separation of Montenegro.. That process intensified with the arrival of the SNS (Serbian Progressive Party) to power and was established on anti-communism., anti-Yugoslav and anti anti-fascist mantra which also led to the

⁵⁶ Ivan Čolović, *Rastanak s identitetom*, Biblioteka XX vek, Belgrade 2014.

promotion of extremist ideologies existing before and during the Second World War. Ifirst of all, it is about the return of Chetnikism as the dominant ideology, which now shapes the value system and culture of remembrance, as well as the revision of history. Public opinion is shaped by the thesis about the endangerment of Serbs and their deprivation in both Yugoslavias, as well as the promotion of Russia as a sincere protector of the Serbian people.

The Orthodox Church (SPC) acts on the social and political scene as an extremely active factor and the generator of Serbia's national development. These tendencies (ethno-clericalist and ethno-totalitarian) are civilizationally downgrading the Serbian society and leading to its anomie. This means a return to the tribal determination of the nation, which is contrary to the liberal democratic values – an open society, the rule of law, pluralism and respect for human rights and freedom. Such a view of the nation, society and community generates tension, the denial of the “other” and even conflicts.

Such a self-definition of the nation, coupled with continuous homogenization, is a prerequisite for keeping the Serbian question open. The leading Serbian elite believes that it will be closed only by “Serbian liberation and national unification” and not by inclusion in Euro-Atlantic integration or some surrogate creation, such as the so-called “region”.

After the wars, when the “Serbian territories” were delineated (primarily Northern Kosovo, the Republic of Srpska and Montenegro), the identity was systematically built as part of cultural politics and revisionism, which should historically prove how much the Serbian people were victims in both Yugoslavias and, at the same time, amnesty them from the responsibility for all crimes, especially those committed during the 1990s.

This is why all efforts to reform and Europeanize Serbia have been unsuccessful. Because democracy can be introduced more or less quickly, while the culture of liberalism needs generations for its development, because it will not emerge spontaneously by itself. In Serbia, as in most post-socialist countries, roads, stadiums,

airports and highways have been modernized, but not their societies. This would require the enlightenment of the population and identity formation based on completely different premises. Primarily on the civic values that have no primacy and are not central to the Serbian political elite. After 1989, democracy was introduced at the level of procedures and not, as Vaclav Havel put it, “at the level of souls and hearts.”

IDENTITY POLITICS AFTER THE WARS OF THE NINETIES

In his book “The Geopolitics of Emotion”, Dominique Moisi, a French political scientist and author, concludes that, after the 20th century was the “century of ideology” and “American century”, the 21st century will be the “Asian century” and the “century of identity”. He also points out that, in a transition from ideology to identity, in both the West and the East, emotions become more important than ever in shaping the worldview.⁵⁷ Bearing in mind the disorderly state of the world, dominance of geostrategic criteria and changes in the world paradigm, this thesis is continuously gaining importance.

The building or upgrading (depending on the circumstances) of state and national identity is not only linked to the territory, but also to the content, which also implies certain values that should ensure the citizens’ stability and economic and social development.

However, Serbia opted for building a new identity of the state and society which it perceives, as pointed out by German historian Holm Sundhaussen, as something “given in advance and obvious, biologically and genetically immutable, and cannot be chosen.” By nature, such a state and society tend towards intolerance, aggressiveness and conflicts.

57 Dominik Mojsi, *Geopolitika emocija*, Clio, Belgrade 2012.

As pointed out by Vladimir Kolarić, an art and culture theorist, the Serbian cultural, civilizational, national and religious identity is based on the established understanding of the country's position as being "between East and West"... In the surrounding of a permanent identity threat, Serbia defines its religious identity by means of the national one and its national identity by means of the religious one. In the face of an "Islamic threat it ties its Christian Orthodox identity to Europe, while in the face of the "threat" of the West, it ties it to the Orthodox cultural and civilizational circle led by Russia.⁵⁸ Kolarić further points out that "19th century Serbia had its head turned to the West and its heart to Russia. At the sensory-instinctive level there is still a strong influence of the Turkish Orient."⁵⁹

After the wars of the nineties, Serbia embarked on the process of creating a new identity, based on the new premises and traumas caused by those wars, primarily due to its defeats in the wars against Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. Serbia did not accept the new reality in the region and tries to revise its defeats under the "Serbian World" project. Just this new identity is problematic for several reasons. The legacy of Yugoslavia is negated and its history is "nationalized", which is also done by the other newly created states. Such a revision is based on myths and mostly on radical right-wing ideologies. Strong anti-communism negates all past experience, diminishes the value system and mocks all achievements of that period, while at the same time serving to legitimize the new political elites.

The post-war building of Serbian identity additionally reaffirms the "magnificent past", that is, the Middle Ages (Dušan's empire), endangerment of the Serbian people throughout the 20th century, Orthodoxy, denial of responsibility for the wars of the nineties, anti-Westernism, anti-communism and anti-Yugoslavism.

58 <https://standard.rs/2019/10/23/izmedju-istoka-i-zapada-iskustvo-srbije/>

59 Ibid.

The additional element is Russophilism aiming to affirm the historical role of Russia as the protector of the Serbian people.

All this was accompanied by the change of the state symbols (coat-of-arms, flag, anthem), removal of a five-pointed star from the City Assembly of Belgrade and replaced by an eagle with spread wings. This was symbolically done by Zoran Đinđić as the Mayor in 1997. Street names are changed in all Serbian cities. They mostly refer to the persons and events from the First World War and Serbian medieval state. Thus, the Day of Serbian Unity, Freedom and Flag, marking the breakthrough of the Salonika front (on 15 September) has recently been introduced. The Armistice Day marking the end of the First World War (11 November) has also been introduced. The new symbols refer to the entire Serbian people and the need for its unity and unification at some time in the future. Thus, Serbia presents itself as an unfinished state by its own choice because it still does not recognize the internationally recognized borders in the region.

REVISIONISM AND THE CREATION OF A NARRATIVE ABOUT "SERBIA'S INNOCENCE"

The revisionist narratives in Serbia try to diminish its role in the wars of the 1990s and its responsibility for them as well as to challenge the categorization of certain events, primarily the war crimes and responsibility of Serbian political and military leaders for them. The revision aims to lay the foundation for a new identity.

The defeats suffered by the Serbian people, as expressed by the main national ideologist Dobrica Ćosić, "are not final, bearing in mind some historical victories such as the Republic of Srpska". That is why Euro-Atlantic integration is viewed as "the closing of the chapter concerning the national question" and putting an end to the revision of borders.

A series of books has been published with the aim to deny Serbian hegemonism and the Greater Serbia project. However, most

of them reveal the misunderstanding of the creators of the processes leading to the breakup of Yugoslavia and therefore justify that project.

In the process of building a new national and state identity, Serbia relativizes its responsibility for the brutal breakup of Yugoslavia as well as its frustration with the defeats and insists on a fairly “distributed burden of guilt”. The theory about Serbia’s “clean hands” is also dangerous, because it feeds and encourages the ambitions based on the expectations that the international context will change and be beneficial for Serbia.

The theory about the “surrounding” of Serbia suggests the existence of constant threats from external enemies. The wars of the nineties also relied on this theory and were presented as “preventive self-defence”. It is implied that everyone is against the Serbian people, even against the state that provokes wars.

The disastrous consequences of the war policy have not become the topic of internal dialogue, although they are still at the very centre of all problems plaguing Serbia today. The idea about “war culprits” is still being elaborated. This idea stands in the way of an open discussion about the causes of the war and Serbia’s politics before and during the war.

Serbia has not distanced itself from the war policy of Dobrica Ćosić. Slobodan Milošević and other architects of that disastrous project. For many of them, Milošević is increasingly becoming a symbol of resistance to the imperial repression of nations and states. With the argument that his plan “has not been so bad and unrealistic – on the contrary”, he is only blamed for the way of its implementation, while his resistance to NATO is considered his greatest triumph.

POST-TRUTH

The efforts of a part of the society to look objectively at the 1990s and Serbia's role and responsibility for war crimes are met with great resistance from virtually all elites that are focused on the so-called post-truth with which they fill textbooks, the public and media sphere, and politics of remembrance.

Despite the abundance of the facts from the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), hereinafter referred to as the Hague Tribunal, and the International Court of Justice (ICJ), as well as numerous testimonies, documents... Serbia denies that it has been involved in the war and thus responsible for the war crimes.

Most verdicts given by the Hague Tribunal refer to Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially the genocide in Srebrenica, and clearly document the responsibility of the Serbian side. The legacy of the ICTY in Serbia has been marginalized and systematically denied. At the same time, the convicted war criminals are glorified after serving their sentences. They are given a lot of public and media attention as well as the opportunity to give their interpretation of the wars on the territory of Yugoslavia almost every day. This has been adopted as the official narrative on the basis of which the new generations are educated. Murals, series, books, studies, films and TV shows affirm, on a daily basis, the interpretation that the western republics (Slovenia and Croatia), supported by the West, are the culprits for the wars. In the current international context, everything is confined to the thesis that the West prevents the "unification of the Serbian lands" because "Serbs are little Russians".

The genocide in Srebrenica, when more than 8,000 Muslim men and boys were executed in 1995, is a special story over which Serbian revisionists argue. The Serbian narrative about Srebrenica focuses on the denial of genocide insisting that it was a military conflict within a civil war. Although it is acknowledged that massacres and crimes did take place, it is claimed that they were not part of a systematic plan to exterminate Bosniaks, but rather

a consequence of the conflict. This narrative is in conflict with the final judgments of international courts. Israeli historian Gideon Greif, who headed the International Commission of Inquiry on the Sufferings of All Peoples in the Srebrenica Region Between 1992 and 1995 (formed by the Government of the B&H entity Republic of Srpska), claims that no more than 3,500 Bosniaks and 2,000 Serbs were killed in Srebrenica. According to the report, there was no genocide.⁶⁰ This report has been criticized by the international professional public.⁶¹ However, the opinion of the Serbian public that genocide had not taken place in Srebrenica has been further strengthened.

KOSOVO – A FROZEN CONFLICT

The question of Kosovo is still a frozen conflict despite the attempts of the EU and the US to put an end to it within the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue. While a large number of countries (about 100) and international organizations recognize Kosovo as an independent state, Serbia does not. The revisionist narratives in Serbia challenge the legitimacy of Kosovo's independence, referring to international law and the inviolability of borders. Radicalization with respect to this issue was intensified after Russia's deep infiltration into the Western Balkans, primarily into Serbia and the Republic of Srpska as early as 2013–2014. That is when the emphatic reminder of NATO intervention (almost every day) and Security Council (SC) Resolution 1244 began. This is mostly initiated by Moscow through its media (Sputnik and Russia Today; Sputnik's radio programme is broadcast on Radio Belgrade at 5.30 p.m. every day, while on Studio B radio it constitutes almost half of the programme) which are widely quoted in Serbian media, especially those under state control. A large part of the academic community and the SPC believes

60 <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/teme/2022/1/19/greif-priznaje-u-srebrenici-ubijeno-oko-8-000-ljudi>.

61 Germany has withdrawn its decision to honour Israeli historian Gideon Greif with the one of the country's highest decoration.

that Serbia is faced with a big challenge in connection with Kosovo's independence and advocates the keeping of the problem in a state of frozen conflict.⁶² At the same time, they believe that the "Serbian plan" must not be abandoned and that the demonization of "our previous national programmes – from the Načertanije to the SANU Memorandum – must be prevented".⁶³ In essence, this means, as pointed out by historian Aleksandar Raković, that "the Republic of Serbia, the Republic of Srpska and Montenegro should unite into a single Serbian state".⁶⁴

THE DENIAL OF MONTENEGRIN IDENTITY

Montenegro is of particular importance when it comes to Serbia's geopolitical ambitions and, in that sense, it is treated as an "internal issue". Serbia's strategic interest is access to the Adriatic Sea and the word "Montenegrin" is treated as a geographical term. Serbian strategists believe that independence has been encouraged by "an impulse coming from outside".

The Serbian presence in Montenegro is aggressive, which clearly points to the importance that Serbia attaches to it. As religion is an important identity factor, especially in Orthodox countries, the autocephalous Montenegrin Orthodox Church (CPC) is perceived as an attack on the "cultural and religious hearth of Montenegrism which lies in Serbdom". The Montenegrin Orthodox Church is treated as a political or nongovernmental organization, while the introduction of the Montenegrin language into official use is treated as an additional blow to Serbdom. The autocephaly of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church will represent the completion of the Montenegrin statehood process and, in this sense, the church issue is the only one left open among the identity issues.

62 Slobodan Erić, "Nema predaje Kosova ni sankcija Rusiji", *Pečat*, 11 October 2023.

63 Ibid.

64 Aleksandar Raković's interview, "Nesalomivi Srbi", *Pečat*, 11 October 2023.

In the elections held in 2020, the pro-Serbian and pro-Russian bloc came out as a winner with the wholehearted help of the Serbian Orthodox Church and Belgrade, primarily due to the Law on Religious Freedoms and Religious Communities.

During the last three years, a special attack on the identity of Montenegro was launched. In this sense, Belgrade managed to destabilize and polarize the Montenegrin society through media, cultural and educational policies.

A very intensive campaign, which is carried by the Belgrade media and all political actors, especially the SPC, as well as the calls on Montenegrins to declare themselves as Serbs in the upcoming census, is underway.

During his recent visit to Montenegro, Patriarch Porfirije⁶⁵ told its citizens that he felt the need to support them to resolutely express “their identity as the believers of the Serbian Orthodox Church, speakers of the Serbian language and glorious members of the Serbian people”.⁶⁶

AMBIVALENCE TOWARDS EUROPE AND WEST

After 5 October 2000, Serbia failed to consolidate itself as a modern and democratic state. Nationalism is still its dominant ideology, while the liberal values are perceived as a threat to Serbian identity and culture.

Since 2000, Serbia's pro-European orientation has never been formally questioned and during the first years of its transition the majority of citizens supported this orientation. In recent years,

⁶⁵ Since his election as the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church in February 2021, Porfirije has visited Montenegro at least five times. On the occasion of his visit at the end of August 2022, the municipal services in Herceg Novi were engaged in putting up Serbian tricolours and banners about Serbian Boka.

⁶⁶ <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/podgorica-patrijarh-spc-porfirije/32636176.html>

however, support in favour of EU accession among Serbian citizens has been dwindling.

With the coming to power of the Serbian Progressive Party, which has close historical ties with Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church, Serbia's turn to Russia was simultaneously accompanied by its moving away from European integration.

In the meantime, the international circumstances changed and the West lost its potential to exert influence not only on the Serbian elite, but also on the elites in the region. In its latest confrontation with the United States, Russia skillfully manipulates their foreign policy failures and promotes the interpretation that the West is mostly to blame for the breakup of Yugoslavia. With such an interpretation of the breakup of Yugoslavia and the ensuing wars, Serbia is granted an amnesty for its responsibility and is presented as the sole victim of all wars fought in the 19th and 20th centuries.

One of the theses used against the West is that it wishes the final spiritual and moral destruction of the Serbs as a nation. This is supported by the West's insistence on Serbia's distancing from Milošević's politics and assuming the responsibility for the wars of the nineties. All this is interpreted as "imposing the identity of criminals which will, once accepted by us, contaminate all historical, cultural and traditional models of the Serbian people".⁶⁷

NATO intervention is most often used as an argument against the West, but it is also mentioned that "Serbia resisted the world's largest army for 77 days" and that, as Nebojša Katić points out, 'Serbia did not only defend its right to exist as an independent state. It did not only defend its honour and dignity, but also defended the honour, dignity and memory of millions of its ancestors who did not think that sacrifice is absurd and did not hold on to realpolitik calculations'.⁶⁸

67 <https://standard.rs/2023/04/06/cija-je-srbija/>

68 <https://standard.rs/2019/04/02/prosveceni-srbi-i-smisao-istorije/>

THE SPC AND VALUE SHAPING

The theological shaping of the public sphere in Serbia began after 2000, when Orthodoxy with political pretensions began to shape the public, that is social sphere. The secular values of civic society – democracy, civil society, pluralistic discourse, secular and religious tolerance and individual human rights – were rejected.

During the 1990s, the SPC was dominated by the Saint Sava ideology. The syntagm of that ideology is – one nation with one religion in one state. The majority of right-wing groups and intellectuals advocate the “Saint Sava identity of the Serbian people”, as the support on which “all victories and hopes for the Serbia’s recovery are based”. They strongly oppose the reforms under the pretext that they destroy the Serbian identity.

An important role in the creation of a new identity is also played by Russia whose presence on the cultural and political scene fuels the Serbian frustration and the thesis that Yugoslavia was a Serbian delusion. The same goes for the thesis about artificially created nations such as, for example, Macedonians, Bosniaks and Montenegrins. At the same time, the influential pro-Russian conservative bloc strengthens the Russian component in the Serbian identity or, in other words, contributes to the “Russification of the Serbian nation” with the thesis about the superiority of the Orthodox civilization, Byzantine heritage, Slavism and mutual historical assistance.

ANTI-YUGOSLAVISM

In Serbia, the breakup of Yugoslavia is perceived, as emphasized by Vladislav Obrenović, a political scientist and contributor to the magazine *Identitet*, as a painful fact that has broken the Serbian illusions about Yugoslavia and joint life of South Slavs. Because after one hundred years the results of great victories have

melted away. The big illusion paid dearly by the Serbian people has disappeared.⁶⁹

Disappointment, which is primarily due to the loss of the territories and dominance, is also reflected in the cultural policy that plays a crucial role in profiling a new identity by praising the “glorious past” (series and films). At the same time, historians diligently fabricate books and publications that amnesty Serbia from any responsibility and are confined to the thesis that the West has demonized Serbs because they are “little Russians”.

Yugoslavia, that is, anti-Yugoslavism became the focal point in profiling a new identity. Anti-fascism, as one of the basic values of Yugoslav socialism, also came under attack as the Chetnik movement rose to the level of the second anti-fascist movement from the right in Serbia. The wars of the nineties were based on the Chetnik ideology and the programme of “homogeneous Serbia”.

Boris Tadić (Democratic Party) and Ivo Dačić (Socialist Party of Serbia) signed the declaration on a political reconciliation between Chetniks and Partisans (2008). According to Tadić, the signing of this declaration was a step towards national reconciliation as well as a message for the international community that Serbia left behind the time of conflicts and confrontations, and entered a new political era. However, the Chetnik movement turned into the dominant antifascist movement, which is supported by various productions – series, films, books and the like. The last in the series are the film “The Heroes of Halyard”, a celebration of the alleged anti-fascist feats of Chetniks during the Second World War, as well as the opening of a private museum dedicated to Draža Mihailović and the erection of his monument.

69 <https://standard.rs/2018/12/20/zasto-srbija-nema-adekvatnu-kulturu-secanja/>

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Identity politics in the Balkans after the breakup of Yugoslavia is deeply rooted in ethnic and nationalist divisions, historical legacy and complex relations between different groups. Despite the efforts to solve these problems and promote reconciliation, the influence of identity politics continues to be a significant factor in the regional politics and societies.

The international community has played a significant role in shaping the post-conflict ethno-religious landscape. The peace agreements (such as the Dayton Accords in particular) and international interventions had implications for ethno-religious relations and identities.

The dissolution of Yugoslavia has left many ethnic minorities in uncertain positions. They face challenges related to their identity and rights, regardless of the existing normative framework largely imposed by the EU and the Council of Europe.

Identity politics continues to influence political decision-making, cultural expressions, and social dynamics in the Balkans. Nationalistic sentiments and ethnic tensions still exist, albeit to varying degrees, in different countries of the region.

Serbian ethno-clericalism continues to mobilize Serbs (as it did in the early 1990s), primarily on the basis of the thesis about threats as well as Serbia's need to revise its defeats. (Recent Banjska case is more than illustrative) Such revisionism has significant consequences for the regional relations, understanding of history and efforts to achieve reconciliation and stability.

All Western Balkan countries seek membership in the European Union (EU) and NATO. This is why the EU and its members should be more involved in the integration process and promotion of a credible narrative, especially the one about the wars of the nineties. Serbia and its state institutions must commit themselves to promoting the policy of remembrance, based on the facts and judgments of the International Criminal Court in the Hague.

IV – WHERE IS THE POLITICAL ALTERNATIVE IN SERBIA, IS THERE ONE?

Since the fall of the regime of Slobodan Milošević, Serbia has been unable to establish a normal democratic system, an ordered society and a legal and political system with a clear division into three branches of government, including purposeful and efficient institutions. The consequences of this continuous failure were particularly visible during the last ten years, during which authoritarianism, personified by Aleksandar Vučić, was imposed in parallel with the pronounced partocracy of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), which he led until recently and then formally stepped down as its head.

At the same time, on the opposition scene, there continued the disintegration of the once ruling Democratic Party, the formation of smaller parties and civil movements, as well as a more prominent profiling of the right-wing and conservative bloc. This process is also accompanied by the fact that both the government and the opposition avoid taking a clear and unambiguous position on the key issues dictated on the domestic scene. This especially refers to the Kosovo issue with which the government most often associates the cliché about the protection of “state and national interests” or “a compromise solution” and that the solution – apart from an insistence on the formation of the Community of Serb Municipalities (ZSO) – has not been defined in a recognizable way.

There is no clear policy or position relating to the circumstances brought about by the current geopolitical changes and war conflicts – from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine to an almost identical ambivalence towards the latest escalation of the conflict in the Middle East.

In addition to all this, Serbia’s progress in EU integration has been slowed down, which has been accompanied by a constant narrative about the policy of independence and neutrality, independent decision making, flirting with the West and the East, and the stance on the hypocrisy of the international community. This has been contributed by the internal restraints imposed by the government due to its political indolence or being in a tight spot without resolute reforms and clear solutions. At the same time, a significant part of the opposition, especially the right-wing one, does not see Serbia in the European Union based on the Brussels standards, but based on its measure of belonging to the European bloc. As a result, Euroscepticism has noticeably increased. Is there an alternative to such a landscape of political and social inconsistency?

POLITICAL MOMENTUM ON THE WAVE OF PROTESTS

Since the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević there has not yet been an agreement on what happened on 5 October 2000, or a consensus on the fundamental issues of the political community, while institutionalized and foreign policy indeterminateness persists. Serbia is still at the crossroads between East and West, between the European Union and Kosovo and Metohija, between NATO and Russia. Or, as noted in the 2020 Conference Proceedings, “Serbia continues to roam the outskirts of Europe, stuck in the struggle for its borders, its legitimacy in Europe, foreign investments, Russian gas, Chinese support ...”⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Proceedings of the Conference held at the Faculty of Political Science, University of Belgrade, on 6 October 2020.

At same time, at the internal level, elections always bring the questions that cross the mind of many voters and are based on their previous experience: “who to vote for” because “they are all the same”, “empty promises, everyone lies”, or whether it is again necessary to vote for “the lesser evil”. Hopelessness has remained the fundamental problem in initiating any change in the state and the society that does not see a clear and convincing alternative. Despite various civic protests, which (occasionally) raised a hope for change among mostly impoverished citizens, anesthetized by aggressive propaganda through state-controlled media, skepticism is almost chronic in Serbia.

No matter how much the opposition points to the government’s “selling fog”, bribing voters with populist measures, modest pension increases and “cheap” decreases in the cost of food basics, it seems that it is not only the question of this.

The key question is whether citizens – as voters and not as the sum total of all registered adult citizens in Serbia – see an encouraging choice among the opposition parties and civil movements on the current political scene, recognize their offer and way(s) to make change in the society and consider them as the forces that can initiate changes and bring a turnaround in state institutions, including the judiciary, police, corrupt state administration, education and health care, namely in almost all segments of systemic lawlessness.

According to publicist Dejan Ilić, “the momentum of the opposition on the wave of protests (rather independent and spontaneous, while the opposition is doing a great job for now in an organizational sense) is strong, but the protesters’ dissatisfaction must also be transmitted to the political field. This is done by means of elections. It is also true that Vučić is now only an empty shell (as he has demonstrated, his coercive power has greatly diminished and weakened and he can hardly still have the authority to govern anything”.⁷¹

71 Izlaz iz slepe ulice, Pešćanik.net, 6 June 2023.

Ilić believes that, given the current conditions, no reasonable person can think that elections can be free and fair under Vučić and that he will not use all his strength to launch the party and media machinery in order to organize the elections which Serbia has already had under his rule and which will only deepen the crisis in case of another victory.⁷²

When asked why there is no relevant political and ⁷³social force in Serbia which supports the civic society values, Žarko Korać, a politician of civic orientation and professor of psychology, answers that people have withdrawn due to deep disappointment. “After the tragedy of the nineties, Serbia actually brought the same people to power once again. At present, Serbia is in conflict with all of its neighbours. The ‘Serbian world’ is here; notorious chauvinists are in power. So, people feel that the electorate has never learned the lesson of the nineties, a huge citizens’ energy has been lost”.⁷⁴

Since Korać’s statement given three years ago, nothing has changed and nothing points to a tendency towards creating a more serious alternative. In his opinion, the part of the opposition in Serbia – which claims that its programmes are fundamentally different from the programme of the current government – can be asked even more serious questions. For example, about its difference in the attitude towards the Republic of Srpska, political contacts with any ideologically similar party in the neighbourhood and its position on Kosovo?

Korać also says that his thesis is that the largest part of the opposition actually does not dispute Aleksandar Vučić’s political programme. It disputes his method and way of ruling. And this is justified. “However, I am deeply convinced that there is a very close relationship between the way you rule and the position you

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74 “Društvo u Srbiji nije izvuklo pouke iz 90’tih”@@, Deutsche Welle (DW), 9 September 2021

advocate. If you are a nationalist, an expansionist or a racist, your ruling style will be the same,” Korać concludes.⁷⁵

So, when it comes to Kosovo – although its factual independence has long been crystal clear – even the parties of “pro-European orientation” also use, more or less similarly, a part of the same narrative as the state leadership in an attempt to keep both national – and right-wing voters.

Dejan Ilić believes that the opposition cannot overthrow Vučić by using the Kosovo issue, because when it comes onto the agenda everyone says the same thing. When Vučić shouts: ‘I will not give Kosovo’ into the microphone, the opposition replies with ‘we don’t give Kosovo’. When Vučić says: ‘We will not sign anything’, the opposition says: ‘Nothing must be signed’. However, they are not an opposition.... Because the thing is that both of them ‘gave’ Kosovo a long time ago, so that this issue remains to hover in the vacuum of the Serbian Assembly. And it seems to suit both of them. It is easy to conduct the policy both from the Government’s viewpoint and the opposition’s viewpoint when their policy is confined to – ‘you have betrayed Kosovo’.⁷⁶

Of all the myths preserved in the political milieu of Serbia, the Kosovo myth is certainly most pronounced, especially in the “(over)exaggeration or alteration of objective historical events”. The “Kosovo myth or the Kosovo cult is one of the crucial Serbian political myths, which creates the base of Serbian national identity” and “the core of Serbian nationalism”. The Kosovo myth is one of the main obstacles to friendly relations between Serbs and Albanians and is embedded in the very foundations of the Serbian-Albanian conflict”.⁷⁷

The Kosovo myth is not the only one aimed at forming a national-political pan-national “patriotic union” in order to retain or win power. Based on the manipulation of past events and intending

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Kosovo zauvek, Pesčanik, 3. February 2023.

⁷⁷ Srpski mit o Kosovu, hr.wikipedia.org/wiki/

to support the glorification of the “national ego” and contribute to collective amnesia, mythomania includes a long list of rewriting recent and distant history. The deep-rooted myth about “centuries-old brotherhood” and close ties between Russia and Serbia has now been actualized. Russia’s aggression against Ukraine and the refusal of the top Serbian leadership to unequivocally speak up about it and impose sanctions against Russia have resulted in the promotion of the myth about “mother Russia” and “eternal friendship”.

By repeating the slogans and platitudes like “Kosovo is the heart of Serbia” and “Russians have always been our brothers”, historical truths and facts are being distorted and suppressed.

Misha Glenny, Rector of the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna and journalist, says that the narratives about a historical friendship between Serbia and Russia in European and American media are totally wrong and points out that Serbia became an independent state with the support of Austria, then Germany and, later, Great Britain, France and the United States. The role of Russia in the modern history of Serbia is relatively small and insignificant and that “traditional friendship” is a recently created myth.⁷⁸ He explains that many people have accepted this story, but the Serbian Government is not interested in opposing it.

“What is certain is that Moscow does not defend Serbia because it loves it, but because it needs Serbia. It is time for Serbia to understand what it needs and stop being led by emotions”.⁷⁹

From 24 February 2022, when Russia attacked Ukraine, until the elections held on 3 April of the same year, support for Putin was coming not only from state officials, but also from the majority of the opposition parties. Only a few opposition parties – including specifically the Party of Freedom and Justice and the Don’t Let Belgrade Drown movement – stated that Russia’s attack on Ukraine was unacceptable. However, even they did not dare to explicitly

⁷⁸ Mit o odnosima sa Rusijom, FoNet, 21 October 2023

⁷⁹ <https://www.telegraf.rs/zanimljivosti/zabavnik/3571623-sve-ruske-izdaje-mislino-da-su-nam-braca-a-ovako-su-se-poneli-prema-nama-u-teskim-trenucima>

say that they support the imposition of sanctions against Russia, because this would cost them a considerable number of votes in elections.

Already at the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, historian Latinka Perović pointed out that in Serbia "the attitude towards the aggression against Ukraine and horrible historical anachronism that we encounter on a daily basis is somehow deeply linked to our position on the wars of the nineties" and our understanding of "territorial rights, regardless of the price to be paid by both the people in that territory and you in your country". In her opinion, due to Russia, Serbia has found itself once again "far out".⁸⁰

Perović also pointed out that "there is one social structure that emerged from the war" on the scene and that in politics and business there are also the people who acquired property and positions during the war by plundering and committing crimes. Such people can also be found in the academic world, media and political parties. They defend their positions regardless of the price to be paid by the people and every citizen. "The issue of understanding is the key issue and I am afraid that it will also be missed this time".⁸¹

The essence lies in the fact that the majority of opposition parties – with the exception of right-wing parties and parties with a national prefix – did not express their views on Russia and its aggression against Ukraine. There is also no recognizable distancing from the official foreign policy, either with respect to the condemnation of Russia's aggression or with respect to the imposition of sanctions against it.

It is the same with the (unsaid) clear positions of the liberal-left and centrist parties on the causes of the war of the 1990s: who started it, the roles of Serbia and Slobodan Milošević, as well as the former Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) in the aggression against the

80 Ruska minijatura, [pescanik.net/ruska-minijatura/Latinka Perović](https://pescanik.net/ruska-minijatura/Latinka%20Perovic), 12 March 2022.

81 Ibid.

former Yugoslav republics. There is no clear and sound stance and thus no distinct alternative in opposition ranks concerning the crimes in Kosovo and genocide in Srebrenica. When something is sporadically mentioned, it is not significantly distant from the concept of those in power, who identify themselves with the state.

Why citizens always fall for myths and believe in everything that is served to them, from the distant past to the present day? Because the generations lived with those myths, cultivated to some extent in school, church, society and now mostly in pro-regime media. The majority believes in what is presented to it, especially because one part of the academic and cultural elite also participates in it.

VOTER APATHY

It is more than devastating that over the years nothing, or almost nothing, has been changed on the political scene. Thus, in the absence of a serious alternative, people either vote “for the lesser evil”, or stick to the ruling parties, “so that the evil does not become greater”. The third group is composed of so-called blank ballots, that is, the voters who – dissatisfied with the political offer – do not want to vote for anyone and thus annul their ballots in various ways. On the other hand, the boycotting of elections is most often the consequence of the doubt about their regularity, or the lack of desire to participate in them. Apathy and disillusionment follow after one’s loss of hope that, given the past experience, anyone will change anything in the future. This skepticism also stems from the multi-year situation: the opposition in Serbia is fragmented, divided, programmatically and ideologically unequal and mostly confused.

According to the current situation, the opposition scene can be conditionally divided into the so-called pro-European opposition, which rallies left-wing liberal and centrist parties, and right-of-centre parties that call themselves sovereignist or state-building

parties. The first group includes, among other things, the Party of Freedom and Justice (the current leader of the opposition bloc according to some polls), Democratic Party (split into factions over the years and having a considerably damaged rating), People's Movement of Serbia, Green-Left Front/Don't Let Belgrade Drown, We Have to – Together party and Ecological Uprising movement.

This rough division also includes the group of conservative and right-oriented parties, such as: the New Democratic Party of Serbia (New DSS) of Miloš Jovanović, the successor of Vojislav Koštunica's DSS (according to the latest researches, its rating is not high enough so that it can pass the threshold alone). The New DSS is in coalition with the conservative right-wing Movement for the Restoration of the Kingdom of Serbia (POKS), led by Draža Mihailović's grandson Vojislav Mihailović. This conditional column also includes the Serbian Movement Dveri of Boško Obradović and the Serbian Party Oathkeepers of Milica Đuđević Stamenkovski. The extremist part of the right-wing opposition is represented by the insignificant Serbian Right Wing of Miša Vacić, which is undoubtedly under the government's control.

All in all, what ideological position should be taken by the opposition as the self-proclaimed bearer of a change towards a democratic society and are there the parties that can be a serious alternative?

According to Lazar Džamić, a publicist and communication expert, the current "liberal opposition" is unable to implement in-depth changes, while the "right-wing" one essentially does not want them. Džamić points out that both 'nuances' of the current opposition – if 'green' movements are excluded – do not instill much confidence in the change of the dispositive – or that they can resist the temptations of the existing one: "At best, the impression is that they are a more polished, more liberal and more enlightened version of the current government, or are nice but ineffective; at worst, the 'right-wing' variant makes the current government a much more desirable option, because at least it is not so

impassioned like right wingers and just opportunistically wants to rule and accumulate privileges in peace”.⁸²

Džamić suggests that it is necessary to have such a political and social force that will establish a progressive system and such a force does not yet exist in Serbia. “The current opposition is unable to act uniquely and has no evident intellectual and operational resources for an organized takeover of society; instead, it hopes to ‘learn on the job’.... The change of the current system – without the mentioned practices – will be, at best, a very slow, sloppy and superficial process. It will be undermined by various challenges posed by the old system, resulting in the loss of the new government’s credibility and new elections. It is now evident that the authoritarian and corruptive forces also have the ways to function while being in a position of power in the existing EU environment, even as official members, let alone outside of it. At the same time, this means that the EU must also adjust its optics in the Balkans, but it is obvious that Europe itself lacks such revolutionary practices. Right-wing populists realized this a long time ago and that is why they pose a constant threat”.⁸³

ELECTIONS AS THE FORCED CUSHIONING OF A CRISIS

When, at the end of September 2023, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić announced early parliamentary, provincial, regional, Belgrade and partial local elections within a very short period of time, on 17 December, such a decision was a surprise to many. Namely, according to the election calendar, regular local and provincial elections were supposed to be held in June 2024, while the general situation in the country, especially after the armed

82 portalforum.rs/blog/2022/08/26/za-promene-je-potrebna-politicka-snaga-kakva-u-srbiji-jos-ne-postoji-2 (autor: Lazar Džamić, pisac i publicista, ekspert za komunikaciju)

83 Ibid.

incidents and killings in Banjska in northern Kosovo, did not seem favourable for Vučić's move.

Naturally, in any normal society, criminal scandals of epic proportions – in which government circles were undoubtedly involved – would immediately prompt resignations and the scheduling of early elections. The tragic events in May 2023 – two unheard-of mass murders, one in the Vladislav Ribnikar Elementary School in Belgrade and the other in the villages near Mladenovac, when 19 persons, mostly children, were killed, also did not prompt resignations or shake the government, which relativizes its responsibility, either in principle or concretely.

The revolted citizens spontaneously organized month-long protests with the clear message – “Serbia Against Violence” which overwhelmed all segments of public space and the society as a whole, ranging from gang showdowns to killings of individuals, increasing peer and family violence, increasingly younger child hooligans and, unfortunately, tragic outcomes in such a social milieu.

Therefore, supported by one part of the parliamentary opposition and while walking the streets of Belgrade and several larger cities the participants of a peaceful rebellion were accusing the government of contributing to the creation of an environment that promotes and supports violence and hate speech in every segment of society and the state. Protests were held for months. The top leadership was demanded to replace the members of the Council of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM) and the management of the Radio Television of Serbia (RTS). The protesters also demanded the shutdown of tabloid newspapers, cancellation of reality shows and cancellation of national frequencies awarded to all TV stations that promote violence, crime and hatred (TV Pink and TV Happy), as well as the removal of the Minister of Internal Affairs, Bratislav Gašić, and the Director of the Security Intelligence Agency (BIA), Aleksandar Vulin. None of these demands was met, while Vulin was forced to resign after the imposition of the US sanctions imposed against him.

The sudden announcement of early elections was especially intriguing due to the fact that Vučić was undeniably compromised after the armed conflict in the village of Banjska, in northern Kosovo, when one police officer and three Serbs were killed. No matter how much the involvement of the top state leadership was denied by the President himself, his fellow party members, ministers and satellite media, their denials did not seem the least bit convincing.

Bearing in mind Vučić's way of governing the country, his tendency to deceive and manipulate, as well as politicking, it is hard to believe that he suddenly decided to meet the demand of one part of the opposition for early elections at its protests and outside of them. That is why the reasons for this decision by the President were mostly confined to the guesses about his calculations and combinations. Shortly after the presidential announcement, there followed the wave of resignations by town mayors and municipality presidents throughout Serbia. This also confirmed the intention for holding partial local elections, based on the current government's rules to put all its electoral lists under the umbrella of one name, namely the absolutely media-dominant Serbian President.

Can the next elections – in a series of early elections reached for by the government believing in its rating during the past decade – change something in Serbia and what? And which political and ideological group can offer – before and after the elections – something different from that which has already been seen, consumed, exploited and disappointing? From the political activities of the “fresh” forces that would offer their options for the future and awaken enthusiasm in the discouraged electorate? What is the reason that skepticism about election results has become chronic even if the government is “overhauled” and changed?

According to Deutsche Welle (DW) interlocutors, early elections are generally called in order to resolve a political crisis. However, they also believe that these elections will not resolve anything in Serbia. According to Zoran Gavrilović from the Bureau for Social Research (BIRODI), this step shows that Serbia has an

electoral system that is in the service of one party and one man. He also says that this is actually an abuse of elections. Instead of selecting the best candidates, we will have the elections at all levels where we will decide by acclamation between supporting and rejecting Aleksandar Vučić's personal power.⁸⁴

If the opposition perceived the elections as an exit strategy after a practical failure of street protests, the energy of which was dispersed throughout Serbia, "it is not quite clear why such a rush suited the ruling party when the possible election date is in question", says Čedomir Čupić, a professor at the Faculty of Political Science. He believes that "certain events gained acceleration, especially in Kosovo, but Vučić probably also reckons with the opposition's unpreparedness for elections. The opposition itself has not yet developed a strategy or tactics for the elections and it is assumed that it will not be able to do this properly within such a short period".⁸⁵

Dragan Đilas, President of the Party of Freedom and Justice (SSP), is sure that the regime will not implement any of the OSCE recommendations and that the result will be another undemocratic and irregular elections.

The answers of other opposition leaders are similar. Radomir Lazović, head of the Green-Left parliamentary club, believes that the SNS is currently in the worst position since its coming to power, especially in large cities. When it comes to the early elections in December, political scientist Cvijetin Milivojević believes that "the conditions for the opposition are now worse than before" and that "the President is guided by the rating of his party and calculates when it is the best time for it".⁸⁶

84 Vanredni izbori u Srbiji pod nepromenjenim uslovima www.dw.com/sr/vanredni-izbori-u-srbiji-pod-nepromenjenim-uslovima 29 September 2023.

85 Vanredni izbori u Srbiji pod nepromenjenim uslovima www.dw.com/sr/vanredni-izbori-u-srbiji-pod-nepromenjenim-uslovima 29 September 2023,

86 "Milivojević: Izborni uslovi za opoziciju sada možda gori nego pre", Insaider, 29 September 2003.

AGREEMENT FOR VICTORY

The opposition parties, which organized the protests “Serbia Against Violence” (by providing technical support), signed the document titled “Agreement for Victory” at the Parliament on 21 September 2023. In fact, it involves an agreement on cooperation and the further steps in the fight against the Aleksandar Vučić regime. Among other things, it anticipates an agreement on mutual non-aggression, joint control of the election process and campaigning to increase election day participation, as well as making one or more similar electoral lists. This document was conceived as a basis for the cooperation of not only the pro-European parties, which took part in its drafting, but also of the rest of the opposition.

Out of a total of 10 items of the Agreement, five are crucial: mutual respect and support, joint control of the election process (including the request for the implementation of all CSCE/ODIHR recommendations and findings related to the lack of the basic electoral conditions for free and democratic elections), joint campaign to increase election day participation and one or more election lists.

In the preamble of this agreement there are also the reasons and explanation for its creation and signing. The key points of departure are the irresponsible behaviour of the government after the mass murders in the Vladislav Ribnikar Elementary School and villages near Mladenovac, and its insufficient measures to ensure that such great tragedies never happen again in society, as well as to stop the wave of violence that swept over the country, the government’s disregard of the justified and concrete demands of the Serbia Against Violence protests that were massively supported by citizens. It is also pointed out that the levels of violence, aggression and hatred promoted by the media with national frequency have not been decreased, so that these media continue unhindered to poison the society, while the competent institutions remain silent; that the living conditions of the majority of citizens have been deteriorating for more than a decade, and that Serbia is the society of

pronounced economic inequalities where a small group of people owns enormous wealth, while the vast majority struggles for existence. In addition, corruption and crime are not only protected by the government, but there are also increasingly more cases of a direct involvement of the top state leadership and security institutions in criminal activities. At the same time, honourable and conscientious officials, policemen, judges and prosecutors, who perform their work responsibly and professionally, are criminalized and under attack by the authorities, while criminals enjoy the protection of the top state leadership.⁸⁷

The Agreement for Victory was signed by the heads of the parliamentary clubs: Marinika Tepić, Direction Europe; Zoran Lutovac, President of the Democratic Party; Miroslav Aleksić, head of the parliamentary club People's Movement of Serbia – Ecological Uprising – New Face of Serbia; Nebojša Zelenović. We Have to – Together, and Radomir Lazović, head of the Green-Left Front parliamentary club. The Agreement was not signed by the representatives of the People's Party and right-wing parties, but the invitation has remained open to everyone to join.

Reacting to the signing of the Agreement for Victory, the People's Party stated that it did not sign the "non-aggression pact" of one part of the opposition as well as the previous two initiatives, because it clearly said to the organizers of the Serbia Against Violence protest at the previous meetings that "it is expressly against political 'scavenging' over the justified protest of citizens after two mass murders".

In the statement of the party led by Vuk Jeremić it is also said: "The protests belong to citizens and not to politicians and political parties, and the attempts to politicize protests destroyed them. The popular revolt was wasted and citizens were deceived, because it turned out that their protests served certain organizers as a springboard for the pre-election campaign."⁸⁸

87 Šta sve piše u "Dogovoru za pobjedu" koji su potpisale opozicione stranke, n1info.rs/vesti/tekst-sporazuma-dogovor-za-pobjedu, 21 September 2023.

88 Narodna stranka usvojila Proglas o srpskom pitanju u 21. veku, novimagazin.rs,

Immediately afterwards, the People's Party issued a proclamation where, among other things, it was emphasized that "it was necessary to create a single plan for the future of the Serbian people and single state policy the principles of which should be consistently observed by Serbia over a longer period in order to join the ranks of developed European countries, implying that the Serbian people is one and indivisible".

In the Proclamation it is also stated that the People's Party proposes the elaboration of the platform titled "The Serbian Question in the 21st Century" with an aim to define the long-term strategic goals of the state and national policies of the Serbian people, as well as the path for their achievement, as the supra-party activity that should rally all political and other organizations with a nationally responsible, state-building and democratic determination, institutions and Serbian intellectuals from the country and abroad.⁸⁹

On the other hand, Zdravko Ponoš, the leader of the Serbia Centre (SRCE) party and presidential candidate in the previous elections, says that he is ready for cooperation and that he supports "any consolidation and joint action and this is a platform that defines how to cooperate. This is not a closed coalition, but is based on certain principles, and I think that this is quite correct. I support it and I welcome it. We are ready to cooperate in the way it has been proclaimed"⁹⁰

The right-wing parties also reacted to the invitation. Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski, a deputy and the President of the Serbian Party Oathkeepers, said that she would cooperate with the pro-Western opposition when it comes to technical cooperation in the protection of election results. The document "Agreement for Victory" and the idea to consolidate the opposition were also supported

22 October 2013.

89 Narodna stranka usvojila Proglas o srpskom pitanju u 21. veku, Beta Agency, 2 October 2023

90 Jedni kažu "Ne, hvala", za druge se "otvaraju vrata" , Blic, 23 September 2023.

by Dveri. The leader of this movement, Boško Obradović, stated that “it is very important that the voters in the next elections see that they can count on the opposition and the change of government” and that the opposition should form two big ideological columns – pro-Western and sovereignist, and that there is no reason why there would be no technical cooperation between these two columns.⁹¹

THE POWER (WEAKNESS) OF THE OPPOSITION

The December elections were announced very shortly in advance, because the government believed that the opposition would not have enough time to consolidate and organize itself.

Despite its weaknesses, the pro-European opposition achieved a good election result. However, in order to become the real alternative, it must work on its structure and programme so that it becomes clear to voters which option to vote for.

Among the numerous pre-election assessments of the prospects of the opposition, the one made by Marija Reljanović, a scientific associate at the Institute for Comparative Law in Belgrade, distinguishes itself. She points out According to her, Namely, she points out that in the current political offer by the opposition one cannot recognize the clear and unambiguous signals that it will stand for something that is qualitatively different. She believes that this can “definitely make both politics and elections disgusting to abstainers and even those who are not, but do not recognize ‘their’ political option as being honestly new and different”. She also believes that “worn-out” politicians, who have already failed those exams while being in power, cannot present a clear position on corruption, judicial independence and the rule of law. “It is necessary to bring new persons to the fore, the persons who are

91 Dveri pozdravljaју opozicioni “Dogovor za pobedu”, agencija Fonet, 21 September 2023.

not only uncompromised, but who sincerely want to change the situation.”⁹²

According to Savo Manojlović, the leader of the “Go-Change” movement, the government has blocked the healthy potential of the society and that the common denominator of the opposition is the view that the society is torn apart by enormous corruption and crime and that it is “suffocated by partocracy and negative selection. The government has isolated numerous social classes in the media and information sense, the consequences of which are the exodus of young people and the most educated citizens, environmental destruction and a disturbed value system. The opposition has no organization like the SNS – the army of activists who spread clear and coherent messages and make promises, which have also been studied by marketing experts” Manojlović says.⁹³

As he points out, in order to implement change it is necessary to have a clear plan which anticipates larger organizational resources, greater support and the structure of activists who are ready to spread the idea of “Serbia which does not want to be drowned in corruption, ecologically devastated by harmful projects and scattered around the world. This is the only possible way to reach a critical mass of people, activate them and lead them toward change”.⁹⁴

The opposition does not have the structure that can “cover” all of Serbia with its controllers on the election day. No opposition party, no opposition-oriented movement, nor all opposition parties taken together have 2,000 motivators who can continuously spend at least four hours a week in the field.⁹⁵ Likewise, they do not cover the largest regional centers, let alone smaller places. There are no lists of supporters; it is not known who abstainers are, what issues they are interested in and what motivates them.

⁹² Na ulicu protiv uličara, Pešćanik, 3 July 2023.

⁹³ Author’s text by Savo Manojlović (Go-Change movement) for NIN: 1.000 ljudi koji će promeniti Srbiju, NIN, 8 October 2023.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

On the election night, the opposition will not have the accurate results from its controllers or software, which it can refer to. Thus, if it wins these elections, it will not know.⁹⁶

Consequently, on the basis of most analyses and opinions, it can be concluded that there is not a single clear and convincing alternative within the opposition corps on the Serbian political scene. The common denominator of all opposition parties, movements and coalitions is the fight against the current government, personified by Aleksandar Vučić, who juggles with legislative, executive and judicial branches of power. This fact alone can be sufficient for voters to reach for in elections, but the process of the long-term recovery of society from the consequences accumulated during more than a decade of the Serbian Progressive Party's rule implies much more than the proof that the government is replaceable.

The civil initiative "ProGlas", launched by a group of intellectuals with an aim to raise social awareness about the need for change, which is not achieved by accumulating discontent, but by voting in elections, has sent the clear messages that "Serbia does not need a new class of privileged political oligarchs who will be above the law; it needs equal opportunities for all and solidarity without which one cannot go through a time of crisis" and that "Serbia does not need the cult of personality; it needs free citizens who manage relationships by themselves in their country".⁹⁷ Due to their authority in society and the fact that they received support from about 200 thousand people, they were the constant target of a brutal media campaign.

96 Author's test by Savo Manojlović (Gp-Change movement) for NIN: 1.000 ljudi koji će promeniti Srbiju, NIN 8 October 2023.

97 <https://www.proglas.co.rs/>

STRENGTHENING OF AUTHORITARIANISM AND THE CHALLENGE OF THE OPPOSITION

Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić announced the victory of the SNS Serbia Must Not Stop list by him at all levels, two hours after polls closed on 17 December.

The opposition Serbia Against Violence coalition demanded the annulment of the elections in the city of Belgrade and then the parliamentary ones due to the “alteration of the electoral will” of citizens. According to the projections of the nongovernmental organizations and election observers (CeSID/IPSOS), the SNS won 128 seats and the Serbia Against Violence coalition 65. The Socialists and the HOPE right-wing coalition also passed the threshold. The greatest surprise of these elections was the entry of the pro-Russian right-wing “We – The Voice of the People” list, headed by conspiracy theorist Dr Branimir Nestorović, into the parliament. Domestic observers reported about “a record number of irregularities” and the organized voter migration to Belgrade.⁹⁸

The list of the pro-European and civic Serbia Against Violence coalition is made up of the representatives of the Party of Freedom and Justice, People’s Movement of Serbia, Green-Left Front, Ecological Uprising, Democratic Party, Movement of Free Citizens, Serbia Centre, We Have to – Together, Reversal Movement, New Face of Serbia and United Trade Unions of Serbia Harmony.

This coalition was formed after the spontaneous months-long Serbia Against Violence protests of citizens due to the murder of children in the Vladislav Ribnikar Elementary School in Belgrade and the massacre in the vicinity of Mladenovac in early May 2023. The cooperation of the parties involved in the technical organization of these protests resulted in the formation of the coalition of the same name and joint participation in the December elections.

The Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) with the Ivica Dačić – Serbian Prime Minister list won 6.9 percent of the vote, the pro-right

98 www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/blog-izbori-u-srbiji, 28 December 2023.

HOPE coalition, made up of the New Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) and the Movement for the Restoration of the Kingdom of Serbia (POKS) – 5.02 percent and Branislav Nestorović's "We – The Voice of the People" – 4.68 percent.

The explicitly right-wing coalitions and parties, the National Gathering coalition, formed by Dveri and Oathkeepers, and Vojislav Šešelj's Serbian Radical Party did not pass the threshold. According to the data on the website of the Republic Election Commission, the threshold for entry into the parliament was also not passed by Vuk Jeremić's People's Party, Boris Tadić's Enough Is Enough, as well as Čedomir Jovanović's It Must Be Different electoral list.

During the short election campaign, the opposition parties/coalitions continuously called on citizens to go to the polls regardless of their party affiliation. According to the data on the website of the Republic Election Commission, the turnout in the parliamentary elections was 58.83 percent or 3,815,499 out of 6,500,666 citizens with the right to vote. In Belgrade, out of 1,605, 877 registered voters, 59.01 percent went to the polls.

Despite the opinions of certain opposition party leaders that a high turnout could "cover the theft", this did not happen. The leader of Serbia Centre (SRCE), Zdravko Ponoš, estimated that the Serbia Against Violence coalition, the member of which is his party, knew that elections would be stolen, but hoped that the turnout would be higher, that is, sufficient to cover "phantom voters": "We knew that the elections would be stolen, but we relied on the turnout of domicile voters which would level this. They stole Belgrade, 40,000 imported votes, which is five percent for the city, but not so high percent for the republic. We tried to avoid that scenario." Ponoš assessed the post-election situation in Serbia as a national crisis.⁹⁹

The greatest surprise of these elections was the entry into the parliament of the pro-Russian right-wing "We – The Voice of the

99 Beta, Ponoš: "Znali smo da se izbori krađu, ali smo se uzdali u izlaznost građana koja bi to pokrila", 19 December 2023.

People” list, led by the controversial doctor and conspiracy theorist, Branimir Nestorović, who declared the corona virus “the funniest virus in the world”. In the opinion of many political analysts, Nestorović is “another project of Aleksandar Vučić”, so that there is no doubt that he will support the SNS in the Belgrade Assembly without which this party would not have a sufficient majority, given the fact that the formation of the city government depends on his We – The Voice of the People list.

Nestorović first claimed that his list would not support either the winning or the opposition list: “We would not go into a coalition with anyone, because this is what we agreed on at the beginning”, he said immediately after the elections. However, he later somewhat revised his position: “We are the opposition, but not the opposition to everything. If there are good proposals in the City Assembly, or if the Republican Assembly votes for the Resolution on Kosovo, which is in the state interest, we will certainly support them”, he said.¹⁰⁰

After asking domestic institutions to annul the elections at all levels, the biggest opposition coalition, Serbia Against Violence, also asked European institutions not to recognize the election results and launch an international investigation into the election irregularities. In the streets of Belgrade, at the end of December, the Student Against Violence organization began to block state institutions, that is, the Republic Election Commission, demanding the inspection and revision of the voter lists.¹⁰¹ The day after the elections, the holder of the Serbia Against Violence list, Marinika Tepić, went on a hunger strike on the premises of the Republic Election Commission (she did not consume food and water for 12 days), demanding the annulment of the elections. She was joined by several other opposition leaders.

The elections in Serbia passed with many irregularities, which have been repeated over the years. However, as pointed out by

¹⁰⁰ www.vreme.com., “Nestorović: Ili podrška naprednjacima ili ništa”, 12 December 2023.

¹⁰¹ N1, “Newsnight: Međunarodna istraga o izbornim nepravilnostima?” 22 December 2023.

political scientist Ognjen Gogić, the question is whether they have dramatically changed the electoral will of citizens. He also points out that the results are in line with some researches, including some surprises, and that the relevant institutions must deal with this right away, because new elections will soon follow and the things that go unpunished are often repeated. Although the irregularities have been talked about over the last ten years, this mostly has no effect.

V – INVIOLEABLE SPIRITUAL VERTICAL

The relationship between the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) and the ruling Serbian Progressive Party is characterized by strong cooperation and synchronized activities that have seriously threatened the secular character of the state and also pose a threat to peace in the region. Regular and intensive communication between the Church and the state has been established in addition to various forms of financial and institutional cooperation. The ideological and diplomatic support of the Serbian Orthodox Church has been strengthened and a high harmony between secular and spiritual authorities has also been achieved. A great contribution to this synergy has been made by Patriarch Porfirije who has been holding this position since February 2021.

Although he was announced as a “man of the people” and modernist, recognizable for his communication skills, the first Patriarch with an official profile on social media and a hierarch who cites regional music stars, Porfirije is the follower of his spiritual father, Bishop of Bačka Irinej Bulović who belongs to the group of the most powerful theological figures within the Serbian Orthodox Church, namely the followers of Justin Popović. The circle of “Justinians” also included Amfilohije Radović, Atanasije Jevtić and Artemije Radosavljević, the most influential theologians and Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church at the time of the post-socialist transformation of Serbian society.

Theologian and Archimandrite Dr Justin Popović (1894–1979), was a fierce opponent of Western culture, united Europe, individualism, democracy, liberalism, human rights, antifascist tradition and ecumenism in Orthodoxy, calling it “omniheresy”. The ideology of Serbian unification and the relativization of the state borders in the region has persisted within the SPC for decades. Patriarch

Porfirije himself constitutional system of the country. However, the greatest concern is caused by the indications about the storage of weapons in monasteries and other SPC facilities throughout the region, especially after the conflict provoked by a Serbian paramilitary group in the courtyard of the Banjska Monastery (September 2023) in northern Kosovo in which one Kosovo police officer was killed.

The ideology of the Serbian Orthodox Church is in compliance with the ideology of the Moscow Patriarchate, which essentially does not conduct religious policy. Rather, it conducts paranational policy, the doctrine used by Russian President Vladimir Putin to attack Ukraine. The rhetoric of “just war” which, at one time, had a very strong and institutionalized theological base among the “Justinians”, was reactivated in the case of a war in Ukraine.

The Serbian Orthodox Church has a strong influence on the shrinking of human rights by imposing “traditional Christian values”, which especially affects minority groups, LGBT and women. The top of the SPC is extremely strict in the condemnation of all dissonant tones within the institution itself and in its attitude towards the clergy. This was especially seen in the case of challenging the autonomy of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology.

When in mid-May 2023, on social media, there appeared an amateur video from a festivity at which, in his speech, Patriarch Porfirije refers to the draft law on gender-sensitive language, his narrative provoked a fierce reaction from one part of the public, especially if one takes into account what was pointed out by sociologist Ratko Božović: “Patriarch Porfirije was known for always being a gentleman”.¹⁰² During his speech, the Patriarch emphasized that this law has nothing to do with women. Instead, it is

¹⁰² “I žene idu u crkvu, mole se i ispovedaju, kako da shvatimo izgovoreno: Sagovornici Danasa o rečima patrijarha Porfirija da su žene ‘jadnice’ i ‘bednice”, Danas, 15 May 2023, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/društvo/i-zene-idu-u-crkvu-mole-se-i-ispovedaju-kako-da-shvatimo-izgoa-o-recima-patrijarha-porfirija-da-su-zene-jadnice-i-bednice/>

about “the essence of our existence, about the essence of our being”. Then he continued to react strongly to the criticism to which he was exposed: “I would cry, I would scream out in anguish when I see a poor thing who changes her theses and says ‘why didn’t they care about women, women are endangered’. Well, they are endangered, we all are endangered by you, wretch.”¹⁰³

Reacting to the Patriarch’s statement, which leaked to the public, the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, Brankica Janković, wrote on her Facebook profile: “The words ‘wretches’ and ‘poor things’, which were used for women and appeared in the public space, are deeply humiliating and disturbing, especially because they were said by the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church” at this time which is “extremely difficult for our society when we were faced with two great tragedies and when the most vulnerable ones in society – children and women were killed.” The Commissioner pointed to a very significant context in which the Patriarch announced himself in this debatable way: “In times of sorrow and pain when we have the eighteenth woman who is a victim of domestic violence and when women are exposed to various forms of discrimination, violence and aggression, the least that is expected from all of us is to be aware of the weight of spoken words and the responsibility for them”.¹⁰⁴

In a sermon after the liturgy in the Church of St Basil of Ostrog in Bežanijska kosa, Patriarch Porfirije said among other things: “We hear that the Church is also guilty of violence against women. Do not do that because we will respond to you. You will not feel well if we respond, because all will see that you have manipulated and that you have lied. So far, we have not responded, because

103 “Govor patrijarha izazvao osude; poverenica Janković: Duboko ponižavajuće reči”, RTS, 13 May 2023, <https://www.rts.rs/lat/vesti/drustvo/5191041.html?print=true>; “Kako može bednica, a zločin je psihološkinja”: Govor patrijarha razbesneo ljude”, N1, 13 May 2023., <https://n1info.rs/vesti/kako-moze-bednica-a-zlocin-je-psiholoskinja-reakcije-na-patrijarhov-govor/>

104 “Poverenica o izjavi patrijarha: Duboko ponižavajuće i uznemiravajuće reči”, N1, 13 May 2023, <https://n1info.rs/vesti/poverenica-o-izjavi-patrijarha-duboko-ponizavajuce-i-uznemiravajuce- reci/>

we also pray to God for you who accuse.”¹⁰⁵ This harshness and threatening tone of the Patriarch’s statement is his reaction to criticism by certain media and nongovernmental organizations after the Patriarch presented his views in the Easter epistle about the need to stop the violence against the Serbian language and abolish the provisions of the law that impose such violence under the law that imposes the so-called gender-sensitive language: “We appeal for the standardization of the use of the Cyrillic alphabet in the public space as well as for stopping violence against the Serbian language and abolishing the provisions of the law which impose it, especially through the unconstitutional law that imposes the so-called gender-sensitive language, which conceals the fight against marriage and family as the Bog-ordained sanctities and natural forms of man’s personal and conciliar life”.

The Bishop Irinej (Bulović) of Bačka and the spokesman of the Serbian Orthodox Church has also stood up in defence of the Patriarch and the Serbian Orthodox Church, as well as his view of the relationship between church and state, in particular. He has dismissed the claims of some media and nongovernmental organizations that the issue of gender-sensitive language is not the issue for the majority church: “We, the members of the Church, are not excluded from society because we constitute its absolute majority. Therefore, the advocates of this purely Marxist perception, disguised as the supporters of ‘Western liberalism’ cannot, at least for now, take away our civil rights and, naturally, our responsibility before the law and society.” Emphasizing the indisputable right of nongovernmental organizations to openly express and present their views, Bishop Irinej points out that “we reject with indignation their undisguised intention to turn that right into a monopoly and call every expression of a Christian opinion about an important national issue ‘a malignant church influence on the state and society’ or come out with even worse and uglier slanders.” After

105 “Patrijarh Porfirije: Neće vam biti dobro, ako vam odgovorimo”, *Vreme*, 16 May 2023, <https://www.vreme.com/vesti/patrijarh-porfirije-nece-vam-biti-dobro-ako-vam-odgovorimo/>

very serious and sustainable arguments, the Bishop pointed out that the position of the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church on gender-sensitive language caused anger and revealed the extreme intolerance of individuals and groups towards the Church and the values it embodies. It is unsparingly sowed through the “CNN affiliate-group” of electronic and printed media. After labeling and targetting, Bishop Irinej pointed out that the Serbian Orthodox Church “will not and cannot give up the demand that the Law on Gender Equality be repealed”.¹⁰⁶

The sharpness and fervour that emerge from the Patriarch’s statements have surprised a great part of the uninformed or optimistic public, regardless of its religious affiliation or the absence of religious faith, while his reputation of being a “gentleman” was extremely tarnished. Those being better acquainted with the activities in and around the majority church have not been surprised by the mentioned rhetoric. Unfortunately, the doubts accompanying the election of the Patriarch were justified and confirmed. When Metropolitan of Zagreb and Ljubljana Porfirije was elected as the 46th Patriarch at the Electoral Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Church in February 2021, it seemed that the new head of this very important religious institution would have the potential to implement or at least start a modest *aggiornamento* of the majority religious community in Serbia. The former Abbot and Hieromonk of the Kovilj Monastery, founder of therapeutic communities for addictions, Vicar Bishop of Jegar, Military Bishop, Coordinator for Cooperation between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Army of Serbia, Council Chairman of the Serbian Broadcasting Agency, Metropolitan of Zagreb and Ljubljana and Doctor of Theology, professor at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Belgrade and polyglot was presented as “a man of the people”, “the Patriarch of all citizens”, recognizable for his communication skills

106 “Episkop bački Irinej: SPC neće odustati da se Zakon o rodnoj ravnopravnosti stavi van snage”, 021, 23 April 2023, <https://www.021.rs/story/Novi-Sad/Vesti/338549/Episkop-backi-Irinej-SPC-nece-odustati-da-se-Zakon-o-rodnoj-ravnopravnosti-stavi-van-snage.html>

and public appearance. As the first Patriarch with an official profile on social media, the hierarch who quotes regional music stars Branimir Štulić, Đorđe Balašević, Konstrakta ... As the Patriarch, he celebrated his first Easter with the homeless and sick children at the University Children's Clinic, which largely obscured the fact that this Patriarch is a spiritual child of Bishop Irinej (Bulović) of Bačka, one of the "Justinians" and one of the most influential hierarchs of the Serbian Orthodox Church over the last few decades.

JUSTINIANS

At the time when the current Patriarch Porfirije studied at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Belgrade and became a monk or, more precisely, during the 1980s, three young and distinguished monastic theologians, professors at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, who were called Justinians, Amfilohije Radović, Irinej Bulović, Atanasije Jevtić and Artemije Radosavljević distinguished themselves for their activities. The latter became somewhat more active during the 1990s.¹⁰⁷ All four of them were the students of the famous Serbian theologian, Archimandrite Dr Justin Popović, who was expelled from the University of Belgrade by the communist authorities and sent to the Ćelije Monastery near Valjevo, where he was kept in some kind of captivity. These increasingly more respected theologians soon became the most influential Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church at the time of the post-socialist transformation of Serbian society.

Justin of Ćelije or Justin Popović, a canonized Serbian saint, was the Archimandrite of the Ćelije Monastery, theologian, expert on the work of Dostoevsky, professor at the University of Belgrade and spiritual father. As a professor at the Bitola Theological Seminary, he was in constant contact with Bishop Nikolaj and St John of Shanghai with whom he became lifelong friends, and in 1934 he was

¹⁰⁷ Thanks to their open anticommunist and nationalist position, three of them were admitted to the Association of Writers of Serbia in January 1985 (Tomanić, p..

elected professor at the Belgrade University Faculty of Orthodox Theology. Justin was a fierce opponent of Western culture, united Europe, individualism, democracy, liberalism, human rights, antifascist tradition and ecumenism in Orthodoxy calling it “omni-heresy”. He expressed his opinion about it in his book *Pravoslavna crkva i ekumenizam* (The Orthodox Church and Ecumenism). On 2 May 2010, pursuant to the decision of the Holy Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Justin Popović was canonized as Venerable Justin of Čelije,¹⁰⁸ while four years later his relics were transferred to the Čelije Monastery church. In church literature there are Justin Popović’s quotes about Holy Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović whom he calls “the thirteenth apostle”, “the holy Serbian evangelist” and “the greatest Serb after Saint Sava”.¹⁰⁹

The rehabilitation of Nikolaj Velimirović began just at the time when the mentioned “Justinians” were becoming increasingly influential in the Serbian Orthodox Church, that is, in the mid-1980s.¹¹⁰ The rehabilitation was initiated by Bishop Jovan (Velimirović) of Šabac and Valjevo, who was Nikolaj’s nephew. Together with his deacon Ljubomir Ranković, he founded the magazine *Glas crkve* in Valjevo, which published Velimirović’s texts and the texts of the “Justinians”, Atanasije Jevtić and Amfilohije Radović, in which Nikolaj was presented as the greatest Serbian philosopher, the unsurpassed Serbian poet, the most important

108 He taught Dogmatics at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology and Patriarch Pavle was also one of his students. Patriarch Pavle was a great opponent of quick canonizations; he was against any rashness, especially when it was a question of future saints. For years, Pavle delayed awarding haloes to Nikolaj Velimirović and Justin Popović, although he highly respected them.

109 The leading theologians in the interwar period, such as Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović who studied at the Universities of Oxford, Bern and St Petersburg, Justin Popović, a professor at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Dimitrije Najdanović and others tried to revitalize St Sava’s legacy by presenting him as a saint and spiritual leader.

110 Much has been written about Nikolaj Velimirović and his legacy, so that we will not dwell here; see, for example, the study: Byford, Jovan (2005) *Potiskivanje i poricanje antisemitizma*, Belgrade, Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia.

saint after Saint Sava and so on. In March 1987, Bishop Amfilohije of Banat informally canonized Nikolaj at a commemorative ceremony and then, two years later, the chapel dedicated to Nikolaj in his native Lelić near Valjevo was consecrated, while Artemije Radosavljević became the author of the first affirmative biography of Nikolaj Velimirović.¹¹¹ The zenith of this galloping glorification and future canonization of Nikolaj Velimirović was the return of his relics to Serbia from the United States, which was organized and massively and pompously seen off in May 1991.

The second wave of a surge in the popularity of the image and work of Nikolaj Velimirović came at the end of the 1990s, especially during the period of NATO bombing when his books were massively published and popularized. This coincided with the rise of anti-Westernism as the result of long isolation and war. Nikolaj became the symbol of anti-modernism and anti-Europeanism in Serbia.

Following the example of his spiritual father, a Justinian, Patriarch Porfirije continued with the glorification of the image and work of Holy Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović. The Patriarch led a great spiritual and cultural ceremony on the occasion of the triple jubilee of Holy Bishop Nikolaj of Ohrid and Žiča: the 140th anniversary of his birth, 65th anniversary of his repose in the Lord and the 30th anniversary of the transfer of his relics from Libertyville to his native Lelić. In his sermon, the Patriarch has emphasized that the life and work of Bishop Nikolaj are still relevant and that we can refer young generations to him as their measure and beacon in life. Pointing out that Bishop Nikolaj's value system is "cruciform love", the Patriarch advises us that "when someone asks us what we think about a topic, we will not speak out of ourselves, out of our mind; we will speak using the language of Holy Bishop Nikolaj, we will speak out of the mind of Christ".¹¹² In an interview, Patriarch

111 The official hagiography of Nikolaj Velimirović, published by the SPC on the occasion of his canonization, is based on the mentioned edition.

112 "Akademija u čast Svetog vladike Nikolaja", TV Hram, 29 June.2022. <https://www.tvhram.rs/vesti/vesti-iz-crkve/4285/akademija-cast-svetog-vladike->

Porfirije has pointed out that Holy Justin of Ćelije, along with Saint Nikolaj of Ohrid and Žiča and Bishop Atanasije, is the most significant Serbian theologian in the world.¹¹³

According to the Information Service of the Serbian Orthodox Church, the marking of the Ascension Day in 2023, namely the Patron Saint Day of the City of Belgrade or, more precisely, the procession led by Patriarch Porfirije represented the “the largest prayer gathering in the history of Belgrade”. Namely, “over a hundred thousand people gathered around the reliquary of Saint Bishop Nikolaj of Serbia, filling the central streets of the Serbian capital”. In his address, the Patriarch emphasized: “Our Saint-Savian people has experienced all difficulties, crucifixions, martyr’s deaths, unimaginable Golgothas and sufferings not because it has had powerful, educated and wise individuals, technology, skills and knowledge, but primarily because it has believed in God, had evangelical faith and lived in accordance with the evangelical values, as was said by the Saint lying in front of us. (...) Because he has known that our neighbours, family, home and homeland are the sanctity and especially because he has known that Gračanica, the Patriarchate of Peć, Dečani, Sopoćani, Žiča, Mileševa, Krušedol, Studenica, Morača, Krka, all our sanctuaries and this holy temple in front of which we are standing today and which bears the name of Saint Sava. This is our identity card, our name and surname. By going down into our hearts, let us honestly ask ourselves whether we know this today or we would prefer to be someone different or someone else, to renounce ourselves, our code, our identity and our Christian Orthodox values, and to adopt a foreign value system and become someone that we are not.”¹¹⁴

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nikolaja-patrijarh-porfirije-vladici-nikolaju-mera-bio-hristos-njegovo-jevandjelje-foto-video

113 “Patrijarh Porfirije o episkopu Atanasiju: “I kada smo sa njim igrali fudbal i kada nas je vodio na Svetu Goru bio je tamo gde i sveti oci”, Nedeljnik, 6.March 2021, <https://www.nedeljnik.rs/patrijarh-porfirije-o-episkopu-atanasiju-i-kada-smo-sa-njim-igrali-fudbal-i-kada-nas-je-vodio-na-svetu-goru-bio-je-tamo-gde-i-sveti-oci/>

114 “Spasovdanska beseda patrijarha Porfirija”, SPC, 26 May.2023, <https://spc.>

THE SYMPHONY À LA JUSTIN, *ACTU* IRINEJ

Unlike Amfilohije, Atanasije and Artemije (the so-called “three aces”), who have been extremely critical towards power-holders, Irinej has always been close to the regime or, more precisely, to the state, regardless of the political party in power. As the last member of the “Jusrinians” theological club, Irinej wishes to implement his interpretation of a symphony between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the state.

Over the last ten years of the political domination of the Serbian Progressive Party, the relationship between the current political elite, led by President Aleksandar Vučić, and the majority church in Serbia has progressed from the initial mutual criticism and spontaneously ignoring each other to multidimensional cooperation and symphonic synchronization. Over time, their disagreements have been overcome and regular and intensive communication has been established, including financial, institutional, ideological and diplomatic support, as well as understanding and reconciliation between the secular and the spiritual authorities.

In May 2019, at the invitation of Patriarch Irinej, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić – together with the Chairman of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Milorad Dodik – attended the session of the Holy Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Church where they discussed the important issues concerning the survival of the Serbian people and the reconciliation of the views between the state and the Church. The Serbian President said: “The Church has the right to have its views, although they are not always the same as ours, but it is important to hear them here, because the Church helped our people wherever it was threatened, like in Kosovo.” He added that the meeting lasted more than two and a half hours and that the Holy Assembly informed him about its concerns and views on certain issues.¹¹⁵ Just before the session of the Holy

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rs/spasovdanska-beseda-patrijarha-porfirija/#

115 “Vučić na Saboru SPC: Izneo sam sve svoje brige, patrijarh me je razumeo”,

Assembly, the President confirmed that there were some Bishops who were seriously against his policy, stating that he would answer all those who sought “his anathema and said the worst things about him” with the truth and the facts”.¹¹⁶ As it turned out, this visit inaugurated the regular practice of visiting each other during the session.

According to some Podgorica media, during the session of the Holy Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Church, one of the most respected and most influential archbishops, Metropolitan Amfilohije of Montenegro and the Littoral polemicized with President Aleksandar Vučić about the accusations that he participated in the creation of a “coup d’etat” scandal together with Montenegrin President Milo Đukanović, and that he was responsible that the leaders of the Democratic Front, Andrija Mandić and Milan Knežević, were each sentenced to five years in prison. On the other hand, the President allegedly blamed the Metropolitan for his bad relationship with the Montenegrin President.¹¹⁷

During the first session of the Holy Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Church headed by the newly elected Patriarch Porfirije in May 2021, the Serbian President hosted a lunch for all Archbishops at the Club of Representatives in Dedinje. This was certainly an innovation in the ritualization of a symphony between the state and the majority church. The Serbian President did a similar thing pretending to establish a (new) tradition a year later when he played host to the Archbishops at Andrićev venac during the May session. The critics did not miss the fact that not all Bishops accepted the invitation. Namely, Bishop Grigorije of Düsseldorf

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Ekspres, 14 May 2019, <https://www.ekspres.net/vesti/vvucic-na-saboru-spc-izneo-sam-sve-svoje-brige-patrijarh-me-je-razumeo>

116 “Vučić na Saboru SPC”, RTS, 13 May 2019, <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/3520015/vucic-na-saboru-spc.html>

117 “‘Vijesti’: Oštar sukob Amfilohija i Vučića na Saboru; Nikola Selaković: To su najbrutalnije laži i neistine”, Nedeljnik, 18 May.2019, <https://www.nedeljnik.rs/vijesti-ostar-sukob-amfilohija-i-vucica-na-saboru-nikola-selakovic-to-su-najbrutalnije-lazi-i-neistine/>

and All Germany and Bishop Maksim of Western America were not present at the President's lunch.¹¹⁸

Two months later, in mid-July 2022, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić met with Patriarch Porfirije and the Serb member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Milorad Dodik, in Belgrade. The President announced on social media that he informed Patriarch Porfirije, the members of the Holy Synod and the Serb member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina about the talks that are held under the auspices of the European Union on Kosovo and Metohija, the situation in the Serb enclaves in the southern Serbian province, the economic and social situation in Serbia and its international position.¹¹⁹

In early November 2022, there was a meeting between the Serbian President and the Patriarch on which occasion the President shared "his concern over the challenges and pressures facing our people in Kosovo and Metohija and the Serbian state". On his Instagram profile, as an epilogue of the meeting, the President wrote: "We are determined to strongly and jointly defend our vital national and state interests". The closed door meeting was also attended by the elected President of the Republic of Srpska, Milorad Dodik, Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivica Dačić and members of the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The President previously also met with the Ambassadors of China and the Russian Federation to Serbia whom he informed about the fulfilment of the obligations agreed upon in the Brussels Dialogue and pointed out that Belgrade did everything, while Pristina did not and refuses to fulfil the assumed obligations.¹²⁰

118 "Sabor SPC se "preselio" na Andrićev venac, Vučić arhijerejima izneo prognoze", N1, 18 May 2022., <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/sabor-spc-se-preselio-na-andricev-venac-vucic-arhijerejima-izneo-prognoze/>

119 "Vučić sa patrijarhom SPC i Dodikom, među glavnim temama Kosovo i Metohija", Blic, 16 July 2022, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-sa-patrijarhom-spc-i-dodikom-medu-glavnim-temama-kosovo-i-metohija/m1dyg8s>

120 "Vučić posle sastanka sa patrijarhom: Odlučni smo da branimo vitalne interese", Politika, 5 November 2022, <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/523812/Vucic-sa-patrijarhom-SPC-o-KiM>

The closeness of the secular and religious Serbian leaders will be monumentalized by the construction of an “all-Serbian shrine”, which was agreed at the meeting of President Aleksandar Vučić and Patriarch Porfirije in early September 2021. The construction of a memorial centre in remembrance of the victims of the Jasenovac concentration camp “and all other Serbian victims in the territories not being under the control of the Serbian people” is planned in Donja Gradina, in the northwest of Bosnia and Herzegovina. During the meeting, the mentioned idea creators consulted with Milorad Dodik by phone. The President stated that “a lot of money” would be invested of which Serbia would provide 80%, while the rest would be provided by the Republic of Srpska.¹²¹

When it comes to the (state) financing of the Serbian Orthodox Church, it is necessary to briefly recall that the Accounting and Auditing Law exempts churches and religious communities from the obligation to submit the annual financial report. Therefore, it is impossible to determine the precise details about the spending of the state money that is transferred to the accounts of religious organizations. In addition to the funds coming to it through the Administration for Cooperation with Churches and Religious Communities, the Serbian Orthodox Church also receives significant funds that are earmarked for nongovernmental organizations through the so-called budget line 481. The majority church also receives the funds collected by the Ministry of Justice on the basis of the postponement of criminal prosecution (the opportunity principle). As for the Church of Saint Sava, the Serbian Orthodox Church also receives the funds from the periodical sale of mandatory additional postage stamps, prescribed by the government decree. The funds given regularly to religious communities through the Administration for Cooperation with Churches and Religious Communities are controlled. However, donations,

121 “Srbija će graditi memorijalni centar za žrtve Jasenovca, ali u BiH”, Al Jazeera, 10 September 2021, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2021/9/10/susret-vucica-i-patrijarha-porfirija-srbija-ce-u-bih-graditi-memorijalni-centar-u-znak-sjecanja-na-zrtve-jasenovca>

especially those from the budget reserves, remain in the grey zone, namely it remains unclear as to whether and who controls them. The public has no insight into the income of the organizational units of churches and religious communities, as well as the Serbian Orthodox Church. The Administration for Cooperation with Churches and Religious Communities is responsible for financing the contributions for old-age pension and disability insurance for priests and church employees, which has exceeded two million euros on an annual basis over the last few years. Since the coming of the Serbian Progressive Party to power, the state has given record-breaking funds for various reconstruction and construction projects of the Serbian Orthodox Church, while the largest expenditure, at least declaratively, accounted for the completion of the Church of Saint Sava. This is also evidenced by the statement given by President Aleksandar Vučić in mid-2020 according to which the state of Serbia invested 43 million euros in the construction of the Church of Saint Sava in Belgrade during the past three and a half years, which is the largest amount for the last 50 years.¹²² In a Helsinki Committee report it has already been written about the state's very generous financial support to the majority church in Serbia,¹²³ but Patriarch Porfirije's statement made after the consecration of the Church of Saint Sava in Foča in late November 2023, is also very indicative: "I believe that I will not sin and make a mistake if I say that, after the period of the Nemanjić dynasty, there was no other period during which so many shrines shot up among our people. This also applies to Serbia regardless of how I see the current political administration."¹²⁴

122 "Vučić: U Hram Svetog Save država uložila 43 miliona evra", Nova, 20 August 2020, <https://nova.rs/vesti/drustvo/vucic-u-hram-svetog-save-drzava-ulozila-43-miliona-evra/>

123 Srbija zarobljeno društvo, <http://helsinki.org.rs/serbian/doc/izvestaj%202022.pdf>

124 "Patrijarh Porfirije: Posle Nemanjića ne postoji period u kojem je toliko svetinja nicalo", Tanjug, 26 November 2023, <https://www.tanjug.rs/region/drustvo/61403/patrijarh-porfirije-posle-nemanjica-ne-postoji-period-u-kojem-je-toliko-svetinja-nicalo/vest>

CHALLENGING STATE SOVEREIGNTY

The recently published communiqué of the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church concerning the revisionist campaign about the number of victims of the Jasenovac concentration and death camp confirms continuity in the treatment of certain topics and the rhetoric of the officials of Serbia's majority church. Without trying to justify the argumentation, it is illustrative to cite how the Serbian Orthodox Church treats certain entities in its official address to the media: "... launched a certain Sarajevo portal, which was immediately accepted by tens of news media, primarily in Croatia, the so-called Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Montenegrin circles functioning as Anti-Serbia, as well as the inevitable CNN affiliate group with its followers in Belgrade, so tutti quanti. (...) The historical truth that genocide was committed against the Serbian Orthodox people in the Independent State of Croatia (NDH), as well as against our brothers Jews and Gypsies cannot be denied by any lie, no matter who tells it, using syllogisms and slandering his own people and their states, Serbia and the Republic of Srpska."¹²⁵ Lest the reader does not think that this is a historical forgery in which the rhetoric that dominated in the 1990s intersects with more recent concepts, such as the aforementioned "affiliate group", we point out that the aforementioned communiqué was published in mid-September 2023 when the head of the Church and its highest executive body was Patriarch Porfirije, while its other member and editor of the Information Service of the Serbian Orthodox Church was Bishop Irinej of Bačka.

The glorification of the "Serbian Piedmont" and relativization of the state entities has been intensively over the decades. The mentioned relativization also adorns the rhetoric of the current Patriarch. In September 2022, at the beginning of the construction

125 "Saopštenje Svetog Arhijerejskog Sinoda SPC povodom revizionističke kampanje o broju žrtava koncentracionog logora smrti Jasenovac," Information Service of the Serbian Orthodox Church, 14 September 2023, <https://spc.rs/saopstenje-svetog-arhijerejskog-sinoda-povodom-revizionisticke-kampanje-o-broju-zrtava-koncentracionog-logora-smrti-jasenovac-2/>

of a section of the Rača-Bijeljina highway, in the presence of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and the Serb member of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Milorad Dodik, Patriarch Porfirije said to those present that state borders are a “variable category”: “We all know that throughout history the borders of the states and habitats of our people kept changing and we are not sure that some time in history, where everything is relative, they will not change”.¹²⁶ Immediately after his election, Patriarch Porfirije continued his very intensive cooperation with the political leadership of the Republic of Srpska. So, at the Patriarchate in Belgrade in April 2021, the Patriarch hosted the Easter reception for the Serb member and Chairman of the Presidency of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Milorad Dodik, and the leadership of the Republic of Srpska, President Željka Cvijanović and Prime Minister Radovan Višković. On that occasion, Milorad Dodik stated that “they in the Republic of Srpska respect what the Serbian Orthodox Church is and what it is doing for the Serbian people and that it represents the strong element of Serbian identity”. He also pointed out that “the Church strongly protects the Serbian people and preserves its language and culture where there is no Serbian state.” Patriarch Porfirije stated that the Republic of Srpska and Bosnia and Herzegovina are a unique common area that carries plenty of affirmed good things within itself, but are also the area that has brought a lot of misunderstanding, and that he personally cherishes special emotions towards the Republic of Srpska. “That national identity will be correct if it is based on spiritual spheres”, the Patriarch said and added that “as a rule, the brother Bishops from Bosnia and Herzegovina express their gratitude, above all else, to the institutions of the Republic of Srpska, because they understand

126 Previously, Milorad Dodik welcomed the Serbian President saying: Welcome to your own and among your own”. “Porfirije: Nismo sigurni da se granice u budućnosti neće mijenjati”, Pobjeda, 15 September 2022, <https://www.pobjeda.me/clanak/porfirije-nismo-sigurni-da-se-granice-u-buducnosti-nece-mijenjati>

the needs of the Church in every respect and try to help to the extent it is necessary".¹²⁷

Let us recall that, in his interview given in May 2014, Patriarch Irinej said that the Republic of Srpska should join Serbia because "there are many reasons" for that.¹²⁸ He also stated that he would not be surprised if a referendum on secession from Bosnia and Herzegovina would be held in the Republic of Srpska and if the Republic of Srpska would join Serbia: "It is a process that has already started. If Kosovo could separate itself from Serbia, why the Republic of Srpska cannot separate itself from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and join Serbia? We have many more reasons for something like this because, after the seizure of Kosovo, two Albanian states were created, while Serbia and the Republic of Srpska would be a single Serbian state as it used to be for centuries".¹²⁹ On the occasion of the opening of the Days of Srpska in Serbia event in Novi Sad in October 2015, Patriarch Irinej stated that the Republic of Srpska is "a Serbian state created in our time". On that occasion, Bishop Irinej of Bačka said that the Drina river does not separate, but "unites the Serbian people from both banks of the river". He added that it could be said that the Republic of Srpska and Serbia are a single entity and represent "substantial unity and common organic belonging to the entire Orthodox world".¹³⁰

The Serbian Orthodox Church does not recognize the Montenegrin nation. Patriarch Porfirije joined the population census campaign in Montenegro, calling on its citizens to identify themselves as members of the Serbian nation, SPC believers who speak the Serbian language¹³¹. Pro-Serbian and pro-Russian forces and

127 "SPC je čuvar srpskog identiteta i jezika!", *Informer*, 29 April 2021, <https://informer.rs/vesti/drustvo/604501/patrijarsija-spc-vaskrs>

128 "Patrijarh: Republika Srpska da se pripoji Srbiji, Vučić da podigne posrnutu naciju!", *Telegraf*, 13 May 2014.

129 "Patrijarh Irinej: RS da se pripoji Srbiji", *Naše novine*, 16 May 2014.

130 "Patrijarh Irinej: Republika Srpska je srpska država", *Blic*, 19 October 2015, <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/patrijarh-irinej-republika-srpska-je-srpska-drzava/1112kfz>

131 RFE: "Ispoljite svoj identitet kao Srbi", poručio u Podgorici patrijarh SPC

media are also included in the campaign and share the same views. The pro-European civil sector and the opposition in Montenegro consider such a campaign as an attempt at ethnic ingeneering and perceive Porfirije as the emissary of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, because he has repeatedly emphasized the importance of the census in order to determine the number of Serbs in Montenegro. There is a fear that an increase in the percentage of Serbs in Montenegro will lead to a change of the country's constitutional system¹³².

The enthronement of Metropolitan Joanikije of Montenegro and the Littoral at the Cetinje Monastery on 5 September 2021, was accompanied by the two-day protests of citizens who blocked the approaches to the city. More than 50 persons were injured in clashes with the police. The enthronement took place under very unusual conditions: Patriarch Porfirije and Metropolitan Joanikije were brought to the monastery by the Montenegrin Army's helicopter and then to the monastery itself "under an armour cloak" with the strong support of the security forces. Although there were proposals to perform the enthronement at another place, in another shrine, for security reasons, the Serbian Orthodox Church and official Belgrade insisted on holding the ceremony "in Cetinje" as it was planned and announced. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić said to Montenegrin Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapić: "It has been planned to postpone the enthronement, but I congratulate Krivokapić for deonstrating that the state has the instruments to implement its plan."

According to political analyst Boško Jakšić, the events in Cetinje, the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church and, through it, the role of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić in them represented a "peculiar gift" for Russia, because the door for its influence on Montenegro was reopened. When the enthronement was finished,

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 Porfirije, 15 October 2023, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/podgorica-patrijarh-spc-porfirije/32636176.html>

132 RFE: Porfirije u kampanji uoči popisa u Crnoj Gori, 16 October 2023, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/porfirije-popis-crna-gora-vlada/32639871.html>

the international community expressed serious concern due to the conflict and ethnic divisions in Montenegro, while Serbia and Russia sent their congratulations for a job well done. According to Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, Russia considers it important for resolving the situation concerning the canonical rights of the Serbian Orthodox Church and its believers. Moscow also fully supports the statements by Patriarch Porfirije and Metropolitan Joanikije aiming to ease tensions. Jakšić holds that the Kremlin's congratulation on the enthronement of Joanikije and support to the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro show that official Moscow was indirectly involved in the mentioned events in Cetinje through Belgrade and the Church. According to Internal Affairs Minister Aleksandar Vulin, the events in Cetinje clearly show how important it is for all Serbs to be united and always act as a single political nation. Montenegrin Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapić denied Serbia's interference in the mentioned events: "Someone can always try something, but there was no outside influence. This is the project carried out solely by the Montenegrin people, by us who wanted to preserve peace and order and achieve stability. And no one helped us".¹³³

At the beginning of 2023, in one of his traditional interviews, Bishop Irinej of Bačka spoke about the "spiritual awakening and healing of the people in Montenegro after almost eight decades of violence caused by its rulers". He also stated that harsh engineering in "Serbian Sparta" caused that "not a small number of them claim to be what they are not what and that they are not what they are, although their immediate and distant ancestors put their heads on the block for what they were". Irinej pointed to the importance of the decision that Patriarch Porfirije and Metropolitan Joanikije "do not succumb to brutal pressures and dangerous threats (or even to the 'well-intentioned' suggestions by 'friends')" that the Metropolitan's enthronement 'should take place in Podgorica and not at

133 "Uticaj Beograda i Moskve na crnogorsku politiku u svjetlu nemira na Cetinju", RFE, 8 September, 2021, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/uticaj-srbija-rusija-crna-gora-cetinje/31450480.html>

the Cetinje Monastery. “They announced themselves from Cetinje and Podgorica, as well as from Belgrade’s “Circle of Two”, then from Sarajevo but, behold, the greatest anger and poisonous hatred towards Patriarch Porfirije and Metropolitan Joanikije, due to their manly resoluteness, came from Zagreb.”¹³⁴

In early August 2022, the Government of Montenegro and the Serbian Orthodox Church, that is, Montenegrin Prime Minister Dritan Abazović and Patriarch Porfirije signed the Basic Agreement.¹³⁵ Under this Agreement, Montenegro recognizes the continuity of the legal subjectivity of the Serbian Orthodox Church since 1219 and guarantees the inviolability of its ownership over monasteries, churches, buildings and other immovable properties and premises. The state guarantees the Serbian Orthodox Church that the state authorities cannot implement security measures in its facilities without the prior approval of the competent church authorities; the Church is granted public legal powers and there is also the possibility of introducing religious education into public educational institutions. The coming of a new era in the relations between the state and the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro is evidenced by the data that since February 2021, when he was elected head of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Porfirije has visited Montenegro at least five times, while his predecessor, Patriarch Irinej, went there once in the last year of his service.¹³⁶ Since the signing of the Basic Agreement, various forms

134 “Intervju koji izlazi samo na Božić: Episkop bački dr Irinej Bulović – SPC je sačuvala svoje svetinje”, *Novosti online*, 8 January 2023., <https://www.novosti.rs/c/vesti/politika/1189857/intervju-koji-izlazi-samo-bozic-episkop-backi-irinej-bulovic-spc-sacuvala-svoje-svetinje>

135 The signing of the Agreement and the Patriarch’s visit to Montenegro were not announced by the Serbian Orthodox Church, while Prime Minister Abazović denied, on Sunday, 11 July, that the document would be signed on 3 August, which eventually did happen. In July 2022, after several hours of discussion, the Government of Montenegro adopted the draft of the Basic Agreement, which was supported by 15 Ministers, while 5 of them were against it. The Government of Montenegro has 20 members. In the Parliament it is supported by the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) of President Milo Đukanović.

136 An illustrative example is the visit of Patriarch Porfirije to Herceg Novi in late

of cooperation between state institutions and the Serbian Orthodox Church as well as between various business entities have been intensified. So, for example, in early August 2022, the Laković Supermarket Chain and the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral submitted a request to the Montenegrin Ministry of Urban Planning for the construction of a business-residential building in Budva. According to some media reports, business premises and apartments will be built on the land that belongs to the Serbian Orthodox Church. In late September 2022, the Government of Montenegro approved 900,000 euros for financing two private secondary schools “Sveti Sava” in Podgorica and “Mitropolit hadži Sava Kosanović” in Nikšić. Although some Ministers and one part of the nongovernmental sector expressed skepticism over the validity of licencing two schools of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which have not yet been opened, the Government’s decision was final. The media reported on the state and municipal land infrastructure investments of the Serbian Orthodox Church. In Žabljak, the local authorities unanimously decided to cede a plot of 600 sq.m for the construction of a cathedral church without compensation. The Church will also carry out construction work near Captain’s Lake, a part of the unspoiled nature in the Municipality of Kolašin where Metropolitan Joanikije consecrated the foundations of the future Church of Saint Lazar of Kosovo on state land.¹³⁷

The statement that largely confirms the suspicions about the ties of Moscow, Belgrade and Podgorica, if not concrete then certainly symbolic and ideological, is the statement of Metropolitan Joanikije of Montenegro and the Littoral at the Cathedral of the

August 2000 when the following text was written on one of the banners: “The proud Serbian Boka is now being warmed by the sun of happiness – Welcome Saint Father Porfirije among the people of Novi.”

137 On 4 October 2012, the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral opened a spiritual and therapeutic counselling centre in Podgorica, modelled after a similar institution in Belgrade with the aim that the newly opened Orthodox Pastoral and Counselling Centre organizes therapeutical and counselling meetings with individuals and families, while special attention will be devoted to children who need help due to various ailments. The offices of Orthodox associations such as “Stupovi” and “Tvrdoš” were also opened.

Resurrection of Christ in Podgorica in mid-March 2022: “Naturally, many world schemers saw their own interest there. As you can see, there are too many lies. We must sympathize with the Orthodox people in Ukraine and, above all else, pray to God for those people who unfortunately found themselves at loggerheads. And that does not seem unknown to us: there are also many divisions and quarrels. And Montenegro was meant to be a small Ukraine”. Analyzing the current situation in Ukraine, the Metropolitan said that it is especially difficult for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church headed by Metropolitan Onufriy, the canonical church “which is in unity with the Moscow Patriarchate and all other Orthodox Churches in the world.” And then, syndromically, the support to Russia is strengthened by anti-European and anti-Western “arguments”: “the long struggle of Orthodoxy against iconoclasts resembles the struggle of Orthodoxy against atheism, communism and godless ideologies of our times in many ways. And this struggle has been going on for more than a hundred years, since the coming of that evil of godlessness, atheism and communism to us from Europe, Protestant Europe. And this struggle continues and so far it has taken many lives. Just imagine how many in Russia and, unfortunately, in our country. And among all Slavic nations”.¹³⁸

The Charge d’Affaires of Ukraine in Montenegro, Natalia Fiialka, condemned the Metropolitan’s statements pointing out that “the situation is not such that Russia protects Orthodox Christians. Orthodox Russians kill Orthodox Ukrainians whom they call ‘their brothers’”. Nela Savković Vukčević, an official of the strongest opposition party in Montenegro, the Democratic Party of Socialists, also reacted: “Metropolitan, the divisions in Montenegro have been created by Greater Serbian politics and the Church that you represent. By saying that Montenegro has been predicted to become ‘a small Ukraine’ and supporting Putin, you are calling for war in our state”. Before giving the latest statement, Metropolitan

138 “Joanikije: Crna Gora je projektovana da bude mala Ukrajina”, *Politika*, 13 March 2022, <https://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/501900/Joanikije-Crna-Gora-je-projektovana-da-bude-mala-Ukrajina>

Joanikije called for peace and an end to war, without taking sides in the conflict. Nevertheless, the organizations close to the Serbian Orthodox Church in Nikšić and Podgorica organized rallies in support of Russia and Putin, whom they called at the last rally “to do the job in Ukraine to the end and destroy NATO”.¹³⁹

In the opinion of historian Miloš Vukanović, Metropolitan Joanikije has said what the highest church dignitaries in Serbia think and that the story about the “neutrality” of the Serbian Orthodox Church vis-à-vis the war in Ukraine is the screen behind which the hiding the ideological goals: “The Serbian Orthodox Church is conditioned by Aleksandar Vučić’s policy and is neutral in this story as much as is ordered by President Vučić,” According to this historian, the ideology of the Serbian Orthodox Church is, in every message, in compliance with the Moscow Patriarchate’s ideology where, in essence, we have no religious policy. This is a paranatol policy, namely the doctrine used by Putin to attack Ukraine: “It is a question of the doctrine that they (Ukrainians) are an artificial nation and that Ukraine should not exist, because it is an integral part of Russia, using fabricated and semi-fantasy historical narratives”. Therefore, Vukanović holds that Joanikije’s parallel between Montenegro and Ukraine is extremely dangerous: “If you plan Montenegro in such a way, then you believe that it should not be an independent state, that the Montenegrin nation should not exist and that it is the state cultural and historical area of another nation.” The Montenegrin Pen Centre previously called on the international community to condemn Joanikije’s statement “as an act against everything that the European Union and NATO stand for”. They announced that “since Joanikije views Montenegro as a small Ukraine, a similar Russian or Serbian aggression against it will be justified due to the ‘ungodly’ Montenegrin aspiration to realize its right to have a state, culture, language and church”.¹⁴⁰

139 “Crnogorska opozicija i diplomata Ukrajine osudili izjavu mitropolita Joanikija”, N1, 15 March 2022, <https://rs.n1info.com/region/crnogorska-opozicija-i-diplomata-ukrajine-osudili-izjavu-mitropolita-joanikija/>

140 “Opasne paralele Crne Gore i Ukrajine”, RFE, 14 March 2022, <https://>

The case of the litany honouring the Patron Saint Day of the city of Danilovgrad, which was organized on 9 October 2022, is also symbolic. It was led by Bishop Metodije of Budimlje and Nikšić together with individuals in unconventional uniforms who allegedly belong to the “Russian Cossack Army”. Those present at the ceremony in Danilovograd also included the Ambassador of the Russian Federation to Montenegro, Vladislav Maslennikov, and the Charge d’Affaires of the Embassy of the Republic of Serbia in Montenegro, Jelisaveta Čolanović.¹⁴¹

WEAPONS AND THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

There have been the indications of the potential storage of weapons in the facilities of the Serbian Orthodox Church for a long time. However, this issue was actualized after weapons and military equipment were found in the courtyard of the Banjska Monastery in northern Kosovo. The monastery was used by an armed group that clashed with the Kosovo police on 24 September, when police officer Afrim Bunjaku was killed. The Diocese of Raška and Prizren, which has jurisdiction over the monastery, announced that these weapons and military equipment “were thrown away by the people leaving the monastery”.¹⁴²

A few months before Banjska, Alicia Kearns, chair of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee, warned the international public that Serbian weapons were being smuggled into Kosovo in ambulances and “stored” in the facilities of the Serbian Orthodox Church. KFOR confirmed that the event refers to 2022 when the Royal Fusilier Battalion was deployed in northern Kosovo as support to

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www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/mitropolit-joanikije-paralele-crna-gora-ukrajina/31752731.html

141 “Crna Gora u ,temeljnom zagrljaju’ SPC-a”, RFE, 12 October 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/spc-moleban-temeljni-ugovor-crna-gora/32075360.html>

142 RFE: „Oružje u hramovima SPC u Crnoj Gori, zasad nedokazana sumnja”, 4 October 2023, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/manastrir-naoruzanje-spc-ustolicenje/32621479.html>

KFOR, but no evidence was found. The Diocese of Raška and Prizren responded that it was a “very dangerous accusation that criminalizes the Serbian Orthodox Church” and requested that the accusations made by Alicia Karns be urgently investigated. The British politician came under attack from the Serbian authorities, including Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić who demanded that an investigation be carried out against Alicia Kearns¹⁴³.

The Serbian Orthodox Church has also been brought into connection with weapons and criminal groups in Montenegro. The media published transcripts of a conversation between two alleged members of the “Škaljarci” criminal clan, in which the SPC is mentioned as the financier of “100 Kalashnikovs” before the parliamentary elections in 2020. The transcripts were downloaded from the Sky application. The case is in the Special Prosecutor’s Office of Montenegro.¹⁴⁴ On the eve of the enthronement of Metropolitan Joanikije Mićović at the Cetinje Monastery (September 2021) and also during the ceremony, several armed civilians were seen in the monastery, which is why activist Aleksandar Zeković filed a report with the Police Directorate and the State Prosecutor’s Office. He asked them to check whether there are unknown persons “who possess firearms and other means suitable for committing various crimes” in it¹⁴⁵. The police and the prosecutor’s office did not respond whether these allegations were verified. On the photos from the event, along with heavily armed police officers and priests of the Serbian Orthodox Church, there are armed civilians¹⁴⁶. Dur-

143 RFE: „Optužbe o oružju još jedna u redu onih koje SPC odbacuje“, 7 July 2023, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/spc-kosovo-oruzje-srbija/32493781.html>

144 RFE: „Oružje u hramovima SPC u Crnoj Gori, zasad nedokazana sumnja“, 4 October 2023, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/manastrir-naoruzanje-spc-ustolice/32621479.html>

145 RFE: „Oružje u hramovima SPC u Crnoj Gori, zasad nedokazana sumnja“, 4 October, 2023, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/manastrir-naoruzanje-spc-ustolice/32621479.html>

146 RFE: „Oružje u hramovima SPC u Crnoj Gori, zasad nedokazana sumnja“, 4 October, 2023, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/manastrir-naoruzanje-spc-ustolice/32621479.html>

ing the enthronement, citizens organized a protest and blocked approaches to the city. They demanded that the enthronement should not take place in Cetinje, which is the symbol of Montenegrin state sovereignty, but also the seat of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro.

The possibility of the police and security services to verify any reports that there are weapons in some SPC facilities in Montenegro became even more difficult after the signing of the Basic Agreement between the Montenegrin Government and the Serbian Orthodox Church in August 2022. The state authorities cannot take security measures without the prior approval of the relevant church bodies. In this way, the SPS actually obtained extraterritorial status due to which pro-European civil society organizations criticized the Basic Agreement.

During the wars of the 1990s, the Serbian Orthodox Church was often associated with the Serbian military forces and paramilitary groups. There are videos of priests blessing the members of these groups.

THE BULWARK OF CHRISTIANITY

Bishop Irinej of Bačka was awarded the Middle Cross of the Hungarian Order of Merit because, as stated in the letter of Hungarian President Janos Ader which was read at the ceremony in the Patriarchate, he significantly contributed to the strengthening of mutual confidence and advancement of relations between the two nations. On that occasion, Bishop Irinej stated that “today we should emphasize more and keep in mind those blessed moments in our history when Serbs and Hungarians fought together to preserve their Christian identity and, due to their geographical position, were the so-called *antemurale christianitatis* for northern and western Europe”. Then he sharpened his rhetoric: “Faced with the onslaught of extreme secularism, which is, unfortunately, only a euphemism for the atheization of now mostly post-Christian Europe, we must join forces to bear witness to our faith, our

soil, our conscience, our identity and thus repeat the feat that was once achieved on the battlefield, but today it should be achieved in the spiritual field, in the field of culture and civilization". There followed the glorification of the personality and deeds of the Prime Minister of our northern neighbour: "Modern Hungary and its President, as well as its Prime Minister Orban serve as an obvious example and a lesson for the whole of Europe and our entire cultural circle in which we live and exist as the Churches, as the nations, as the states".¹⁴⁷

The same values, based on the image and work of Nikolaj Velimirović, were emphasized by Patriarch Porfirije in Budapest, in early September 2022, when he presented the Order of Saint Sava of the first grade to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban at the seat of the Hungarian Government in the presence of Bishop Irinej of Bačka and Bishop Lukijan of Buda. The highest decoration was awarded "as the sign of gratitude for the promotion of traditional Christian values, selfless support to the Diocese of Buda of the Serbian Orthodox Church and exceptional personal contribution to the strengthening of friendship between our two neighbouring nations." The Patriarch said that we all knew that each individual and each community live in accordance with their value systems: "On the basis of these values they organize private, social and cultural life, form public morals, set the priorities and standards, build relations with others and those who are different and, in a word, build and cherish their authentic identity. Today, however, we are faced with the waves of new value systems that are often aggressively imposed on a global scale with an aim to destroy every existing natural and civilizational order and establish a new paradigm". In this maelstrom, the Patriarch continues, the intention is to destroy the foundations of identity and the pillars of individuals and communities and make everything relative, fragile and fluid: "However, you advocate the Christian value system originating from the the

147 "Mađarska odlikovala episkopa Irineja, on poručio: Orban daje primer Evropi", N1, 28 November 2021, <https://n1novemberinfo.rs/vesti/madjarska-odlikovala-episkopa-irineja-poboljsao-polozaj-madjara-u-srbiji/>

Gospel that was established by God. Those values shaped both the Hungarian and the Serbian people, the values that shaped the Europe we knew until yesterday and lived in it until yesterday. That is why we are the same; there is no difference between us.”¹⁴⁸

So, for example, Bishop Irinej of Bačka criticizes the European Union and mentions a desirable model: “Brussels refused not only to enter the prayer to God into the European Constitution, but also at least to mention the historical fact that the contemporary European culture and civilization have Judeo-Christian roots. That is why Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, who is a greater European than all Brussels bureaucrats taken together, put God back in the Constitution of the new, genuine, Christian and Orthodox Russia.”¹⁴⁹

THE SERBIAN PATRIARCHATE BETWEEN THE SECOND AND THE THIRD ROME

During the traditional Christmas interview, at the beginning of January 2023, after the statement of Milorad Vučelić, the editor-in-chief of the pro-Russian newspaper *Večernje novosti*, that “the plan to destroy Orthodoxy has been devised in certain centres of power”, Bishop Irinej of Bačka was asked to comment on the “events in Ukraine” which confirm that the plan is underway. The Bishop condemned the key role of the Patriarchate of Constantinople in the noncanonical creation of “its quasi-ecclesiastical yet nonecclesiastical parastructure in Ukraine”. Bishop Irinej pointed out that the mentioned Patriarchate “knew all along that the post-Maidan Ukrainian government, planned as the most radical anti-Russian team in the direct service of NATO and the political ‘West’, is not only interested in the transformation of schismatic

148 “Patrijarh Porfirije uručio Viktoru Orbanu najviše odličje SPC – Orden Svetog Save prvog stepena za zasluge”, *Informer*, 5 September 2022, <https://informer.rs/vesti/drustvo/732472/patrijarh-porfirije-viktor-orban-orden>

149 “Njegovo preosveštenstvo episkop bački Irinej Bulović: Ako pristanemo da nam uzmu Kosovo, nestaćemo sa lica zemlje”, *Novosti*, 1 January 2021, <https://www.novosti.rs/drustvo/vesti/950187/njegovo-preosvestenstvo-episkop-backi-irinej-bulovic-ako-pristanemo-nam-uzmu-kosovo-nestacemo-lica-zemlje>

groups into a state Church, but is also extremely active in the persecution of the real canonic Church.” Irinej finished his analysis in which he discussed the “Anti-Russia Project, state persecution of everything Russian in Ukraine, especially the Church, Russian language and culture, perennial terror against Russians and Russian-speakers in Donbas, NATO’s refusal to make Ukraine a neutral buffer zone and its intention to reach the Russian borders and so on”, namely his unilateral preference for the arguments of exclusively one party to the conflict, with the conviction that “we all, in all Orthodox Churches, should feel the same co-suffering love for each other and constantly pray that the God of Peace restores peace among the brothers as soon as possible and that we by no means participate in the propaganda of the forces that are declaratively for peace, but “promote” it by sending more and more weapons to Ukraine, thus making the war last as long as possible...”¹⁵⁰

The recognizable rhetoric of a “righteous war”, which used to have a very strong institutionalized theological base among the “Justinians” was reactivated in the case of the war in Ukraine. Commenting on the current events in the Kyiv-Pechensk Lavra, Bishop Irinej of Bačka said that no matter whether we consider this war to be more just or entirely just from Russia’s side which is, as he pointed out, the prevailing opinion among Orthodox Christians, and was not sought by Russia but by the West, we cannot say, due to such a viewpoint, ‘Let the Ukrainians suffer.’¹⁵¹

It is interesting to point to the reaction of some Orthodox authorities to the letter sent by Patriarch Porfirije to world and church leaders in July 2023, asking them to use their worldwide reputation to stand up for the release of Metropolitan Pavel of Vyshgorod and Chernobyl and the Abbot of the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra

150 “Intervju koji izlazi samo na Božić: Episkop bački dr Irinej Bulović – SPC je sačuvala svoje svetinje”, *Novosti online*, 8 January 2023, <https://www.novosti.rs/c/vesti/politika/1189857/intervju-koji-izlazi-samo-bozic-episkop-backi-irinej-bulovic-spc-sacuvala-svoje-svetinje>

151 “Episkop Irinej Bulović: Rat nije tražila Rusija, nego Zapad”, *Sputnik*, 6 April 2023, <https://lat.sputnikportal.rs/20230406/episkop-irinej-bulovic-rat-nije-trazila-rusija-nego-zapad-1153755369.html>

from custody in Ukraine. In the Patriarch's opinion, the decision of the Ukrainian judiciary is, on one side, "the product of a tense atmosphere in Ukraine, which is engulfed in the flames of war" and, on the other side, "the result of the current government's intention to take over the Kyiv-Pechensk Lavra (monastery)". Namely, Patriarch Theodore II of Alexandria and All Africa replied to the letter of Serbian Patriarch Porfirije in which he reprimanded him for his selective sensitivity to the current events in the Orthodox world, including primarily Russia's interference in Africa and its invasion of Ukraine. In his answer, the Patriarch of Alexandria "reminds" the Serbian Patriarch that he has not shown the same sensitivity towards thousands of African Orthodox Christians whom the "Moscow Patriarchate has spiritually poisoned by its redatory and brazen invasion of a parish that is geographically, pastorally and spiritually under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Alexandria". (...) "We regret that you do not show the same sensitivity to this completely unjust, anti-Church and anti-canonical act as in the case of Russia-backed Metropolitan Pavel of Vyshgorod. You remain silent despite my repeated appeals concerning not only one person, but thousands of African Orthodox Christians", added the Patriarch of Alexandria, expressing the expectations that the Serbian Patriarch will show the same feeling he has shown toward Metropolitan Pavel and condemn the anti-canonical and anti-Christian actions of the Russian Church.¹⁵²

152 "Ćutite, uprkos mojim ponovljenim apelima": Patrijarh aleksandrijski odgovorio na pismo patrijarha Porfirija", *Danas*, 26 July 2023, <https://www.danas.rs/svet/cutite-uprkos-mojim-ponovljenim-apelima-patrijarh-aleksandrijski-odgovorio-na-pismo-patrijarha-porfirija/>

INTRA-CHURCH TENSIONS IN THE SHADOW OF THE POLITICIZATION OF THE MAJORITY CHURCH

Bishop Irinej (Bulović) of Bačka, the long-time head of the Information Service of the Serbian Orthodox Church, initiated the procedure for banning priests from communicating through social media unless they have the blessing of the competent hierarchy. The proposal, which did not surprise anyone, was later formalized by the decision of the Holy Synod and Patriarch Porfirije. At the session held on 31 August 2021, the Holy Synod made the decision concerning the “increasingly frequent practice of some priests to appear in various discussions and video clips on social media. (...) Any public appearance, including one’s appearance and activity on social media, is not allowed without our blessing.” According to anonymous patriarchal sources, published by some Belgrade media, “the reason for this decision was the public appearance of some priests who not only criticized some bishops, but also criticized the authorities on social media. It is an open secret that the Bishop of Bačka maintains close relations with the Serbian regime and that he has been the transmitter of their influence on decision making in the Serbian Orthodox Church. He has been the most influential member of the Holy Synod for years and we also see that this body still implements the decisions coinciding with his ideas”¹⁵³ The ban on the public appearance of priests, that is, making it conditional upon the blessing of the relevant bishop, is not something new or surprising. For example, Bishop Jovan (Mladenović) of Šumadija – as the Administrator of the Archdiocese of Belgrade and Karlovac, the position he assumed after the death of Patriarch Irinej – made the decision to ban public appearance, which was legitimized by making reference to the Holy Synod’s decisions of 2003 and 2017.

153 “Irinej zabranio sveštenicima da pišu statute na mrežama, Porfirije odobrio”, Nova, 6 October 2021, <https://nova.rs/vesti/politika/irinej-zabranio-svestenicima-da-pisu-statuse-na-mrezama-porfirije-odobrio/>

The Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church has already distanced itself from the statements of some bishops, especially if they have been directed against the current political elite. They have most often distanced themselves from the statements of Bishop Grigorije of Düsseldorf and All Germany. As is emphasized by the Holy Synod, “they are exclusively of a political and even party character and have no common ground with the mission of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Therefore, the Holy Synod informs all those who somehow attribute one’s political statements to the SPC or connect them to it that this is exclusively a question of the personal view and involvement of an individual – not in the capacity of a bishop, but exclusively in the capacity of a citizen. The extent to which the political or state legal activity of bishops and clerics is approved and blessed is autonomously and independently determined by the Church on the basis of its canonical order”.¹⁵⁴ It is assumed that the text authored by Bishop Grigorije of Düsseldorf and All Germany and published in a Belgrade weekly,¹⁵⁵ in which he publicly supported an opposition presidential candidate, was the reason for the imposition of new, stricter and more precise bans within the church hierarchy.

On the other hand, for example, in his address to the public after the completion of “The Road of Mother Serbia”, which connects the Medina Monastery “with the rest of the civilized world”, Archbishop Sergije of Bihać and Petrovac pointed to the significance of the Serbian President’s image and deeds as well as to the harmfulness of opposition activities. The Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church not only failed to react, but even published this laudatory address on the official website of the majority church. In the text posted on 23 September 2021, one can read, among other things, the following words of the aforementioned Archbishop:

154 “Sinod se ograđuje od Grigorija: Izjave političkog, čak i stranačkog karaktera”, N1, 11 January 2021, <https://n1info.rs/vesti/sinod-se-ogradjuje-od-grigorija-izjave-politickog-cak-i-stranackog-karaktera/>

155 “Vladika Grigorije: Vladeti Jankoviću kao čoveku u potpunosti verujem”, N1, 3 February 2022, <https://n1info.rs/vesti/vladika-grigorije-o-vladeti-jankovicu/>

“... I understand and I do not hesitate to say that, thanks to Aleksandar Vučić’s statesmanlike vision, the Serbian people is experiencing a great renewal for which we have been waiting for at least eight decades. (...) Zagreb does not forgive Vučić because the Serbian Army is the strongest in the region, Sarajevo is upset because Vučić supports Srpska through plenty of projects in every local community, Pristina is upset because Vučić is alive at all, while one part of the Podgorica public finds it unforgivable that Vučić takes care of local Serbs and the SPC on a daily basis. On the other hand, the Other Serb political and media elite, aware of Serbia’s strong step forward, does not forgive him because Serbia and Serbs are better off; the deserters have never forgiven the warriors their victories.” The eulogy for Aleksandar Vučić ends with the following statement: “That is why it is important not to be in opposition to Serbia, its daily progress and the efforts of the current government to turn Serbs back to themselves, their spiritual values and economic progress.”¹⁵⁶

In February 2022, only a few days after the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church sent a letter to the Bishops stating that they are banned from “interfering in secular affairs” and supporting political parties and politicians. The appearance of the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the propaganda pre-election video of the Serbian Progressive Party provoked numerous public reactions. In order to prevent “confusion and discouragement among the faithful people” it is specifically pointed out in the letter that “it is inadmissible to participate in inter-party competition and make public statements in favour of or against political parties or candidates in election processes and outside of them”.¹⁵⁷ In the pre-

156 “Episkop Sergije: “Put Majke Srbije”, Aleksandar Vučić i srpske stranputice”, IS SPC, 23 September 2021, <https://spc.rs/%d0%b5%d0%bf%d0%b8%d1%81%d0%ba%d0%be%d0%bf-%d1%81%d0%b5%d1%80%d0%b3%d0%b8%d1%98%d0%b5-%d0%bf%d1%83%d1%82-%d0%bc%d0%b0%d1%98%d0%ba%d0%b5-%d1%81%d1%80%d0%b1%d0%b8%d1%98%d0%b5-%d0%b0/>

157 “Ništa im nije sveto: Vučić ubacio Porfirija u spot SNS, a on zabranio vladikama da govore o politici”, Direktno, 22 February 2022, <https://direktno.rs/izbori-2022/399322/patrijarh-porfirije-spc-vladike-politika-aleksandar-vucic-sns-spot.html>

election video of the ruling party, next to Patriarch Porfirije there appears Bishop Pahomije of Vranje, filmed while breceiving a decoration from Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić. According to Professor Rodoljub Kubat, the Patriarch was expected to speak out and publicly distant himself from the video of the Serbian Progressive Party and ask it to remove the controversial content. However, this did not happen.

Let us remind ourselves that a similar situation occurred five years earlier when, during a pre-election campaign, the presidential candidate Vuk Jeremić used the shots from a forum at which the then Metropolitan Porfirije of Zagreb and Ljubljana also participated. The Metropolitan reacted harshly, stating that he had been abused and asked that the shots capturing him be removed, which Jeremić did. At that time, Metropolitan Porfirije reacted very decisively and clearly: “I have an obligation to inform the public that I did not even assume that my participation in a religious gathering, to which I was invited as a guest, could be (mis)used for political promotion in anyone’s presidential or any other campaign”. Metropolitan Porfirije also stated that his encounter with Jeremić was “tendentiously used in various forms in the presidential campaign” and pointed out that his permission was not sought. He added that even it had been sought it would not have been granted. The then Metropolitan and current Patriarch clearly explained: “The role of a priest is to unite and not to separate. I have never publicly opted for politicians or political parties before and I do not intend to do that in the future.”

In the midst of the presidential election campaign in the Republic of Srpska, in October 2022, when the President of the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) and its candidate at the upcoming elections, Milorad Dodik, met with Patriarch Porfirije in Belgrade. Milorad Dodik wrote on his Instagram profile that he and Porfirije discussed the current situation in the Republic of Srpska and other important issues for its people.¹⁵⁸ This time,

158 “Dodik se sastao sa patrijarhom Porfirijem”, N1, 19 October 2022, <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/dodik-se-sastao-sa-patrijarhom-porfirijem/>

Porfirije did not dissociate himself from the media, that is, the political-propaganda exploitation of the image and work of the highest Orthodox religious authority.

The previous Patriarch Irinej also used to find the ways to avoid the responsibility for his political activities. Here we can cite an example from March 2019. Namely, the office of Patriarch Irinej was allegedly acquainted with the content of the letter from the opposition Alliance for Serbia, which was published in the media and in which it protests because during his speech in Niš marking the anniversary of NATO bombing, the Patriarch said that protests give “strength to our enemies”. On that occasion, he also said that opposition politicians “cannot come (to power) in this way nor can they harm (the government), but they can harm their people and their country”. In an open letter to the Patriarch, signed by the part of the opposition supporting months-long anti-government protests, it is written: “Your negative public assessment of the protests means direct interference in daily political issues and open siding with the authorities, which someone in your position should never do, because the Serbian Orthodox Church is not owned by the Serbian Progressive Party and you are the Head of our whole Church that is comprised of believers of different political affiliations”.¹⁵⁹

The political preference of religious leaders is not a novelty. Immediately after the introduction of multi-party system there were bishops who openly supported either the government or the opposition. However, there were only sporadic calls to support a certain candidate in elections, which was usually sanctioned in the church circles themselves. Bishop Filaret of Mileševa, for example, had to publicly repent and apologize to the Bishops for showing his support for Slobodan Milošević in the 2000 presidential elections. In 2013, Patriarch Irinej called on Serbs to vote in Kosovo, but the statement of the Serbian Orthodox Church soon followed, explaining that the Patriarch did that in his own name and not in the name of the Church. The only call for voting, which was generally

159 “Savez za Srbiju: Patrijarh Irinej stao uz vlast”, RFE, 25 March 2019, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/29841089.html>

accepted, was the call of Patriarch Pavle urging Serbian citizens to vote in the referendum on a new Constitution in 2006.

As of late, the Bishops have frequently issued the statements referring to the socio-political situation, but it is evident that those who defend President Aleksandar Vučić comparing him even with Jesus Christ are not reprimanded for their statements. On the other side, for example, Bishop Grigorije of Düsseldorf and All Germany, who has been openly criticizing the current regime for years, is always reprimanded for his views. The connoisseurs of church affairs believe that the decision of the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church to ban commenting on the election campaign was brought precisely because of Grigorije's support for an opposition candidate.¹⁶⁰ The ties between the church and the political structures has also been pointed out by Rada Trajković, President of the European Movement of Serbs from Kosovo and Metohija. According to her, prior to the election of Patriarch Porfirije, the Serbian Orthodox Church acted as the main support for Serbs, but now there are doubts about that institution which is "more involved in politics as a branch of the SNS than is the place and roof for all people who are its believers".¹⁶¹

A certain group of the dignitaries of the Serbian Orthodox Church, regardless of occasional criticism both from certain parts of religious structures and from the "secular sphere", resists pressure very strongly and persistently, and maintains a very exclusive status of protected social actors in our society. The nongovernmental organization Montenegro International has recently pointed out and reminded the international public about them by sending a letter to the Ecumenical Patriarch in which it has accused the high dignitaries of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Bishops

160 "Porfirije mora da se izjasni oko spota SNS", *Danas*, 23 February 2022, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/porfirije-mora-da-se-izjasni-oko-spota-sns/>

161 "Rada Trajković: SPC se ponaša kao ogranak SNS, do Porfirija bila oslonac Srbima," N1, 20 July 2022, <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/rada-trajkovic-spc-se-ponasa-kao-ogranak-sns-do-porfirija-bila-oslonac-srbima/>

Joanikije and Irinej Bulović, as well as Patriarch Porfirije of hiding pedophilia within the Church, despite knowing about the cases of pedophilia and pimping for many years. However, all investigations have ended up in a cover-up. In his latest book "Ispovest kako smo ubili Boga" (The Confession of How We Killed God), which was published by the NGO Montenegro International, the former Deakon Bojan Jovanović accused Bishop Joanikije of covering up the cases of pedophilia. The mentioned nongovernmental organization reminds us that in 2012 the commission of the Serbian Orthodox Church headed by Bishop Joanikije of Budimlja and Nikšić launched an investigation into three cases of pedophilia at the Cetinje Monastery, but it never got an epilogue. On 9 May 2021, Montenegro International brought the criminal charges against the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral and Bishop Joanikije due to covering up the cases of pedophilia and alleged minor pimping at the Cetinje and Dajbabe Monasteries before the Special State Prosecutor's Office. The cases of pedophilia that have especially shaken the Serbian Orthodox Church are the cases of Bishops Kačavenda and Pahomije.¹⁶²

It might be interesting to mention another unusual case in which Bishop (Bulović) of Bačka has stood out with his characteristic reaction. Namely, after the death of Vicar Bishop Jeronim (Močević) of Jegar, one of the youngest Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church, who suddenly died at the age of 47 in 2016, his mother wished to build a legacy consisting of her son's belongings and personal library. Thus, she asked the Diocese of Bačka, through her lawyer, to return to her his personal documents, manuscripts, PhD thesis, numerous books, some of which were very valuable, as well as the gifts obtained by her only son from his friends when he was elected Bishop. According to some media reports, the Bishop Irinej of Bačka reacted very harshly. He criticized the bereaved

162 Diković, Jelena, "Mi: Joanikije, Porfirije, Irinej Bulović i drugi prikrivali pedofiliju u SPC", *Danas*, 16 August .2021, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/mi-joanikije-porfirije-irinej-bulovic-i-drugi-prikrivali-pedofiliju-u-spc/>

woman for asking him for her son's belongings at all, for hiring lawyers and for taking over the family apartment after the grant of probate was issued. In his letter, the Bishop points out that the way she has acted so far "is not acceptable for the Church" and that it is best for her to "accept the Church's views". According to the testimony of the berievđ woman, the Diocese of Bačka has not even given her the list of her son's personal belongings left in the Kovilj Monastery where he served and lived, nor has she ban allowed to see them.¹⁶³

FROM THE PURGE TO THE CHALLENGE OF AUTONOMY

The common area of activites, demonstration of power and disciplining by Patriarch Porfirije and his mentor Bishop Irinej of Bačka is the most prestigious higher education religious institution, that is, the Faculty of Orthodox Theology of the University of Belgrade. After his controversial appointment as Associate Professor in 1990, which was made only after the death of Bishop Sava of Šumadija, who was in charge of church education within the Serbian Orthodox Church. Later on, Bishop Irinej Bulović was the four-term Dean of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology for four terms. His terms were marked by disciplining the boarding life of students and installing the bars on the windows of the student dormitory.

In late 2019, the Faculty of Orthodox Theology was torn by internal conflicts and the names of the actors involved in them – Metropolitan Porfirije of Zagreb and Ljubljana and Bishop Irinej of Bačka among others – appeared in public. Namely, after the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church denied a blessing to the Dean, Bishop Ignjatije, to carry out this duty because he was against the decision to remove two lecturers from teaching, the Rectorate of the University of Belgrade reacted because

163 "NIN: Kako je episkop bački pretio majci preminulog vladike", N1 24 November 2020, <https://n1info.rs/vesti/a675963-nin-kako-je-episkop-backi-pretio-majci-preminulog-vladike/>

the Church's interference in the work of the Faculty that is part of the University. The conflicts were intensified to such an extent that the employed reported the threats by Metropolitan Porfirije, who is the head of the Faculty Council, whose legality has been called into question.

Some experts pointed to cooperation between the Church and the state authorities in the violation of the Constitution and law, as well as the Statute of the oldest state university. According to the sociologist of religion, Professor Milan Vukomanović, "the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church went so far in the dispute over the Faculty of Orthodox Theology that it completely ignored the warnings from the Rectorate. Moreover, the Serbian Government, as the founder of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, came to the aid of the Holy Synod by appointing eight representatives to the Faculty Council, including one Bishop, a member of the Holy Synod, Irinej Bulović, who complemented the illegally elected Council as a state representative just before the election of a new dean."¹⁶⁴

The Rector of the University of Belgrade, Ivanka Popović, has stated that the University is concerned because the reputation of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology is called into question due to the influence coming from outside the academic community, thus jeopardizing the legally guaranteed autonomy of the Faculty.

The problem soon became more complicated by the announced dismissals from the mentioned religious institution of higher education. In mid-October 2020, Professor Rodoljub Kubat announced that he received a dismissal notice from the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in which it was stated that, pursuant to the executive decision of the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Faculty of Orthodox Theology brought the decision to ban Kubat from teaching at that Faculty.

164 "Jedan dopis stvorio probleme – 'igra moći' na Bogoslovskom fakultetu," N1, 17 December 2010, <https://n1info.rs/vesti/a553305-jedan-dopis-tvorio-probleme-igra-moci-na-bogoslovskom-fakultetu/>

One part of the public expressed its condemnation and assessed that the autonomy of the University and scientific research, as well as the principle of secularism proclaimed by the Serbian Constitution were called into question in a “most cruel way” because the Administration of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology “unquestionably” carried out the decision of the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church by handing over a dismissal notice to the mentioned professor. Metropolitan Porfirije of Zagreb and Ljubljana reacted to the condemnation stating that in the case of the fired Professor Rodoljub Kubat “individuals see the base and chance for the elimination” of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology from the academic community. He also stated that one “cannot dispute the legality and democracy of Kubat’s treatment”. Metropolitan Porfirije, who is the President of the Council of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, continued his reasoning: “The Holy Synod of Bishops has the legitimate right to grant and withdraw the approval for teaching at the highest theological institution which has originated from the bosom of the Serbian Orthodox Church and, as a founder and full-fledged member of the University of Belgrade, also fully participates in the life of this institution.” Emphasizing that the decision of the Holy Synod “was not unfounded”, the Metropolitan explained it in the following way: “According to the conclusion of this body, it was preceded by Dr Kubat’s perennial anti-church and anti-faculty activities which, through social, print and electronic media, as well as in other direct and indirect ways, caused irreversible damage to the most important institutions and the reputation of the Serbian Orthodox Church.” Reacting to the statement of the Rector’s Board of the University of Belgrade, which disputes the legality and legitimacy of the decision of the Dean of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Professor Kubat has stated that things are moving in a very wrong direction if the Faculty of Orthodox Theology “persists in its intention to fire him” even after the the statement of the Rector’s Board. Kubat claims that “much more serious

problems in the Church and at the Faculty” are covered up” by his dismissal.¹⁶⁵

Soon afterwards, Professor Bishop Maksim Vasiljević was also dismissed from the same faculty in an almost identical way, after the Holy Synod did not give him its blessing for the teaching position. In this case, the recently fired Professor Kubat recognizes the systematic persecution of the unfit, while the message of university professors that a blessing at a state university cannot be a criterion is more and more often articulated. In addition to Professors Kubat and Bishop Maksim, Assistant Professor Marko Vilotić was also left without a blessing at the beginning of the year. Even then, the Church did not give any explanation, while Bishop Irinej of Bačka stated that it was of a theological nature and would not be comprehensible to the public.¹⁶⁶

In the end, the Ministry of Education did not accept the objections of the University of Belgrade that giving consent (blessing) by the Serbian Orthodox Church for the employment and dismissal of teachers at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, as well as for the enrolment of students would violate the University’s autonomy and produce harmful consequences. In the Draft Amendments to the Law on Higher Education, which was adopted by the Serbian Government in mid-2021, there remained the identical provisions as those in the Draft Amendments to the Law to which both the University and several faculties expressed their objections during the discussion. The attempts to find a compromise solution for the University and the Faculty of Orthodox Theology did not bear fruit, so that the state decided to resolve the dispute by amending the Law on Higher Education. It is worth mentioning the observation made by Ognjen Radonjić, a professor at the Faculty of

165 “Mitropolit Porfirije: Postupak otkaza profesoru Kubatu zakonit i demokratičan”, N1, 25 October 2020, <https://n1info.rs/vesti/a664524-mitropolit-porfirije-postupak-otkaza-profesoru-kubatu-zakonit-i-demokratican/>

166 “I vladika Maksim ‘bez blagoslova’, Kubat kaže – sistematski progon kritičara”, N1, 15 Novembar 2020, <https://n1info.rs/vesti/a672321-i-vladika-maksim-bez-blagoslova-kubat-kaze-sistematski-progon-kriticara/>

Philosophy, that it was clear from the very beginning that the Draft Amendments to the Law on Higher Education were put up for discussion just to fulfil the form. He assumes that the agreement on the introduction of a blessing into this law was reached with the leaders of the Church, which is why the Ministry of Education was not interested in the opinion of academics from the outset. In this case, Professor Radonjić pointed to a very important fact: “It must be admitted, however, that even the academic community did not react to it when it was the subject of discussion. (...) Apart from a few lonely voices, the University Administration as well as the Senate have decided to solve this problem, which has been present since 2019, by doing nothing. And the price had to be paid: the autonomy of the University was thrown into the dustbin, because a non-university body was allowed to decide on university issues, while the Serbian Orthodox Church is neither the owner nor the employer nor the founder of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology. It has been shown that the University is not up to the situation we are in and the only thing left for me is to express my regret.”¹⁶⁷

THE CONTINUATION OF DISCRIMINATION

In its communiqué the Holz Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church has welcomed the decision of the highest state authorities to cancel the holding of EuroPride in Belgrade in September 2022 and sent its “sincere congratulations” to the Serbian President and the Government on that “responsible decision”. In this communiqué it was pointed out that the “holding of this ‘parade’, in the service of promoting LGBT ideology, which tries to impose itself on Europe and the so-called Western world in general and, unfortunately, on our people as well, would not be useful to anyone. On the contrary, it would cause additional tensions and new divisions, as well as bitterness and revolt among the believers of the

167 “Izmene Zakona o visokom obrazovanju”, Paragraf, 8 June 2021, <https://paragrafco.co.rs/dnevne-vesti/100621/100621-vest8.html>

Serbian Orthodox Church and all other traditional churches and religious communities in Serbia". It is further stated as follows: "We believe that the LGBT topic itself is inappropriate, especially nowadays when for us the Serbs, both in Serbia and everywhere in the world, there is the topic of topics, that is, the topic of Kosovo and Metohija". Naturally, even on this occasion, the opportunity was not missed to mention "our state leadership headed by the Serbian President" who is "uncompromisingly and unyieldingly fighting for the preservation of our primeval southern province within Serbia, for the salvation of our greatest sanctuaries, (...) as well as for the survival and stay of the Serbian people on their centuries-old hearths."¹⁶⁸

The majority position in the majority church was comprehensively articulated by Bishop Nikanor of Banat in August 2022: "... They have been sent by those who want to destroy everything which is valuable, which is sacred, which is valuable, which is God's. And we raise our voice against such. I also have one option, that is what I am going to do now, to anathematize them all. I will pronounce a curse on them, but not on their descendants and families, their children... in fact, they don't have children, right? They don't recognize their children, they are not parents, what are they? They are neither the mothers nor the fathers. Now our child, namely your child must not call you father or mother, but the first parent, the second parent and so on. Do we want to listen to the one who desecrated our country and if I say her name, I won't be able to say God's name. The one who allowed her own brother to be the father of her son. Will we accept that? And you know who I'm talking about. She is neither of our faith, nor of our origin. She is an enemy, her parents and grandparents were enemies and butchers of the Serbian people. And she preaches today that she has neither the father nor the mother. She has no children and has children. Whose children, whose children are they? We will stand up against it, me first. I'm getting up at this moment, I've already

168 "SPC pozdravlja otkazivanje Europrajda", *Politika*, 27 August 2022, <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/515318/SPC-pozdravlja-otkazivanje-Europrajda>

gotten up. And at this moment today, I stand up and curse, I will curse and anathemize all those who organize and participate in something like that. I can do so much, if I had a weapon, I would use it, but I've not. And probably no one will give it to me even if I ask for it now when they hear that I would go out with a weapon. And I would go out..."¹⁶⁹

In late July 2022, in his address after the liturgy in Pelagićevo, Bishop Fotije of Zvornik and Tuzla said that the preparation of the so-called Pride Parade "violates all family values and all moral values of our Serbian Orthodox people. The preservation of the family and true moral values is something that is primary and necessary". Criticizing the yielding to foreign influences, the Bishop continued: "Unfortunately, it seems that there will be gay parades throughout Serbia during one week in September. And when I saw the programme of the announced gay parades, they should visit all cultural institutions, church institutions, monasteries, the Seminary and the High School in Sremski Karlovci, where they won't be?! You can imagine what that week will look like! And why the one who signed that didn't think with his head and compromise his people, ethics, morals, conscience, history, belief? And now people come to us from the hundredth value system, from the hundredth belief system – which is not accepted in our Serbian Orthodox tradition and culture!"¹⁷⁰

While serving "a prayer for the sanctity of marriage and family, harmony and peace among our people in front of the Church of Saint Sava in Belgrade on 11 September 2022 and while addressing the "endless lines of pious people", Patriarch Porfirije pointed to the importance of "Orthodox Christian identity and Gospel values" in the formation of "our public morality", our national identity that is, as traditionally emphasized, based on the historical and

169 "Vladika Nikanor o Pride parade u Beogradu", Youtube, 11 August 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=70Sy0mfsVgg>

170 "Konačno! Episkop Fotije: Ko je potpisao za gej paradu, ko potpiše nezavisno Kosovo...", Pravda, 27 July 2022, <https://pravda.rs/2022/7/27/konacno-episkop-fotije-ko-je-potpisao-za-gej-paradu-ko-potpise-nezavisno-kim-video/>

value-oriented pivotal role of the Serbian Orthodox Church for all Serbs “wherever we live, regardless of the state and political borders”. Here we will single out a long yet very illustrative quote: “... we do not impose our way of life on anyone, but we also do not want anyone, from any part of the world, to come and impose his values, his view of the world, his way of life. (...) We do not want anyone to tell us what we should be. For us, our measure and criterion are the word of Christ, the word of God. Today, however, we are faced with waves, with a tsunami, with the invasion of numerous new value systems, which are imposed violently, aggressively or with soft power and invisible works under the radar, aiming to destroy any existing natural or civilizational order, establish a new paradigm, new rules. (...) The epilogue of these ideologies of post-humanist society is not only that we lose the idea of what is male and what is female, what is marriage but that, in the end (...), we cannot even say with certainty what a man is.”

The Patriarch tried to remedy and mitigate the possible consequences of Bishop Nikanor's destructive rhetoric. However, he retained essentially his stance and demanded the review of textbooks and the withdrawal of the lectures “which promote gender ideology”: “(...) let me immediately emphasize that we are also against any kind of violence, that we are against contempt, hatred, persecution and labelling of those who share such ideas, especially if violence is committed in the name of God, in the name of Christ. (...) We do not judge them, we do not accuse them and we do not condemn them. (...) We do not interfere in how someone organizes his life. It is not a question of personal relationship with anyone in particular. It is about the fact that we cannot accept anyone's weaknesses, preferences and choices wif they are not in compliance with the order established by God, but are promoted and imposed as a new social norm and rule. (...) We cannot allow this ideology to change the model of the society where our people has been living ever since. We are already faced with the fruits of the silent engineering of that LGBT ideology. Lest anyone say that we exaggerate, that we are distrustful, that I exaggerate: we have

recently found out that in our primary and secondary school textbooks, away from the public eye, there are lessons which promote gender ideology. Who has done that? Has anyone asked you, whose children go to school, about it? Do you agree? If you have not been asked and I know you have not, we call on the competent authorities to immediately withdraw all textbooks, handbooks and teaching aids from secondary and elementary schools, as well as pre-school institutions where there are such lessons.”¹⁷¹

It can only be said so much about “we do not impose on anyone”. This topic requires a special review and analysis, but now it is certainly appropriate to ask the Patriarch (former Metropolitan of Zagreb and Ljubljana) whether Serbian citizens were asked this question and “we know they did not” when the mandatory additional postage stamp was issued to finance the construction of the Church of Saint Sava, when the money from the budget of the Republic of Serbia was allocated for the health and social insurance of the clergy, when the property tax exemption and the right to a VAT refund were introduced, when enormous funds from the state budget were allocated for the construction of the Church or the mere introduction of religious education into the education system which, on top of everything, was done beyond law and public debate.

The mentioned rhetoric represents the continuation of a wide range of condemnations, indignations and discontents of the church dignitaries due to the organization of the events pointing to the unfavourable position of LGBT people. It was just the spiritual father of the current Patriarch, spokesman of the Serbian Orthodox Church and permanent (current and then) member of the Holy Synod, Bishop Irinej of Bačka, who stated on the official website of the majority church on 18 September 2009 that “the Serbian Orthodox Church and traditional churches and religious

171 “Desetine hiljada vernih na svenarodnom molebanu za svetinju braka i porodice, slogu i mir u našem narodu”, SPC, 11 September 2022, <https://spc.rs/tv-hram-uzivo-svenarodni-moleban-za-svetinju-braka-i-porodice-slogu-i-mir-u-nasem-narodu/>

communities oppose the right to a public expression of sexual orientation or any other inclination, especially if it offends the citizens' rights to privacy and family life, religious beliefs and inviolable right to personal dignity". The representatives of traditional religious communities also referred to this official position during the subsequent years.

For more than a decade, numerous church dignitaries, especially the loud-mouthed Metropolitan Amfilohije of Montenegro and the Littoral, have called pride parades, both in Serbia and Montenegro, as "violent propaganda", "endangerment to public morals", "eternal symbolism of Sodom and Gomorrah"; LGBT people have been called "the stench of Sodom", characterized as "ungodly and perverse" and "the plague and pestilence of Sodom", and that all this has been the reflection of "the moral state not only of our society but of the entire Euro-American civilization". The late Patriarch Irinej has demanded that the "parade of shame" not take place, because "we are tired of being humiliated and fulfilling foreign wishes". Due to the decision to ban the Pride Parade in Belgrade, Bishop Filaret of Mileševa has presented a decoration to the Minister of Internal Affairs, Ivica Dačić, because he "brought honour to Serbia these days" when "some democrats" tried to put it in a pillory and spill the Serbian blood in the streets of Belgrade". Anti-European and pro-Russian messages could also be heard. Thus, Bishop Filaret said that no one would turn Serbia and Russia on each other: "Europe, Europe, and it has taken away our heart – Kosovo and Metohija!" and exclaimed "We want Russia, long live Russia!"¹⁷²

Apart from the mentioned permanent rhetoric, one should also recall one attempt of church interventionism in 2009,¹⁷³ name-

172 "Patrijarh: Irinej: Hvala majci Rusiji", Kurir, 7 October 2011.

173 In the same year, the Church also demonstrated its influence when the the Statute of AP Vojvodina was put on the agenda of the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia. The Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church sent a warning letter to the state institutions pointing to the unconstitutionality of the text of the Draft Statute of AP Vojvodina.

ly the demonstration of a strong political influence of the majority church on the secular legislative state bodies. It is about the joint action of traditional churches and religious communities in Serbia, led by the majority church, aiming to prevent the adoption of the Draft Anti-Discrimination Law in the National Assembly, as well as requesting the deletion of the articles dealing with the right of an individual to freely practice his or her religion or conviction, as well as gender equality, that is, sexual freedom. The deletion of the terms “sexual orientation” and “gender equality” was also demanded and the objections were raised with respect to the article about misdemeanour liability in the case of discrimination.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

On the occasion of the 20th anniversary of reintroducing religious education in elementary and secondary schools in the Republic of Serbia, the representatives of traditional churches and religious communities in Serbia, together with the Serbian Government officials, experts from Germany, Italy, Greece and Serbia, as well as religious teachers gathered at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Belgrade in early November 2021 and, on that occasion, sent a joint message that was signed by Patriarch Porfirije. In this message it was pointed out that special attention was paid to the “current unfavourable legal provisions and solutions that regulate the implementation of the religious education curriculum”. It was jointly appealed to all relevant institutions in the country to “change such a status” of religious teaching in the school system “as soon as possible”. The participants also expressed their hope that the irregularities would be rectified and that “this pressing problem of Serbian society and education” would finally be solved.

The religious authorities propose that “religious education regains the status of a subject, that is, the status of a mandatory elective subject, that teaching is organized at the class level, not at the group level, regardless of the number of registered students...; that the choice between religious education and an alternative subject

should be made at the beginning of the first and the beginning of the fifth grade of primary education, as well as at the beginning of the first grade of secondary education ...; to legally regulate the employment status of 2100 religion teachers and anticipate their employment for an indefinite period; that churches and religious communities can exercise an independent supervision over religious teaching...". It is interesting to note that in this case, unlike most others, the experience and authority of the European Union (Scholae Europeae) was completely used as an argument for proving the correctness, justification, that is, legality and legitimacy of the presented demands and proposed measures.

The periodical topic that reactualizes the status of religious teaching in the education system of the Republic of Serbia came into the public spotlight much more seriously in mid-June 2022, when Patriarch Porfirije announced the following on his Instagram profile: "I am very disappointed with the information that the principals of a number of elementary and secondary schools in Serbia knowingly discourage and, I would say, even prevent students and parents from opting for religious education. I will consult with my brother Archbishops and representatives of other churches and religious communities about whether we should announce their names and the names of the schools that discriminate against their own students. In any case, we will also send an official response to the competent state authorities." The meeting of the highest secular and spiritual authorities and Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić with Patriarch Porfirije and the members of the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church was held soon. In the press release issued after this meeting it is emphasized in one sentence that the church representatives "expressed their concern about the position of religious education in the Serbian education system and asked support from the Serbian President so that the state's position on this issue would be changed".¹⁷⁴

174 "Đenović: Veronauka se ne predaje sa kredom i pred tablom", VOA, 18 July.2022, <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/srbija-spc-porfirije-veronauka-vu%C4%8Di%C4%87-sve%C5%A1tenici/6663064.html>

CURIOSITY

Hardly anyone could assume that Patriarch Porfirije would also be mentioned in seemingly peripheral sports news, but this case can be very indicative in an analysis of the relationship between secular and spiritual spheres and competences, limits and responsibilities. Namely, after several weeks of negotiations with the management of the Partizan Basketball Club, Nikola Mirotić, the Spanish basketball player of Montenegrin origin and one of the best European basketball players, addressed the public with a letter in which he announced that, due to constant threats, he would not continue his career in the aforementioned club. In the official statement of KK Partizan, it was said that, parallel to the official negotiations, “there was a lot of information that certain people were threatening Nikola Mirotić, so that there is a fear for his safety if he becomes a Partizan basketball player”. In further text it is also stated that KK Partizan “firmly believes that Nikola Mirotić’s reasons for not signing a contract have nothing to do with threats, but with some other issues”.¹⁷⁵

During his appearance at a TV station, the former and most trophy coach of KK Partizan, Duško Vujošević, mentioned Patriarch Porfirije in connection with the Mirotić case: “There are rumours that the Patriarch also called on him, relying on his religiosity, to choose another club which he also supports. If this is really true, and I doubt it, then he is not a patriarch, but is a member of some lobby”. Patriarch Porfirije’s answer came two days later: “I share at least two loves with Mr Duško Vujošević. I love basketball and sports in general, and I also love the Bay of Boka and, in particular, Herceg Novi. It is clear that he did not replace Škver and Savina beaches for Belgrade at more than 40°C without immediate need. Therefore, I can somewhat understand his carelessness, because he included me as the possible protagonist in a bizarre,

175 “KK Partizan: Mirotić nam je dao reč, ali...”, Sport klub, 22 July 2023, <https://sportklub.n1info.rs/kosarka-euroleague/vesti-euroleague/kk-partizan-mirotic-nam-je-dao-rec-ali/>

absurd and utterly unbelievable fabrication about me and basketball player Mirotić.”¹⁷⁶ In a written response sent to a sports editorial board, Vujošević refers to the Patriarch’s comment: “I am glad that with your statement you confirmed my doubts about the truth of the rumours that you have been involved in in the Mirotić case, relying on his religiosity. I have instantly and very clearly expressed my doubts. And this can easily be confirmed on the available video of my guest appearance in the morning programme ... (...) I do not see how all this has anything to do with where I spend the summer, but since you also brought up this question, I will be glad to answer. It is true that I often spend my summer in the Bay of Kotor, but when I am there, I stay in an apartment and not in the luxury Lazaro Hotel.” In continuation, Vujošević refers to a hardly naive fact: “I am glad that you understand the importance of sports and treat them in the right way. In this context, it is good that you do not use your influence to divide the Serbian people into Crvena zvezda and Partizan fans because, due to your function, you should be above such harmful divisions. In that sense, I hope you agree that such divisions are emphasized if the reception of the Crvena Zvezda basketball players is organized, but is not followed by the reception of Partizan basketball players.”¹⁷⁷ Here the coach alludes to the case when, in early October 2021, the day after the victory in the ABA League Derby, the Crvena Zvezda basketball players paid a visit to the Patriarchate, that is, Patriarch Porfirije. A complete delegation of the KK Crvena Zvezda (men’s and women’s selection, management and President Nebojša Čović). On that occasion, KK Crvena Zvezda issued the following statement: “The Club has also sent an official invitation to our Patriarch, who himself has never hidden that he is a Zvezdaš and a great fan of sports

176 “Patrijarh odgovorio Vujoševiću na tvrdnje o Mirotiću”, Sport klub, 28 July 2023, <https://sportklub.n1info.rs/kosarka-euroleague/vesti-euroleague/patrijarh-odgovorio-vujosevicu-na-tvrdnje-o-miroticu/>

177 “Vujošević odgovorio Porfiriju: Potvrdili ste moje sumnje”, Sport klub, 28 July 2023, <https://sportklub.n1info.rs/kosarka-euroleague/vujosevic-odgovorio-porfiriju-potvrdili-ste-moje-sumnje/>

and basketball, to be the guest of KK Crvena Zvezda in the season that has just started”.¹⁷⁸

Less than three months after the discussion between the former KK Partizan coach and Patriarch Porfirije, in an interview for a Belgrade weekly, the current coach of KK Partizan, Željko Obradović, reflected on what was happening regarding the negotiations with Mirotić, which were progressing as desired, but the circumstances suddenly changed: “Less than two weeks after such negotiations, he called me and said that he could not come. When I asked him why, he answered that this was due to pressure. (...) Then he told me that there were several calls and that he was forced to give up. I will tell you exactly what Mirotić told me. He did not mention any name, but he told me that the calls ‘came from politicians’ and ‘from the church’”.¹⁷⁹

178 “‘Patrijarh nikad nije krio da je zvezdaš’; Košarkaši Zvezde u poseti Patrijaršiji, crveno-beli dres za Porfirija”, Pink, two years ago <https://pink.rs/drustvo/337313/'patrijarh-nikad-nije-krio-da-je-zvezdas'-kosarkasi-zvezde-u-poseti-patrijarsiji-crveno-beli-dres-za-porfirija-foto>

179 “Željko Obradović o razlozima zbog kojih Partizan nije potpisao najveće pojačanje ovog leta: ‘Mirotić mi je rekao da sigurno dolazi, a onda je dobio pozive “iz politike” i “iz crkve”’, Danas, 5 October .2023, <https://www.danas.rs/sport/zeljko-obradovic-o-razlozima-zbog-kojih-partizan-nije-potpisao-najvece-pojacanje-ovog-leta-mirotic-mi-je-rekao-da-sigurno-dolazi-a-onda-je-dobio-pozive-iz-politike-i-iz-crkve-video/>

VI – MEDIA FREEDOM IN FREE FALL

The European Commission and numerous international organizations have been warning for years about a bad media situation in Serbia, which has only further deteriorated over time. According to this year's report of the Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Serbia has fallen 12 places from 2022 and now ranks 91st country in the world according to the media freedom index. "Award-winning, quality journalism, which investigates crime and corruption, is caught between rampant fake news and propaganda. While the legal framework is solid, journalists are threatened by political pressures and impunity of crimes committed against them." In the RSF's report it is also stated that investigative organizations are subjected to harassment, intimidation and violence, both by the authorities and government supporters.

The suppression of media freedom and attacks on journalists have become an almost daily occurrence. Suffice it to mention that only during the first four months of 2023, 43 cases of threatening, pressures and attacks were recorded, which is 4 more than in the same period a year earlier. It is about a progressive increase in the number of attacks on the freedom of media reporting, which is pointed out by the fact that in 2022 almost twice as many threats, pressures and attacks were recorded than in 2021. In addition to threats and pressures, journalists were also prevented from doing their work as well as subjected to physical violence, intimidation, threats to privacy and attacks on property.

THREATS, INTIMIDATION AND ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS

It is sufficient to cite only a few examples to make it clear what kind of atmosphere Serbian journalists work in. Brankica Stanković, the editor-in-chief of Insajder TV, was targeted by the threatening and insulting chants of Partizan fans during two matches, just like 14 years ago when she was given police protection. During July, there appeared the videos against the journalists of N1 and Nova S, as well as other independent media on social media, saying that their task is “to destroy culture and Orthodoxy in Serbia”. Apart from showing the photographs of the current and former journalists and editors of N1, Nova S, Danas and Insajder, the video also launched the message about them as “the dark world of the N1 and Nova media”. These media are accused of being the “incarnation of anti-Serbian propaganda” and that “their evil intention is to destroy the Serbian identity, culture, tradition and religion”, which is financed with foreign money. The TV Nova S News Director, Slobodan Georgiev, who is one of the targeted journalists, claimed that the videos were ordered by Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić.

In May, thirty or so people with sound systems and banners broke into the courtyard of the office building where the N1 newsroom is located. Calling themselves the “People’s Headquarters”, they gathered in front of N1 and held speeches for several hours, threatening that the wrath of the people would catch up with N1 and disrupting the work of journalists. The television staff immediately reported to the police the unauthorized entry into the private property and disruption of their work, but the police did not react. Several plainclothes policemen were present at the scene, but said that they had not been ordered to identify the crowd or remove them from private property.

Due to a multi-year smear campaign and numerous death threats, Marko Vidojković, the co-author of the podcast “Dobar, loš, zao” (Good, Bad, Ugly) and columnist of the daily Danas, was

forced to leave the country in early February. The International PEN Centre relocated Vidojković and his family due to fear for their safety. Vidojković was threatened that he would be shot in the head, burned or beaten to death or hanged, that his tongue would be cut out and that his hands would be broken, so that he would no longer be able to write. The campaign against the journalist was launched by some government representatives and pro-regime media. They coordinated the targeted campaigns against him – which resulted in intense online molestation and numerous death threats. The most radical among the politicians was the Mayor of Belgrade, Aleksandar Šapić, who openly threatened Vidojković on TV Pink that he would rip out his heart.

The case of Aleksandar Šapić is not the exception, but the rule: it has become customary for government representatives to attack and smear journalists, although they usually do not send death threats. Attacks on dissenters, media lynching persecution, death threats, slander, defamation, smearing, insults, targeting, drawing a target on one's forehead and similar violent activities are a common occurrence in Serbia. Aleksandar Vučić and his party comrades are leading the way in the persecution of everyone who thinks critically, everyone who sticks to the elementary facts, everyone who is critical towards the society in which he lives or towards the Progressives' rule. The media loyal to the ruling party (which resemble more of propaganda magazines) have created such an atmosphere that it is quite normal to declare certain Serbian citizens traitors, autochauvinists, foreign mercenaries and legitimate shooting targets.

The makers of the atmosphere of threats and intimidation are the highest government officials: President Vučić, Prime Minister Ana Brnabić, Ministers Goran Vesić and Aleksandar Martinović, President of the National Assembly Vladimir Orlić, many deputies like Vladimir Đukanović, as well as many other officials regularly verbally attack the United Group media and other independent media, labelling them as tycoon-owned and anti-Serbian. foreign mercenaries and servants of centres of world power, accompanied

by accusations that they work against their own government and people. Their threatening and incendiary rhetoric is then transferred to government-controlled media – television stations with national frequencies and numerous tabloids, which further elaborate the given theses. After the media elaboration, the chase continues on social media, resulting in the threatening of journalists' safety. It was on this basis that the Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office prepared 73 cases during the period from 1 January to 30 November 2023. These cases dealing with the threatening of journalists' safety registered 19 attacks against female journalists and 43 against male journalists (some of whom were attacked more than once). Unfortunately, such cases rarely end with an adequate legal settlement and the sanctioning of perpetrators.

SLAPP SUITS

SLAPP suits are another form of pressure on media freedom. The European Commission has detected this problem in Serbia and pointed to it in the report 2023. The report, among other things, states: "However, cases of threats, intimidation, hate speech and violence against journalists remain a concern, as is the increase of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP), notably launched by members of national and local authorities that may cause a chilling effect, including self-censorship. Recurrent statements by high-level officials on the daily and investigative work of journalists provide for a challenging environment for the exercise of freedom of expression. The possibility of journalists' ability to report on ongoing criminal proceedings is excessively limited in the legal framework". The investigation of the CASE coalition has shown that Serbia ranks 10th in Europe in the number of SLAPPs.

In this context, the record holder on Serbia's media scene is the Crime and Corruption Reporting Network (KRIK) against which as many as 12 such lawsuits have so far been filed. They have mostly been sued by government representatives and those who are close to the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and its currently informal

leader Aleksandar Vučić. The most frequent reasons for such lawsuits are texts on criminal cases and court reporting. So, for example, KRIK has been sued by Dijana Hrkalović, the former State Secretary of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and Predrag Koluvija, the owner of the Jovanjica marijuana plantation, against whom court proceedings are conducted.

The most bizarre is still the second lawsuit against KRIK, filed by the Witness Protection Unit of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, due to the information it has published that the heads of this police unit had already initiated a lawsuit against it. KRIK is sued because of two sentences stating that this unit has already filed a lawsuit against it and how much money it demands. Such lawsuits are filed for the purpose of intimidation and censorship, so that the defendants are burdened by long court trials and large expenses.

REM IN THE GOVERNMENT'S SERVICE

The big problem of Serbia's media scene is that its regulatory bodies do not do their job and do not sanction the violations committed by pro-government media. This is most evident in the case of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM). As in all previous years since the coming of the Serbian Progressive Party into power, REM persistently refuses to perform the duties prescribed by the law and consistently fails to react the violations committed by pro-government media.

Radio and television stations with national frequency, including Pink and Happy, do not provide true, impartial and timely information. Instead, these media frantically spread pro-government propaganda and disinformation, while REM does not sanction them. The activities of the highest government officials and SNS representatives of the Serbian Progressive Party are predominantly represented in electronic media news programmes, while all critical opinions have been completely banished from their programmes, but this does not provoke any reaction from the regulatory body.

In addition to the Progressives' official propaganda, the media are also wide open to Russia's malign influence. Not only Russian-owned media, such as Sputnik and RT-Balkan, are "responsible" for spreading the Kremlin propaganda narratives, this is also done by TVs with national frequency and all tabloids. According to a report by the Dutch Klingendal Institute, Russia's malign influence in the West Balkans is strongest in Serbia and is reaching a worrying level, especially in the area of media and disinformation. This is reflected in the narratives spread by Russian politicians, which are accepted in Serbia, such as the narratives about the Russian invasion of Ukraine, or the spread of anti-Western, antidemocratic and antiliberal propaganda.

REM also ignores the following violations of the pro-regime media: the violation of the obligation to equally represent political actors during the election campaign; the broadcasting of reality shows harming the moral and mental development of minors and threatening personal dignity; the violation of the obligation set out in the Programme Plans and included in broadcast licences (for example, Happy and Pink TVs do not have children's programmes, programmes for minors, science education programmes and cultural and arts programmes, although they are obliged to have a certain percentage of such contents).

In the report of the European Commission it is benevolently stated that "limited progress" has been made this year and that "the new laws will strengthen the independence of the regulatory body for electronic media (REM)". The new media laws have been adopted and have mostly been harmonized with the Media Strategy, which has been harmonized with the democratic standards of the European countries. However, the problem lies in the fact that the legal regulations are not implemented in practice. Thus, in its morning programme, TV Pink broadcast a private video of the opposition deputy Đorđe Miketić with explicit scenes, which was then "analyzed" by the on-duty propagandists of the ruling party. The REM reacted mildly, so that this TV station will not bear adequate consequences. According to Article 62 of the new Law on

Electronic Media, the officials' campaigning is strictly prohibited, which did not prevent Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić from being the main face of the SNS election campaign.

The pre-electoral observer delegation from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) has stated that such activities of the President "could indeed confuse voters and are not subject to campaign rules". The delegation also stated that the pre-election period in Serbia was marked by "an unprecedented level of negative campaigning and fearmongering, attacks against the opposition and journalists and serious issues related to the media". Despite all this, the REM did not find it necessary to register any irregularity in the pro-government media that reported on (and often participated in) the election campaign.

In the report of the European Commission it was also stated that "in August 2022, REM published a call for the allocation of a fifth media service licence, which has still not been awarded, without credible justification". The justification cannot be credible, because the reason for not awarding frequency is to avoid at all costs that a TV station, which is not loyal to the Vučić regime, obtains the national frequency licence. Thus, REM is another usurped institution put openly at the government's service. According to the new Electronic Media Law, the new REM members will be elected one year after the law comes into force. Also, much more demanding professional criteria for the election of the REM Council members are anticipated. However, the current members are also experts, but the problem lies not in their expertise, but in their lack of ethics and loyalty to the ruling party. There is no legal mechanism that will secure more professional members who will not obey Aleksandar Vučić's will and work in accordance with the legal regulations.

MONOPOLIZATION OF THE MEDIA SPACE

In the report of the European Commission it is also stated that “the legislative process was not finalized fully in line with the EU acquis and European standards”. The ownership of state-owned enterprises was prominent in deliberations. The Law on Public Information and Media and the Electronic Media Law, which were passed before the dissolution of the National Assembly, enable Telekom to found media. The legal regulations have legalized the role of the state-owned company Telekom which it already has on Serbia’s media scene. Those operating within Telekom include, inter alia, the Supernova TV cable, internet and telephone provider, Arena sports TV and Euronews Serbia news TV channel. The new laws enable the further expansion of Telekom which can result in the additional monopolization of the media space that is already fundamentally monolithic and subordinated to the interests of the Serbian Progressive Party.

The very process of adopting a new set of media laws was not without controversies, which clearly points to the ruling party’s efforts to control almost the entire media scene. After the public debate about the media laws and just before their adoption, the authorities added two amendments to Article 122 without the knowledge of the Working Group and other participants in the making of the laws. The first amendment stipulated that all cable operators should also be obliged to enter into their offer – in addition to the public service – private TV programmes with national frequencies and to pay them the amount determined by REM, without the possibility of cancelling them. The second amendment, added also overnight, anticipated the obligatory channel distribution according to which the first two places must be reserved for public service channels to be followed by the national TV stations Pink, Prva, B92 and Happy. Consequently, the total domination of TV stations that persistently violate laws and serve as a propaganda service of the Progressives’ regime was anticipated.

The compromise solution was adopted only after heated public reactions and intervention of international organizations.

Prime Minister Ana Brnabić held a meeting with the representatives of the OSCE Mission, EU Delegation, Norwegian Embassy, Serbian Government, Ministry of Information and Telecommunications, representatives of the working groups, as well as the representatives of journalist and media associations. At that meeting, under international pressure, Brnabić agreed to drop the first amendment. As for the second one, a partial solution was adopted. It was agreed that the channel operators would have service information; they would be followed by RTS 1 and RTS 2, two TV Vojvodina programmes and thereafter cable operators could line up the channels as they wish. Thus, the SBB cable operator, which operates as part of the United Group, broadcasts its N1 and Nova programmes only on channels 5 and 6.

During 2023, the regime of Aleksandar Vučić continued to work intensively on assuming full control of the media. In this way, Vučić controls the public opinion and uses the media as one of the ways to stay in power. Due to such authoritarian tendencies, media freedom in Serbia is in free fall. Moreover, the chances of stopping this fall are zero, especially in light of the recent post-election events. Vučić openly stole the elections and altered the will of the citizens, which was also stated by numerous international observers.

Vučić sent the gendarmerie against the protesters who demanded the annulment of irregular elections and the holding of new ones in improved conditions. The gendarmerie used excessive force against the people who were mostly doing nothing. Those arrested are accused of trying to violently overturn the constitutional order despite the fact that, by fighting against electoral fraud, they were actually defending the constitutional order. During this time, the regime's media machinery demonized the opposition and rebellious citizens, accusing them of preparing a civil war, undermining the state for the account of the Western "power centres" and organizing a Maidan. This is a typical narrative of Kremlin propaganda, which even the highest state officials do not hide, referring to the Russian services. The post-election political crisis hints at even darker days for media freedom in Serbia.

VII – THE SECURITY SYSTEM: FAR FROM REFORM AND PARLIAMENTARY CONTROL

Despite entering the third decade since the beginning of its democratic transition, marked by the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević on 5 October 2000 and the election of the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS) coalition, led by Zoran Đinđić, Serbia has not yet achieved the proclaimed security sector goals – to ensure the predominance of the civilian government over security policy and put the security sector under legal and legitimate democratic and parliamentary control. This will be “cut short” at the very beginning due to the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić. Despite this, however, the first decade witnessed at least rhetorical, if not essential, changes in the democratic control of state actors over the security sector. In the second decade, this topic vanished from public discourse, while the oversight of the security sector was increasingly guided by the political and ideological bias principles, which are based on the legacy of the past.

This trend is characterized by the visible and frequent presence of retired security officers as political analysts and interpreters of the current policies and geostrategic issues in a consistent anti-Western and anti-EU discourse. This became dominant in the media after Russia’s aggression against Ukraine.

So it came to the situation where, instead of the security sector being the guardian and guarantor of the success of Serbia's negotiations on EU accession, the head of the Security Intelligence Agency (BIA) became Aleksandar Vulin, the proponent of the ideological and value concepts that are contrary to the EU values, while his successors at the head of the political party that formed the ruling coalition with the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) will submit the initiative for Serbia's accession to the BRICS bloc to the Parliament.

The departure of the security sector from the values that are anticipated within Serbia's still nominal commitment to EU membership is reflected not only in its use against the party rivals on the political scene, but also in the Parliament where 10 sessions of the Security Services Control Committee out of 11 sessions of the last convocation were closed, while the BIA Director appeared only once before the members of this Committee in the second month of his term. This session was also closed. It was published on the Parliament website that the last time the Committee met was in July 2023,¹⁸⁰ so that the dramatic events in northern Kosovo and Banjska escaped its attention, as neither the BIA nor the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MUP) reported on them.

At the end of 2022, there was a "short casting" in the civilian security sector, since this sector (like the military security sector anyway) remained under the control of the SNS and Aleksandar Vučić's three most loyal associates (as he said). The former heads of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (Aleksandar Vulin) and the Security Intelligence Agency (Bratislav Gašić) exchanged their positions.

Over time, public dissatisfaction with those sectors, expressed in the previous period, only became stronger.

From May 2023 until the time of the preparation of this report. Serbia was characterized by regular citizen protests in the capital and several larger cities in Serbia (Novi Sad, Niš, Kragujevac, Čačak, Užice...). Peaceful protest walks were organized every

180 http://www.parlament.gov.rs/11._sednica_Odbora_za_kontrolu_slu%C5%BEbi_bezbednosti.47665.941.html

weekend under the joint name “Serbia Against Violence”. They were motivated by the tragic mass murder of seventh grade students at the Vladislav Ribnikar Elementary School in Belgrade, which was committed by their schoolmate, as well as two murders in two villages near Belgrade (Dubona and Malo Orašje), which were also committed by a peer of the victims.

After these tragedies, the public demanded the removal of the heads of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Security Intelligence Agency, but the Serbian President and the authorities made it clear right away that as long as they are in power these demands will not be met.

Such a stance was not changed even after the biggest security incident in September 2023, in the village of Banjska¹⁸¹ in northern Kosovo and the conflict between the Kosovo police and the paramilitary group led by Milan Radoičić, an official of the Serbian List, a satellite party of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS),

The authorities in Belgrade denied any connection with this event although, after their failed deployment in northern Kosovo, Radoičić and an unspecified number of members of his paramilitary group fled to the territory of Serbia. From where, it seems, they came to Kosovo. In addition, in the explanation of the decision of the Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office in Belgrade to start an investigation it is stated that the weapons discovered in Kosovo were prepared and kept near Belgrade.

This only raised a question about the responsibility of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Security Intelligence Agency – how all this could happen without their knowledge?

181 One of the most serious incidents in recent years occurred on 24 September 2023, after several months of tensions between Kosovo and Serbia. That day, armed groups attacked the Kosovo police in the village of Banjska in the municipality of Zvečan, killing police sergeant Afrim Bunjaku. In the exchange of fire that followed, three Serbian attackers were also killed. After the attack on Banjska, Serbia amassed its military troops on the border with Kosovo, which was condemned by the EU and the US characterizing it as a “very destabilizing action” .

It is also worth mentioning that the United States imposed individual sanctions against the head of the Security Intelligence Agency, Aleksandar Vulin. Although at that time it was stated that they would not affect security cooperation between the United States and Serbia, this situation was unprecedented even in the controversial history of modern Serbia, filled with numerous security scandals after the breakup of Yugoslavia.

Vulin was put on the sanctions list of the US Department of the Treasury due to suspicions about his involvement in “international organized crime, illegal narcotics operations and misuse of public office”.¹⁸² Those public suspicions referred mostly to the media scandals involving Vulin when he was the Minister of Defence and Minister of Internal Affairs. However, the time of the imposition of sanctions was a clear signal of the extent of US dissatisfaction with the appointment of an extremely pro-Russian politician as Director of the Security Intelligence Agency.

Vulin's attachment to Russia was clearly manifested and most evident in his protection of Russian interests in the territory of Serbia. This protection began by failing to take any measure and tolerating the activities of Prigozhin's Wagner Group in the territory of Serbia. In addition to spreading Russian state propaganda about the war in Ukraine, this paramilitary group also tried to recruit Serbian citizens to take part in the war against Ukraine on the side of the Putin regime. Vulin also sent reports on the activities of Russian opposition members in Serbia to the Kremlin.¹⁸³

After being sanctioned by the US, Vulin disappeared from public life in a flash, although he was previously present in the media and mostly noted for his political statements about the so-called Serbian world, which irritated and worried both the pro-European public in Serbia and Serbia's neighbours in the Western Balkans.

Vulin's absence from public life also abruptly ended with his irrevocable resignation as head of the Security Intelligence Agency,

182 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/vulin-sad-sankcije/32498986.html>

183 <https://nova.rs/vesti/politika/ni-rec-o-vagnerovcima-ruski-placenici-vrsljaju-po-srbiji-a-vulin-gasic-i-dacic-cute-kao-zaliveni/>

after parliamentary elections were called for 17 December. In the announcement of his irrevocable resignation – without changing any of his positions, which were condemned by the pro-European public in the country and the region, as well as in the EU and the US, but even reaffirming them – he stated that the resignation was his personal decision.¹⁸⁴

However, just a day before Vulin announced his irrevocable resignation as head of the Security Intelligence Agency, Vučić met with the Russian Ambassador in Belgrade. And after Vulin's resignation, Vučić publicly announced that he is his longtime friend. This probably explains how in the first week, on the day when the Hit Tweet Show was broadcast on TV Pink, Vulin was given the privilege of being its only guest – which is an honour that this TV station attached to Vučić showed only to the Serbian President – and was not interrupted with advertisements. On that occasion, after repeating his political views, Vulin will announce that he will actively participate in the pre-election campaign and represent the interests of the SNS electoral list bearing Vučić's name.¹⁸⁵

However, despite the presenter's insistence, Vulin avoided giving a clear answer about the BIA's responsibility and his lack of knowledge about the preparations of Radoičić and his group for what will happen in Banjska. Thus, the BIA and the rest of the security sector in Serbia conspicuously continued to remain silent about their findings, despite the announced session of the National Security Council, which has not yet been held and from which the public will allegedly learn what has exactly happened in that incident and how it has happened.

Looking back at the past year, in continuation of this report, we will focus on four more segments: the failed changes in the Law on Internal Affairs, which were attempted only a month after the change at the top of Ministry of Internal Affairs, political abuse of the border police, attitude toward the opponents of the Putin

184 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/vulin-ostavka-bia/32672064.html>

185 <https://n1info.rs/vesti/sta-je-vulin-nakon-ostavke-kazao-na-pinku-optuzbe-manipulacije-i-neistine/>

regime and its aggression against Ukraine who escaped to Serbia, as well as the situation within the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

THE DRAFT LAW ON INTERNAL AFFAIRS

In December 2022, the Ministry of Internal Affairs put the Draft Law on Internal Affairs¹⁸⁶ for public debate. However, numerous provisions of this Draft Law were criticized by civil society organizations, professional associations and opposition parties.

The most controversial provisions of this Draft Law referred to the drastic expansion of police powers which included the search of apartments and houses without a warrant, practically unlimited biometric surveillance, which was already illegally used in misdemeanour proceedings against environmental activists, as well as the expansion of police powers in order to use force against participants in non-violent meetings.

Due to the criticism of these provisions and short period for a public debate about this Draft Law, the Ministry has prolonged a public debate – which has originally been planned to last a little more than three weeks (from 8 to 31 December) – until 22 January 2023.

This concession, however, has not softened the criticism of the Draft Law, which has received a lot of media attention and gained in importance due to the reaction of opposition parties, which have threatened to organize protests should this version of the Draft Law enter the parliamentary procedure.

As the result of these pressures, the Government of Ana Brnabić withdrew the proposed Draft Law from the procedure on 26 December 2022. In the Prime Minister's address after the announcement of this decision it was stated that this was done as a concession to civil society organizations and to harmonize the Draft Law with the EU regulations.

186 <https://ekonsultacije.gov.rs/topicOfDiscussionPage/98/1>

On 23 January 2023, the Serbian Government held a meeting with civil society organizations, which was also attended by Prime Minister Ana Brnabić, Internal Affairs Minister Bratislav Gašić and EU Integration Minister Tanja Mišćević.¹⁸⁷

On that occasion, the Ministry of Internal Affairs stated that the provision of the Draft Law relating to the search of premises without a warrant was omitted. It was also emphasized that the legal regime prescribed by the Law on Criminal Procedure would remain in force in that area.

Similar guarantees concerning biometric surveillance were not unequivocally given. However, in later public addresses it was stated that the existing legal framework, linked to special proving methods and anticipated by the Law on Criminal Procedure, would apply to it.

However, such promises did not sufficiently resolve the issue of biometric surveillance measures because for their legal regulation it is first necessary to change the Criminal Procedure Law, which does not prescribe them in the part related to the special evidence procedure.

Thus, it can be concluded that the Government has not given up the introduction of biometric surveillance measures into the legal system of the Republic of Serbia despite fears that their “normalization” could be abused and without any guarantee by the government itself that it would take effective measures to prevent such abuse.

At this moment, the Draft Law is still being “refined” and it is uncertain when the new, revised version will be released for public debate and whether all controversial provision, which were pointed to by the public in the first draft, will be removed after their revision.

187 <https://www.rts.rs/lat/vesti/drustvo/5097993/ana-brnabic-javna-rasprva-zakon-unutrasnji-poslovi.html>

POLITICAL INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF THE BORDER POLICE

During 2022 and 2023, there was a noticeable increase in the number of cases when the border police resorted to detaining people who used to publicly criticize official Belgrade's policy at border crossings without an apparent and convincing reason. In this connection, it is possible to distinguish two kinds of situations.

The first refers to the seemingly indiscriminate detention of the citizens of the Republic of Serbia when crossing the state border. In these cases, prominent political figures and their family members were often subjected to such measures. Probably the most striking example of such practice was the detention of Rada Trajković, a politician from Kosovo, at the Merdare administrative border crossing in December 2022. It lasted more than 24 hours.¹⁸⁸

Her daughter was subjected to similar yet shorter border control at the border crossing at Nikola Tesla Airport. This also happened to Rada Trajković at the same border crossing less than three months after her detention at the Merdare administrative border crossing.

Apart from Rada Trajković, Momčilo Trajković, also a politician from Kosovo,¹⁸⁹ and Zdravko Ponoš, the leader of the Serbia Centre party, were also subjected to a similar "special" treatment by the border police.¹⁹⁰

Ponoš's case from 2022 was especially publicly noted because he was President Aleksandar Vučić's opponent at the presidential election held earlier that year.

It is especially important to note that the border police did not give an official explanation for any of these detentions, which

¹⁸⁸ <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/vise-od-12-sati-zadrzana-na-prelazu-rada-trajkovic-i-dalje-ne-moze-da-se-vrati-u-srbiji-sa-kosova-ukljucena-i-bia/>

¹⁸⁹ <https://n1info.rs/vesti/mera-zastrasivanja-momcila-trajkovica-na-prelazu-merdare-zadrzali-dva-sata/>

¹⁹⁰ <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/balkan-srbija-granica-batrovci-opozicija-zdravko-ponos-zadrzavanje-bia-policija-vulin/6707189.html>

differed from regular border controls in many respects and were the subject of great public interest and concern at that time.

A special group of cases concerning the inappropriate behaviour of the border police includes the incidents involving foreign citizens after which they were banned from entering Serbia without any coherent explanation.

The first such recorded case was the detention of Domagoj Margetić, a Croatian investigative journalist, who was coming to Serbia to present his book based on the notes left by the late lawyer Vladimir Cvijan.¹⁹¹

Margetić himself announced the news about his detention at the border crossing on 8 June 2023. During his detention, Margetić was interrogated by the members of the Security Intelligence Agency as part of a “regular border control”. After this “regular control” – which officially lasted one week – Margetić was banned from entering Serbia due to “the protective measure of removing a foreigner and the security measure of expelling a foreigner”.

At that time, although some opposition media reported on this event, no special attention was devoted to the fact that the very act of banning Margetić from entering the country was unlawful. Namely, for an entry ban it was necessary to have such a measure imposed against Margetić on the basis of the final judgment of guilty of a criminal offence committed on the territory of Serbia. However, at the time of getting an entry ban, Margetić had no criminal record in Serbia.

The question of the legality of the border police actions and entry ban came to the fore when Peter Nikitin, the founder of the Russian Democratic Society in Serbia and anti-war activist, was banned from entering Serbia one month later.¹⁹²

Nikitin's case was also special because an entry ban was imposed against a person to whom the Ministry of Internal Affairs

191 <https://www.021.rs/story/Info/Srbija/343313/Policija-drzala-hrvatskog-novinara-Margetica-sedam-sati-na-srpskoj-granici.html>

192 <https://n1info.rs/vesti/bia-zabranila-ulazak-u-srbiju-ruskom-antiratnom-aktivisti-koji-zivi-u-beogradu/>

had previously given permission for permanent residence in the Republic of Serbia as a foreigner.

After one night spent at Nikola Tesla Airport and the stormy reaction that his detention caused in the public and among civil society organizations, Nikitin was allowed to enter Serbia, although the decision on an entry ban was not formally repealed.

Perhaps the most blatant case of political abuse by the border police was banning Jovana Marović, the former EU Integration Minister in the Government of Montenegro, from entering Serbia.¹⁹³

Similarly to the Margetić and Nikitin cases, Jovana Marović was refused entry into Serbia at the border crossing and such a decision was justified because she “poses a threat to Serbia’s national security”. What the threat consisted of was never officially explained. But it should be pointed out that Jovana Marović set off to Belgrade in order to support the protests organized throughout Serbia after the mass murders in the Vladislav Ribnikar Elementary School and in the vicinity of Mladenovac.

As in the case of border controls of domestic citizens, no official explanation was ever provided as to why these people were banned from entering Serbia.

Although an institutional response was never provided, it could be concluded from the comments given by high state officials that the motives for these controls and bans were primarily politically motivated.

THE PERSECUTION OF THE RUSSIAN DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

The Russian Democratic Society (RDD) is a nongovernmental organization that brings together the Russians who found refuge in Serbia after the beginning of Putin’s invasion of Ukraine. Since the beginning of the aggression in February 2022 they have

¹⁹³ <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/jovana-marovic-srbija-zabrana-ulazak/7238320.html>

participated in anti-war protests which have been organized in Serbia and have called for an end to the Russian aggression.

This political engagement has put them in the focus of the Serbian police and security forces. Namely, despite the official policy of the Republic of Serbia, which condemned the Russian aggression against Ukraine in the United Nations, when Aleksandar Vulin became the Director of the Security Intelligence Agency they systematically began to intimidate the members of this organization with an aim to prevent the spread of their anti-war messages which, as they believed, could jeopardize Belgrade's relations with Moscow.

Apart from the already mentioned detention of RDD founder Peter Nikitin at the border crossing at Nikola Tesla Airport and the attempt to ban him from entering Serbia, although he had a valid permanent residence permit, similar measures were also taken against other RDD members to whom the domestic police authorities also started to deny residence permits in Serbia due to their involvement in the organization of rallies against the Russian war against Ukraine.

The denial of permits is most often justified by the fact that these persons have not previously passed security check, which is why their further stay in Serbia would "pose a danger to national security". The danger posed by these individuals has never been clearly identified and it remains unknown even in the judicial proceedings initiated by them.

There are no precise data on the number of Russians who fled to Serbia in order to avoid conscription and mobilization in the army waging the war of aggression against Ukraine. As for Ukrainians who fled to Serbia after 24 February 2022, the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia maintains a special section on its website, 'Ukrainian Crisis Diary'. On 18 March 2023, according to the latest information, the Government of the Republic of Serbia, adopted a special Decree on Assistance to Ukrainian Refugees, which will be valid until 19 March 2024.

In her statement given to the Tanjug News Agency on 6 December, the Commissioner for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia, Nataša Stanisavljević, pointed out that “in 2023, there was a decline in number of migrants and that during 2023, until the beginning of December, about 104,000 people passed through Serbia, which is a 10 percent decrease compared to 2022. At the end of November, 4,600 migrants were accommodated in the reception centres managed by the Commissariat which is, according to the Commissioner, less than 75 percent compared to the total operational capacity.¹⁹⁴

The Commissioner especially emphasized the fact that since 27 October more than 7,500 migrants have been dislocated to reception centres by police actions after the groups of illegal migrants emerged as a dramatical security problem, mostly in northern Vojvodina. During October, the media reported about serious, hours-long clashes among migrant groups, which were followed by police action.¹⁹⁵

On 27 May, as was also mentioned by Commissioner Stanisavljević, the media reported that the Serbian President talked with the Minister of Internal Affairs, Bratislav Gašić, on Pink TV. On this occasion, the President said to him in respect of illegal migrants that “either they will do what they have to do, or he will bring in the army”. “If you are not capable, I will bring the decision on a partial engagement of the army and we will clear up everything within 24 hours. When we bring in the army, you will see how those smugglers and criminals, that is, migrant criminals, will lay down their weapons and disappear from that area.¹⁹⁶ We will take care of that one way or another”, said Vučić, adding that he is “fed up with the promises that everything will be fine”, and that the

194 <https://kirs.gov.rs/lat/aktuelno/broj-migranata-koji-je-prosao-kroz-srbiju-manji-za-10-odsto/4573>

195 Ibid..

196 <https://insajder.net/prenosimo/vucic-ako-policija-ne-moze-da-resi-problem-sa-oruzanim-obracunima-migranata-angazovacu-vojsku>

actions must be such that migrants will never “think of using the territory of Serbia for fighting among themselves”.¹⁹⁷

Some analysts have attributed such a harsh statement by the President directed at the head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs to a nervous intra-party atmosphere in the Serbian Progressive Party in anticipation of the December parliamentary elections. Thereafter, the news about migrant clashes became rarer, while Serbia – apart from migrant operations centres in Sombor, Subotica and Kikinda – established such centres at the border with Bulgaria, in Pirot, Bosilegrad, Dimitrovgrad and Babušnica, at the border with North Macedonia, in Preševo and at the border with Kosovo.

THE PERSECUTION OF WHISTLEBLOWERS IN THE POLICE

In this report it is also necessary to mention a few more important things in order to complement the picture of the situation over the past year.

The Serbian Police has been without the Director for more than two and a half years. On the one hand, this shows the essential and real attitude towards police reform and, on the other hand, the reluctance and inability of the authorities to find a reliable and respected person among police professionals.

The wide powers of the director of the police have been entrusted to Bratislav Gašić by special government decrees, thus enabling direct and nontransparent staffing, promotions and reshuffles in all sectors of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

At the same time, according to the data of the State Audit Institution, 15,133 lawsuits against the Ministry of the Internal Affairs are currently underway. Their potential value is 5.6 billion dollars.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ <https://novaekonomija.rs/vesti-iz-zemlje/mup-tuzena-strana-u-preko-15-hiljada-sporova>

Last year alone, pursuant to court decisions, the Ministry of Internal Affairs paid fines and penalties to the amount of 2.2 billion dinars plus 88.9 million dinars for the damage and injuries inflicted by state bodies – of which 14 million dinars were paid for damages to wrongfully convicted persons. These data are presented in the report by the state auditors who checked the last year's books of the Ministry.¹⁹⁹

These data were published by Predrag Simonović, a retired BIA inspector who went from being one of the most respected, multi-awarded members of the Ministry of Internal Affairs to a whistleblower, namely a fighter against the violation of the laws in the police.

He also presented the data he had requested in accordance with the Law on the Availability of Information of Public Importance. These data show that from the beginning of 2012 until the end of 2022, the Ministry of Internal Affairs had to pay almost 17 billion dinars or over 144 million euros at the current exchange rate, as well as indemnities for injuries and damage caused by state bodies.²⁰⁰

During the period 2022–2023, the public and media almost continuously received newspaper reports on the judicial proceedings against the policemen who openly pointed to the irregularities in the work of the Ministry of Internal Affairs as well as against the police officers who had a more notable role in the investigations prior to some of the most important proceedings that are currently conducted before the Special Department of the Higher Court in Belgrade.

What they had in common was that in all cases it was a question of individuals who – either by speaking in public or while performing their regular tasks – pointed to the well-founded suspicion about the ties between high-ranking security officers and criminal circles, as well as about abuses in security sector management

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ <https://www.vreme.com/vesti/u-novom-broju-mup-nikad-nije-bio-ovoliko-kriminalizovan/>

which would have remained hidden from the public eye if they had not spoken about them.

Among the most significant cases mention should be made of the judicial proceedings against Milan Dumanović and Mladen Trbović, who have pointed to the unlawful sending of police forces to Potočare (Srebrenica).²⁰¹

In the reporting period, the attention of the public was especially focused on snail-paced attempts to reveal the events associated with the Jovanjica case, that is, the discovery of a marijuana farm in which the members of both the civilian and military intelligence services were involved.

The public was especially irritated by the removal of the police inspectors who exposed the whole affair from their positions and their reassignments to other jobs, while the media particularly pointed to the fact that one of them is threatened with physical elimination.²⁰²

Parallel to all this – and the fate of the whistleblowers and diligent policemen – their colleagues were climbing the career ladder without hindrance despite the plenty of indications about their ties with organized crime groups.

The KRIK investigative news portal has publicly presented the details that point to the potential ties of gendarme Nenad Vučković with Veljko Belivuk's criminal group and that, as it seems, no action is being taken, nor there is any indication that the relevant prosecutor's office will take it in the forceable future.²⁰³

At the beginning of this text, there was mention of a "short casting". The same move was repeated in the case of the former Minister of Internal Affairs (Nebojša Stefanović) and the then Defence Minister (Aleksandar Vulin).

201 <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2022/4/1/bivsi-policaјci-u-slucaјu-potocari-oslobodjeni-optuzbi>

202 <https://www.nezavisne.com/novosti/ex-yu/Smijenjeni-inspektori-koјi-su-otkrili-aferu-Jovanjica/786471>

203 <https://www.krik.rs/veze-belivukove-grupe-u-policiјi-samo-zagrebane/>

However, Stefanović disappeared from the security triangle. Both he and his associate Dijana Hrkaloović were accused of eavesdropping on the Serbian President and having ties with Belivuk's notorious group. Over time, the accusations against Stefanović, which used to "adorn" tabloid newspaper front pages for days, fell silent, while the judicial proceedings against Hrkaloović, who is defended by a lawyer – one of the SNS elite members – are underway. However, it is impossible to predict how and when they will be finished.

It must also be noted that the civilian, democratic and parliamentary control of the security services is formal and far from the goals and practices envisaged at the beginning of the attempted democratic transition in Serbia with which it was supposed to advance towards the EU.

VIII – ARMY FOR THE PROMOTION OF THE GOVERNMENT

The Serbian Armed Forces are a strong government's pillar in the creation of a positive image in public perception. This is achieved by very frequent displays of military might in the presence of the top government officials and by live TV coverage. Regular activities are directed to promoting the prestige of the government, primarily President Aleksandar Vučić. Senior officials of the Ministry of Defence and the Serbian Armed Forces address him by the title "Supreme Commander" which is unknown in positive law. Those who use this title hope to be "recognized" for the promotion to a senior position.

The modernization of the Serbian Armed Forces has been put in the foreground. The internal problems related primarily to brain drain are hidden by denying access to the information about the real situation within the defence system. Serbia is the only country in the wider region which does not disclose the data on the summary size of its Ministry of Defence and armed forces, as well as the relationship between filling the ranks by formation and the actual filling.

THE PERSONALIZED IMPACT OF POLITICS

Under strong pressure from the ruling Serbian Progressive Party, the Serbian Armed Forces are much more closed than in the period until 2012. The consequences of the military elite's subjugation to politics are evident, because they have led to a dramatic violation of the principle of leadership and command, which

has been left to politics and civilians. It is constantly emphasized that they act on Vučić's orders, whether it is about exercises or crisis situations following the Banjska incident. On 2 October 2023: Defence Minister Miloš Vučević publicly stated that "if the Serbian Armed Forces receive the order from Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić as the Supreme Commander to enter the territory of Kosovo and Metohija, as part of Serbia, they will carry out such a task..."²⁰⁴ A very similar atmosphere was witnessed in the spring of 2023, after the incidents in northern Kosovo and the Kosovo Police's intervention. On 26 May 2023, it was announced that President Vučić signed an order to raise the combat readiness of the Serbian Armed Forces to the highest level.²⁰⁵

Defence Minister Vučević, who took over this Ministry in October 2022, is seen in public as the man who follows his leader Vučić. In the state administration he is also the First Deputy Prime Minister. As for the party structure, Vučević is at the head of the Serbian Progressive Party. In the defence system there are no indicators that the Minister's importance is felt. By contrast, Nenad Miloradović, Assistant Minister for Material Resources, has a very strong influence. He has actual control over weapons procurement and the weapons development activities led by the Military Technical Institute (VTI) located in Žarkovo. He has an important "control package" in the defence industry, because state-owned factories have a three-member supervisory board made up of army officers chosen in the Miloradović's office. He imposes decisions by resolute action with the reference of a man who enjoys Vučić's greatest confidence. According to sources from the Ministry of Defence, his signature is very rarely found in documents. Most important issues are resolved by imposing a view and verification within the system without a formal connection with Miloradović.

204 <https://www.021.rs/story/Info/Srbija/354413/Vucevic-Vojska-Srbije-bi-ukoliko-dobije-naredbu-od-predsednika-Vucica-usla-na-teritoriju-Kosova.html>

205 <https://www.tanjug.rs/srbija/politika/32395/vucic-izdao-naredbu-da-se-podigne-borbena-gotovost-vojske-srbije/vest>

At numerous armament demonstrations, Miloradović always dominates and walks beside Vučić. It seems that the culmination of Miloradović's influence was the International Armament and Military Equipment Fair – PARTNER 2023, held in Belgrade, 25–28 September 2023, at which he personally dominated as the host.²⁰⁶

MODERNIZATION

In December 2016, when the first major contracts with foreign partners were signed, an extensive process of the modernization of the Serbian Armed Forces was launched. It seems that politics has a decisive impact on the selection of funds, which is hidden by the non-disclosure of a long-term procurement plan in contrast to other countries in the region. As to the question whether something is a priority the answer is always “yes”, but what is written in the plan is confidential and cannot be revealed. Miloradović stands just behind that atmosphere. He mainly acts ad hoc or, in other words, he very often changes the main plan flow. For example, in 2020, the M-20 combat vehicle was presented as a infantry transport vehicle and then “evolved” into a platoon vehicle for infantry company fire support. In the meantime, it was presented as an alternative to the newly manufactured M-20 vehicle, called M-21, by converting a 1980s vehicle.

Miloradović personally imposes unusual solutions in the selection of weapons, the most radical of which is the idea that the Serbian Armed Forces, as the only army in the world, adopts the 6.5×39 mm caliber (the so-called Grendel) as the basic one for infantry weapons. Since 2016, they have been working on the design of a modular automatic rifle with a changeable barrel, because the old stock of 7.62×39 mm ammunition will be used first and then, after the consumption of those supplies, the 6.5×39 mm caliber barrel. Such an idea is a world precedent, because all armies try to equalize the caliber with their allies, namely the potential

206 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CxvhIumMhw0/?ref=BRIN10>

ammunition filling source. Now the Serbian Armed Forces have a practical problem, because they have inherited a considerable number of automatic rifles and submachine guns with the Yugoslav era 7.62×39 mm caliber, while at the same time using 5.56×45 mm caliber weapons – domestic M21, Belgian SCAR-L and German HK-416 and G36 rifles. Miloradović now imposes the third caliber and in 2023, under his pressure, the Zastava Arms manufactured the zero series of 2,000 pieces.

As for domestic weapons production, in the period from autumn 2022 to autumn 2023, the third battery consisting of six M15 (Nora-B52) self-propelled howitzers in NATO's standard 155 mm caliber was introduced. At present, the Mixed Artillery Brigade based in Niš has a division made up of three batteries having 18 howitzers. Some batteries have been modernized. Those equipped with the M77 Oganj 128 mm multi-barrel rocket launcher have been transformed into the digitalized M17 model and those equipped with Soviet-made 2S1 122 mm self-propelled howitzers have been transformed into the 2SIM variant.

The production of combat vehicles – Lazar 3 wheeled vehicles in the 12.7 mm machine gun variant has been continued and the Serbian Armed Forces now have about 40 of them, divided among four companies, each in one infantry battalion in the Jug military base, namely in the Vranje, Raška and Zaječar garrisons, as well as in the Loznica battalion, which will temporarily keep its equipment in Sremska Mitrovica until the completion of the infrastructure works in its home barracks.

The Miloš combat vehicle is in serial production. Since the beginning of 2021, it has been part of the armament of the 72nd Special Operations Brigade. In 2023, it appeared in the inventory of the 63rd Parachute Brigade.

In 2023, air defence units obtained at least one battery equipped with the new subvariant of the PASARS 40 mm self-propelled weapon with the Cummins 254 kW (340 HP) engine.

Other programmes related to the modernization of complex combat systems are in different stages of development, but in

public presentations it is insisted that they form part of the armament. At the Serbian Armed Forces Capabilities Demonstration “Granite-2023” at the Batajnica Airport on 22 April 2023, an unusually large amount of weapons was displayed. At first sight, some of them were displayed only to create the image of their mass production in domestic factories and cover up a delay in the realization of important programmes such as the modernization of the M-84 tank and M-80A infantry combat vehicle.²⁰⁷ So far, only the prototypes of the modernized M-84AB1 and AB2 tanks as well as M-80AB1 vehicle could be seen. At the Batajnica Airport there were only “serial” samples, namely the standard vehicles painted visibly in haste and covered with camouflage nets in order to conceal the absence of the new systems being characteristic of advanced equipment.

As for new weapons imports, Chinese CH-95 drones for reconnaissance and fire support tasks with laser guided missiles, 25 hours autonomy and 200 kg payload have been procured. The import from France included light portable Mistral 3+ air-defence missile systems in the subvariants with a lancer on the tripod, placed on the ground or suitable vehicle (at the Partner 2023 Defence Exhibition one could see it being installed on the Zastava NTV vehicle) or the PASARS system.

As for aviation, two C-295MWs have been manufactured in the Airbus Factory in Seville for the Serbian Armed Forces. They are intended for the transport of people and materiel, as well as parachute landings.²⁰⁸

The French Thales Group supplied the Serbian Armed Forces with new, GM400 long-range surveillance radars with the maximum range up to 515 km and GM200s with the range of 250 km for the air surveillance and reporting system which presently has old AN/TPS-70 US radars and British S-600 series systems at the

207 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/prikaz-sposobnosti-vojske-srbije-granit-2023-na-vojnomo-aerodromu-u-batajnici-22-aprila/>

208 <https://uSED/aero.telegraf.rs/vojna-avijacija/3754531-sutra-stize-u-srbiju-airbus-c-295>

sites of Stari Banovci, Kačarevo, Sombor, Zlatibor and Niš.²⁰⁹ Short-range GM60 radars with the range of 120–150 km are intended for surveillance by air defence units.

The United States are also on the list of the countries from which weapons are supplied: 118 off-road vehicles (HMMWV) have been procured from the US firm AM General under direct contracting.

Used Mi-35P combat helicopters were received from Cyprus in the autumn of 2023.²¹⁰ This is a controversial deal in a technical sense, because these helicopters were manufactured in 2001 and 2003 and will soon have to be overhauled, which can only be done by Russian firms. The deal has allegedly been concluded in exchange for new domestic Tamnava multi-barrel rocket launchers and hence the potential economic benefit from the later sale of rockets and additional launchers had a crucial influence on the procurement of old combat helicopters.

Compared to the period until 2022, the inflow of foreign weapons declined, as the significant number of the relevant contracts was signed with the Russian Federation in 2021. A bad intelligence assessment obviously had an influence on trying to procure military equipment from the country that was preparing itself for a war, which could be learned from open source reporting. Due to Russia's international isolation, the contracts could not be fulfilled and the question that imposes itself is how to replace the necessary equipment with third-party systems. Such an example are short-range air defence systems. The Serbian Armed Forces now have only one battery consisting of Russia's modern Pancir-S1E system. Two additional batteries have been ordered but, due to the wartime situation, their delivery must be forgotten. This is why the negotiations with China have been opened and, as an alternative to the Pantsir-S1 air defence system, the HQ-17A air defence

209 <https://tangosix.rs/2023/16/06/ekskluzivno-alesovo-prisustvo-u-srbiji-ne-prolazi-ispod-radara/>

210 <https://militaristikablog.wordpress.com/2023/03/27/kiparski-jurisni-helikopteri-mi-35p-za-srbiju/>

system with the area of destruction of up to 15 km in length and up to 10 km in height has been selected.

The last shipment before the war in Ukraine, which was received in December 2021, was the first of several planned tranches of the 9K135 Kornet-EM anti-tank guided missile system. It is now necessary to find new missiles, because in the inventory of the Serbian Armed Forces there are mostly Malyutka and Fagot missiles manufactured in the 1980s.

THE RENEWAL OF EXERCISES WITH NATO

As for international military cooperation, there is a noticeable turn towards NATO, including a series of joint exercises in a bilateral form with the US as well as dynamic protocol activities.²¹¹ After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, at the Serbian Government's session held on 27 February 2022, it was decided to stop all planning and training activities in the context of military neutrality and pressure on our country. It was concluded that military to military cooperation should not be continued until further notice. In the middle of 2023, the activities with the NATO members were resumed. In Bulgaria, at the Shabla range, live firing at the services of the air defence Neva-M and Kub-M missile systems was carried out. MiG-29s flew from Batajnica to Bulgaria's Graf Ignatievo Air Base and practiced shooting with air-to-air missiles with the colleagues from the relevant unit. In cooperation with the US army the "Platinum Wolf 2023" exercise was held at the South military base in southern Serbia.

211 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-vojna-vezba-platinasti-vuk-nato/32455592.html>

THE SITUATION IN KOSOVO

The notable activities of the Serbian Armed Forces from the autumn of 2022 to the autumn of 2023 were a show of force in the area stretching to Kosovo. On several occasions, the measures were taken to raise the combat readiness of one part of the Serbian Armed Forces and deploy reinforcements with a focus on the Novi Pazar and Raška garrisons in addition to the stationed units – the 28th Mechanized Battalion and the 21st Infantry Battalion. This has become almost a ritual and each time the opportunity has been used to display the prestige and power of the political leadership, which is filmed with military equipment in the background and sends the picture of the power of the force it has created.

- The exercise called “Manoeuvres 2022” was interrupted after the session of the National Security Council held on 27 October 2022²¹² and having to deal with the worsened situation in Kosovo. The crisis was a “baptism of fire” for the new Minister Vučević. On 1 November, two MiG-29s were seen near the administrative border and the pro-government media explained that they had intercepted drones coming from Kosovo. On 2 November, Vučević appeared on RTS and dismissed the idea of sending MiG-29s to carry out such a task. On that day one drone was allegedly grounded near the barracks in Raška with the use of an electronic gun. The topic has got first-class media coverage and has been interpreted as the confirmation of the aggressiveness of the Kosovo authorities. The case has not been clarified, because it has been officially announced that the Military Intelligence Agency will issue a report on this incident once it finishes its part of the work. And this topic has been intentionally sidelined. The professional public has remained suspicious and claimed that this is the case of false reporting in favour of the government’s media promotion.

²¹² https://www.mod.gov.rs/ladrones_t/19377/odrzana-sednica-saveta-za-nacionalnu-bezbednost-19377

- Combat readiness was also raised on 11 December 2022 and, after the session of the National Security Council, Vučić said that adequate measures were taken to protect our homeland and that, in this connection, he issued the most important orders. The reason was the entry of the Kosovo Police into the territory of Kosovo.
- In a turbulent atmosphere surrounding the meeting in Brussels in the night of 27/28 February 2023, the combat readiness of one part of the Serbian Armed Forces was raised once again.
- A new crisis broke out on 26 May 2023 when the reinforcements were raised in support of the units stationed in southern Serbia.²¹³ The occasion was the Kosovo Police's entry into Zvečan. The task to calm down the atmosphere was carried out by Ivica Dačić who said on 27 May that there was no plan for the intervention of the Serbian Armed Forces in Kosovo and that the goal was to be prepared "for all scenarios".²¹⁴
- After the incident in Banjska on 24 September 2023, the units of the Serbian Armed Forces were mobilized, but the foreign factors reacted for the first time and ordered them to return to their home barracks.²¹⁵ The messages from the press conference held on 2 October remained in the shadows. On that occasion, apart from the phrases about the execution of orders, Minister Vučević highlighted the excellent cooperation of the Serbian Armed Forces with KFOR and acknowledged the role of the international forces in the protection of Kosovo Serbs. In the message it was very clearly stated that Serbia would work on de-escalation.²¹⁶ For

213 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-ministar-odbrane-kosovo/31474837.html>

214 <https://n1info.rs/vesti/dacic-necemo-intervenirati-na-kosovu/>

215 <https://www.sd.rs/vesti/kosovo/bela-kuca-pozvala-na-povlacenje-srpske-vojske-vasington-trazi-od-nasih-snaga-da-napuste-2023-09-29>

216 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/milos-vucevic-kfor-vojska-srbije/32621398.html>

the first time since 2017, that is, the beginning of the practice to raise combat readiness and send reinforcements to the south in every crisis, the data on the size of the armed forces in the south has been given. Namely, according to the Chief of the General Staff, General Milan Mojsilović, there are about 8,350 soldiers. The importance of the current activities has been lessened due to the fact that in December 2022 and May 2023, there were 14,000 Serbian soldiers on the ground in each crisis situation.²¹⁷ At the request of the foreign factor it has been presented that there is no higher concentration of the armed forces. On 5 October, American Ambassador Christopher Hill visited the barracks in Raška and Novi Pazar to make sure that the situation is as it was said. This visit is a reflection of the leadership's rayah mentality – the submission to the authority is demonstrated in the presence of foreigners (as being stronger), while the alleged superiority and self-confidence are demonstrated to the domestic public.

THE CLOSURE OF INFORMATION

During 2023, the trend of denying access to the relevant information continued pursuant to the decision not to publish personal data in the *Official Military Gazette* (Službeni vojni list) such as promotions to a higher rank, retirements and appointments for which the rank of general is anticipated.²¹⁸ In addition, the Minister signed the decision on raising the data confidentiality level to “strictly confidential” for the documents dealing with the upgrading of the defence system in peacetime, formation size and current size of the defence system personnel. In that decision it is emphasized that the disclosure of information to an unauthorized person will cause damage to state security. In addition, as of

217 <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/575059/Mojsilovic-Nije-bilo-pojacane-borbenegotovosti-Vojske-Srbije-samo-pojacano-prisustvo>

218 <https://www.vreme.com/vreme/kamufliiranje-stvarnog-brojnog-stanja/>

13 October, pursuant to the Minister's decision, the data on the elements of the formation positions of officers and non-commissioned officers had to be marked as "internal". In the past, the tables showing ranks and pay grades relating to formation positions were published in the *Official Military Gazette*. By analyzing these data one could learn, for example, about the formation of the third battalion in the 72nd Brigade for Special Operations or the structures of the air defence missile division that is supplied with the Chinese-made FK-3 missile system. The position of the Ministry of Defence, which is stated in the explanation of the decision to treat these data as confidential in the future, is that they should not be public, because access restriction is "more important than the interest to allow free access to information of public importance".

In the atmosphere of concealing the data on sensitive topics, such as filling the ranks in the Serbian Armed Forces, it is not possible to realistically analyze the politically very sensitive issue of accepting additional special forces soldiers, which was undertaken by Vučić's order of 25 December 2022. According to the statements given by Serbian officials, the goal is to have 5,000 soldiers in those units by December 2024, but it is not clear what it refers to: whether strictly to the 72nd Brigade, 63rd Brigade and Military Police Special Operations Detachment "Cobras" for Special Operations or also include, as mentioned by Vučić in some statements, reconnaissance units and probably the existing forces such as tank, mechanized, artillery and other battalions.

BANJSKA CASE

The recent events in Kosovo (September 24, 2023) dramatically changed the atmosphere and the attitude of the Western community towards the Western Balkans and, in particular, Serbia. The West's prompt response to the terrorist act in the village of Banjska exposed Serbia's duplicitous policy and the failure of the Western policy of tolerating and pandering to Serbia. In a certain way, this event had a sobering effect on the EU, the US and NATO.

Although official and complete reports on this event are not yet accessible, judging by the intense ongoing diplomatic activities, it is clear that this was Serbia's serious attempt to take advantage of a fluid international context and threaten both regional and European security. It was an attempt to forcefully create the conditions for the annexation of northern Kosovo.

As security has priority, especially bearing in mind that Russia stood behind the attempts to destabilize the Balkans on several occasions (and it is still present), the West's prompt response could be expected, since this event was the red line and warning that Belgrade's manipulations and lies cannot be tolerated any more.

After the thwarted operation in Kosovo, official Belgrade is making efforts to distance itself and shift the responsibility to Kosovo Serbs, claiming that they have the right to rebel due to the continuous discrimination against them. Milan Radoičić, who admitted to being the organizer of this operation, was apprehended and then released, and there are no indications that he will be tried in due course. The West publicly tolerated that narrative, but did not give up the demand that those responsible be brought to justice.

The terrorist act in "Radoičić's organization" intensified the discussions on EU enlargement, especially to the Western Balkans, which has evidently become the most vulnerable spot when it comes to Europe's new security framework in the making. In her annual address on 13 September, Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission (EC), said that the EU with 30+ members is "strategic interest".²¹⁹ She also said that enlargement is an investment in the EU's security and prosperity, and that it will be a "progress catalyst". And Charles Michel, President of the European Council, announced back in August that the EU should be ready to receive new members "by 2030".²²⁰

Enlargement was discussed at all conferences and meetings held after 24 September (the murder of a Kosovo policeman in

²¹⁹ <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/evropska-unija-grenada-lideri-prosirenje/32621362.html>

²²⁰ Ibid.

Banjska), but its dynamics is still not clear. However, as President Macron hinted, the set goal – 2030 – cannot be achieved without the necessary changes in the EU itself.

BELGRADE DENIES ITS RESPONSIBILITY

The attack of an armed Serbian group in the village of Banjska as well as the previous protests in northern Kosovo in May suspended the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, and thus the integration of the Serb community into Kosovo society. The conflict in Banjska damaged the position of Serbia and, in particular, President Vučić, who is now trying to control damage and regain the initiative and control – both at home and abroad.

The scale of that operation was disclosed on a daily basis. During the month-long investigations and raids, a large collection of weapons – ranging from mortars to explosives – was seized. Such an operation could not be prepared and carried out without the support of certain circles in Belgrade. The arsenal found in the Monastery of Banjska was mostly manufactured in Serbian factories. The former American Colonel Gian Gentile said that the attackers were “equipped as infantry soldiers”.²²¹ The situation vis-à-vis Serbia was all the worse because, after the attack on Banjska, it increased its military presence on the border with Kosovo. This move was condemned by the European Union and the United States, which characterized it as “a very destabilizing action of the Serbian Army”.²²²

According to retired US General Wesley Clark, the attack in northern Kosovo poses a real problem for the stability of the Balkans and the European Union and NATO should be worried. He especially pointed out that it is disturbing that after the incident it turned out that a large quantity of weapons was kept in a Serbian monastery. There were also such cases in the Balkans during the 1990s, when certain monasteries were the strongholds of Serbian

²²¹ <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/kosovo-banjska-/32652032.html>

²²² Ibid.

nationalism. He hopes that the KFOR will insist that all this is verified, because there is no place for something like that at the moment when it is attempted to secure an agreement on granting autonomy to Kosovo citizens of Serb nationality.²²³

After the incident, the Serbian Army increased its presence on the border with Kosovo, which was condemned by the State Department and Brussels. The White House National Security Spokesman, John Kirby, called for the withdrawal of the Serbian forces in order to reduce tension.²²⁴ In response to the Banjska incident, NATO approved sending additional KFOR troops.

Belgrade denied that it raised the combat readiness of the Serbian Army, which Vučić persistently repeated to his Western collocutors. As he stated during his talk with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, “he denied that because he did not sign that and that it is not true”.²²⁵ However, the visit of US Ambassador Christopher Hill and the head of the EU delegation, Ambassador Emanuel Gioffre, to the Serbian Army barracks, which was organized ten or so days after the conflict, was a kind of pressure on the army to withdraw.²²⁶

President Vučić denied Serbia’s involvement in the conflict in Banjska and said that he himself would conduct an investigation. He also claimed that the conflict in Banjska was carried out by a group of “desperate local Serbs” and accused Kurti of “terrorizing” Serbs in northern Kosovo.²²⁷

The atmosphere and the events that preceded the Banjska attack should also be taken into account. Like the announcement of the incident, the graffiti inscriptions “When the army returns to Kosovo” flooded not only Belgrade, but also the interior of Serbia.

223 <https://n1info.rs/vesti/vesli-klark-za-voa-napad-na-severu-kosova-treba-da-zabrane-eu-i-nato/>

224 <https://www.sd.rs/vesti/kosovo/bela-kuca-pozvala-na-povlacenje-srpske-vojske-vasington-trazi-od-nasih-snaga-da-napuste-2023-09-29>

225 <https://www.sd.rs/vesti/kosovo/negirao-sam-neistine-vucic-otkrio-detajle-razgovora-sa-blinkenom-postavio-je-amerikancu-vazno-2023-09-29>

226 <https://chat.openai.com/c/18d33dc6-999d-4c82-97d3-a2f203ab00b9>

227 Ibid.

In addition, the speech of President Aleksandar Vučić at the UN General Assembly, his tone and message that Serbia will remain strongly independent and neutral and thus protect its interests, and that it will not give up Kosovo or its friendship with Russia²²⁸ – once again causes a dilemma about the direction taken by Serbia.

Official Belgrade did not distance itself from the paramilitary group. On the contrary, it was legalized by the very fact that the killed members of this group were declared heroes and that the day of mourning was declared. Considering the fact that the EU and the US characterized the attack as an act of terrorism, the question is how the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue will be continued if Belgrade does not deliver Radoičić or bring him to justice.

It is indicative that Aleksandar Vulin, Director of the Security Intelligence Agency (BIA), resigned his position at the moment when Serbia was under great pressure due to the Banjska conflict. His appointment as Director (in the autumn of 2022) was already met with outrage from the West due to his pro-Russian orientation and, after he was sanctioned by the US Treasury Department (July 2023), it stopped cooperating with the BIA. However, until now, Vučić has not shown any intent to remove him saying that Vulin is not sanctioned “because of crime and corruption, but because of Russia” on which Serbia still has not imposed sanctions due to its war in Ukraine.²²⁹

Giving the reason for sanctioning Vulin on 11 July, Brian E. Nelson, Under-Secretary of the US Treasury Department, said that Aleksandar Vulin was responsible for the allegedly corruptive and destabilizing acts which also enabled Russia’s malignant activities in the region.²³⁰

Aleksandar Vulin’s resignation is still not a proof that Serbia is distancing itself from Russia’s influence. Daniel Server points out that his resignation does not imply Serbia’s departure from its

228 <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/politika/1283190/vucic-izneo-istinu-pred-celim-svetom-hrabar-govor-predsednika-srbije-generalnoj-skupstini-video>

229 <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-66173264>

230 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/sad-vulin-sankcije/32501949.html>

policy of supporting Russia. It is rather an effort to avoid additional sanctions. He adds that Vulin is not the only problem in Serbia or its intelligence services. President Vučić did not show any regret for the events on 24 September (in northern Kosovo).²³¹

Apart from being increasingly tied to China and Russia, Serbia is again met with criticism from the West because, as pointed out by Radio Free Europe, Serbian companies export Western goods covered by EU sanctions (because they can be used in the military industry) to Russia. “Kominvex” is one of the dozens of companies registered in Serbia, which have exported such goods to Russia since the beginning of the war in Ukraine (February 2022).²³²

However, as stated in the EU decision on the 11th package of sanctions against Russia, adopted in June 2023, a country that does not respect the EU decisions on sanctions can even be punished by banning its import of advanced Western technology.²³³

Maximilian Hess from the International Institute for Strategic Studies in Philadelphia says that the export of that technology to Russia is banned because it is used for the production of Russian weapons that attack innocent Ukrainian citizens. Participation in it means a direct support to Russia’s aggression. Serbia has the responsibility to ensure that its companies comply with the international sanctions, adopt the relevant regulations and prevent such things”.²³⁴

EU AND US REACTIONS

The West has tightened its requirements, especially due to the possibility that an attack, like that in Banjska, is repeated, and the awareness of the possible consequences for the region. This is reflected in every new statement relating to the Western Balkans.

231 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-vulin-vucic-rusija-server/32670271.html>

232 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-rusija-sankcije-poslovanje/32674619.html>

233 Ibid.

234 Ibid.

The messages sent to Belgrade have become sharper and more precise. The atmosphere has changed and there are increasingly more requests for concrete action, which are confined to the request for Belgrade to strongly and unequivocally condemn the recent armed conflict and promise that it will not happen again, and that both sides engage much more seriously in the implementation of the Ohrid Agreement.

Immediately after the armed attack in Banjska the EU Political and Security Committee held a meeting to discuss the new situation in Kosovo. According to some diplomatic sources, many countries expressed the view that the measures against Serbia should be taken if its involvement in the attacks or its role in sending weapons to Kosovo, which was found during a police action, is proven.²³⁵

On 16 October, Tirana hosted the Berlin Process Summit²³⁶, the first such summit held outside the EU. The process was revitalized after it was shown that the Western Balkans alone has no internal potential to lead the process that will prepare the Western Balkan countries for EU membership. This was also shown by the Open Balkans Initiative (Serbia, North Macedonia, Albania), which was launched by President Vučić, but was not supported by all Western Balkan countries considering it as an attempt of Serbian domination.

This year's summit in Tirana was held immediately after the events in northern Kosovo, which also influenced the EU's clearer commitment to pursuing the enlargement policy.

German Chancellor Scholtz repeated the call for the soonest possible admission of the Western Balkan countries to the EU and pointed out: "It is quite clear that 20 years after the accession of

²³⁵ <https://n1info.rs/vesti/mere-eu-protiv-srbije-zbog-banjske/>

²³⁶ The Berlin Process is a platform for cooperation among the Western Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia). This initiative was launched by the former German Chancellor Angela Merkel in 2014 and it aims to spur the economic development of six Western Balkan countries and their rapprochement to the European Union.

these countries was promised, it must also happen soon.”²³⁷ And the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, said that this summit sent a strong message about the EU’s commitment to its enlargement and that it is necessary to increase access to the internal market, but this calls for reforms so as to make EU investment funds available.²³⁸ She also pointed out that the 30 billion euros economic investment plan laid a solid foundation and that the Western Balkan countries should found off their common regional market.²³⁹

In the summit conclusions, it was pointed to the importance of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans in the face of geopolitical uncertainty on the European soil. The document stressed the need to enhance connectivity in transport, trade, energy and digital domains among six Western Balkan countries and between the region and the EU. The need to bridge socio-economic disparities between the Western Balkans and the EU was also emphasized. This implies the need for tighter mutual cooperation.²⁴⁰

It is a disturbing fact that President Vučić did not go to the summit in Tirana. Instead, he opted to attend the jubilee celebration of the “Belt and Road” project in Beijing. This also raised the question of whether Vučić really wants to join the European Union. German analyst Johanna Deimel asks the question whether Vučić is a real partner in view of the fact that he did not go to Tirana where the future of the Western Balkans was discussed.²⁴¹

On 19 October, the European Parliament adopted a very harsh resolution relating to the attack on the Kosovo police. The document calls on Kosovo and Serbia to de-escalate the situation,

237 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/samit-berlinskog-procesa-tirana/32639097.html>

238 Ibid.

239 <https://www.aa.com.tr/ba/politika/scholz-u-tirani-berlinski-proces-najbolji-instrument-za-ubrzanje-integracija-zapadnog-balkana-u-eu/3021925>

240 <https://autonomija.info/fon-der-lajen-eu-otvara-vrata-jedinstvenog-trzista-zapadnom-balkanu-ali-uz-reforme/>

241 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/demostat/velika-petorka-donosi-konkretna-zhteve-i-rokove-o-cemu-ce-razgovarati-sa-vucicem-i-kurtijem/>

establish all facts about the events in Banjska and return to their dialogue. However, the resolution demands, among other things, that the European Commission and the European Council take measures against Serbia if it is proved that it was directly involved in the events. In the debate over the resolution, many parliamentarians demanded the imposition of sanctions.

In the message sent by the “Big Five” – Miroslav Lajčák, (EU), Gabriel Escobar (USA), Emmanuel Bonne (France), Jens Plötner (Germany) and Francesco Tallo (Italy) – to Belgrade (21 October), it was stated that there would be no European future for Serbia and Kosovo without the normalization of their relations and implementation of the agreement.²⁴² Lajčák said to the media that Serbia and Kosovo entered into new talks in February and March of this year and that both sides are expected to start fulfilling their obligations arising from the new and old agreements”.²⁴³

That the “meeting was difficult” was also confirmed by President Vučić, who holds that “we will find the way out of the crisis in the coming period”.²⁴⁴

Viola von Cramon, a member of the European Parliament Greens, made it clear after the Banjska conflict that if someone is not interested in EU membership, he can continue playing without the European Union, but then he does not need any money. And that they know that he depends on that money. This is why she thinks that they should play this card and use this instrument much more.²⁴⁵

In an open letter, German Chancellor Olaf Scholtz, French President Emmanuel Macron and Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni requested that Kosovo start the procedure for establishing the Community of Serb Majority Municipalities and that Serbia de facto implement the recognition of Kosovo. It is also stated that,

242 <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/srbija-kosovo-normalizacija-vu%C4%8Di%C4%87-petorka-kurti-dijalog/7320732.html>

243 Ibid.

244 Ibid.

245 <https://n1info.rs/vesti/viola-fon-kramon-vucic-diskredituje-eu-a-uzima-novac/>

in order to speed up progress, Kosovo is called upon to start the procedure for establishing the Community of Serb Majority Municipalities, as described in the draft statute, while Serbia is called upon to implement the de facto recognition of Kosovo. Formalities should not stand in the way of progress on this issue”.²⁴⁶

On 24 October, the United Nations Security Council considered the new six-month report on the work of the UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) by the UN Secretary General, António Guterres. The report did not include the attack in northern Kosovo. The messages of the members of the UN Security Council did not differ much from the previous ones. Belgrade and Pristina are called upon to return to dialogue and the need to establish the Community of Serb Majority Municipalities was emphasized. As some Western countries pointed out, it is time to end the UNMIK mission, because the reality is different in comparison to that in 1999. Russia holds that the UNMIK is still necessary, primarily because the UN is a forum where it has more weight.

In a series of visits by high-ranking EU officials, there was one by Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, who repeated the messages that had already been heard – the West will no longer tolerate the incidents such as the one in Banjska and that it expects the de facto recognition of Kosovo, namely the implementation of the Ohrid Agreement. Kosovo also has to fulfil its obligations such as, inter alia, the establishment of the Community of Serb Majority Principalities according to the plan offered by the Commission.²⁴⁷

The annual report of the European Commission (8 October), the most important document for every country aspiring to become a EU member, again criticizes Serbia’s progress in the key chapters, 23 and 24, which refer to the rule of law. The normalization of relations with Kosovo is required by both sides on the path

246 <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/regija/scholz-macron-i-meloni-kosovo-treba-da-iformi-zso-a-srbija-da-de-facto-prizna-kosovo/231027178>

247 , <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/von-der-layen-beograd-posjeta-/32662229.html>

Eu accession. However, in the absence of progress, both sides risk losing important opportunities. The report specifically refers to the case of Banjska, which is considered “the gravest escalation in recent years”. It is also requested to investigate the violence perpetrated against KFOR troops during the protests at the end of May. It is also emphasized that Serbia did not impose sanctions on Russia, align its foreign policy with the EU’s policy and counter foreign information manipulation and interference.²⁴⁸

The report also emphasizes that Serbia should inform the EU about the activities of the Serbian-Russian Humanitarian Centre in Niš and its integration into the emergency management system. Serbia should also ensure that this humanitarian centre does not duplicate the role of the European Commission’s Emergency Response Coordination Centre.²⁴⁹

In the meantime, the European Commission also presented the *Growth Plan* (8 October), which should be considered a special incentive for all Western Balkan countries. Namely, it is about the €6.3 billion package, which includes €2 billion grants and €4 billion loans based on international financial conditions, and aims to reduce the gap between the countries in the region and the EU. European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Várhelyi said that the region is asked to “treat each other the way they will treat us”.²⁵⁰ Serbia and Kosovo will not be able to use the “Growth Plan” funds if they do not make progress in the dialogue on the normalization of their relations.

The West is evidently in a hurry to solve the Kosovo problem before the European and US elections next year.

248 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/evropska-komisija-srbija-izvestaj/32673608.html>

249 <https://n1info.rs/vesti/evropska-komisija-trazi-od-srbije-objasnjenje-oruskom-humanitarnom-centru-u-nisu/>

250 “Dogovor Srbije i Kosova, pa milijarde od EU”, *Danas*, 9.November 2023.

RUSSIA'S REACTIONS

In giving support to Serbia, Russia is guided by its geopolitical reasons when it comes to Kosovo. It defends Resolution 1244 more than Serbia because, in this phase of world order transformation, it aims to use the Kosovo precedent in its own surroundings. Russia is directing its efforts towards the so-called Kosovo precedent and the politicization of the disputed international norms (especially territorial integrity and sovereignty and the right to self-determination). In order to defend its aggression against Ukraine, Russia is focusing on the reinterpretation of history, humanitarian and ethnic factors, as well as the reinterpretation of Western actions in the Balkans.

Russia's interest also explains its efforts to take every opportunity to obstruct the efforts of the EU, the US and NATO to round off Kosovo's independence and thus eliminate the point of constant tension that can easily turn into a conflict, as shown by the case of Banjska. Russia's influence on a significant part of the Serbian elites (in Serbia, the Republic of Srpska and Montenegro) and, above else, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) undermines the efforts of the Western Balkan countries to establish a permanent link with Euro-Atlantic integration. That is why it is in its interest that the status of a frozen conflict in Kosovo and the dysfunctionality of the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina are maintained.

As for the events in Banjska, Russia not only sided with Belgrade, but also interpreted them in the same way, laying the blame on Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti. Russia's position was explained by the Minister for Innovation and Technological Development, Nenad Popović: "Russia will never accept Kosovo as an independent state or its admission to EU membership. However, it will support any compromise over Kosovo which suits Serbia and is reached within the framework of Resolution 1244 and the Serbian Constitution."²⁵¹

²⁵¹ <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/popovic-u-manastiru-banjska-rusija-nikada-nece-prihvatiti-da-kosovo-bude-nezavisna/3t74b5n>

Immediately after the events in Banjska, President Vučić met with Russian Ambassador Botsan-Kharchenko to inform him that the brutal ethnic cleansing of Serbs is being carried out in Kosovo, organized by Albin Kurti with the support of part of the international community.²⁵²

The Russian Ambassador said that “the West encourages Pristina and that it is absolutely clear that the dialogue i(in Brussels) serves as a cover for what is really happening in Kosovo. The dialogue absolutely do not produce any results and the same applies to the contacts with the representatives of the leading Western countries.” He also stated that the members of the KFOR mission, led by NATO, “not only failed to fulfil their assignment, but assisted the police forces in violence against civilians”.²⁵³

This was followed by the statement of the Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova, that “the worsening of the situation in Kosovo and Metohija, which led to the bloodshed in the village of Banjska, is the consequence of the policy pursued by the ‘Prime Minister’ of the self-proclaimed republic, which aims to inflame the conflict and cleanse Serbs from the province”.²⁵⁴

The Deputy of the Russian Foreign Minister, Alexander Grushko, stated that “Russia does not see any prospects for a long-term stabilization of the situation in Kosovo because America and the European Union are constantly inflaming it”.²⁵⁵

Commenting on US Ambassador Christopher Hill’s statements relating to the case of Banjska, the Russian portal *Sputnik* has concluded that they boil down to the conclusion that Pristina is obliged to establish the Community of Serb Majority Municipalities and

252 <https://www.aa.com.tr/ba/balkan/vu%C4%8Di%C4%87-sa-ambasadorom-ruske-federacije-u-srbiji-aleksandrom-bocan-har%C4%8Denkom/3000354>

253 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/ruski-ambasador-bocan-harcenko-un-banjska-tragedija/>

254 <https://24sedam.rs/politika/vesti/246325/marija-zaharova-i-rusija-kritikovali-aljbina-kurtija/vest>

255 <https://www.kosovo-online.com/vesti/politika/moskva-bez-izgleda-za-dugorocnu-stabilizaciju-na-kosovu-28-9-2023>

that Serbia must allow the membership of the fake state of Kosovo in international organizations.²⁵⁶

Moscow, namely Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) has also reacted to the US sanctions against Aleksandar Vulin, Director of the Security Intelligence Agency (BIA), accusing the United States for a new act of aggression against Serbia.²⁵⁷ On the occasion of his resignation, the Russian media have reported that Vulin has decided to step down in order to protect Serbia from more pressure from Washington and Brussels and that this is another form of pressure on Serbia and President Vučić for not imposing sanctions against the Russian Federation.²⁵⁸

256 <https://lat.sputnikportal.rs/20231004/konacna-ucena-amerike-hil-je-dugo-cutao-pa-otkrio-sta-se-krije-iza-dima-krvavih-sukoba-u-banjskoj-1162011537.html>

257 <https://sputnikportal.rs/20230724/rusija-sankcija-protiv-vulina---novi-akt-americke-agresije-protiv-srbije-1158984498.html>

258 <https://informer.rs/vesti/politika/843715/mnogobrojni-ruski-mediji-izvestavaju-o-ostavci-direktora-bia-aleksandra-vulina-podneo-ostavku-kako-bi-sprecio-dalje-pritiske-zapada-na-srbiju>

IX – EDUCATION: THE PROBLEM OF PSEUDOMORPHOSIS

The future of every country depends on the readiness of its citizens to successfully overcome the challenges of the 21st century, including accelerated development, advanced globalization and large-scale disruptions (such as pandemics and climate change), which are primarily reflected in uncertainty. Since the only certain and predictable situation is just the unpredictability of change and progress in the next decade, the education system must successfully build the capacity of young people, so that after leaving the education system they can be competent to live and work in the 21st century. (Strategy for the Development of Education and Upbringing by 2030)

EDUCATION STRATEGY: A NORM AS A FORM

On 3 June 2023, at the proposal of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (in further text referred to as the Ministry), the Government of the Republic of Serbia adopted the *Strategy for the Development of Education and Upbringing by 2030* (in further text referred to as the Strategy). On that occasion it was emphasized that the Strategy was adopted with the aim to improve the quality of the education and training process, that the focus is laid on student-oriented education and the development of his/her competencies, as well as on the implementation of modern approaches, methods and techniques. During the public debate on the draft Strategy, the Ministry representatives emphasized that this strategic document set important goals – to increase child education coverage at all levels, prevent vulnerable groups from

dropping out of school, improve student performance, improve programmes and teacher support. Special emphasis was laid on strengthening the link between education and the labour market.

In the introductory part of the text it is also stated that the Strategy is a “comprehensive public policy document relating to the development of education and upbringing in the Republic of Serbia, which respects and values the achieved results, changes in the context from 2012 to the present day, as well as the needs for (1) the inclusion of the topics that were not part of the existing strategic framework and the implementation of which began in the previous period; (2) the harmonization of education policies with scientific, technological and sustainable development and contemporary trends in society and economy; (3) the harmonization of education regulations with international documents (UN, EU and Council of Europe documents) and initiatives, as well as the new strategic framework of the Republic of Serbia”²⁵⁹.

The Strategy is also accompanied by the *Action Plans* (for the periods from 2021 to 2023 and from 2023 to 2026) which are its integral part. The *Action Plans* contain concrete measures and activities that will be undertaken in order to ensure the conditions for achieving the defined goals. The *Action Plans* specify the actors and partners in the implementation of those measures, as well as the deadlines and financial resources for their implementation. They have been prepared in the prescribed way and the format that permits data entry and the subsequent monitoring and reporting through the *Unified Information System for Public Policy Planning and Coordination*.

According to the Strategy, the representatives of other institutions of the system, international organizations, non-governmental organizations and media have also participated in the consultations – the Republican Institute for Public Policy, Ministry of European Integration, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Environmental

259 Strategija razvoja obrazovanja i vaspitanja do 2030. godine, Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 63, 23 June 2021 (<http://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/vlada/strategija/2021/63/1/reg>)

Protection, Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities of Serbia (SKGO), Serbian Chamber of Commerce, Provincial Government, Team for Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction, UNICEF, British Council, Council of Europe, OSCE, GIZ, Pestalozzi Foundation, Conference of the Parties (COP), Centre for Interactive Pedagogy (CIP), Centre for Youth Integration, Child Rights Centre, National Association of Parents and Teachers of Serbia (NARNS), Roma Education Fund and Užice Child Rights Centre.

It is also stated that the Strategy is also based on a number of the relevant international documents, such as the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals*, the document referring to the global development agenda for the post-2015 period. The sustainable development goals refer to numerous social needs, including quality education for which it is necessary to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities”²⁶⁰; the *Strategy for the Western Balkans*²⁶¹, which is focused on comprehensive reforms and lays special emphasis on six leading initiatives, including digital agenda; Article 26 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* prescribes the right to education²⁶²; the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, which the Republic of Serbia has ratified and thus assumed the obligation to implement the measures to prevent violence against children and ensure their protection from all forms of violence in the family, institutions and larger social environment²⁶³; Article 14 of the *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union* – 2016/C 202/02, which prescribes the right to education²⁶⁴; the *Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning*, which lists the revised key competences for lifelong learning and points to the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to

260 <https://rsjp.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/Agenda-UN-2030.pdf>

261 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/news/strategy-western-balkans-2018-feb-06_en

262 <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html>.

263 <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention>

264 Official Journal of the European Union C 202/389 – <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:12016P/TXT&from=EN>

the development of competencies²⁶⁵; Article 12 of the *Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities*, adopted at the meeting of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe and ratified in 1998, prescribes the obligation of the state to take measures in the field of education and research to cherish the culture, language and religion of the national minorities and majority population, provide the appropriate opportunities for teacher training and the availability of teaching aids, facilitate contacts between students and teachers from different communities and ensure equal access to education at all levels for members of the national minorities²⁶⁶; the *European Charter of Regional or Minority Languages*, ratified in 2005, whereby the state assumed the obligation to protect minority languages (including Albanian, Bosnian, Bulgarian, Hungarian, Roma, Romanian, Ruthenian, Slovak, Ukrainian and Croatian)²⁶⁷; the *UNECE Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development*, which deals entirely with sustainable education and whose main goal is to motivate and support the UNECE member states to work on the advancement of education for sustainable development and the integration of this form of education into the formal education system²⁶⁸.

As stated in the Strategy, due to “the commitment of the Republic of Serbia to the European integration process”, the authors of this document tried to refer to the values, strategic priorities and goals included in the European Education Area by 2030, and especially relied on the Resolution on a New Strategic Framework for Education and Training by 2030 (ET 2030) where the vision of the future of education and training is defined by setting five main strategic goals – improving quality, equity, inclusion and success for all in education and training; making lifelong learning and

265 Official Journal of the European Union C 189/1 – [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604\(01\)&from=LT](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604(01)&from=LT).

266 [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:32021G0226\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:32021G0226(01))

267 https://ec.europa.eu/info/files/european-pillar-social-rights-action-plan_en

268 Communication on a European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience

mobility a reality for all; enhancing competences and motivation in the education profession; reinforcing European higher education; supporting the green and digital transitions in and through education and training²⁶⁹; the EU Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, which sets out the key principles and rights of essential importance for equal and functional labour markets and social protection systems²⁷⁰; the European Skills Agenda, a five-year plan aimed at helping individuals and businesses to develop their skills by strengthening sustainable competition, ensuring social equality, providing access to education, training and lifelong learning for all and building resilience as a response to crisis situations²⁷¹; the European Digital Strategy and Digital Education Action Plan (2021–2027), which presents the European Commission’s vision of high-quality, inclusive and accessible digital education in Europe²⁷²; the European Higher Education Area and Bologna Process, based on the common set of obligations and key values such as the freedom of expression, institutional autonomy, independent student associations, academic freedom, free movement of students and the employed²⁷³; the EU Roma Strategic Framework by 2030, a new 10-year plan including a proposal for the Council’s Recommendation to support Roma in the EU²⁷⁴; the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, which anticipates greater attention to the importance of education and employment, especially by implementing multisectoral instruments such as the Youth Guarantee²⁷⁵.

269 [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:32021G0226\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:32021G0226(01))

270 https://ec.europa.eu/info/files/european-pillar-social-rights-action-plan_en

271 Communication on a European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience

272 https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/digital-education-action-plan_en

273 <https://ehea.info/page-ministerial-declarations-and-communiques>

274 https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/new-eu-roma-strategic-framework-equality-inclusion-and-participation-full-package_en

275 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_1811

In this analysis, we attribute the status of an authentic public document to the Strategy as a general action plan whose purpose is to achieve specific, clearly defined goals, thus providing a framework for understanding the formal intentions of the state in the field of education. On the other hand, the Strategy provides guidance for identifying a discrepancy between the normative shaping of an area, namely education in this case, and something that is actually happening. This is especially important because the requirement for preserving (and developing) a system is to consistently turn the set norms into reality. In the opposite, it will be impossible to obtain the elementary consent of all actors regarding the understanding and interpretation of the created normative framework, which then leads to the system dysfunctionality.

Our basic assumption is that in 2023 the relationship between the façade normative projection of education in Serbia and the real situation is also inversely proportional. We have defined the situation in which the norms are produced without the intention to implement them, as the problem of pseudophormosis (the term introduced by Oswald Spengler into social theory) as a false shaping of things due to which there is a significant difference between form and content. The result of this asymmetry or, more exactly, discrepancy between external “architecture” and internal structure is an empty form into which a completely different content is poured (mostly due to foreign policy reasons, the content cannot be articulated within the scope of its own form, but is forced to accept this adaptation form).

In order to justify this thesis, we will test several key points from the Strategy, the vision and mission, namely the “desired states” of education, as defined in this document,

It is defined by the vision and mission (in the Strategy, these two categories are practically indistinguishable) that, among other things, it is strived for the respect of cultural diversity and the specificity of a multicultural environment, as the necessary preconditions for life in a modern society. Emphasis is also laid on

developing critical thinking, building a just society and fostering cultural diversity.

It is also anticipated to strengthen (...) the preventive and intervention activities associated with the protection against violence and discrimination, as well as the preservation of mental health and gender equality.

It is stated that it will be insisted on “increasing the reputation of education in society” and “ensuring high-quality education that serves the development of the full potential of each individual and, therefore, the society as a whole”. In other words, the education system must successfully build the capacity of young persons, so that they become competent for life and work in the 21st century,

THE FUTURE OR THE COMING OF THE PAST

Consequently, despite a declarative appreciation for the cultural diversity and specificity of a multicultural environment, pro-European values and interculturality, as necessary conditions for life in a modern society (and a kind of pledge for the future), the practice in the Serbian education system is completely different. Moreover, it is evident that the institutional capacities of the education system are precisely (and unrestrainedly) used as a channel for the unilateral redefinition of cultural identity. For this purpose, a peculiar narrative and functional complex made up of the “national tradition”, revision of history and desecularization of schools has been constructed. Therefore, it will be necessary to project the core of the national identity at the level of the education system which, in itself, will be unquestionable and can be problematized without risking the disapproval of the “entire society”.

One of the most important roles in this process is certainly played by the *Charter on the Serbian Cultural Area*²⁷⁶, the document

276 По, веља о српском културном простору (kultura.gov.rs)

signed by the Ministries of Culture of the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Srpska in Sremski Karlovci on 4 March 2019. The basic thesis of the *Charter* is that the boundaries of a cultural area cannot be confined to the boundaries of a political, namely state area". By that very fact it is implied that the purpose of the *Charter* is that a single cultural area serves as a (temporary) substitute for a single political area. The *Charter* emphasizes that "We devote special attention to the introduction of systemic care about the Serbian language and Cyrillic script, as well as about support for the programmes of teaching the Serbian language, history and culture, which represents one of the fundamental tools in the legitimate effort to avoid the denaturalization of new generations, not only in the increasingly larger diaspora, but also in Serbia and the Republic of Srpska".

This explicitly incorporates the idea of the Serbian cultural idea into the education system too. Since 2021, in order to responsibly use the heritage as an "irreplaceable support for the safer pace of the generations of self-conscious descendants participating in the continuity that we call history, tradition and culture", the curricula (for the so-called national group of courses, including the Serbian language, history, geography and science and society courses) have been harmonized between primary schools in Serbia and the Republic of Srpska. To this end, the following publications have been published: *Negovanje kulture srpskog naroda i razvijanje nacionalnog identiteta* (Cherishing the Culture of the Serbian People and Developing National Identity), published by the Institute for the Improvement of Education and Training, Belgrade, and *Očuvanje nacionalnog identiteta i vrijednosti u kontekstu osnovnog vaspitanja i obrazovanja* (The Preservation of National Identity and Values in the Primary Education and Training Context), published by the Republican Pedagogical Institute of the Republic of Srpska, Banja Luka). Emphasis in these publications is laid on the binding elements of Serbian national identity: the Cyrillic script, Orthodox faith, Saint Sava, gusle, epic poetry, patriotism and the like.

Apart from the warning that “accelerated changes and globalization processes are already bringing the world’s cultural diversity into question”, the Charter calls for a “different and sober approach” concerning respect to “generous openness toward others” in order to avoid becoming a cultural colony and experiencing identity depersonalization.

The central role in all this is played by the “common memories of the crucial historical events, especially those of collective suffering”. It is exactly this equalization of history and memory which is problematized by Dubravka Stojanović in her book *Prošlost dolazi. Promene u tumačenju prošlosti u srpskim udžbenicima istorije 1913–2021* (*The Past Is Coming. Changes in the Interpretation of the Past in Serbian History Textbooks*)²⁷⁷. Referring to different historians, the author reminds us that history and memory represent – opposites: “Memory is made up of emotions and passions, it is affective and sacralizes memories. Historical science is secular, scientific, critical and rational. Memory keeps repeating the past in the present, while history keeps it at a distance and fixes it in the past in which it happened. Memory is absolute, history is relative”. In this context, history textbooks are becoming “the primary instrument of transmitting the officially sanctioned memory”.

According to Dubravka Stojanović, “changes at the level of facts and their interpretations in Serbian history textbooks, published from 1913 to 2021, confirm the thesis that they are completely dependent on the current political needs. This is why it was possible that in some of them there was no mention that the “eternal enemy” Turkey fought on the same side as Serbia in the Second Balkan War. So, in the first textbooks published under socialism the entire Second Balkan War was omitted in order to prevent us from having a grudge against friendly, socialist Bulgaria. Due to the influence of the current political interests, it was possible to read in the textbooks published during the existence of Yugoslavia about thousand-year processes that supposedly inevitably led

277 Dubravka Stojanović, *Prošlost dolazi. Promene u tumačenju prošlosti u srpskim udžbenicima istorije 1913–2021*, Biblioteka XX vek, 2023.

to its creation. However, after the breakup of the common state, all of that was cancelled and it could be said that the creation of Yugoslavia was never Serbia's idea. The facts about the Second World War also underwent a complete change. Thus, after 2000, one could find in textbooks that partisans collaborated with the occupier and committed crimes, while Chetniks were portrayed as antifascists. And the facts about their collaboration with Germans and their crimes were "forgotten". What can we say about Gavrilo Princip's portrayal during the last hundred years, ranging from a Yugoslav patriot in interwar textbooks to a progressive youth in the socialist period and to a Serbian hero today. Such dramatic manipulations of historical facts would not be possible if textbooks were not part of historiography. All these examples prove that they are part of a highly variable collective memory and direct result of the state's history policy".

The specific interpretation of tradition in a multicultural society, now in the form of desecularization, is also shown by the case of the *Aleksa Šantić* Elementary School in Sečanj. Namely, in January 2023, after the decision of Principal Olivera Marjanović that the school's feast of Saint Sava would be celebrated in a different way, that is, without a religious ceremony, she was exposed to social media lynching. According to her testimony, she explained to the priest on that day that, according to Article 11 of the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, school and church are separated, because a school can also be attended by Catholics and Muslims, that is, students of all religions and atheists: "Therefore, we cannot force anyone in the school to attend other people's religious ceremonies". The then Minister of Education, Branko Ružić, had a different view of interculturality and secularity in education: "When we speak about Saint Sava, we actually speak about someone who is practically the founder of the modern Serbian state and the autocephalous Serbian Church. When we speak about the celebration of Saint Sava's Day as the school patron saint feast day, we speak about our tradition. When speaking about tradition – how do you think it should be celebrated if not by cutting the feast cake." After

this event, several non-governmental organizations from Vojvodina reacted and called on the citizens of Sečanj and Vojvodina, as well as the civil sector to protect and support the Principal because, in the meantime, she was declared “an enemy of the state” and “a traitor” and her dismissal was publicly demanded.

Intercultural education is mentioned in Section 4. *Vision of the Development of Education and Upbringing in the Republic of Serbia* where it is stated, among other things, that “it is necessary to develop the teaching models in primary and secondary education and upbringing which are anticipated by the *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* (...) in order to ensure that, through the teaching and learning programme, students belonging to the majority population learn about the culture of the national minorities living in the Republic of Serbia, as well as to provide the conditions for the development of intercultural education by applying a cross-curricular approach in regular classes and extracurricular activities”. In the same section, it is also emphasized that, to achieve the “desired state”, “apart from technical sciences, the development of social sciences and humanities is also of utmost importance for cherishing national and cultural identity, pro-European values and interculturality, as well as for the education of citizens in critical thinking skills and development of modern society”. Employees in education should also perform an upbringing function, including the contents devoted to sustainable development and collective well-being, which also anticipates philanthropy”.

Although this is mentioned in the Strategy, the basic impression is that there is a problem concerning the very understanding of the concept of interculturality. Namely, in the *Action Plan for the Period 2021–2023* the content of the proposed one, by which the intention from the Strategy would actually be operationalized, shows that interculturality is one-directionally perceived – only as the possibility of getting acquainted with the Serbian language and culture or, in the other case, with the Roma language and culture (this part of the content is intended for the Roma themselves).

The relevant research shows that young people are mostly not in contact with their peers who belong to other cultures. This often leads to the social exclusion of young people who do not belong to the dominant culture. More than 40% of young people in Serbia believe that being Serbian fully describes their identity, while one fifth of young people believe that the loss of national identity is an inevitable result of EU membership. These data show that young people do not understand and do not know enough what the concept of interculturality means. On the other hand, the education system in Serbia does not encourage interculturality and thinking on this topic nor does it provide enough information about interculturality and cultural differences for young people.

Such an understanding of identity issues inevitably leads to sliding into the organic images of the world, which result in a binary schematism, an “us”/“them” perspective, namely a division into “us” and “them”. These belated forms of identity legitimization face young people with the presumed consent about their identity and collectivity. Such an understanding of identity is due to the absence of open communication among social actors. This means that such societies lose their complexity and flexibility, and thus the potential for successful development in the future.

THE EDUCATION SYSTEM AND SECURITY THROUGH SCHOOL WALLS

In September 2023, six months after the tragedy at the Vladislav Ribnikar Elementary School in Belgrade, the beginning of the new school year seemed never to have been more stressful. For all – children, parents and teachers. For each of them in a different way. However, what is common to them and the entire Serbian society is an almost unbearable level of tension, coupled with a loud mention of violence or – whispering about it. The answer to the question – what will you do to prevent this from happening again – which was put by citizens to the authorities no one actually managed to figure out. We only know that there are police

officers in schools and that, just before the beginning of the school year, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development sent to schools the *Guidelines*, which mostly resemble the digest edition of two large and most important social categories – values and virtues... One of the questions that will probably remain unanswered for a long time is how it is possible that the team comprised of decision makers and government administrators responsible for education, as well as various expert associates do not know how, by which process and how long it takes to adopt values and virtues.

On 1 September, the Teaching Council of the High School in Čačak addressed the public with a letter regarding the Ministry's *Guidelines*. In it they state that, after studying this document, they address the public, because they feel the need to present their views, "considering them as the basis for a serious public dialogue of all interested parties". In this letter, they also state that *Guidelines* sent by the Ministry to schools as a teaching aid "make teachers angry and resigned", that the Ministry of Education and the whole state system have long had a disparaging attitude towards schools and their staff and that they are treated as "the only culprits for the shortcomings and total fiasco of the school system". In its public letter, the Teaching Council explicitly states that the school is not an isolated environment, that it now functions only thanks to responsible individuals and that the main problem and source of violence are "such a society and violence that children come into contact with via national frequencies which are accessible to them via TV programmes and social media. The responsibility lies with this society and the state and not with teachers and parents who are not asked anything."

As to the questions (which have been discussed by teachers, parents, psychologists and sociologists among themselves for months) – how do teachers feel at the beginning of the new school year after the tragic events in May; how do parents and students feel; is the presence of the police in schools a guarantee of their safety if we know that violence is all around us; will the set

of *Guidelines* (on virtues and values) bring any progress; are virtues and values adopted by such measures or this is the process that is inseparable from the society as a whole and, finally, has Serbia's education system collapsed and to what extent, and where this collapse is most obvious and where it is most alarming. My collocutor, Helena Šešum, a computer scientist, activist of the Bravo Civic Movement from Novi Sad and mother of three elementary school children, has answered:

“Unfortunately, the presence of police in schools does not worry parents and children today; on the contrary, it relaxes them. Instead of private security guards having no authority over anything, but giving parents a false sense of security which they finance, the presence of those having authority does calm them down. However, violence has long since penetrated every pore of society so much that we no longer notice it. Thus, it passes undetected even through school walls. Also, *Guidelines* issued by the Ministry do not bring anything that is not contained in the relevant laws and already applied by good teachers. However, virtues and values must be cherished and developed by offering one's own example, acting as a stimulant for child or for man in general, independently of him and, transforming him together with the environment and not at another 45-minute lecture. Bearing in mind that today's education observation framework and its evaluation have been transferred to an entirely different cultural environment, compared to the one at the time when the parents and teachers of today's students were sitting in the same classrooms, it takes a lot of effort to understand in what social context today's children grow up and their teachers work. In order to understand this, which is a prerequisite for the successful work of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, it is necessary to ask those who spend their school and working days in classrooms, as well as those who send their children to school. It is also necessary that all these actors have greater autonomy at work and in decision making. Their absence points to the absence of a system and the existence of one centre of will, which is here at work”.

The relationship between education and society is certainly crucial for this problem. Schools are not and cannot be isolated enclaves or lonely islands unaffected by their environment. Even the best-conceived reforms of the school system cannot achieve lasting results if students – after leaving the school building – face the society dominated by violence, hate speech, corruption, social inequalities... And if they take that joyless “package” with them when they go back to school the next day. School and society are inextricably linked and, therefore, insisting on any “guidelines”, which will project “values and virtues” exclusively in the school context, sounds either like a complete misunderstanding of the problem or cynicism.

If we assume that it is the question of a misunderstanding, we can remind ourselves of American philosopher John Dewey, the most significant representative of the philosophy of pragmatism and the author who had a crucial influence on education reform in the United States, Japan, China, Turkey, Mexico... in the first half of the 20th century. According to him, it is necessary to connect the school with the external social environment. In his opinion, socially desirable qualities cannot be assigned in advance by “pouring” the projected content into a “passive container”. Dewey believed that it was necessary to connect knowledge gained in school with out-of-school experience. There must be an interaction between these two dimensions. Because it is possible to imagine a school with a perfect atmosphere, but its social life will not correspond to what is happening – beyond school walls.

EDUCATION OR EDUCATED POLICY?

Consequently, immediately after the beginning of the 2023/2024 school year, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development submitted its *Guidelines for the Organization and Realization of Educational and Upbringing Work in Elementary and Secondary Schools for the 2023/2024 School Year*. to all schools. In *Guidelines* it is stated that “Taking into account the

consequences of the May tragedies and in order to ensure continuity in educational and upbringing work and the achievement of the educational and upbringing goals, the Ministry of Education has submitted *Guidelines* to all schools (...) laying special emphasis on the improvement of upbringing work with students”.

According to *Guidelines*, the main goal of educational and upbringing work in the 2023/2024 school year is “to develop positive human values in students and improve relationships based on mutual respect, cooperation and solidarity, including respect for diversity”; as for activities, it is anticipated, among other things, to organize thematic teaching, including workshops and other activities aimed at “cultivating empathy” during the first teaching week (from 4 to 7 September 2023).

In *Guidelines* it is also stated that the *Institute for the Advancement of Education and Upbringing* has created a new extracurricular activity for 5th to 8th grade elementary school students – virtues and values as a life compass. *Guidelines* also anticipate that, by the end of the first semester, the school creates, together with students and parents, “the school identity (motto) by defining the common values, expected behaviours and behavioural outcomes within the school and society as a whole, which are in compliance with the established identity”.

Reaching out for such an intervention in September 2023 in Serbia which, in the meantime, during the installation and duration of the current regime, sank not into authoritarianism, but also into all it entails (structural violence in society, blocked communication, ideological indoctrination, populist practices and the destruction of all institutions and value systems), seems not only bizarre, but also rather ominous, belated and failed. This is primarily due to the fact that the education system is not an isolated island. It cannot be excluded from the government’s general value trend with a quick magical intervention, because education is one of the value-based sectors which, by its very nature, resists quick, charlatanic and politically utilitarian (mis)uses and transformations.

Unless fundamental political changes do not take place soon, it will be too late for Serbia. Such instant value and particular turnabouts in the education system, immersed in the context of autocracy and a nationalistic version of populism, will only cause further confusion and the proven mass political hypnosis, which proverbially diverts the public attention and cardinally replaces theses. Namely, such manoeuvres imply the (manipulative) thesis that the entire political and social system is good and that the basic problem lies in – schools. It is true that during the last twelve years, precisely due to the actions of the current regime, the education system in Serbia was thoroughly destroyed – by the bad (party) staffing decisions, untransformed textbooks with the nationalist ideological potential due to the creation of wrong and dangerous images and role models (some of whom are convicted war criminals), copied and revised history and distortedly interpreted reality. However, it is the fact that even if, at best, an isolated and almost utopically perfect school environment is created, when its students leave it, they will again be faced with the old and unchanged political and social context, filled with psychological and physical violence, anomie and social pathology in every sense of the word.

Unfortunately, such instant political and educational projects represent everything that is contrary to the position of American sociologist Talcott Parsons. Speaking once about the inextricable relationship between education and society, he especially emphasized that school is the focal point of socialization in modern societies; it teaches children to accept the difference between particularistic and universalistic evaluation norms, whereby universalistic norms mean that the individual is only one of many equals, that his position is not guaranteed in advance and that his achievements are valued on the basis of general criteria, accepted in society, and not on the basis of special criteria – being someone's child, or belonging to a certain race, religion, nation and the like.

On the other hand, John Dewey's definition of gaining experience as the process of human-environment interaction is very

close to his understanding of learning. Therefore, the goal of teaching and learning is reflected in the development of experiential self-determination, while the key role in that process is played by imitation, according to which plays a key role according to which young people try to adjust their behaviour to the example given by others and reproduce it within the framework of their behaviour. Thus, Dewey believed that, to be successful in upbringing, teachers themselves should be active and respected members of their society, thus being an example to their students.

Therefore, it is not surprising that, at the end of September, a protest was staged by educators, who demanded from the Government of the Republic of Serbia to improve their professional and financial status. The protest was organized by the Education Union of Serbia, Association of Teachers' Unions of Serbia, Nezavisnost Teachers' Trade Union of Serbia and Teachers' Union of Serbia. This time, teachers from Belgrade were joined by their colleagues from other Serbian cities. The basic protest message was "Respected teacher – dignified Serbia".

The collapse of the teachers' status should serve not only as a warning and sobering knowledge, but also as an ultimate alarm. The education system should not be on the periphery in the societies focused solely on the "economy". On the contrary, a good education system is a vital prerequisite for the development of every modern society and every modern policy. Thus, it is not unimportant what the policy will be like. It certainly has to be – education policy.

CONCLUSION

By analyzing the *Education and Training Strategy by 2030*, as the fundamental document that aims to operationalize education policy at the empirical level, we have realized that there is a discrepancy between form and reality, that is, between the proclaimed goals and reality. In order to describe this problem, we have used the term pseudomorphosis not only to point to a serious gap between normative and real, but also to draw attention to the continuous implementation of the contents that do not correspond or are even contrary to the “desired state” projection.

Thus, instead of “respecting the cultural diversity and specificity of a multicultural environment, pre-European values and interculturality”, as the necessary conditions for living in the modern world, we have realized that the Serbian education system serves as a platform for the strengthening of national identity, creation of a close culture, revision of history and desecularization of the whole society.

Instead of “the school as a safe environment” for students and educators, there was a mass shooting in the Vladislav Ribnikar Elementary School, coupled with the continuous increase of peer violence. The Ministry’s reaction was completely inadequate – schools are treated as isolated islands that should be put in order, while at the same time neglecting the relationship with society, as an anomic environment where aggression and violence are actually, generated.

Finally, instead of “increasing the reputation of education in society” and “ensuring high-quality education that serves the development of the full potential of each individual and, thus, society as a whole” on which, after all, a “knowledge society” should be based, we face the permanent deterioration of the status of educators, This completely leads to the collapse of their authority and, therefore, their dysfunctionality in the education system.

In a word, instead of the proclaimed position that “the education system must successfully build the capacity of young people, so that after leaving the education system they are competent to live and work in the 21st century”, the current state of the education system is just the opposite. And the state that devalues its education system will inevitably degrade its citizens, condemning them to a second-class role in the world of today and tomorrow.

X – CSOs AND HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

A large number of registered civil society organizations (CSOs) gives the impression that Serbia provides unlimited and encouraging space for their activities. In practice, however, many CSOs are forced to perform limited activities, while a significant number of them performs insignificant or temporary activities. A significant number of organizations represents certain political interests and are the extended arm of political parties. Despite this, active CSOs, together with informal and professional organizations, independent media and academics, are the initiators of numerous initiatives and uncompromising government controllers and represent a significant force of civic society which is still in the making, more than two decades after the beginning of democratic changes.

The majority of nongovernmental organizations dealing with human rights is located in Belgrade. Their overall capacities (material, financial and human), access to external resources, recognition at the national level, influence on the public opinion, trust of the population) are significantly larger than at the local level. Although local organizations are largely in a disadvantageous position, especially with respect to resources and access to domestic and international funds, the influence of some of them has significantly increased and gone beyond the local limits in recent years. However, their financial instability and lack of funds seriously affect all CSOs and significantly limit their programmes and activities, as well as joint actions. The Serbian authorities are not interested in the development of civil society. Moreover, they continuously marginalize it and threaten it, using overt and covert

measures, protecting their authoritarian policies that undermine the country's fragile democracy.

Therefore, human rights defenders – regardless of whether they act within an organization or independently – face more or less the same problems in 2023 as in the previous years.

In the report made after her visit to Serbia in March 2023, which was published in late September, Dunja Mijatović, Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, called on Serbia to foster a safe and favourable environment for the work of civil society organizations and human rights defenders and to oppose the widespread SLAPP lawsuits (Lawsuits Against Public Participation) against journalists, human rights defenders and various activists.

Namely, in its latest report of the CASE coalition (Coalition Against SLAPPs in Europe), dated August 2023, more than 250 strategic lawsuits against public participation were recorded in Europe, while Serbia took the high 20th place among five European countries. According to the CASE coalition, almost all lawsuits were initiated by powerful companies close to the authorities and politicians in order to intimidate individuals who publicly speak out against various irregularities in their societies, but often to exert financial pressure that leads to the destruction of independent media.

Commissioner Mijatović's multi-day visit has confirmed that the Council of Europe as well as the European Union and numerous international organizations are closely monitoring a turbulent social situation in Serbia and, in particular, the response of the state which. Instead of dialogue and constructive solutions, is increasingly opting for threats, discrediting, intimidation and hate speech, as well as reprisals against nongovernmental organizations, journalists and activists. Instead of restricting the freedom of speech, peaceful assembly and association, Mijatović recommended the government to fully harmonize Serbia's legal framework and practice with the relevant international human rights standards.

CURRENT TRENDS IN CIVIC SPACE

1. LEGAL RESTRICTIONS AND EXTRALEGAL BARRIERS

On the CIVICUS Monitor list, which assesses and monitors the state of civil liberties in 197 countries and territories, Serbia has been in the group of countries obstructing the basic rights and freedoms since 2019. This rating corresponds to the real situation in the country which proclaims the enjoyment of the highest democratic standards by its Constitution and laws but, in practice, greatly hinders and sabotages them and even stops them completely.

It is of utmost importance that human rights defenders have a favourable environment where they can speak freely and unhindered in public and advocate the values they stand for. The regulations guaranteeing the freedom of assembly, freedom of association and freedom of expression should contain the highest democratic standards, but should also be implemented. In that sense, Serbia should make additional efforts to improve its laws and, what is even more important, ensure their full implementation in practice.

Despite unfavourable conditions for their activities, legal restrictions and extralegal barriers, independent CSOs in Serbia are very active and involved in the fight for respect and defence of human rights.

2. FREEDOM OF PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY

The freedom of peaceful assembly, with certain restrictions, is guaranteed by the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, Law on Public Assembly as well as international treaties and conventions ratified by Serbia.²⁷⁸ However, while the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms prescribes the restrictions on the freedom of peaceful assembly very restrictively, the freedom of peaceful assembly, the mentioned law

²⁷⁸ Universal Declaration on Human Rights, Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

(in force since 2016) regulates the restrictions more broadly and unprecisely.

In addition, the Law on Public Assembly gives the police enhanced powers in deciding on whether to accept or reject a notification about peaceful assembly which, in practice, occasionally results in a ban or a request to change the place or time of assembly without a valid legal reason. In addition, the police very often independently decides on spontaneous and moving gatherings, because the law has failed to establish the precise conditions and restrictions for them.

High penalties for disobeying the law, along with numerous ambiguities and voluntaristic interpretations by the police are contrary to the democratic standards that reduce the abuses of the possibility of restricting the freedom of peaceful assembly to a minimum.

3. FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION

The Constitution of the Republic of Serbia guarantees the freedom of political, union and any other association, as well as the freedom of the individual to remain outside of any association. The Law on Associations provides a broad legal framework for the registration of associations (the achievement and promotion of a certain common or general goal and interest), while the prohibition of an association is anticipated only if its goals are the disruption of the territorial integrity of the Republic of Serbia, incitement of inequality, hatred and intolerance based on rational, national, religious or other affiliation or orientation, as well as sex, gender, physical, psychological or other characteristics or abilities. The law prohibits secret and paramilitary organizations, as well as the public use of visual signs and symbols of a prohibited association. On the other hand, the Law on the Prohibition of Manifestations of Neo-Nazi or Fascist Organizations and Associations and the Prohibition of the Use of Neo-Nazi I Fascist Symbols and Signs prohibits

the activities of the organizations affirming Neo-Nazi and Fascist ideas in their programmes and statutes.

However, during the past years there were several public gatherings of organizations displaying Neo-Nazi symbols and Fascist slogans as well as attacks on peaceful citizens' gatherings by unknown groups. In mid-October 2023, the "Crni ovan" café in Novi Sad was attacked for the umpteenth time. The café is known for its anti-fascist actions and critical public debates which it organizes. Neo-Nazi organizations are especially active in Novi Sad and Vojvodina where the majority of national minorities lives, so that hate graffiti and calls for their "extermination" are not rare. It used to happen that, despite previous warnings, there was no police on the scene or it came late. As a rule, such cases are unsolved and aggressive groups and individuals remain unidentified, which points to the ties of the authorities and various powerful people with informal and, in essence, secret associations whose primary goal is to suppress civic gatherings by aggression and violence.

4. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

In addition to international treaties, the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia also guarantees the freedom of opinion and expression, as well as the freedom of the press and the right to information, which the media are obliged to respect. The media laws more closely regulate the field of public information, while the Constitution guarantees the right to access the data held by the state bodies and organizations entrusted with the public authority regulated by the Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance.

The court is the only one that is authorized to temporarily suspend information dissemination via media, but only in exceptional cases – to prevent calls for the violent overthrow of the order established by the Constitution or the violation of the territorial integrity, prevent the propagation of war or incitement to direct

violence, or prevent the advocacy of rational, national or religious hatred, which incites discrimination, hostility or violence.

Several laws, including the Criminal Code, prohibit hate speech. However, in recent years, hate speech in public discourse has been on the rise. The lack of reaction from the competent authorities and regulatory bodies has not only normalized hate speech, but has also had an indisputably great impact on the rise of discriminatory behaviour, hatred and violence towards different groups, individuals and organizations.

Unlike pro-government electronic and print media and tabloids, professional media and journalists are exposed to disparagement, insults and even open threats not only by sympathizers of the current government and hundreds of bots, but also by the highest officials of the state and the parties in power. In late October 2023, the Serbian Government adopted the new draft laws on public information and media and on electronic media, claiming that both laws are in line with the media strategy on which the European Union (EU) insisted that media associations also participated in their drafting. However, contrary to the proposals of professional associations, the laws enabled state-run companies, like Telekom Srbija, to own media; they did not anticipate the provisions that enable judicial and citizens' control of the actions of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM) following the complaints from citizens and organizations, as well as the provisions restricting officials' companies and prescribing the criteria and methodology on the basis of which REM monitors media reporting during election campaigns. In practice, this will mean the increased government influence on the editorial policies of the media established by state-owned companies, as well as maintaining full control over the regulatory body.

5. RESTRICTION OF FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS

Although the government representatives persistently repeat that human rights are respected in Serbia and do not miss opportunity to point out that civil society organizations and media are safe and have greater freedom than in many Western countries, the facts say something else. The space for the unhindered work of civil society and media is threatened by the authorities, institutions, right-wing political parties and their fans, state-run and privileged private companies, hooligans and individuals. With its public statements on many issues, which are beyond its competence, and its influence on the government, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) also joined the group of conservative and anti-Western propagandists.

They all, almost on a daily basis, targetedly attack civil rights defenders, civil society organizations and some journalists and media with their widespread campaigns of defamation, harassment, threats and intimidation, as well as the already mentioned strategic lawsuits against public participation.

In the period after a complete lifting of the ban imposed during the pandemic, local and national civil society organizations were the initiators of many gatherings, or actively participated in the protests organized spontaneously by citizens themselves. Although these gatherings were of a different nature and had different reasons, their common goal was a civil state that would respect human rights, guarantee equality before the law and decisively and efficiently suppress crime, corruption and nepotism. In a large number of cases during these events and manifestations a large number of incidents was recorded, which points to the shrinking of the space for the work of the civil society and professional media.

6. DEALING WITH THE PAST

More than thirty years after the beginning of the wars in the territory of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and more than twenty years after the end of the last armed conflicts, all newly established states still avoid dealing with their own role in the bloody events that deeply traumatized the population in the whole region.

The undoubtedly difficult legacy of this period and the avoidance and, not rarely, rejection of one's own responsibility strongly characterizes Serbia and all political elites being in power since 2000 in the country that has been devastated in every respect. The great expectations of a part of the public related to dealing with the past quickly have disappeared. Instead of creating an atmosphere for an open reflection and critical review of the tragic events, politicians have mostly declaratively, rarely and very restrainedly showed any interest in starting the process. On the contrary, the nationalist and chauvinist narrative has gained new momentum, while dealing with the past has remained an important topic only for a very small number of nongovernmental organizations, intellectuals, journalists and public figures. Thus, in the general atmosphere filled with silence, denial and forgetting, they have become "the enemies of Serbia". "spokesmen of foreign services and states", "traitors of their own people" and the like, and thus the target of extreme nationalists and rightists, politicians in power and pro-government media.

In late May 2023, Đorđe Miketić, an opposition party deputy at the Serbian Assembly, received death threats via social media, while threatening graffiti against him written after he painted over a mural in Belgrade depicting the image of Ratko Mladić, whom the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia sentenced to life imprisonment. The disputed mural was painted on the façade of a residential building in central Belgrade by unknown authors in July 2021 and since then it has been painted over by citizens and non-governmental organizations, but it has always been restored to the original state. Although groups of young people in black hoods and covered faces were "on duty" in front

of the mural for some time and police cars took turns in the immediate vicinity, the protectors of the war criminal remained “unknown”. Deputy Miketić previously participated in several actions to remove the mural. The leader of the Social-Democratic Party, Boris Tadić, who was the Serbian President at the time of the arrest of General Mladić, has also received death threats. After the judgment of the Hague Tribunal in mid-2021, there appeared the graffiti with death threats against Tadić in Belgrade, while Banjaluka was covered with stickers with a similar content.

Unlike the “unknown” authors of the threats received by the leader of an opposition party and deputy, human rights activist Aida Ćorović was proclaimed guilty by the Misdemeanor Court because she threw eggs at the mural in November 2021 after the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Serbia (MUP) banned the activists of the nongovernmental organization Youth Initiative for Human Rights from organizing a public gathering for the removal of the mural. Ćorović was arrested with another activist just after the incident. The police guarded the mural that day in order “to secure public order and peace”, but it also legitimized everyone who wanted to come closer to the mural. The activists of the Women in Black organization and the citizens supporting them in the public commemoration of the anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide have been exposed to threats and insults for years, often in full view of the police that does not react. The Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, which deals intensively with the past by determining responsibility, solidarity, social memory and the common future of the successor states of the former Yugoslavia, has been exposed to attacks by unknown groups and individuals, as well as high state officials, for three decades. So far, not one case of attack, including the destruction of property, physical or verbal threats to the employees and associates has been investigated or had a judicial epilogue. The N1 TV reporter team has been repeatedly prevented from filming the “young men in balaclavas” guarding the mural with the image of Ratko Mladić who have threatened them and have forbidden them to come closer and inform the public

about the ongoing events. However, a reporter noted on one occasion that a police patrol car stopped next to those young men and that the policemen said goodbye to them, thus confirming the suspicions that the authors and guardians of the mural are not only known to the police, but even enjoy political protection.

Nikola Krstić, a journalist and member of the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (NUNS), has received dozens of threats due to his articles about the Srebrenica genocide. However, there has been no reaction from the competent authorities, even though he has reported the threats. He says that all journalists who write about war crimes testify that no other critical text can be compared to what is provoked by texts on war crimes in terms of the number of threats, their monstrosity and the fervour with which they are uttered. Dejan Kožul, the correspondent of the Radio-Television of Federal Bosnia and Herzegovina, was exposed to thousands of threats and attacks after every report, or article about war crimes, especially about Ratko Mladić and Srebrenica, for which no one has ever been punished. In addition to threats and insults, Danas daily journalist Snežana Čongradin has also been physically attacked for reporting on Ratko Mladić. Journalist and writer Marko Vidojković left the country in February 2023, after serious death threats addressed to him and his wife.

How dealing with the past is a taboo topic in Serbia and therefore a dangerous one is also evidenced by a significant number of journalists dealing with it end by the lack of solidarity – even within the journalistic profession. The lack of reaction by institutions and state officials to attacks on journalists who write about war crimes encourages nationalists and right-wing groups, but it also unequivocally points to the responsibility of the current policy and rhetoric of the top state leadership. In numerous international and domestic studies related to the threatened security of journalists, it is also pointed out that the attacks are orchestrated and inspired from the top. According to the NUNS data, eight physical attacks on journalists, 118 pressures and 40 verbal threats have been recorded since the beginning of the year.

7. "SERBIA AGAINST VIOLENCE"

Every weekend since May 2023, citizens protest in many Serbian cities, including Belgrade. Above all else, they demand an end to all kinds of violence to which they are exposed on a daily basis. The gathering of citizens began spontaneously, after two mass murders that shocked the public not only throughout the country, but also much wider. On 3 May, at the Vladislav Ribnikar Elementary School in Belgrade, nine children and a security guard were killed, while five students and a teacher were injured in an armed attack by a 13-year old student of that school. Just one day after this tragedy, in two villages near Mladenovac, a 21-old man killed nine and injured 12 young people. Two minors were also among those killed.

The first spontaneous gathering of more than 50,000 citizens took place in Belgrade on 8 May, five days after the tragedy at the school. The Serbia Against Violence protest spread to the whole of Serbia the very next day, while its organization was taken over by some opposition parties. Numerous civil society organizations have been with citizens in all cities since the very beginning. The protest was soon joined by numerous public figures – actors, professors, writers and other artists, students and professional associations.

Prime Minister Ana Brnabić linked the protest to the foreign services and said from the parliamentary platform that some protesters were "vultures and hyenas"; President Vučić claimed that the protests were organized by someone from abroad in order to "overthrow him and thereby weaken Serbia". The authorities rejected all protesters' demands – to dismiss the Minister of Internal Affairs, Bratislav Gašić, and the Director of the Security Intelligence Agency (BIA), Aleksandar Vulin,²⁷⁹ the management of the

²⁷⁹ Aleksandar Vulin has been on the sanctions list of the US Treasury Department since 11 July 2023 due to the alleged corruption and involvement in drug and arms trafficking, as well as his ties to Russia since 11 July 2023. Although the authorities characterized this decision as "scandalous and unfounded", Vulin resigned from the position of BIA Director, explaining that "he does not want to allow to be the reason for blackmail and pressure on Serbia and the Serbian

Radio Television of Serbia public service (RTS) and the Council of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM), to shut down tabloids due to the constant publishing of fake news and the violation of the journalistic code of ethics, as well as to ban reality programmes and revoke the national frequencies of TVs Pink and Happy, which promote violence, profanity and aggression in prime time.

Uniformed policemen were not present at the first protests. They were sent to secure the protests after the opposition parties' intervention.

Although the protests were mostly peaceful, at the beginning of June, the police arrested a 61-year old man for wearing a doll resembling the Serbian President at the protest. The Ministry of Internal Affairs announced that a criminal complaint against him would be filed to the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade for the criminal offence of calling for a violent change of the constitutional order.

During the same protest, there was an accident when a US citizen was attacked by several members of the right-wing group "People's Patrol". The Ministry of Internal Affairs stated that the US citizen initiated the accident by "provoking citizens". However, numerous witnesses said that the US citizens commented on Z shirts (the symbol of Russia's aggression) worn by the members of the right-wing organization "People's Patrol", after which they knocked him to the ground and started kicking him. The Vice-President of the Democratic Party, Miodrag Gavrilović, who tried to protect him, also received several blows. Although the police was present, it did not react until one of the attackers began hitting the foreign citizen with a baton on the head. Then it detained both the American and the young man who was the most aggressive, while the other attackers were not even identified. A misdemeanor charge was filed against both detainees for disturbing public order and

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world". Before becoming the head of the Security Intelligence Agency, Vulin was the Minister of Defence and Minister of Internal Affairs and is one of the most trusted associates of President Vučić.

peace, while the US citizen was also charged for undeclared stay due to which he violated the Law on Foreigners. The US citizen was given a 30-day jail sentence, while the 22-year old attacker was given a 15-day sentence.

In September, Miodrag Voštinić, an activist of the Local Front initiative from Kraljevo, was attacked. He was knocked off his bicycle by a car. According to the activists, Voštinić was first “intercepted” by a car which he managed to avoid and then another car hit his bicycle from the side and knocked him down. Voštinić suffered a fracture of the right wrist as well as strong blows along his entire right side and bruises on his head. The Ministry of Internal Affairs stated that “intensive work is being done to establish the facts and circumstances of the traffic incident”.

The campaign of hatred and attacks on public figures who support protests and criticize the government is very intensive. Sociologist and professor Jovo Bakić has been the target of the Serbian authorities and government-controlled media for years. In mid-2023, after an interview for a weekly magazine in which he denounced the nationalistic stance of the Serbian authorities and connections between criminal organizations and their representatives, President Aleksandar Vučić smeared Bakić at a press conference, calling for a criminal investigation against him. The Serbian broadcaster RTS even published an edited version of the interview in which Bakić was falsely made to appear to be calling for violence. A pre-investigation procedure was immediately launched, but was promptly shelved after Bakić provided a copy of his interview to the police, which clearly showed that there was not any call for violence.

However, this did not end the attack on the professor. A few days after the two great tragedies, the pro-government Pink TV again accused Bakić of inciting violence and broadcast a short film in which Bakić was quoted out of context. The government representatives and pro-government media and tabloids competed in the insults and slanders vis-à-vis Professor Bakić, while Prime Minister Ana Brnabić called on the University of Belgrade to take

a stand against him. This television even published the home address of the Bakić family.

PEN International and Serbian PEN Centre requested an immediate suspension of the campaigns of state officials and pro-government supporters against writer and professor Bakić. They confirmed that they saw numerous messages sent via social media in which Bakić was subjected to hate speech, harassment and threats, while his family was subjected to the threat of rape. Bakić himself reported that on two occasions he was approached by an unknown person who threatened and insulted him.

As more and more public figures joined the Serbia Against Violence protests, anonymous authors launched a campaign through social media and video clips against dozens of the actors whom they condemned for “destroying the state and constitutional order”. In addition to numerous messages in which hate speech, slander and brutal insults were used, the families and children of some artists were also targeted. The Serbian Minister of Culture, Maja Gojković, condemned the threats to children, while regarding the attacks and insults aimed at actors who support the protests, she said that she was “against harsh words”. Earlier, the Serbian Prime Minister and official of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), Ana Brnabić, stated that the insults against the actors uttered in the Assembly were a “mistake”.

At the Serbia Against Violence protests, citizens and public figures condemned crime, corruption and the repressive policy against whistleblowers. Instead of legal protection, numerous brave individuals who publicly pointed to the irregularities in the work of public enterprises or state bodies are exposed to persecution, threats, disparagement and professional degradation. At the same time, while whistleblowers remain without adequate legal protection, the cases they pointed out remain uninvestigated. In February and March 2023, hundreds of judicial employees and citizens protested against the dismissal of Bojana Savović and Jasmina Paunović, Deputy Public Prosecutors of the Anti-Corruption Department of the Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office in Belgrade.

They were replaced without an explanation after their investigation of an embezzlement case in the largest state-run electric power utility company (EPS), which is expected to amount to about \$7.5 million. The Prosecutor's Office stated that the two prosecutors were reassigned "according to the regular annual plan", while the Serbian President called the protest "a political hunt" against the leading people in the Prosecutor's Office.

8. ECOLOGICAL PROTESTS

Several smaller and regionally limited ecological protests were organized in various parts of Serbia as early as 2020. Citizens and civil society organizations stood up to protect rivers, forests and land against the construction of mini hydroelectric power plants, confiscation of agricultural land and its conversion into construction land, destruction of forests... Although there were occasional incidents at those smaller protests, the situation culminated in mid-November 2021 when the wave of ecological protests swept over 50 cities in the country. Citizens, ecological activists, human rights defenders and other organizations, part of the scientific and academic public have protested for months against the multinational company Rio Tinto and the opening of a lithium and boron mine in the town of Jadar near Loznica, as well as against trial research at other sites in Serbia. The protests accompanied by the blocking of government facilities and domestic and international roads forced the Serbian Government to put a temporary moratorium on this project in 2022. Ecological protests are remembered for a large number of detained protesters and misdemeanor charges, but even more for brutality. Police officers in uniforms and plainclothes, as well as unknown private security companies, right-wing organizations and informal groups of masked young men attacked peaceful protesters on several occasions, using not only physical force but also metal rods, baseball bats and the like. Social media and independent TVs broadcast dozens of videos showing the beating of protesters, including women, but

most of those responsible have not been punished or have been more mildly punished than protesters.

Excessive force was also used against ecological protesters in Novi Sad in 2022 and 2023. In July 2022, unknown men in civilian clothes clashed with the citizens protesting against the adoption of the General Urban Plan, which would change the purpose of a large green area and turn into construction land for domestic and foreign investors close to the government (“Novi Sad Waterfront”, the same concept as the one applied in Belgrade where a bank of the Sava was sacrificed for the construction of “Belgrade Waterfront”). At that time, several citizens were beaten and there are serious suspicions that the hooligans were hired by the City Assembly headed by Mayor Miloš Vučević, a high official of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party.²⁸⁰ The authorities claimed that there was no violence despite the footage showing three plainclothes men kneeling on the neck of a protester and handcuffing him. A week later, citizens held a protest, demanding the investigation into the responsibility for the use of violence at the previous meetings. Several protesters threw paint at the SNS premises and broke the glass which the authorities used to discredit the protest and cover up the previous beating of citizens. The Novi Sad Mayor wrote after the incident that he was “horrified with the primitivism of thugs who turned the allegedly peaceful protests into hooliganism”. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić also got involved with a statement on the pro-government TV Pink that the “Uprising Against the Dahijas” in Novi Sad was organized by an “aggressive, civic-minded group” to which he attributed anti-Serb sentiment.

In March 2023, after an unsuccessful legal battle during 2022, activists blocked the access to Šodroš, an oasis with protected animal and plant species in Novi Sad. Before that, the citizens warned

²⁸⁰ Local associations and opposition parties stated that the members of the private security firm Intersex Team, hired by the City of Novi Sad, as well as the members of the Serbian security forces – the police and gendarmerie also participated in the violence against protesters,

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/novi-sad-protest-policija/31963984.html>

that the cutting of forests in Šodroš (in order to construct a bridge for which experts proposed a more suitable location) would endanger the city and its flood defence system, but the government did not want to listen either to citizens or to experts. In June 2023, activists set up a camp in Šodroš where they denied access to the city authorities and the Chinese Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC) which will construct the bridge. In mid-October 2023, the workers of this Chinese company erected a fence around the future construction site with the assistance of large police forces and an intervention unit with anti-riot equipment. The police pushed the ecological activists into the forest by force and using shields; some activists, including several elderly citizens and an 83-year old woman, were taken to the police. Like in many other cases, the police did not protect the citizen's right to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression.

9. PRIDE PARADE – PRIDE

In 2022, there were 89 incidents motivated by hatred towards LGBT+ people, including 29 cases of physical violence. According to its respect for the human rights of this population, Serbia holds the 26th place among 49 European countries on the list of the IL-GA-Europe organization due to widespread hate speech against this community and hate crimes on the rise. The 2022 report published in May 2023 shows that only 35 percent of the human rights of the LGBT+ community in Serbia is respected. The highest percentage was achieved in the categories such as civil society (83 percent) and equality and nondiscrimination (64 percent), while no criteria were met in the family category that includes marriage and civil unions and the right to adopt children.

This year's Pride Parade was held on 9 September 2023. It was secured by strong police forces and passed without accident. The foreign Ambassadors, Commissioner for the Protection of Equality Brankica Janković, Minister for Euro-Integration Tanja Miščević, representatives of several opposition parties and numerous supporters of the rights of the LGBT+ community in Serbia joined the

traditional parade through the streets of Belgrade. The previous Pride Parade (Europride, 2022) in Belgrade was preceded by numerous controversies. It was first approved, then the permit was revoked and it was forbidden; finally, it was approved. Obstructions and pressures came primarily from the Serbian Orthodox Church and the government gave in to it, although Serbia is a secular state according to its Constitution. During the march, there were 16 attacks on the participants and the police refused to intervene in several cases. Eight activists from the Albanian LGBT community were physically attacked and beaten on the way to their hotel after the Europride.

State representatives, the Serbian Orthodox Church, right-wing parties and organizations, as well as some influential public figures constantly use hate speech towards the members of the LGBT+ community and their supporters, while the journalists reporting from the Pride Parade are also targeted. For example, Ivana Parlić, a deputy from the ruling SNS, continuously targets the young singer Filarri on social media, although he said that he was receiving death threats due to that. All members of the LGBT+ community face these and similar threats, heinous insults and humiliation.

The key demands of the LGBT+ community in Serbia include the adoption of the law on same-sex unions and the law on gender identity and the rights of intersex people, as well as the improvement of health care for trans people. The participants of this year's Pride demanded efficient protection from the state bodies and the public condemnation of hate speech and crimes motivated by hatred towards LGBT+ community from the state representatives.

Serbian President Aleksandar stated in August 2023 that he would not sign the Law on Same-Sex Unions which is prepared by the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights (after the first draft law was withdrawn) or the law which, as he said, would create "a third gender where you are neither a man nor a woman".

In September, the Green-Left Front submitted its draft Law on Civil Partnership to the Serbian Assembly, which would regulate same-sex unions, but the Government did not even enter it in the procedure.

10. POLITICS IN THE SERVICE OF ATTACKS ON HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

The Serbian authorities especially show intolerance towards CSOs and individuals who criticize the tactless and frequently dangerous statements addressed to power holders in other Western Balkan countries by top state officials. The Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, which has been dealing with the relations among the newly formed states, facing the past, building trust and establishing cooperation among the former Yugoslav republics and peoples since the beginning of the breakup of Yugoslavia, is continuously attacked by top government officials and their supporters. Other human rights organizations and defenders that point out that the government encourages ethnic tensions in Serbia and the region, using nationalistic narratives, insults, threats and inflammatory statements, are publicly targeted as the traitors of Serbia and “haters” of the Serbian people.

Numerous nongovernmental organizations and public figures reacted to the ban on entry into Serbia to Jovana Marović, an activist and the former Montenegrin Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of European Affairs, in August 2023. In the press release issued by the network of associations of citizens, journalists and media standing up against violence²⁸¹ it was pointed out that the official refusal of Jovana Marović's entry into Serbia due to the “protection of the security of the Republic of Serbia and its citizens” is shameful and incorrect and that the only real reason for this ban is the fact that Marović publicly criticized President Aleksandar Vučić and participated Serbia Against Violence protests. Vladimir Đukanović, a SNS deputy, assessed the decision of the authorities as correct and also asked for entry ban for Viola von Kramon, a

281 The Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, Centre for Contemporary Politics, Centre for European Politics, CRTA, European Movement in Serbia, Civic Initiatives, Youth Initiative for Civil Rights, Open Parliament, Partners–Serbia, RERI – Renewables and Environmental Regulatory Institute, Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation, Yucom – Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights and others.

member of the European Parliament. He accused her of supporting “green-left extremists in Serbia” and leading a campaign for the independence of Kosovo. He added that anyone who “undermines Serbia” by “financing various nongovernmental organizations that create chaos” should also be denied entry into the country.

In February 2023, Marijan Pavliček, a member of the Croatian Parliamentary Committee on Croats Outside Croatia, was also banned from entering Serbia for the same reason – he threatens the security of Serbia and its citizens. In addition to politicians, some actors and singers were also banned from entry into Serbia and there are also numerous examples of detention and interrogation at the border crossings.

In 2022, Serbian actress and producer Bojana Maljević received death threats via social media only because – before the Oscar awards ceremony – she wished good luck and congratulated the team of the Bosnia and Herzegovina film “Quo vadis, Aida?”, whose theme was the Srebrenica genocide. The same threats were also received by Serbian artists appearing in this and other films dealing with the crimes committed during the wars of the 1990s.

The Helsinki Committee for Human Rights was especially exposed to harsh public criticism and threat as the producer of the first theatre play that thematized the Srebrenica genocide, “Srebrenica. When We Who Were Killed Rise Up” as well as its author and director Zlatko Paković and a complete cast. The play was performed on 24 September 2020, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide at the Centre for Cultural Decontamination in Belgrade, after all Belgrade theatres refused to allow its performance on their premises. In addition to Belgrade, the play was also performed in Novi Pazar, Zagreb (Croatia), Tuzla (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and Brussels (Belgium). Although the Helsinki Committee offered to pay the rent at the market price, not one theatre in Serbia accepted to have this play performed on its premises. Thus, the Helsinki Committee showed the play on its You Tube on several occasions. Also, right-wing organizations and activists broke into the hall of the Kolarac Endowment where

the Helsinki Committee's performance preceding the mentioned play ("Introduction to the Play: Srebrenica. When We Were Killed Rise Up") was presented, trying to stop it. Otherwise, the Kolarac Endowment was the only one that accepted the performance under the commercial conditions. Negating the Srebrenica genocide, marginalizing or completely ignoring the memorial that is held in Potočari every year, falsifying and/or preventing historical documents and facts, preventing the cherishing of the culture of memory are still strongly present in Serbia.

Every initiative of the CSOs aimed at easing tensions as well as cooperation between Serbs and Kosovo Albanians is met with criticism and public calls for lynching. Visiting Albanian artists, joint youth activities, debates, exhibitions and similar events are regularly attacked not only via social media and the Internet, but are also exposed to physical threats to security. The Helsinki Committee, Centre for Cultural Decontamination and other organizations and public figures are still exposed to threats, harassment, fake news and discreditation like in the previous years.

In March 2023, the photographs of three professors of the Belgrade Faculty of Political Science (FPN) appeared in front of this higher education institution, along with the word "traitor" and the coat-of-arms of the former Albanian Liberation Army, due to the announced round table in which the FPN professors and the professors of the Faculty of Philosophy in Pristina were supposed to participate. Although the event was cancelled for security reasons, the FPN stood behind its professors, while a public rally in their support was held in front of the faculty. It was also attended by professors of other Belgrade faculties, CSOs and citizens.

11. REFUGEES FROM RUSSIA AND UKRAINE

As a strategically important point towards Europe, in the view of the Kremlin, Serbia is suitable to become an "experimental farm" on which the overall growing power of Russia has been successfully manifested. All the more so, because it has already been well

positioned in Serbia. At the same time, Russia relies on historical, cultural and religious relations, which are greatly exaggerated by propaganda and diplomacy, including the skillful use of soft power. However, the basic link between Serbia and Russia is their resistance to liberal values, including the ideology of human rights.

According to the official data from May 2023, permits for temporary residence in Serbia were approved for nearly 30,000 citizens of the Russian Federation. Ending with August 2023, the Serbian Government issued as many as 43 Serbian passports to Russian citizens under a special procedure, while during 2022 – 50 passports. At the same time, the data on citizenship that is granted according to a regular procedure and decided by the Serbian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MUP) are not publicly available. It is quite clear that the Russian citizens who received passports belong to the group of those “privileged”, that is, businessmen and other important persons for whom the sanctions made it impossible or significantly difficult to stay in Russia.

In contrast to them, Serbia is not benevolent towards Russian citizens and human rights defenders who came to Serbia due to their opposition to the War in Ukraine and Vladimir Putin. U September, Evgeny Ryzhansky was declared a “threat to national security” and, together with his wife, lost the right to stay in Serbia. After the Administrative Court rejected their request to postpone this decision, they had to leave the country. A little earlier, the “danger” was posed by Peter Nikitin and Vladimir Volokhonsky, the founders of the Russian Democratic Society, the nonprofit association that rallies the Russian diaspora in Serbia, organizes antiwar protests and guest appearances of Russian artists with antiwar views and collects aid for Ukrainian refugees. Nikitin, who also has a Dutch citizenship, was detained at the Belgrade airport in July without explanation, although he has a permanent residence permit in Serbia and has lived with his family in Belgrade for seven years. After two days, he was allowed to enter the country – without explanation. Volokhonsky was informed in August that his temporary residence permit in Serbia would not be extended, but

he is still expecting for the competent authorities to respond to his appeal. Civil Society Organizations and lawyers in Serbia helped Russian dissidents and publicly addressed the MUP and other institutions. There are indications that the number of Russian citizens expelled from Serbia and those who have been denied a residence permit is much higher. The fact that these are the persons who publicly criticized the Russian regime and/or only participated in anti-war protests clearly points to the support of the Serbian authorities for the current Russian policy of Vladimir Putin.

The heaviest sentence against a more prominent opposition figure in Russia in recent years was handed down to the Russian opposition leader Vladimir Kara-Murza. In April, he was sentenced to 25 years in prison in Russia for “high treason”, spreading “false information” about the Russian army and illegal work for an “undesired” organization, despite his British citizenship and numerous requests from Western countries for his immediate release. In November, Kara-Murza arrived to serve his sentence at a high-security prison colony in Omsk in Siberia. In late 2021, he accused Aleksander Vulin, the then Serbian Minister of the Internal Affairs, that during his visit to Moscow, before Russia’s attack against Ukraine, he handed over the recordings of a meeting of Russian dissidents in Belgrade to the Russian head of security, Nikolai Patrushev, after which one of them was arrested in Russia.

In March 2022, a correspondent of the newspaper Danas from Zaječar was threatened via social media for interviewing a young man who escaped from Ukraine. In this case, the reaction of the police was quick and the person who threatened him was taken into custody and interrogated in the Prosecutor’s Office. The number of Ukrainian refugees in Serbia is not big. Pursuant to a special decision of the Serbian Government, they all enjoy temporary protection and have residence permits, accommodation, food, health care and the possibility of education and work. Nongovernmental organizations and citizens organized several peaceful protests in support of Ukraine and the Ukrainian people and provide them with free legal aid and humanitarian support.

12. PRESSURES ON EDUCATION

A large number of educators who are considered the opponents of the regime are exposed to pressures. The leading positions in elementary and secondary schools depend on the opinion of the relevant ministry, while the autonomy of universities is violated not only due to the covert influence of the ruling parties on the election of deans and rectors, but also of study group leaders and even professors.

Local governments have a particularly great influence on schools. Since in almost all municipalities and cities the ruling parties are the same as those at the national level, the influence of political parties is exerted through principals and school boards where, in addition to the representatives of the employed and parents' council, the local government representatives are also present. The pressures on the principals and new non-partisan members of the school board with a view to ensuring complete party control over the employed, range from "friendly advice", through telephone harassment and persuasion, to threats that they or close family members will lose their jobs (in case they are employed in a public company), or all possible inspections will come to them (if they are entrepreneurs or owners of private firms). Principals and school boards are expected to ensure the cooperativity of educators, that is, to join the party and participate in its activities, sign election lists, participate in pre-election rallies, unquestionably implement the principal's decisions and the instructions of the relevant ministry, etc. Educators who are "identified" as the opponents of the ruling party are exposed to mobbing, reduction in the number of lessons (and thus their salaries), transfer to outlying (far) rural classes, disciplinary proceedings for bizarre reasons and the like. The difficult economic situation in the country and the employees' fear of losing their jobs and jeopardizing the existence of their families, as well as the lack of confidence in the relevant institutions that should protect them are the most common reasons for their silence and submission to blackmail. Thus, the party has an extremely great influence on schools and employees, although it is almost impossible to prove this in court.

The mass murders at the Vladislav Ribnikar Elementary School in Belgrade and the vicinity of Mladenovac prompted many teachers and professors to join the “Serbia Against Violence” protests. Since they have been warning the competent authorities not only about the increase in peer violence, but also about the inappropriate and violent behaviour towards teachers, which was documented by numerous videos, many teachers felt that it was their professional and civic duty to join the protests. Senka Jankov, a professor of sociology at the Zrenjanin High School, was suspended from her job after speaking at one of the protests in Zrenjanin at the end of May about the collapse of the education system, pointing out that it happened after the years of the unprocessed scandals in education, the purchase of diplomas, resistance to the awareness concerning a deep crisis caused by violence, political employment and daily pressures on educators.

Although civil society organizations, the academic society and citizens reacted vehemently to the professor’s suspension, it was lifted just before the beginning of the new school year. However, the decision of the Principal of the Zrenjanin High School to reduce her salary by 20 percent remained in force, because she put a Zrenjanin Against Violence poster in the Google classroom. Although this case should have discouraged teachers and professors from participating in protests, a large number of them did not give up.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Civil space is the only space that fosters political thinking and promote liberal values as the basic prerequisites for EU membership. That is why it is exposed to various restrictions, discrimination and distractions. In order to stabilize this space and provide a serious assumption for the creation of a political alternative, which was only nominally established in the elections on 17 December. 2023, it is required as follows:

- The legislative framework related to the work of civil society organizations and the guarantee of human rights should be improved and harmonized with advanced democratic standards, whereby it is crucial to ensure the full implementation in practice of both laws and international conventions and declarations on human rights and their defenders.
- All defenders of human rights (activists and CSOs, media and journalists, as well as individuals fighting for human rights) must enjoy the protection of state bodies and institutions, primarily the police and courts.
- Verbal and physical attacks on activists, human rights defenders and media must be thoroughly investigated and processed, while the perpetrators must be punished in accordance with the law.
- The European Union, the US and crucial international organizations of which Serbia is a member, must strengthen their efforts for the Serbian government to fulfil its international obligations and insist on upgrading the rule of law; institutions must be completely depoliticized, because it is the obligation of top government officials and institutions to respect the Constitution and laws and to resolutely fight against all cases threatening the equality of citizens and their rights; state officials must counter the increasingly negative social tendencies – hate speech, discrimination, intimidation and violence – regardless of who the promoters and ideologists of such tendencies are.
- The Serbian authorities must provide conditions for the safe and unhindered performance of pre-election activities to all election participants; the media and journalists must enjoy the full protection of the competent bodies in their work, while citizens must have freedom to express their interest and/or political will without fear or pressure.

XI – HEALTH CARE SYSTEM: THE COLLAPSE OF THE WELFARE STATE

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

The political continuity of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), which entered its second decade, did not bring stability to Serbia, let alone progress. Contrary to the data of its state institutions (often fabricated), the reports by the competent international organizations indicate that Serbia is recording stagnation and even regression in many areas. Despite the diplomatic vocabulary, this can often be understood from the statements by numerous international officials and experts. The country has been in a serious social and political crisis for years, which often affects its entire system.

Although it is difficult to single out the area that could be said to have little impact on the lives of citizens in such a situation, there is no doubt that health care is in the high first place. Due to its importance and undeniably crucial role in maintaining the very existence and basic quality of life of the population, the health care system is of utmost importance for all Serbian citizens. Exposed to various stress situations at work and in private life, in the constant decades-long struggle for survival, they are increasingly getting sick and are more and more dependent on the health care system. The extremely delicate role of health care is also clear to the government, which speaks a lot about new investments, its modernization and improvement, but in practice this is hardly visible.

What is however still striking is the political influence with which the Serbian government keeps this sector under strong control. In all health institutions, from primary to tertiary care, the leading positions are held by SNS members. This pernicious influence is additionally spread by the control of educational institutions, which fall “within the competence” of its coalition partner, the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS). Teaching staff, from secondary medical schools to medical faculties, is appointed on the basis of one invisible yet clear criterion – party affiliation. With rare exceptions, expertise and professional and moral credibility are less important or completely unimportant in both cases.

Exposed to the elaborated and already perfected methods of blackmail and pressure, the employed in the health care and education sectors are often forced to participate in political events, election and other campaigns that are organized by the government for the sake of self-promotion or personal interests. The reward for loyalty includes career advancement and protection from lawsuits due to unprofessional work, as well as the tolerance of widespread corruption.

After the December (2023) elections, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić announced that the new government would be formed in record time, probably as early as March, despite the opposition’s protests and demands for the cancellation of the election process. According to analysts, some of the reasons behind the unusual haste of the SNS, are to remove the election scandal from the focus of attention of the domestic and international public as soon as possible and to neutralize the opposition, as well as to but also to make the report of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) senseless. Otherwise, the ODIHR has already expressed serious doubts about the election process in its preliminary report. Bearing in mind that the new EU and US pressures regarding the continuation of the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue are expected in February, the statement by Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić that “there will be no international

investigation... and everything will be finished at the level of the Serbian state authorities” is not unfounded.

The current cycle of the SNS's rule may not last four years, but it will most certainly lead tensions in the society to the breaking point and further destroy institutions and threaten the otherwise devastate systems in the society.

FINANCIAL INVESTMENTS ON THE RISE HE HEALTH CARE SYSTEM IS GETTING WORSE

The budget of the Republic of Serbia for 2024 (adopted in October 2023) anticipated – in addition to the traditionally largest allocations for the Ministry of Finance – larger incomes for the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Agriculture and, as usual, the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Several Ministries should receive smaller raises, including the Ministry of Health. Although Finance Minister Siniša Mali boasted about larger allocations for health care, “from 519.9 billion to 544.9 billion dinars, as well as the continuation of record allocations for rare diseases amounting to 7.2 billion dinars,²⁸² this Ministry is among those which will have the budgets similar to their previous year's budgets.

It should also be borne in mind that in March 2023 Serbia took an additional 200 million euro loan from the Council of Europe Development Bank for investing in health infrastructure, thus increasing the total value of the projects to be financed by this loan to 630 million euros of which 400 million euros are from the loan, while the remaining amount is from the state budget. Of the planned successive construction of new facilities and the reconstruction of the old and existing four University Clinical Centres in Serbia (in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš and Kragujevac), which had to be carried out during the period 2020–2023, only the works on the Niš

282 <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/576442/Prioriteti-novog-budzeta-ostaju-isti-rast-na-svim-poljima>

University Clinical Centre were completed, while the construction work in Kragujevac has not yet started. Also, in October 2023, the World Bank approved the \$ 75 million loan for the Noncommunicable Diseases Prevention and Control Project, which will be invested in the improvement of noncommunicable diseases prevention and control, both at the primary health care level and in hospitals. Within the framework of financing certain projects, health care in Serbia is also supported with significant funds by the European Union, UNICEF, UNDP, World Health Organization and other international organizations.

Nevertheless, despite smaller or larger but continuous investments in the devastated health care system, health institutions throughout Serbia are still faced with the lack of basic and decent working conditions. In addition to the fact that health facilities are old and have partly decayed furniture, waiting rooms in many health centres and clinics have not been painted for years, they do not have a sufficient number of usable chairs, adequate heating and cooling, and fresh air supply and natural light. In general hospitals and clinical centres the situation is also not good – many wards have no beds, mattresses and bedding, sanitary facilities are dilapidated, many buildings are so old and ruined that damp walls, mold and the like cannot be covered with whitewash.

Speaking about health care financing in March 2022, Minister Siniša Mali said that “health care financing has been sorted out and significant savings have been achieved since the introduction of centralized public procurement, inventory and material accounting and the eRecept system... and, as President Aleksandar Vučić said, we are not interested in taking this money from health care, but in returning it to where it is most needed, namely in innovative medicines and purchasing equipment..”²⁸³ He added that only one month and a half earlier he criticized health institutions because they did not follow the recommendations of the Republic Health Insurance Fund (RFZO) and that since then progress has

283 <https://whic//mfin.gov.rs/sr/aktivnosti-1/sinia-mali-uvodimo-red-u-finansiranje-u-zdravstvu-1>

been made: “Each director and each health centre are now part of the system. They did not need much time to adjust. It took one month or one month and a half for their finance sectors to understand what they should to do and become part of the system. I also expect this from tertiaries and secondaries, clinical centres and general hospitals”.²⁸⁴ However, the Minister did not explain why all this was not done much earlier, and how and why it still happens that brand new equipment is kept in warehouses without being recorded.

Thus, the State Audit Institution (DRI) in its report on the supervision carried out at the University Clinical Centre of Serbia (UKCS) in October 2022, when it found that the University Clinical Centre of Serbia did not record the equipment worth 100 million euros. which was acquired by the Ministry of Health for equipping this institution, stated that the “non-implementation of inventory in the prescribed way leads to the risk that the equipment value in financial statements is incorrect and the risk of unlawful property use and disposal”.²⁸⁵ The cases of non-entered new equipment and even very expensive devices and their subsequent “mysterious” disappearance years ago are the subject of secret conversations among health professionals, just like the entered costs of alleged servicing or repair of devices and everyone knows that they still do not work. In the mentioned DRI report the answer can be guessed: “It was also established that the equipment received by the UKCS without complete documentation in 2020 and 2021 was recorded on the as an off-balance sheet item valued one dinar per piece”. At the gathering where Siniša Mali also spoke, Health Minister Danica Grujičić indirectly admitted that there was the problem with unlawful agreements and influences of interest groups regarding the maintenance of medical devices and announced that the Ministry of Health would defence the interests of patients and not producers: The plan is to transfer all money for apparatus mainte-

284 Ibid

285 <https://novaekonomija.rs/vesti-iz-zemlje/oprema-klinickog-centra-od-sto-miliona-evra-nema-je-u-popisu-ministarstvo-zdravlja>

nance to the Ministry of Health and that it directly contracts the maintenance and service of apparatus and equipment, so that it does not happen that a patient waits for one month or longer for a scanner to be repaired, and that everything is finished within a few days, so that a patient receives care on time”.²⁸⁶

Professional staff in the health care system poses an even bigger problem due to a large outflow of specialist doctors and experienced nurses and technicians to Western countries and due to poor education. Although the state and the relevant ministry are unable to establish the exact number of medical personnel that left the country, it can be concluded from their media statements that the reason for such decision was of inancial nature. The Minister of Finance denies this and claims: “Looking from 2014, when we implemented fiscal consolidation, until today, including the last increase of 12.5 percent, medical doctors and nurses’ salaries increased by 102 and 115 percent respectfully”.²⁸⁷ After the adoption of the 2024 budget, he announced a new 10 percent salary increase for public sector employees, minimum 17.8 percent wage increase and 24 percent pension increase.

All of this should convince Serbian health care workers and citizens that they work and live in a socially responsible state where health care is the Government’s priority. However, the outflow of qualified health professionals has not stopped. This is testified by the health workers themselves who face numerous problems at work in hospitals and clinical centres due to the insufficient number of specialists as well as the fact that requalified nurses can often be met in hospital wards. If it is taken into account that the expertise of those who have finished the relevant schools is increasingly questionable, the future of the health care system is not encouraging and Serbian citizens have many reasons to fear who will treat them.

²⁸⁶ <https://mfin.gov.rs/sr/aktivnosti-1/sinia-mali-uvodimo-red-u-finansiranje-u-zdravstvu-1>

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

SERVICES AND ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE

According to the data of the Republic Statistical Office (RZS) presented in the Statistical Yearbook for 2023, there are currently 20,186 doctors, 1,533 dentists and 1,395 pharmacists in Serbia. The number of residents per doctor is 339, while there are as many as 160 patients per hospital bed. The number of patients per doctor did not decrease in the period from 2012 until 2021, but remained almost identical and is constantly about 350.²⁸⁸ The problem is also complicated by the fact that doctors and other medical staff are not equally burdened. According to the 2022 data provided by the Milan Jovanović Batut Public Health Institute, the highest number of doctors per 100,000 inhabitants in Serbia is recorded in the Nišava District (470), the Šumadija District (387) and the territory of Belgrade (366). The lowest number of doctors per 100,000 inhabitants is in Srem (only 195), then in Mačva (225) and in the Rasina District (234).²⁸⁹ The overloading of health workers and increasing bureaucratic procedure have a decisive effect on the quality of services that citizens receive as well as on the formation of waiting lists.

Some health institutions at the secondary and tertiary levels have managed to shorten the mentioned lists, but it is still necessary to wait for specialist examinations, screening and surgeries (except in emergency cases) for a long time – from several months to several years. In many patients their disease progresses in the meantime, so that their treatment becomes more difficult or even possible, while the costs are much higher. Citizens can get out of this vicious cycle – between needs and availability – in two ways. If they have money, they will go to a private medical facility and get the diagnosis and everything else they need from the same specialist who works in a state facility, or they will pay a bribe to the

288 Danas, 5 December 2023, <https://www.danas.rs/ves-ti/drustvo/lekari-pacijenti-zdarvstvo-opterecenje/>

289 Ibid.

appropriate person in the state system and thus buy the precious time and health care they need. Corruption in the health care sector has been talked about for years, the public was assured that the authorities would arrest any doctor who receives money in exchange for a health service, and arrests did occur – albeit sporadically and mostly in smaller centres and hospitals. University Clinical Centres and specialized hospitals, which are the most difficult to reach and have the longest waiting lists, have remained outside the reach of the law. At the same time, those who were arrested were usually released quickly due to the lack of evidence, and when there was the evidence and witnesses they were punished less than it is prescribed by law. The permanent revocation of the licence was not recorded in any case, so that the responsible persons returned to the health care sector after some time. Some legal experts warn that even the existing legal regulations do not support the suppression of corruption, but the impression is that this concerns only those citizens who barely make ends meet, and their number is the highest.

In the private health care system, the prices have been liberalized and every individual or company owning a private clinic or practice is allowed to set them independently. Although the question of solving the duality between state and private institutions has been repeatedly raised, both systems operate in parallel and without any indication that the private sector will be incorporated into the state health care system. Considering the great interests of the officials being in power and powerful domestic and international companies dealing with the procurement of health care medicines, equipment and devices, which are worth millions of euros, it is difficult to expect that anything will be changed in due time. The increasingly older population and changes in the population by region, coupled with the persistent refusal of the authorities to decentralize the country, seriously disfavours the health capacity and the possibility of treatment in smaller and rural environments, in particular. Along with the traditionally poor health care solutions for certain categories of the population (people

with mental disorders, Roma population, the elderly and infirm, people suffering from rare diseases and/or chronic diseases for the treatment of which significant financial resources are necessary – whether it is a question of the necessary health care procedure or the procurement of expensive medicines for which the participation payment is often an impossible task for many), Serbia's health system is a strong and irrefutable indicator of the destroyed idea of the welfare state. Instead, citizens have found themselves in an even more unequal position, the gap between the rich and the poor has increased and overall social inequality and discrimination have been normalized. Therefore, it is not surprising that Serbia has been at the top of the list of the countries with the highest mortality rate in the world for years. Unfortunately, there is no way out in the current socio-political circumstances.
