

Religious Education in Serbia as a Litmus Test for Church-State Relations¹

Fifteen years after its introduction religious education (RE) in Serbia hardly arouses any more public interest and most students, parents and teachers seem to have come to terms with it.² Couple of year after first classes began I have conducted an evaluation and in the meantime many other authors have done research, providing valuable insight, analysis and criticism of many of its aspects as well as recommendations for its improvement.³ In the past years some technical issues raised have been resolved while other problems remained. However, going beyond technicalities there is a scant evidence and limited pedagogical methodology to demonstrate whether and what impact RE had on those enrolled and the Serbian society in general. So what is there more to say on the subject that would draw attention, especially that of English language readers? It is only in the larger context of its introduction and continuous amendments it underwent that RE provides useful hints for scholars of contemporary Serbian society. As already suggested by Milan Vukomanović, RE is a litmus test, a prism through which to study Church-State relations in Serbia since 2000.

What lends importance to the topic of Church-State relations is the association of the Yugoslav crisis in nineteen eighties and the tragic wars that followed its dissolution in 1991 with country's multiconfessional demographics and more importantly, the detrimental role played by religious hierarchies and clergy in hate mongering and victimisation.⁴ The body of literature on this topic is growing but it is less known that during the period of open conflict and wars, when Serbia was under the leadership of Slobodan Milošević, there was hardly any change in Church-State relations. Religious communities and most notably the biggest of them, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), were certainly not repressed any longer.⁵ They gained access to media and became more prominent in the public sphere but these important symbolic changes were not reflected on legal/constitutional level. In fact, Milošević vetoed any attempt to change the position of the SOC or begin the process of return or compensation for Church property nationalised after the Communists took power in Yugoslavia in 1945.⁶ The real transformation only ensued after Milošević was ousted from power and was actually linked to his arrest and deportation. The first step was the introduction of RE in schools which opened the door for many other changes. Teaching RE and other pastoral and clerical roles for which State financing was acquired allowed for manifold increase in the number of clergy and lay persons in the mission of the SOC. With the prioritised return of confiscated property, financial aid from state on multiple levels and increased donations or emoluments the SOC has become a powerful institution in Serbia. Allegedly, the Church is the third largest income taker in the country after state electricity and oil companies though this is difficult to measure and confirm given that its monetary transactions remain outside the financial system. At the same time, the SOC is entrusted with providing an ideological framework and value system for state institutions ranging from schools to armed forces and penitentiary institutions. These developments make Church-State relations a valuable topic as the following pages will attempt to demonstrate.

In lieu of conclusion, I will offer criticism of the existing interpretations and propose a somewhat different view of the changes. Acknowledging that the initial decision in 2001 to introduce confessional RE in Serbian schools might have been driven by sheer pragmatism of the government of Zoran Đinđić, that wanted to appease the Serbian Church after the extradition of Milošević to the International Criminal Tribunal (ICTY), all developments to date indicate that it set a pattern for future Church-State relations in Serbia. As numerous

subsequent concessions demonstrated the hasty introduction of RE paved the way for the unprecedented role of the SOC in the history of modern Serbian state. Yet, the concessions to the Church were arbitrary more often than not. Moreover, it is the state that makes the concessions and still holds the upper hand in this relationship, heavily determining its outcome. Therefore, my conclusion will dismiss the notion of clericalisation of the Serbian society, which is often used, though admit some clericalism within the SOC itself. There is also little evidence for the thesis of de-secularisation or counter-secularisation. Taking a stock of RE fifteen years after its implementation and assessing some other developments in Church-State relations my article will nevertheless underline the enormous political role given to the Church in Serbia's post-conflict and post-socialist transformation in times of post-democracy. This larger context determines the growing importance of the Church, a development already described in much more detail in neighbouring Romania and further away in Russia, to mention but two countries with Christian Orthodox majority and great role assigned to their respective churches.⁷ The following undertaking is based on previous research of others and my own as well as press and electronic media survey and field observation.⁸ Unfortunately, neither government nor church officials in charge were available for comment.

Introduction and amendments to Religious Education over last fifteen years

As already indicated the Government's decision to introduce RE in public schools in Serbia took place outside of the then existing legal framework, without prior public/parliamentary discussion and bypassing the Ministry of Education. Many civic organisations objected its constitutionality and legality as it licenced only seven so-called traditional religious communities to perform it, and because the decision contradicted the existing education laws. Their arguments were rejected by courts and subsequently the Government passed the necessary regulations and amended the Laws on Primary and Secondary Education. Aside from legal lacunae, the key issue was the selection of confessional model of RE, which was designed and instructed by the above mentioned traditional denominations. In reality the SOC provides ninety percent of RE in Serbia with Islamic Community and Roman Catholic providing for the rest with small number of children attending Hungarian Reformed and Slovak Lutheran Churches' classes. For smaller religious communities it is much more difficult to organise RE provision because of higher dispersion of their potential attendees. Educational experts warned strongly against the model of catechism as it is usually known but the Government sided with the SOC, whose request for confessional model was also backed by other denominations involved. Initially, the Government envisaged RE and its counterpart Civic Education as optional subjects but because of weak interest and upon the insistence of religious denominations in 2002-2003 the subject became compulsory with only option being between the two subjects.

Given that the educational dimensions of confessional model were discussed widely elsewhere, this article, focusing on Church-State relations, will look at few other implications the new subject in state schools brought about. In terms of financing and human resources introducing RE meant that the state was accepting and taking over the payment of salaries or parts of salaries to hundreds of priests (and few imams) and lay religious teachers appointed and supervised by their confessional hierarchy alone. Because of sheer numbers of students and teachers involved the SOC was an overwhelming beneficiary of the model applied. The next important government's decision was in 2004, when the Theological Faculty of the SOC was re-associated with the state financed University of Belgrade, fifty two years after it was

removed by the former Communist-led government. In the meantime the Faculty was fully governed and financed by the SOC. Despite the State's takeover the Church's full control of the rules of admission and promotion was maintained which many deemed discriminatory.⁹ In logistic terms, accepting to finance the Theological Faculty of the SOC the state effectively undertook the cost of training of RE teachers but also of the rest of SOC clergy too. Clearly, introducing RE set the pattern of the state overtaking important shares of church finances. But let's pose for the moment and take a stock of some of the other issues raised by the research on RE.

The problem with this kind of research and Belgrade's Institute for Pedagogic Research conducted two surveys on behalf of the Ministry of Religion is that they could only capture personal subjective perceptions of students and RE teachers.¹⁰ There is no control group to assess how much of proclaimed tasks and aims were fulfilled. Furthermore, these tasks and aims are not clearly defined and teachers and students have quite different expectations as indicated by Vladeta Milin, one of the researchers from the Institute.¹¹ Un disclosed research by the Ministry of Education among teachers of RE from 2014, singled out the uneven quality of programmes and stressed they were the most problematic in early grades where topics, contents and methods were not correlated with the age of pupils, which in turn affected their motivation. In Catholic RE too, some topics were singled out as excessively difficult for students while a particular problem was the lack of programme for three year high schools which simply did not teach the fourth year without any adjustments.¹² RE teachers also stressed that they expected more support from their superiors in the promotion of the subject in their own professional training and in terms of more quality textbooks and teaching material.

There has been little clarity about popular demand for classes and the issue was made somewhat redundant when the RE/CE were made compulsory. Year after year the Ministry of Education repeats that approximately 50% of students opt for Religious and consequently similar number for Civic Education. The lack of precise data implied in this fifty-fifty figure reminds of when white wine is mixed with soda in so-called spritzer, as it is locally known, where exact ratio is not so important because of poor wine quality.¹³ Fragmentary evidence suggest that more students (or their parents) opt for RE in rural areas and in South Serbia but this is just a speculation as long as the Ministry does not disclose concrete figures and trends over years.¹⁴ More significantly, the conflict and division within the Islamic community in Serbia led to the boycott of RE taught by imams and teachers from the opposite side of the divide exposing all the vulnerability of confessional model.¹⁵ Namely, if there are conflicts within religious communities or among their leadership, this immediately reflects on state provision of RE.

Despite the problems only sketched above RE continued with unequivocal support of all post-Milošević governments in Serbia. Nevertheless, towards the end of 2015, a big shock erupted when the Education Minister Srđan Verbić publicly expressed doubt in educational aims and outcomes of RE, stressing that it creates divisions and segregation instead of building unity and harmony.¹⁶ The problem, according to Verbić, is especially acute in multi-ethnic (multi-confessional) areas where students split into Orthodox, Islamic and/or Catholic catechism and those who opt for Civic education. Furthermore, Verbić stressed the lack of competent staff and students being overburdened, suggesting that in the future RE should be taught in four instead of all twelve years of schooling (8 years of primary and 4 years of

secondary education). None of these arguments were new and have been pointed out in all previous evaluations mentioned above. The only new argument raised and a rather valid one given that it was raised by the Minister of Education himself was about the cost of RE. Verbić's cost reminder makes all the more sense knowing that Serbia has been in uninterrupted recession since 2008 and salaries (and pensions) of all state employees including teachers were slashed. However, his initiative came as big surprise and remains an enigma given that Verbić was brought in the Government by the so-called Progressive party or SNP, which won two previous elections with an overwhelming majority. The Progressives ruled for years and cemented the model of quasipluralist Church-State relations described above which was built around the confessional model of RE.

Not surprisingly the barrage of attacks against the Minister came from the SOC. Rev Dragomir Sando, coordinator for RE with SOC accused Verbić of the lack of professionalism and morality (sic).¹⁷ Nevertheless, the topic soon got buried amidst more pressing issues. After the elections in April 2016, the new government was formed without Verbić as the Minister in charge. Yet during the same summer for the first time since RE was introduced in an appeasing statement the SOC (its Commission for RE) accepted some criticism made by the Institute of Education (Zavod za vrednovanje vaspitanja i obrazovanja). It promised to work on new plans and programmes and produce a new set of textbooks which would be in accordance with the existing Law on textbooks, indirectly admitting previous ones were not.¹⁸ In an unusually compromising announcement bishop Irinej of Bačka, who wields the most power in SOC concerning education matters, also foresaw a new set of criteria and expertise for RE teachers and promised that new teaching materials would be more related to everyday life and more accessible to students.¹⁹ The very same coordinator for RE with SOC who previously attacked the Minister and all criticism on behalf of educational experts announced that new textbooks will be done via open competition as with other school textbooks (previously they were all written by a single bishop Ignjatije of Braničevo). It was the state's turn, according to the SOC, to respond by fully equalising the status of RE teachers, allowing them other benefits available to full teaching staff such as housing credits, etc.

Despite the anticipating rhetoric the long term observers of political life in Serbia and Church-State relations doubt there will be any change on the horizon. Textbooks were little used before and two issues at the core of Verbić's criticism – division of students and costs associated with confessional model of RE - were not addressed. This last episode of discussion on RE once more exemplifies the nature of Church-State relations shaped by arbitrariness and concessions the Government is granting to the Church for political and symbolic gains. RE has been introduced and is still driven by the state and ruling party's political interests rather than the educational needs of students and the Serbian society. This approach has been vindicated in all subsequent state dealings with the SOC.

Church and State in Serbia since 2000

The codification of the new model of Church-State relations in Serbia, which institutionalised seven "traditional" religious communities, happened with the new Law on the Churches and Religious Communities in 2006. Again all objections to this law, like to previous Government's decisions regarding RE, were rejected by the Constitutional Court. Withholding the official state church status to the SOC, the Serbian authorities applied the so-

called “quasi-pluralist” model of Church-State relations, as described by Stan and Turchescu in Romania.²⁰ This approach ensures informal precedence of the Orthodox Church by government agencies on all levels. Moreover, it was immediately followed with the Law on the Restitution of Church Property which foresaw, with regard to religious communities, the complete restitution of their nationalised property while the return of nationalized property to private individuals is still pending. There are more than three thousand claims with the SOC claiming more than 90% of property for return according to the official report.²¹ The process of return is extremely complex and slow and so far less than half of the property have been returned. Nevertheless, righting the previous injustice not only cemented the primacy of SOC among religious communities but its political importance for the state as other victims such as private persons or endowments are still left behind.²²

After education the most important breakthrough for the SOC was its association with the Army. Previously the bastion of Yugoslavism and Communism, after 2000, the Army found itself in ideological vacuum and the SOC was enthusiastic to fill it with its own version of Serbian nationalism vaguely defined as *Svetosavlje*.²³ Excursions to monasteries were followed by mass baptisms of officers and soldiers and RE was duly introduced in military schools. The mutual rapprochement eventually culminated with the Agreement on military chaplaincy between the Ministry of Defence and seven traditional religious communities in 2011, that envisages paying chaplains the same salaries as officers (depending on their rank), reduced service years for retirement, housing help and other benefits.²⁴ Again the overwhelming beneficiary was the SOC with most chaplains, military chapels and close association between the two institutions, clearly visible at every religious celebration or military anniversary as men (and now women soldiers too) parade in military uniforms and church vestments side by side.

Over the years and especially by way of the return of property and taxation policy (or lack of it) the central government became the main financier of Churches.²⁵ Since 2004, the government is funding salaries for priests and monks in Kosovo and some other areas of Serbia considered remote. From 2012, it is also paying the retirement contribution to all active priests. Special stamps were introduced to finance the building of the monumental St. Sava Church in Belgrade, to which the State already contributes in various other ways. It is difficult to estimate or calculate the amount of financial aid from state funds to the Church as it takes place on many more levels than central government contributions and subventions.²⁶ After the Army built churches in its major headquarters and barracks, state hospitals, social care and penitentiary institutions followed suit, engaging a number of priests to officiate in them. Furthermore, most local communities provide land and infrastructure for church building free of charge and contribute in various other ways. State utility companies are also among the major donors. Last but not least, the SOC was given initially a place and then a chairmanship of the Serbian Radio Broadcasting Council, a media regulatory body.

Clericalism, de-secularisation or else?

Acknowledging the recent rise of SOC prominence and its close ties to the state, the question remains what to make of it and here is where analysts disagree. First of all, one must recognize the fundamental ontological differences in analysing the Church and other secular institutions in terms of their mission, influence, outcomes. Not withholding that the Church is most interested in other world by definition, this article only evaluates its strengthening in

this world. Nevertheless, it questions the conclusion by some observers that due to the unprecedented growth of the SOC in terms of clergy and associates' numbers, accumulation of financial power and influence as well as its privileged position secured through legal changes Serbia is in danger of Clericalism.²⁷

Clericalism like Fascism is an often (mis)used notion rendering it hardly viable and explanatory. Historically, the term Clericalism was coined to describe a political tendency for influence or domination of the Catholic Church and its clergy. It was developed in relation to political Catholicism in the late nineteenth century Europe and signified the drive of Catholic Church leadership and ordained clergy to impact or decide matters of political and sociocultural importance in an increasingly secularised world. In majority Orthodox countries there was no equivalent force. For centuries now in Orthodox countries the state was subjecting and controlling the Church and often state rulers chose or removed bishops and patriarchs. State domination of the Church in Serbia too has also had two centuries of long uninterrupted tradition. Clearly the notion of clericalism in Serbia does not apply in historical perspective but what about today?

Looking closer at the most recent developments in Serbia there is an evident tendency from political elites, mostly leaderships of recently formed political parties, to manipulate the Church for their own ends, mostly as a political legitimacy tool. This tendency is somewhat reminiscent of the interwar and earlier periods. In addition to this historical predisposition contemporary Serbia undergoing post-Socialist transition, like neighbouring Romania and more distant Russia, is facing a huge ideological gap. In all three countries we can observe political elites filling this void with the help or in close association with the Church. What's more, being late or the latest country to transition from conflict and socialism, Serbia's recent developments coincide with European-wide questioning of the direction or end station of this transition. Throughout Europe but also elsewhere there is a widespread negation of democracy. In fact, our age is already described by Colin Crouch as post-democracy, where elections and decision making are no more than a spectacle run by spin doctors and where the mass of citizens plays a passive, quiescent, even apathetic role.²⁸ It is this post-conflict, post-Socialist, post-Democratic context that provides a fertile backdrop to Church-State relations in Serbia.²⁹ The rise of political extremists and antidemocratic political options throughout the region, or simple dismissal of democratically elected governments of Italy and Greece, relativize the actions of the Serbian political leadership and relieve them of any scrutiny including Church-State relations. International partners, primarily the European Union, which Serbia aims to join ever since it ousted Milošević in 2000, are too busy for pettiness of democratic proceduralism and sees relations with the Church as side show to more important issues. Facing the lack of political expertise, economic recession, loss of territory (Kosovo) and widespread popular distrust Serbian (also Romanian or Russian) secular elites need allies and rely heavily on symbolic rewards that close associations with the Church provide. Thus, once again in Serbian history the state became the chief financier, supporter but also regulator of the Church.

The SOC has generally and willingly accepted the close relationship for financial and other benefits, which nearness to real power brings. Over the last decade and a half Church-State relations have not been a one-way road but in most instances the state has been determining the direction. Criticism or initiative from the Church is limited to few issues. On several occasions prominent bishops and the entire hierarchy of the SOC expressed their discontent

and fierce opposition to state policy towards Kosovo to no avail. The two most remarkable occasions were in 2004, when the then Serbian President Boris Tadić clashed with the Patriarch and the Church over voting in Kosovo, which nevertheless took place. In 2013, protesting the signing of the so-called Brussels Agreement between governments of Kosovo and Serbia, Metropolitan Amfilohije and bishop Atanasije held a prayer for death [molitva za upokojenje] of government and parliament members of Serbia for what they deemed was a state treason. The SOC considers Kosovo as its Holy Land or Serbian Jerusalem and condemns any move of the Serbian government to reconcile with the Albanian rule of the country since it unilaterally declared independence in 2007. Nevertheless, Patriarch Irinej later condemned bishop Atanasije as enfant terrible and the SOC reconciled with the Government. Similarly, anti-EU position of many bishops never became official Church's position and never threatened state policies of EU accession.³⁰

The second most important concern for the Church is the abysmal and declining birth rate among Serbs and it uses all possible means to condemn the right to abortion, which it deems a crucial factor for low fertility. Yet an initiative from the Church to change the law regulating birth control was immediately dismissed by the Health Minister.³¹ The Church has also been the fiercest opponent of non-discrimination of LGBT and their right to demonstrate. There are many studies on the issue of gay parade in Belgrade and most rightly stress that behind the Church opposition stood the attempt to de-secularize public sphere and re-traditionalize social relations.³² Yet after a period of harsh protests from the Church and severe violence employed by some para-church organisations to stop it, previously reluctant Serbian government now secures the LGBT parade year after year. Similarly, the opposition to decriminalisation of homosexuality by the Orthodox Church in Romania was quashed by its government and in Orthodox Greece, where the Church has much more power and privilege than Serbia, the Parliament recently approved of gay partnership let alone the right to march despite massive protests from the Church.

Finally, it is not only in terms of key policies that the state seems to distance itself from the SOC. Stories, often half-truths or rumours, about sexual and other (mostly financial) scandals involving priests and bishops are freely circulating in Serbian media, most of whom are linked to the state or stakeholders close to the government. Clearly, clergy has no special media immunity awarded to politicians or businessmen and are easily exposed to ridicule. The SOC in turn never ceased cherishing an inimical attitude to media and for years has been attempting to circumvent them by creating its own radio and TV stations alongside print and electronic media. These Church media however still struggle to gain wider audience.

In conclusion, the position of SOC improved massively compared to repression or marginalisation during Communist-led Yugoslavia and some clergy managed to translate it into financial gain. Yet there is very little evidence that they are able to affect government's foreign or economic policies or change basic tenets of parliamentary democracy in Serbia, thus emptying any possibility of Clericalism in its original definition. On the other hand, Clericalism as a term has also been used to describe the cronyism and cloistered political environs of denominational hierarchy. Again it appeared mainly in connection to the Roman Catholic Church, where for centuries the hierarchy and/or clergy dominated over believers in all matters before some important changes were made on the Second Vatican Council. This understanding of clericalism has more reference with the Orthodox Church which is, like its Catholic counterpart, episcopalian, hierarchical and authoritarian by definition and has not

succumbed to any reforms. Furthermore, the numerical and financial growth of Orthodox Churches in post-Socialist countries inevitably saw an accumulation of power behind the scene by few bishops, priests or even laymen.³³ More and more sons of priests follow in their footsteps, a practice which was a norm in the Russian but nonexistent in the Serbian Church. It is also rumored that Bishops who cannot marry surround themselves with family members.

Despite these clearly “clericalist” developments, the SOC remains vulnerable as an institution if not becoming even more so with the recent changes. Here are some illustrations: Although canons proscribe that one is bishop for life, or in canonical terms wedded to his bishopric, the Constitution of SOC allows for “retirement” in exceptional circumstances and requires the majority in the Bishops’ Assembly to vote so. In the last few years more Serbian bishops were “retired” for financial, sexual and other violations than in entire Church’s history.³⁴ Processes among several other bishops are well under way and some owe their continuous status only to divisions between various lobbies or groupings among the bishops. With the rise of financial stakes these inner conflicts are only set to rise. Among the lower clergy and Church staff too there were already a number of well documented cases of fraud and the so-called financial mismanagement despite the attempts to keep them hidden from the public.³⁵ Outside its ranks the SOC has been awarding medals and praising its donors even though some of them were accused of smuggling, privatization frauds and economic criminal.³⁶

Besides internal personnel issue, the Serbian Church and its bishops are fraught with their links/dependencies on Russian and Greek (Ecumenical) Church. The divide among Orthodox Churches was best exemplified in the refusal of the Russian Church (joined by churches of Antiochia, Bulgaria and Georgia) to attend the pan-Orthodox Council in Crete in summer of 2016. For the SOC, this perennial division is crucial given the disagreements of two camps about the future of the Orthodox diaspora, which is one of the biggest financial resource for the SOC. So far the Serbian Church was pretty successful in its balancing act between the two powerful centres of Orthodox Christianity. This is because most powers and decisions over foreign relations are concentrated in the hands of two Irinejs. One is Patriarch and bishop of Belgrade, the other is bishop of Novi Sad. Presiding over two biggest and richest dioceses they also hold most power within the Church and traditionally make sure to keep good relations with both Orthodox powers as well as with secular powers in Serbia. But sometimes the balancing act gets out of control. Recently, the news agency of SOC in a Freudian twist mistakenly transmitted the information on a traditional meeting of Serbs and Greeks with the title “Serbian-Russian friendship”.³⁷

Relations with other Orthodox churches are fraught with difficulties and the SOC faces many challenges in what it sees as its canonical territories adding to the above mentioned vulnerabilities. Romanian Orthodox Church for example tonsured its own priests in east Serbia, the first step in establishing its own diocese on the territory the SOC sees at its exclusive domain or canonical jurisdiction.³⁸ For years there have been no solution to this problem and negotiations involving Serbian and Romanian secular authorities only worsened the situation. In Montenegro for many years the Serbian Church is confronting the opposition and attempts by those who ethnically identify themselves as Montenegrins to establish their own national church. Last but not least is the issue of the Orthodox Church in Macedonia, unresolved for half a century. As it was discussed elsewhere here it is only mentioned to underline the weakness of the SOC. Orthodox Christian principle of one state-one church

simply does not resolve the problem of jurisdiction of the Orthodox diaspora in countries with non-Orthodox majorities or in the countries emerging after the dissolution of Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. In conclusion, the Serbian Church remains vulnerable as an institution making it more difficult to impose its will on Serbian state or society as definitions of clericalism would require despite the favourable Church-State relations.

The best analyst of the rapprochement of the state and church and increasing clerical involvement in Serbian politics Milan Vukomanović rightly saw the main impetus for changes in the SOC ambition for de-secularization. In a recent study Vukomanović provided a detailed and damning picture of the SOC rejection of democracy, ecumenism, human rights, European Union and many other aspects of modernity and globalization.³⁹ Yet we found little evidence of important Church impact on state policies besides securing privileges for itself as an institution and its clergy or RE teachers for that matter. Namely, the criticism that senior figures in SOC so frequently direct at European Union accession criteria or policies of nondiscrimination create for the Serbian government much less headache and threat than economic recession, vile criminal groups, corruption or foreign interference in Serbian affairs.

We still need to investigate whether and what change the Church impacts in the society or among the majority of citizens who declare as Serb and Orthodox. The political organizations, mostly Youth groups, that are favoring Church's anti-European, anti-modernist stance do not count a massive membership and only in the last elections, the strongest of them, *Srpske Dveri*, managed to climb electoral census and enter the Parliament with 5 % of vote. Another telling evidence is the 2010 research concerning the attitude of the citizens of Serbia toward the European integrations with traditional believers being the most supportive of the Serbian accession (89%) despite the Church's clear anti-EU stance and rhetoric.⁴⁰ While almost all citizens of Serbia declare as believers, sociologists interpret this as national identification rather than adhering to the faith let alone moral or political precepts of the Church. Levels of church attendance remain very low despite hundreds new churches being constructed and other public or personal displays of easy visible markers of Orthodox identity (crosses, prayer ropes, icons, etc.).

On the other hand, in Serbia, just like in Romania or Russia, surveys show that their dominant churches (and the army) enjoy highest degrees of popular trust, by far higher than democratically elected institutions such as parliaments. This too should come as no surprise given the widespread disillusion with the so-called democratic transition and especially the neoliberal model of capitalism, most notable in the policies of privatization, which made few very rich and vast majorities poorer. In Serbia (and much of former Yugoslavia) not only wellbeing but personal security was under threat for a decade with wars raging from Slovenia to Macedonia with various intensity. The political instability continues to this day, which renders great appreciation for solace, tradition and stability, all values associated with the Church. No wonder political elites extend to churches for legitimacy and an illusion of stability that is so hard to come by. Together with the hierarchs political leaders and opinion makers nourish in general public the image of the Church as an embodiment of national unity and purpose no matter how constructed its role in history, privileged its position in the present or illusory vision of the future might be.

The SOC cherishes the current situation and thus prefers to deal with the state rather than society at large. Its caritative, developmental, environmental or Youth related mission are still in their infancy although there have been no obstacles for such work for quarter of century now. As this is a topic for another study let me only give two examples. During last year the SOC started its first ever programme for prisoners and had 10 (ten) attendants out of more than ten thousand incarcerated in Serbia.⁴¹ The SOC was more active in rehabilitation of drug users but here again with mixed results, having established some good practice but also had to confront the murder of one inmate by the priest in charge.⁴² To invoke the parallel with neighboring Romania again and Stan and Turcescu's condemning verdict of the Romanian Church's failure to fulfill its social mission, which could be applied to the SOC too: "The Church's most serious enemy is itself."⁴³

The case study of RE was used to illustrate recently transforming Church-State relations which defy existing terminology and standardization and can be understood only within Serbia's post-conflict, post-Socialist and post-democracy context. Recent traumatic experiences make both sides in this uneven relationship unwilling to clash over any disagreements. Quite the opposite they have found common interests and share similar agenda of speaking or preaching for unity, purpose, solace and stability in times when these are completely lacking. More specifically, pressing with RE the Church showed it was not only a puppet in state's hands and it managed to impose its own agenda and lay ground for its own future. As a result of the informal precedence by government agencies on all levels, direct state aid and popular support we are witnessing an unprecedented growth of the Serbian Church. Yet its concrete influence in Serbia in many spheres from how to run the economy to youth sexuality remains limited if any at all.

¹ I acknowledge that I use a metaphor already used by Zorica Kuburić i Milan Vukomanović in theirs, "Religious education: The Case of Serbia", in Zorica Kuburić and Cristian Moe, eds., *Religion and Pluralism in Education*, Novi Sad: CEIR in cooperation with the Kotor Network, 2006, pp. 107–138. It led to the subheading title in a wider study by professor Milan Vukomanović of the University of Belgrade entitled "Ecclesiastical Involvement in Serbian Politics: Post-2000 Period" published in Gorana Ognjenović and Jasna Jozelić, eds., *Politicization of Religion, the Power of State, Nation, and Faith*, London: Palgrave Macmillan US, Palgrave Studies in Religion, Politics, and Policy, 2014, pp 115-149, here p. 118. While we arrived to this conclusion independently I am most indebted to professor Vukomanović for many insights on the topic of religion in Serbia derived from his numerous studies cited below as well as from private conversations. My differences in analysis will be spelled out towards the end of this article.

² Jelena Jorgačević, "Đaci su zadovoljni", *Vreme*, 05.08.2010. available on <http://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=1109033&print=yes>

³ Bojan Aleksov, *Veronauka u Srbiji*, Niš: JUNIR. 2004 [Abbreviated version in English: Bojan Aleksov "Religious Education in Serbia" in *Religion, State and Society*, Vol. 32/4, 2004, pp. 341-364]; Jana Bačević, "Veronauka i(li) evronauka: kritika elemenata reforme obrazovanja 2000–2003", Beograd: Filozofski fakultet, 2004; Zorica Kuburić i Milan Vukomanović, "Religious education: The Case of Serbia", in Zorica Kuburić and Cristian Moe, eds., *Religion and Pluralism in Education*, Novi Sad: CEIR in cooperation with the Kotor Network, 2006, pp. 107–138.

⁴ For brief analysis of pre-war developments see Klaus Buchenau, "What went wrong? Church-State Relations in Socialist Yugoslavia", *Nationalities Papers* 33 (2005) 4, pp. 547-567. For more on the role of churches see *ibid*, *Kämpfende Kirchen. Jugoslawiens religiöse Hypothek*. Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang 2006 (Erfurter Studien zur Kulturgeschichte des orthodoxen Christentums, 2).

⁵ This article will concentrate on the relationship between the state and the Serbian Orthodox Church given its dominant position among the religious communities in the country. Furthermore, the introduction of RE institutionalised seven “traditional” religious communities who among themselves account for more than 95% of declared believers and who in dealings with the state mostly act in unison.

⁶ The only exception is some 60 acres of land used by the Apiary cooperative during the Communist ruled period that the Government of Serbia in 1997 returned to the Monastery of Dečani. This decision, has long been contested by local Kosovo Albanians though it was on several instances confirmed by European authorities in power in Kosovo during the transition European rule after NATO occupied Kosovo in 1999. Earlier this year the Kosovo Constitutional Court confirmed it in final instance. See Roksanda Ninčić, “Varanje Crkve. Bogu božje - caru imovina,” *Vreme* N. 429, 9. 1. 1999. For the Decision of the Kosovo Constitutional Court in English see http://www.gjk-ks.org/repository/docs/KI132-15_ANG.pdf.

⁷ For Romania see Lavinia Stan and Lucian Turcescu, *Religion and Politics in Post-communist Romania*, Oxford University Press, 2007. The literature on Church and State in Russia is too rich to note here. Book volumes include: Wallace L. Daniel, Peter L. Berger, Christopher Marsh, eds., *Perspectives on Church-State Relations in Russia*, J.M. Dawson Institute of Church-State Studies; 2008; Katja Richters, *The Post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church. Politics, Culture and Greater Russia*, Routledge, 2012. For other case studies in the region see Ines A. Murzaku, ed., *Quo Vadis Eastern Europe? Religion, State, Society after Communism*, Ravenna: Longo Editore, 2009. For recent development regarding RE in these two countries see Lavinia Stan and Lucian Turcescu, “Religious Education in Romania,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 38, no. 3 (September 2005), 381-401; See also Elena Lisovskaya and Vyacheslav Karpov, “Orthodoxy, Islam, and Desecularization of Russia’s State Schools,” *Politics and Religion*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2010).

⁸ Most important recent studies include: Klaus Buchenau, “Orthodox values and modern necessities”, in Ola Listhaug, Sabrina Ramet, Dragana Dulić, eds., *Civic and uncivic values, Serbia in the post-Milošević Era*, Budapest, New York: CEU Press 2011, pp. 111-142; Ibid, “The Serbian Orthodox Church”, in Lucian Leustean, ed., *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, London/New York: Routledge 2014, pp. 67-92; Ibid, “From Hot War to Cold Integration? Serbian Orthodox Voices on Globalization and European Integration”, in Jerry Pankhurst, Victor Roudometof, Alex Agadagian, eds., *Eastern Orthodoxy in a Global Age, Comparative Perspectives and Transnational Connections*, Walnut Creek (Cal.) 2005, pp. 58-83; Milan Vukomanovic, “The Serbian Orthodox Church as a Political Actor in the Aftermath of October 5, 2000,” *Politics and Religion*, Vol. 1 (2008), 237–269; Ibid, “The Serbian Orthodox Church: Between Traditionalism and Fundamentalism,” in Ulrika Mårtensson, Jennifer Bailey, Priscilla Ringrose, and Asbjørn Dyrendal et al. (eds.), *Fundamentalism in the Modern World*, vol. 1, London: I.B. Tauris, 2011; Ibid and Radmila Radic, “Religion and Democracy in Serbia since 1989: The Case of the Serbian Orthodox Church”, in Sabrina P. Ramet, *Religion and Politics in Post-Socialist Central and Southeastern Europe Challenges since 1989*, Palgrave Studies in Religion, Politics, and Policy, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 180—211; and mine “The Serbian Orthodox Church: haunting past and challenging future” in *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* Vol. 10, No. 2, (2010), pp. 176-191; “The New Role for the Church in Serbia” in *Südosteuropa*, Vol. 56/3, (2008) pp. 353-375.

⁹ Potential candidates need blessing from their bishops in order to enrol. Almost all academic staff is male; many are clergy but all have to be approved by the Church.

¹⁰ One is published as Snežana, Joksimović, ed. 2003. *Verska nastava i građansko vaspitanje u školama u Srbiji*, Beograd: Institut za pedagoška istraživanja.

¹¹ Jelena Jorgačević, Đaci su zadovoljni, *Vreme* available on <http://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=1109033&print=yes>

¹² Veronauka bliža deci, *Večernje novosti*, 28. septembar 2016

¹³ The last available data are from 2011 when the Ministry of Religions reported 530.000 students attending Orthodox R, which was taught by 1.789 catichets. Islamic RE was taken by 38.000 students and Roman Catholic catechism was followed by 14, 000 and taught by 160 teachers while the smallest group was of the Slovak Lutheran church with 1.170 students. Decenija učenja veronauke, *Večernje novosti*, 13. februar 2011 see <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/drustvo/aktuelno.290.html:319096-Decenija-ucenja-veronauke>

¹⁴ V. Nedeljković, Beogradski đaci neće na veronauku, 04. 10. 2008. Available on <http://www.pressonline.rs/info/politika/48341/beogradski-djaci-nece-na-veronauku.html>

¹⁵ Lecima u Novom Pazaru poziva se na bojkot veronauke, *Blic*, 3.10.2012.

<http://www.blic.rs/vesti/drustvo/lecima-u-novom-pazaru-poziva-se-na-bojkot-veronauke/bpnw8fy>

¹⁶ Iva Martinović, Veronauka u Srbiji na testu: Ministar protiv vetrenjača, *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, available on <http://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/veronauka-u-srbiji-na-testu-ministar-protiv-vetrenjaca/27489411.html>.

¹⁷ Among many angry reactions see “Crkva ljuta na Verbića” available at <http://www.informer.rs/vesti/drustvo/47041/CRKVA-LJUTA-VERBICA-Ukidanje-veronauke-bilo-SKANDAL-KAKAV-PAMTI>

¹⁸ Jelena Čalija, Novi nastavni planovi za pravoslavnu veronauku, *Politika*, 29.08.2016.

-
- ¹⁹ See the official statement from the SOC, Veronauku pohada pola miliona učenika available on http://spc.rs/sr/veronauku_pohadja_pola_miliona_uchenika.
- ²⁰ Stan, Turcescu, *Religion and Politics in Post-communist Romania*, pp. 26-29.
- ²¹ Most common form nationalised property from religious communities is arable land, followed by forest, real estate, industrial and commercial premises. The full list is available at the report by relevant government body dealing with restitution of Church property. See <http://www.restitucija.gov.rs/latinica/direkcija-za-restituciju.php>.
- ²² Jelena Čalija, "Crkve favorizovane u vraćanju imovine", *Politika*, 05.05.2011.
- ²³ Klaus Buchenau, "Svetosavlje und Pravoslavlje, Nationales und Universales in der serbischen Orthodoxie", in Martin Schulze Wessel, ed., *Nationalisierung der Religion und Sakralisierung der Nation im östlichen Europa*, Stuttgart 2006, pp. 203-232, is the most elaborate attempt to historically trace and define Svetosavlje. See also Maria Falina, "Svetosavlje. A Case Study in the Nationalization of Religion", *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Religions- und Kulturgeschichte* 101, pp. 505–527 and mine "Nationalism in Construction: The Memorial Church of St. Sava on Vračar Hill in Belgrade" in *Balkanologie*, Vol.VII/2, 2003, pp. 47-72.
- ²⁴ The relevant agreements are available on the web site of the Ministry of Defence of Serbia. See <http://www.mod.gov.rs/lat/4348/verska-sluzba-u-vojsci-srbije-4348>.
- ²⁵ The "traditional" religious communities are freed from property, income, and financial transactions' taxes. All laws governing religious communities are available at <http://vere.gov.rs/cir/Siteview.asp?ID=19>.
- ²⁶ More on financial benefits and taxation in Radić and Vukomanović, "Religion and Democracy in Serbia", pp. 194-197.
- ²⁷ An example is the project-publication *Kritika klerikalizacije Srbije* by AFANS, Antifašistička akcija Novi Sad, (samizdat 2007). Also used by the late analyst Mirko Đorđević. See his interview "Klerikalizacija Srbije" available at http://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/intervju_mirko_djordjevic/1884601.html. Vukomanović too criticises the use of clericalisation and instead suggests "etatisation" of the SOC in his "Ecclesiastical Involvement", pp. 125 and 147.
- ²⁸ Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, London: Polity, 2012, p.4.
- ²⁹ Post-socialist and post-conflict context is the most important framework of analysis for the most recent compendium of studies on Church-State relations in several of Yugoslavia's successor states. See Branislav Radeljić, Martina Topić, eds., *Religion in the Post-Yugoslav Context*, Lanham: Lexington books, 2015)
- ³⁰ The report by Helsinki Committee in Serbia details and analyses thoroughly these conflicts and their apparent reconciliation. See Helsinški odbor za ljudska prava u Srbiji, *Ljudska prava u Srbiji 2013. Iskonski otpor liberalnim vrednostima*, Belgrade, 2014, pp 374-384.
- ³¹ Helsinški odbor, *ibid*, p. 399.
- ³² Marek Mikuš, "Faggots Won't Walk through the City": Religious Nationalism and LGBT Pride Parades in Serbia" in Srdjan Sremac, R. Ruard Ganzevoort, eds., *Religious and Sexual Nationalism in Central and Eastern Europe*, Leiden: Brill, 2015, pp. 15-32.
- ³³ Three laymen with close relationship to Patriarch Irinej and bishop of Bačka represent the Church in State Media Commission (Dušan Stokanović); run the SOC production of clerical vestments, candles and other accessories (Dejan Nakić); and manage public relations (Dimitrije Stikić).
- ³⁴ Recently removed are Bishops Artemije of Kosovo, Konstantin of Germany, Georgije of Canada, Vasilije of Tuzla-Zvornik, Filaret of Mileševa, Sava of Slavonija and Jovan of Niš. Temporarily suspended was Pahomije of Vranje.
- ³⁵ In 2013, the accountant of the Patriarchate Srba Žikić, known for his jet set lifestyle was arrested and accused for stealing over 1 million euros of church money. The whole case was then buried from public eyes. See <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/tema-dana-opljackana-kasa-patrijarsije-blagajnik-spc-ukrao-milion-evra-gotovine/wjtvf64>
- ³⁶ Ivana Kljajić, "Bože, pomiluj me grešnog: Srpski političari i biznismeni viđeniji ktitori", 19.04.2015, *Alo.rs*. <http://arhiva.alo.rs/vesti/aktuelno/boze-pomiluj-me-gresnog-srpski-politicari-i-biznismeni-videniji-ktitori-foto/94189>
- ³⁷ See http://spc.rs/sr/srpskorusko_prijateljstvo_u_ruti_hilu.
- ³⁸ Under the leadership of Bojan Aleksandrović, who the SOC previously defrocked, the Romanian Church created the so-called Romanian Orthodox Protopresbyterate of Dacia Ripensis. See <http://www.daciaortodoxa.ro>.
- ³⁹ Vukomanović, "The Serbian Orthodox Church: Between Tradition and Fundamentalism".
- ⁴⁰ This research and its apparent paradoxical results are discussed in Vukomanović, "Ecclesiastical Involvement", p. 139.
- ⁴¹ Jelena Čalija, "Zatvorenici veruju u biblijska čuda", *Politika*, 25.10. 2016. <http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/366326/Drustvo/Zatvorenici-veruju-u-biblijska-cuda>

⁴² Reverend Branislav Peranović who committed the murder was sentenced to 20 years while the bishop in charge apologized publicly. See

http://spc.rs/sr/saopshtenje_za_javnost_episkopa_shabachkog_gospodina_lavrentija.

⁴³ Stan, Turcescu, *Religion and Politics in Post-communist Romania*, p. 39.