

## Article

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# “Symphonia”? A New Patriarch Attempts to Redefine Church–State Relations in Serbia

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**Abstract:** The authors examine the relationship between Church and state in Serbia since the election of the new patriarch in February 2021. They demonstrate the ways in which Church and state have begun to take divergent paths. This is not to suggest that political and ecclesiastical power are not deeply entwined in contemporary Serbia—they are. However, the authors show how—contrary to accounts which present Church and state as practically homologous—clerical and political leaders are increasingly pulling in different directions. They evaluate the key features of what has so far been a brief, but momentous tenure of the Serbian Patriarch Porfirije. A particular emphasis is placed on the new patriarch’s ecclesiastical diplomacy, the ever-increasing role of the Church as a mnemonic agent, the Church’s reaction to Belgrade hosting an LGBT pride parade and, finally, its rapport with the Serbian government.

**Keywords:** Serbian Orthodox Church; Church–state relations; Serbia; Patriarch Porfirije; Aleksandar Vučić



## Introduction

On 18 February 2021, an expectant crowd of journalists and onlookers gathered outside the towering and recently completed Saint Sava Temple in Belgrade. Inside the church, in the ornate crypt, the bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) had gathered to elect a new patriarch. The previous incumbent, Irinej, had succumbed to Covid-19 in November 2020. After celebrating the Divine Liturgy, the bishops withdrew from the public gaze to vote for their preferred candidates,

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eventually whittling down the number to three. In the preceding days, the tabloid press had kept up a steady stream of intrigue and scandal about the election and there was an atmosphere of heightened tension. After a while, an elderly monk was led into the temple to select one of the three names which had been placed inside the Gospels. There was a quickening of media interest: people whispered about who might be chosen and made furtive calls to glean information. Eventually, there were cheers and enthusiastic back slapping from a cluster of clerics waiting by the temple, and the cry of *Axios!* (He is worthy!). The news filtered back to the crowd, but was received with little if any surprise. Porfirije (Perić), the Metropolitan Bishop of Zagreb and Ljubljana, had been elected as the 46th patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church.<sup>1</sup> The main doors of the temple creaked open, and the bishops started to process out. Porfirije appeared in black flowing robes, escorted by two deacons, and they proceeded swiftly to the parish house.<sup>2</sup> A new chapter of Serbian Church history was beginning.

Since the fall of President Slobodan Milošević in 2000, the Serbian Church and Serbian state have enjoyed an ever-closer relationship (Aleksov 2008; Vukomanović 2008). Patriarch Irinej, in particular, was widely seen as being weak and heavily influenced by Serbia’s increasingly autocratic president, Aleksandar Vučić. When Porfirije’s predecessor Irinej awarded President Vučić the highly prestigious Order of Saint Sava in 2019—for “love of the Church and tireless struggle for the integrity of Serbia”—there was outcry from some bishops, and from the public at large, who felt that the Church should not be so intimately involved with state politics. Most bishops boycotted the ceremony which took place in a Belgrade congress hall rather than the Patriarchate building, as is traditional.<sup>3</sup>

Unsurprisingly, concern about the apparently close relationship between the Vučić regime and the Serbian Church permeated discussions around the election of the new patriarch. A Belgrade taxi driver Lackenby spoke to during fieldwork mused that the Church *should* be entirely separate from politics, but worried that political “fingers” would almost certainly meddle in the election. More acerbically, a man awaiting the result of the election accused Vučić of “meddling in everything”, suggesting that the president was, in fact, down in the crypt himself, ensuring that

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1 In this article, we refer to Serbian clerics with the Serbianised version of their name, not the Greek version (so Porfirije not Porphyrios). For clerics of other Churches, we either use the forms commonly employed in the media (so Kirill, not Cyril), or the English transliterations of Greek names.

2 This observation is based on the ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Belgrade by Lackenby in February 2021.

3 For some of their views see Jorgačević 2019. “Nedostojni kompromisi.” *Vreme*, 24 October. <https://www.vreme.com/vreme/nedostojni-kompromisi/> (accessed 3 August 2023).

his preferred candidate was chosen. When, on 19 February 2021, Porfirije was officially enthroned as patriarch in the packed Cathedral Church of Saint Michael the Archangel in Belgrade, President Vučić was present, walking through the congregation to stand at the front. Following the first official meeting between Vučić and Porfirije, the front page of Serbia's most circulated daily *Politika* featured a headline quoting the president: "Serbia is an easy target without the oneness of the state and the SOC."<sup>4</sup> More recently, at an event celebrating a century of the reestablishment of the Serbian Patriarchate, Miloš Vučević, the mayor of Novi Sad and vice president of Vučić's ruling Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska napredna stranka*, SNS), delivered a speech in which he noted that "no matter how much some tried to separate us, divide us formally, legally and technically into different columns, the wings of the people and the Church and the State have always been and forever remained inseparable".<sup>5</sup> In short, whether it is said with praise or with derision, anecdotally or officially, in contemporary Serbia people frequently depict the Serbian Church and the politics of state as being rightfully, or excessively, interconnected.

Of course, the issue of the interplay between Church and state transcends the Serbian context. The increasing interconnections between Orthodox Churches and their respective states are reflected in an ever-expanding social scientific literature on the subject (for instance, Leustean 2014; Metreveli 2020). The issue is especially fraught in southeastern Europe, with volumes dedicated to the "politicization of religion" (Ognjenović and Jozelić 2014a; 2014b) and the ways in which the Orthodox Churches have immersed themselves in antidemocratic, conservative politics (Ramet 2019). What such literature generally points towards is how Church and state benefit materially and symbolically from the other's attention.

Certainly, in Serbia, it is undeniable that the state meddles in Church affairs. On the day before Porfirije was chosen as patriarch, *Danas*, a critical Serbian daily, reported on how Vučić had lobbied bishops, noting that this amounted to the involvement of an officially secular state in a Church election.<sup>6</sup> Even a quick glance at the two other top candidates confirms the rumours that Porfirije was predestined for the role, given their age and the divisiveness they brought about throughout their long episcopal tenure. However, contributing to the same edition of *Danas*, Professor

4 "Srbija je laka meta bez jedinstva države i SPC." *Politika*, 25 February 2021, no. 38527.

5 For a report of the event, see "Jedan vek od vaspostavljanja Srpske Patrijaršije 1920–2020." *Sveštena Episkopija Gornjokarlovacka*. <https://www.eparhija-gornjokarlovacka.hr/hr/%D1%98%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B0%D0%BD-%D0%B2%D0%B5%D0%BA-%D0%BE%D0%B4-%D0%B2%D0%B0%D1%81%D0%BF%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%B2%D1%99%D0%B0%D1%9A%D0%B0-%D1%81%D1%80%D0%BF%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B5-%D0%BF%D0%B0%D1%82/> (accessed 3 August 2023).

6 "I Vučić i Selaković lobiraju za tron SPC." *Danas*, 17 February 2021, no. 8542.

of Law and expert on ecclesiology Zoran Čvorović noted that whilst it was unsurprising that an autocratic regime would wish to control an institution such as the SOC, it would be equally unsurprising for the Church hierarchy to actively resist such outside interference and strive to preserve its autonomy.<sup>7</sup> Could it be that a government preselecting a candidate does not necessarily guarantee the submission of that candidate once they are in office?

Čvorović is far from the only voice questioning the consensus on the so-called symphonic relationship between the Orthodox Church and the state. Recently other scholars have begun to interrogate the received wisdom about the connection between the two. For instance, attention has been paid to how the historic peculiarities of Church–state relations have, in some cases, *facilitated* democratisation (Veković 2020), not hindered it, as we might expect. In an important collection, Tobias Köllner (2018; see also 2020) argues against a simplistic analysis of Church–state relations. He suggests that we should think about the relationship between the two as highly complex and “entangled”—sometimes cooperative, but sometimes conflictual and rivalrous. Following this line of criticism, we examine the Church–state relationship in Serbia since the election of the new patriarch. We demonstrate the ways in which Church and state have begun to take divergent paths. This is not to suggest that political and ecclesiastical power are not deeply entwined in contemporary Serbia—they are. However, we show how—contrary to accounts which present Church and state as practically homologous (cf. Subotić 2019, 101)—clerical and political leaders are increasingly pulling in different directions. We will evaluate the key features of what has so far been a brief, but momentous tenure of the Serbian Patriarch Porfirije. We place particular emphasis on the new patriarch’s ecclesiastical diplomacy, the ever-increasing role of the Church as a mnemonic agent, the Church’s reaction to Belgrade hosting an LGBT pride parade and, finally, its rapport with the Serbian government—a tenuous relationship, but one which is essential for both the Church’s diplomatic and its mnemonic activities.

## The New Patriarch

The Covid-19 pandemic hit the Serbian Orthodox Church hard. In the space of a few months in 2020, it lost three of its most senior bishops, and eventually, its patriarch. When the Assembly of Bishops elected the then Metropolitan of Zagreb and Ljubljana Porfirije as the new patriarch, their decision was hailed in Church circles as a consensus solution. It seemed like the solution best suited to confronting the

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<sup>7</sup> “Vlast ima potrebu da kontroliše sve delove srpskog društva.” *Danas*, 17 February 2021, no. 8542.

challenges that had accumulated, both within the Orthodox world abroad and at home, where the seemingly friendly relationship with the Serbian government hides signs of long-festering conflict. Some outside observers welcomed the choice of Porfirije, recognising that he is relatively young (born in 1961), modern and tolerant, and pointing to his tenure in Zagreb, where he garnered the sympathy of many Catholic Croats.<sup>8</sup> Others were more sceptical, given the new patriarch's previous role as a long-term member and chairman (2008–2014) of Serbia's Regulatory Authority of Electronic Media, and the influence of his mentor and spiritual father, Bishop Irinej (Bulović) of Novi Sad and Bačka. In the meantime, Irinej, the most influential of all Serbian bishops, has continued his decades-long control of the Holy Synod (the Church's government), and especially his (in)formal oversight of the Church's foreign policy and media.<sup>9</sup>

The sheer range of the new patriarch's appearances, activities, statements and policies in the first year and a half of his tenure have suggested a relatively independent stance, notwithstanding the authoritarian and centralising tendencies associated with his mentor. For decades, the patriarchal seat was occupied by octogenarians and nonagenarians with limited power and influence over other bishops. A famous anecdote about Patriarch Pavle (who served from 1990 until his death in 2009) illustrates this nicely. Arriving at a meeting of the Assembly of Bishops, Pavle was reportedly struck by the luxurious episcopal cars parked around the Patriarchate. He asked what it would look like if they had *not* taken the monastic oath of poverty.<sup>10</sup> The patriarch's words strongly resonated with ordinary people, but the bishops effectively ignored his reprimand, continuing to amass wealth and influence.

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**8** The following reports are illustrative of the initially neutral or positive tone taken towards the new patriarch: Anđelković, N. 2021. "Srbija i Crkva: Šta znači izbor Porfirija na mesto patrijarha Srpske pravoslavne crkve." *BBC News*, 18 February. <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-56116083>; Stojanović, M. 2021. "Serbian Church Elects Patriarch Deemed Close to President." *Balkan Insight*, 18 February. <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/02/18/serbian-church-elects-patriarch-deemed-close-to-president/>; "Hrvatski teolog i novinar raskrinkao nova s: Vodite zlonamernu kampanju protiv patrijarha Porfirija." *Republika*, 24 February 2021. <https://nizelige.republika.rs/vesti/srbija/261829/hrvatski-teolog-i-novinar-raskrinkao-nova-s-vodite-zlonamernu-kampanju-protiv-patrijarha-porfirija> (all accessed 3 August 2023).

**9** Bishop Irinej is frequently referred to as the shadow patriarch. The fact that he also attends meetings between the patriarch and the president of Serbia suggests that this claim is far from simply rhetorical. See "Patrijarh Porfirije i vladika Irinej razgovarali sa predsednikom Vučićem." *Srpska Pravoslavna Crkva*. 28 August 2022. <https://spc.rs/patrijarh-porfirije-irinej-razgovarali-sa-vucicem/> (accessed 3 August 2023). Bishop Irinej also maintains close ties with Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev, recently dismissed from his role as Chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate.

**10** Beoković, J. 2010. "Luksuz ne priliči vladikama." *Politika*, 15 January. <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/119681/Drustvo/Luksuz-ne-prilici-vladikama> (accessed 3 August 2023).

With Porfirije, however, the Serbian Church finally chose a younger, agile, yet extremely experienced leader, who is capable of asserting his authority.

Such leadership qualities were made necessary by the unprecedented public role given to Churches in former Communist-ruled countries since the 1990s, and their increasing centralisation. The political suppression of religious institutions (including the SOC) during Communist rule in Yugoslavia (and elsewhere) resulted in more ecclesiastical autonomy on a local or diocesan level. In the case of the Orthodox Church, this trend was coupled with John Zizioulas’s episcopocentric ecclesiology (dominating the SOC educational institutions in recent decades), resulting in the rather polycentric nature of Church governance with many specificities on diocesan level and the almost unrestrained rule of its bishop.<sup>11</sup>

However, Patriarch Porfirije’s agenda of imposing more central authority became immediately clear from the new approach to the Church’s increasing Internet presence. Its social media accounts (Facebook and Instagram) were aligned to focus on the centrality of the patriarch and his activities. Previously, the official website of the SOC published news and images from throughout its jurisdiction. Today, it is dominated by long stories about the patriarch’s activities, accompanied by photos and transcripts of his entire sermons. News from elsewhere has been reduced to brief notices with a single image.

Other policies followed suit. These ranged from disciplining bishops in the diaspora for their unapproved organisational moves or media interviews that did not toe the official line, removing dissenting professors from the Theological Faculty of Belgrade University, to decisions which further diminished the limited lay participation in Church governance and education.<sup>12</sup> Crucially, the new patriarch set a precedent in the history of the SOC, with ten new bishops elected at the last two annual Bishops’ Assemblies. The new bishops were selected from among mostly young, charismatic monks. Almost all could boast personal relationships with the

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<sup>11</sup> Zizioulas advocates an episcopocentric understanding of Church structure, according to which the Bishop is the president of the Divine Liturgy and the Eucharistic community. Zizioulas, titular Metropolitan of Pergamon since 1986, is a leading Orthodox Christian theologian. His ecclesiology was first developed in his doctoral dissertation, published in English translation as *Eucharist, Bishop, Church: The Unity of the Church in the Divine Eucharist and the Bishop During the First Three Centuries* (see Zizioulas 2001).

<sup>12</sup> The targets were Bishop Grigorije of Germany, Bishop Irinej of New York and East Coast, and Bishop Maxim of West Coast. The latter was also removed from his post as professor at the Theological Faculty of Belgrade University. See “Saopštenje za javnost povodom izjava episkopa Grigorija.” Srpska Pravoslavna Crkva. 11 January 2021. [http://arhiva.spc.rs/sr/saopshtenje\\_za\\_javnost\\_povodom\\_izjava\\_episkopa\\_grigorija.html](http://arhiva.spc.rs/sr/saopshtenje_za_javnost_povodom_izjava_episkopa_grigorija.html) (accessed 3 August 2023). The Church also withdrew its blessing from several lay professors and teaching assistants at the Faculty, which means they were dismissed. There is no evidence that Patriarch Porfirije was directly involved but as a professor at the same faculty and the highest ranked bishop, this could be inferred.

patriarch either as his students or spiritual sons, testifying to his decisive role in the selection. This was a selection which skipped over abbots of the most prominent monasteries, who were long expected to be elevated to episcopal rank. In this way, in just two years of his tenure, the new patriarch helped elect almost a quarter of the Church's ruling body. A patriarch with such strong support among the bishops can clearly command more leverage in the crucial rapport with the Serbian state. Patriarch Porfirije's centralising agenda also seems to follow a trend in (mostly Russian) Orthodox ecclesiology, which insists on the Church as an autocephalous assembly of dioceses within a single country gathering the faithful of a single people *and* the worldwide diaspora of that people, rather than Zizioulas's preoccupation with a local diocese with a single bishop. The patriarch's strong autocephalist stance is also seemingly opposed to the Ecumenical Patriarchate's insistence on its primacy among Orthodox Christians worldwide.<sup>13</sup>

## Ecclesiastical Diplomacy

For proponents of the autocephaly of individual Churches within global Orthodox Christianity, establishing and defending Church territory and jurisdiction is a key aspect of ecclesiastical geopolitics, especially in terms of Orthodox inter-Church relations. While sharing this agenda, Patriarch Porfirije's tenure has so far been shaped by the long-accumulated issues that he inherited. After only a few months in the role, the patriarch demonstrated a strong resolve by flying in a special forces helicopter to enthrone Metropolitan Joanikije of Montenegro. The enthronement took place despite the barricades and fierce resistance from a group of advocates of a separate Montenegrin Church, who regard the SOC as a bastion of Serbian nationalism and an extended arm of Serbia's domination of Montenegro.<sup>14</sup> The patriarch's confident face-off with his opponents impressed the hardliners in the Church, who had been openly critical about the strategy of appeasement his predecessors had long pursued. A year later, in August 2022, after decades of struggle and fierce opposition from Montenegro's long-standing President Đukanović, Patriarch Porfirije signed an agreement with the government of Montenegro, which guarantees the SOC all its property in Montenegro, allaying fears of possible schisms (in the event that this property were to be shared with the group claiming to be the Montenegrin Church, or a potential fall-out group from the SOC ranks).<sup>15</sup> The patriarch's continuous and

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<sup>13</sup> For more on the ecclesiological differences between Moscow and Constantinople Patriarchates, see Mihail Comănoiu 2022.

<sup>14</sup> The only recent scholarly works on the self-proclaimed Montenegrin Orthodox Church are Saggau 2017; 2020.

frequent visits and presence in Montenegro ever since demonstrate his determination regarding the role of the SOC in independent Montenegro.

A much more significant testimony to the new patriarch's rising strength and confidence both at home and abroad was demonstrated through the issue of Church autocephaly in North Macedonia. Long before Porfirije's ascent to power, the ecclesiastical situation in (North) Macedonia had posed the gravest challenge to the authority and unity of the SOC, one of the many stains on universal Orthodoxy's reputation, undermined by divisions over the autocephaly of its parts, and disputes over the authority of those who grant it (Šljivić and Živković 2020). Therefore, Patriarch Porfirije's most consequential decision so far has been, in May 2022, to lead the Assembly of Serbian Bishops to recognise unconditionally the autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church–Ohrid Archbishopric (MOC), 55 years after it uncanonically separated from the SOC.<sup>16</sup> This unconditional recognition came as a great surprise, as all previous negotiations were halted due to irreconcilable differences. Yet, just days after the Ecumenical Patriarch announced his decision to recognise the Church in North Macedonia as canonical, Serbian bishops followed suit.<sup>17</sup> This was not just an announcement, as Patriarch Porfirije subsequently issued the legal act of recognition, the so-called *Tomos* of autocephaly. While the decision of the Serbian Church was well received by the clergy and faithful in North Macedonia, who affectionately welcomed Patriarch Porfirije in Skopje and Ohrid, the Church in Greece was frustrated. It objected to the name given to the newly autocephalous Church (The Macedonian Orthodox Church–Ohrid Archbishopric), the fact that it allowed the Macedonian Orthodox Church to keep its diaspora dioceses, and finally, the very fact that the Serbian Church had granted autocephaly, since it views this power as the prerogative of the Patriarchate of Constantinople.<sup>18</sup> The fact that the Ecumenical Patriarch (and the other so-called Greek Churches) object to Macedonian (as well as Serbian and many other) Churches having their own dioceses in diaspora is an insurmountable obstacle given the important role the diaspora play in supporting Churches in their mother countries. On the other hand, Patriarch Porfirije's

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15 For more details on the Agreement, see “Temeljni ugovor: Šta znači potpisivanje sporazuma Crne Gore i Srpske pravoslavne crkve.” *BBC News*. 3 August 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/cyr/balkan-62406362> (accessed 3 August 2023).

16 “Saopštenje Svetog Arhijerejskog Sabora Srpske Pravoslavne Crkve.” *Srpska Pravoslavna Crkva*. 16 May 2022. <https://spc.rs/saopstenje-svetog-arhijerejskog-sabo/> (accessed 3 August 2023).

17 For the recognition of the Ecumenical Patriarchate see “Phanar: Yes to the Recognition, No to ‘Macedonia’ for the Archdiocese of Ohrid.” *Orthodox Times*. 9 May 2022. <https://orthodoxtimes.com/phanar-yes-to-the-recognition-no-to-macedonia-for-the-archdiocese-of-ohrid/> (accessed 3 August 2023).

18 “Greek Synod Objects to Name and Territory of Macedonian Orthodox Church.” *Orthodox Christianity*. 8 June 2022. <https://orthochristian.com/146626.html> (accessed 3 August 2023).



decision is here to stay and has since been acknowledged by other Orthodox Churches, including the Moscow Patriarchate. Clergy and bishops in Serbia and Macedonia continue to celebrate liturgies together in a rare sign of unconditional sisterhood among the Orthodox Churches.

The decision of the SOC to recognise Macedonian autocephaly cannot be viewed outside the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the fratricidal war which has been smouldering there since 2014, as well as the schisms that have ruptured global Orthodoxy in recent years. While the Serbian Church did not immediately take sides, either with the Greek Churches or with the Moscow Patriarchate, a statement by Bishop Irinej rejected the Ecumenical Patriarch's creation of an independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) as uncanonical. Stopping short of severing eucharistic communion, the Assembly of SOC Bishops confirmed the statement by Bishop Irinej, practically allying itself with Moscow's side of the argument.<sup>19</sup> So far, the new patriarch has not had a chance to meet any other heads of Orthodox Churches to challenge this position. The Covid-19 pandemic meant that contact among Orthodox leaders at the highest level completely ceased, and even meetings between bishops of various Orthodox Churches became extremely rare. Serbian hierarchs even failed to participate in the annual celebrations of the holy Apostle Paul on the site where he preached 2000 years ago, in Veria, Greece, an event which regularly gathers hierarchs from all Orthodox Churches. The Sunday of Orthodoxy (a display of Orthodox unity) is no longer jointly celebrated by Orthodox parishes in the diaspora. Serbian clergy abroad occasionally celebrate the liturgy with other canonical clergy, though this is more common with priests and bishops from the Russian, or its close ally the Antiochian Church. However, on a practical level, the Serbian Church remains most closely connected to the Greek Churches, especially the Archbishopric of Athens and (Ecumenical) Patriarchal eparchies in northern Greece, with hundreds of Serbian theology students being schooled in Thessaloniki or Athens. The SOC also has its biggest monastery (Hilandar) on the Greek territory of Mount Athos under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarch. Countless other ties among parishes, monasteries, priests and the faithful have continued. The close links with the powerful Greek diaspora are especially important.

Taking all these details into account, it should not come as a great surprise that after the initial statements in support of Russia, following the invasion of Ukraine, there were signs that the position of the SOC might be shifting. On 29 July 2022, Bishop Jovan (Ćulibrk) of Slavonia used the occasion of the commemoration of the Velika martyrs in Montenegro—where over 600 people were killed in 1944 by the SS

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<sup>19</sup> See “Serbian Orthodox Church Formulates Its Official Position on Ecclesiastical Situation in Ukraine.” The Russian Orthodox Church, Department for External Church Relations, n.d. <https://mospat.ru/en/news/46589/> (accessed 3 August 2023).

divisions “Prinz Eugen” and “Skanderbeg”, the former mostly composed of Yugoslav ethnic Germans, the latter of Albanians—to stress that

what is happening in Ukraine is a tragedy [...] where an Orthodox Christian kills another Orthodox Christian [...] We should not wish evil to anyone and instead pray to God to stop this fratricidal war [...] First and foremost, we should pray for Kiev Metropolitan Onufriy, who is walking on fire, carrying the heaviest cross of humanity at the moment, trying to save his heart and that of his people and work for peace, where global powers brought war.<sup>20</sup>

A few days earlier, at another celebration in the presence of the prominent Metropolitan of Montenegro Joanikije and the Bishop of Germany Grigorije, Bishop Jovan was even more explicit, condemning the taking of sides over the Ukraine conflict as superficial, hot-headed, and most importantly—deeply unchristian. Reminding those gathered that most Ukrainian refugees are practising Orthodox Christians, Bishop Jovan pleaded for them to be helped as Christians, regardless of any geopolitical, geostrategic or national causes. Once again, he pointed out the martyrlike burden borne by Metropolitan Onufriy (until the invasion, the Exarch of Ukraine in the Patriarchate of Moscow, and ex officio, the primate of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, the only canonical Orthodox Church in Ukraine in terms of apostolic succession) and compared the suffering of the Ukrainians to that of the Serbs in recent wars. As a sign of hope and an example of brotherly love to emulate, the bishop cited the reconciliation between the Serbian and Macedonian Church.<sup>21</sup> After making these speeches, Bishop Jovan went to Moscow (the only Serbian bishop to have done so recently), most probably to prepare for the highest-level meeting between Russian and Serbian hierarchs since political divisions, the pandemic and the war in Ukraine froze intra-Orthodox communication. Finally, in October 2022, Bishop Jovan escorted Metropolitan Joanikije of Montenegro on an extensive visit to Russia, where they concelebrated with the Russian Patriarch Kirill. This was a rare outing for the Russian Patriarch, widely ostracised for his support of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. No details were published about an actual audience for the two Serbian hierarchs, although after the liturgy, Patriarch Kirill praised the SOC as “the closest of all the Churches to our Church in her spiritual traditions and fidelity to the unity of Orthodox Slavdom”, and stressed that “Serbia has never been on the side of Russia’s enemies.”<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> “Proslavljeni Sveti mučenici Kirik i Julita i Sveti novomučenici Velički.” Pravoslavna Mitropolija Crnogorsko-Primorska. 29 July 2022. <https://mitropolija.com/2022/07/29/proslavljeni-sveti-mucenici-kirik-i-julita-i-sveti-novomucenici-velicki/> (accessed 3 August 2023).

<sup>21</sup> “Slava Miholjske Prevlake: Da nas Bog udostoji da što prije krenemo u obnovu ove svetosavske svetinje.” Pravoslavna Mitropolija Crnogorsko-Primorska. 26 July 2022. <https://mitropolija.com/2022/07/26/slava-miholjske-prevlake-da-nas-bog-udostoji-da-sto-prije-krenemo-u-obnovu-ove-svetosavske-svetinje/> (accessed 9 August 2023).

At the same time, since Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev's shocking removal from his post as chair of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Relations, and his symbolic role as vice Russian Patriarch, Bishop Irinej (who occupies a similar role in the SOC) has met him several times. Peter Anderson, a regular commentator on the Orthodox world, observed that when Metropolitan Alfeyev was rector of the Russian Orthodox Annunciation Cathedral in Kaunas more than three decades ago, he had urged Soviet troops not to fire on unarmed persons in Lithuania. His silence over Ukraine stands in great contrast to the positions taken by the Russian Patriarch Kirill and eventually cost him his position.<sup>23</sup>

The most recent meeting between Metropolitan Alfeyev and Bishop Irinej was while the latter was accompanying the patriarch on his visit to Budapest where Metropolitan Alfeyev had been transferred.<sup>24</sup> On the occasion of that visit, two bishops from the Ecumenical Patriarchate attended the welcome service, though there was no opportunity for a common Eucharistic celebration. Yet in Novi Sad, on 2 October 2022, Patriarch Porfirije and his mentor Bishop Irinej scored a minor diplomatic success. They gathered for the liturgy and concelebration of the new saints of Bačka (see below) with both the Russian Metropolitan Alfeyev and the Greek Metropolitan of Corfu, Nectarius, alongside less controversial guest bishops from the Antiochian, Czech and Macedonian (Ohrid Archbishopric) Churches.<sup>25</sup>

While the rift between the Ecumenical and Russian Patriarchates is very deep, and the Serbian Patriarch's efforts are unlikely to change much, they testify how much the SOC under its new leadership strives to heal such divisions.<sup>26</sup> This is further amplified by the uncomfortable position in which the Serbian Church finds itself, along with the Serbian state, due to their specially close relationship with the Russian Church and state. The closeness of these ties became particularly apparent

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22 "Hierarchs of the Serbian Church Concelebrate with His Holiness Patriarch Kirill at the Liturgy in the Dormition Cathedral of the Moscow Kremlin." The Russian Orthodox Church: Department for External Church Relations. 18 October 2022. <http://mospat.ru/en/news/89726/> (accessed 4 August 2023).

23 See his "Why was Metropolitan Hilarion transferred to Budapest." University of Fribourg, Faculty of Theology, Study Centre for Eastern Churches, Centre St. Nicholas. 7 June 2022. <https://www.unifr.ch/orthodoxia/de/dokumentation/anderson/news-2022/> (accessed 3 August 2023).

24 As reported by Church media: "Hierarchs of 6 Local Churches Concelebrate Transfiguration Liturgy in Budapest." *Orthodox Christianity*. 23 August 2022. <https://orthochristian.com/147846.html> (accessed 4 August 2023); "Patrijarh Porfirije stigao u kanonsku posetu Eparhiji budimskoj." *Srpska Pravoslavna Eparhija Budimska*. 3 September 2022. <https://www.serbdiocese.hu/2022/09/03/patrijarh-porfirije-stigao-u-posetu-eparhiji-budimskoj/> (accessed 4 August 2022).

25 "Svečani čin kanonizacije svetog Irineja, episkopa bačkog, ispovednika vere, i svetih mučenika bačkih." Srpska Pravoslavna Crkva. 2 October 2022. <https://spc.rs/svecani-cin-kanonizacije-episkopa-backog-svetih-mucenika/> (accessed 4 August 2023).

26 Indeed, the subsequent enthronement of the SOC Bishop for Western Europe in Paris saw Ecumenical and Russian bishops only in attendance rather than cocelebrating.

with the participation of Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev in the official enthronement of Patriarch Porfirije in the Church of Holy Apostles of the Patriarchal Monastery of Peć in Kosovo, where this second-ranked Russian bishop was the sole foreign guest.<sup>27</sup>

Whereas the acceptance of the Church in North Macedonia corresponded with President Vučić’s strategy of rapprochement with Macedonian state authorities, most aptly illustrated in what is known as the “Open Balkans” initiative,<sup>28</sup> maintaining a close relationship with Russia in the present circumstances presents unsurmountable obstacles. Under escalating pressure from the EU to harmonise Serbia’s policy as an accession candidate, President Vučić is gradually drifting away from Serbia’s traditionally pro-Russian stance. The SOC will never fully agree with this move. However, in his most recent speech to the Archbishop of Vienna, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, and the Catholic *Pro Oriente* foundation, Patriarch Porfirije outlined the SOC’s neutral stance regarding the war in Ukraine while reasserting its support for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) and its Metropolitan Onufriy.<sup>29</sup> The latter did not go down well with the Greek Churches. Their dissatisfaction was illustrated by a recent statement from the Patriarch of Alexandria who accused Patriarch Porfirije of defending the UOC but not condemning the Russian Church in Africa.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the patriarch’s compromise has been to avoid direct support for the Russian Orthodox Church and advocate only for the canonical UOC and its Metropolitan.

To complicate things further, in moving away from Russia, Serbia is losing its greatest ally in its attempt to at least formally retain sovereignty over Kosovo. For the SOC, this is the ultimate red line, as it considers Kosovo to be its cradle, its Jerusalem. To emphasise his commitment, the new patriarch frequently insists that he entered monkhood in Kosovo. The parties of the right and intellectuals close to the SOC recently reaffirmed their stance by promoting a declaration demanding the

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27 “Hierarch of the Russian Church Takes Part in Festive Enthronement of Patriarch Porfirije of Serbia at Patriarchate of Peć.” The Russian Orthodox Church: Department for External Church Relations. 15 October 2022. <http://mospat.ru/en/news/89718/> (accessed 4 August 2023).

28 For more on the “Open Balkans” initiative, see “Serbia, North Macedonia, Albania Push Forward On ‘Open Balkans’ Initiative.” *Radio Free Europe*. 29 July 2021. <https://www.rferl.org/amp/serbia-macedonia-open-balkans/31384360.html> (accessed 4 August 2023).

29 “Svečano obraćanje patrijarha Porfirija u Nadbiskupiji u Beču.” Srpska Pravoslavna Crkva. 9 June 2023. <https://spc.rs/svecano-obracanje-patrijarha-porfirija-u-nadbiskupiji-u-becu/> (accessed 4 August 2023).

30 The reaction of the Patriarch of Alexandria is published here: “ΒΑΡΥΣΗΜΑΝΤΟ ΓΡΑΜΜΑ ΤΟΥ ΜΑΚΑΡ. ΠΑΤΡΙΑΡΧΟΥ ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΕΙΑΣ ΠΡΟΣ ΤΟΝ ΜΑΚΑΡ. ΠΑΤΡΙΑΡΧΗ ΣΕΡΒΙΑΣ.” Patriarchate of Alexandria. 26 July 2023. <https://www.patriarchateofalexandria.com/varysimanto-gramma-toy-makar-patriarchoy-alexandreas-pros-ton-makar-patriarchi-servias/> (accessed 4 August 2023).

reintegration of Kosovo into Serbia's constitutional framework.<sup>31</sup> While this is extremely unlikely to happen, it reiterated the Church's stance, signalling where the crucial conflict with the state might happen. While an overwhelming majority within the Church believes that the new patriarch is too moderate, and a significant number of believers and monastics have already split from the Church on this issue,<sup>32</sup> there is no doubt that Patriarch Porfirije will inevitably clash with the Serbian president over any compromise regarding Kosovo.

## The Church as a Mnemonic Agent

The Church's greatest political potential lies in its role in the construction of popular memory. In a context where the ethnic and the confessional are symbiotic, the SOC is eager to exercise its agency to define and prescribe Serbian national identity and its boundaries. In the initial period after the ousting of Slobodan Milošević in 2000, the SOC mostly relied on conservative and nationalist groups and intellectuals to impose its mnemonic agenda, while confronting the state's unsystematic and discontinuous commemorative practices. However, Aleksandar Vučić's electoral success in 2012, and the further strengthening of his power on being elected prime minister in 2014 and president in 2017, led to an overlap if not a complete merger of two mnemonic agendas. This has resulted in what has been described as a hegemonic memory culture of post-Yugoslav and post-conflict Serbia (David 2016). The new patriarch cemented this position and became its most active agent. In addition to liturgical remembrance, embedded in Church practice, the Serbian bishops and clergy, and especially the patriarch, have regularly participated in and spoken at state-organised events. Such events are dominated by a discourse of victimisation, mainly focused on the genocide of Serbs in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina during the Second World War, perpetrated by the Croatian fascist Ustaša. Lending legitimacy to hegemonic commemorative practices and an exclusive focus on Serbian victimhood, the

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31 Dragojlo, S. 2022. "Serbia's Parliamentary Rightists Unite on Platform to Reclaim Kosovo." *Balkan Insight*, 20 October. <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/10/20/serbias-parliamentary-rightists-unite-on-platform-to-reclaim-kosovo/> (accessed 4 August 2023).

32 The bishop of Kosovo, Artemije (Radosavljević), clashed with other bishops regarding their (in his eyes) cowardly stance towards the independence of Kosovo, which was proclaimed in 2008 by the authorities of its overwhelmingly ethnic Albanian inhabitants. Subsequently, the Assembly of Bishops removed him from his position and Artemije, in turn, established his own Church, known as the Diocese of Ras and Prizren in Exile, which has since spread throughout Serbia boasting hundreds of monastics and thousands of the most devoted believers. See "Biography of His Eminence, the Bishop of Raško-Prizren in Exile Artemije." Eparhija Raško-Prizrenska u egzilu. 25 June 2021. <http://www.eparhija-prizren.org/?p=99421> (accessed 4 August 2023).

Church hierarchs and publications summarily dismiss any accusations of historical revisionism and of overlooking crimes committed by Serbs, made by liberal intellectuals and human rights organisations, as coming from malicious “mondialists” and foreign hirelings.<sup>33</sup>

The shared state/Church victimisation agenda also saw the continuous rise to prominence of the above-mentioned Bishop Jovan (Ćulibrk), best known for his role as the head of the Jasenovac Committee of the SOC, the main body tasked with the memorialisation of the Jasenovac Concentration Camp and other atrocities committed against Serbs. As part of the Church’s liturgical commemorative agenda, Bishop Jovan, along with Bishop Irinej, are probably the most responsible for erecting memorial Churches and adding an unprecedented number of persons to the SOC diptych of saints to be commemorated in the Church calendar. Most of these were Serbian victims of the Ustaša genocide during the Second World War in Croatia and elsewhere (Holy Martyrs of Jasenovac, Prebilovci, Piva, etc.), as well as clergy and bishops who fell victim to the Communist Partisans’ terror in the aftermath of the war as supporters of monarchist or collaborationist forces, followed by occasional victims of the Ottoman period and the First World War.

Minor controversy arose around the sainthood for Bishop Irinej Ćirić of Bačka, who was elevated alongside the victims of what is referred to as the Novi Sad raid in January 1942, when the Nazi-allied Hungarian army brutally executed thousands of Serbs and Jews.<sup>34</sup> Bishop Ćirić was the only one of those who have been dubbed the Bačka martyrs personally elevated to sainthood, even though he remained in his post throughout the war (and the massacres) and held his seat in the Upper Chamber of the Hungarian Parliament.<sup>35</sup> Even more emotionally charged was the sainthood for thousands of children, the martyrs of Jastrebarsko and Sisak, two camps for Serbian orphans in the Ustaša state. The Croatian (Catholic) Bishops’ Conference protested, insisting that Jastrebarsko and Sisak were transit camps, where the clergy, and especially nuns, worked to save, not exterminate, Serbian children. There was no

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<sup>33</sup> Hofmeisterová 2022, 110–6. This PhD thesis deals extensively with the SOC’s role in historical revisionism concerning the World War Two Četniks and the relativisation of crimes committed by the Serb forces during the wars in 1990s, which could not be discussed here.

<sup>34</sup> Historian Zvonimir Golubović (1992) places the total number of civilians killed in the raid at 3,809, which is a generally accepted figure.

<sup>35</sup> Ćirić’s postwar suffering at the hands of the Communist regime was crucial in the justification of his sainthood. While their wartime roles were incomparable, it is interesting to note that the exact same reasoning was applied by the Catholic Church in the beatification of Croatian Archbishop Stepinac, which the SOC vehemently opposed, based on Stepinac’s wartime collaboration with the Croatian fascist Ustaša regime. For criticism of Bishop Irinej Ćirić’s sainthood, see Pavkov, K. 2022. “Ko je novi svetac SPC, Irinej Ćirić, istoričar kaže – kolaboracionista.” *N1*, 4 October. <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/ko-je-novi-svetac-spc-irinej-ciric-istoricar-kaze-kolaboracionista/> (accessed 4 August 2023).

response from Patriarch Porfirije or the Synod of Serbian Bishops, at least not a public one, while the canonisation of the children of Jastrebaske and Sisak duly took place.<sup>36</sup>

Yet, with President Vučić's move to monopolise the memory of the Second World War for everyday political aims in Serbia, the Church has found itself in an increasingly subservient role. Not long after Bishop Jovan Ćulibrk took up the position of chair of the board of the Serbian State Museum of Genocide, he was targeted by various associations commemorating the genocide of Serbs in the Ustaša state and many prominent Serbian nationalist intellectuals, who denounced him for promoting revisionist accounts "drastically decreasing" the number of Serbian victims, and cautioning against excessive criticism of Zagreb's wartime Catholic Archbishop Stepinac.<sup>37</sup> Even Patriarch Porfirije was condemned in a diatribe by the Belgrade history professor Vasilije Krestić for confusing the Serbian public by demanding forgiveness for Ustaša crimes.<sup>38</sup> The state interfered indirectly in this debate by awarding Vasilije Krestić its highest decoration in 2022, in what appeared to be a clear rejection of Bishop Jovan's attempt to shift the discourse away from the number of Serbian victims to evoking the tragedy of each individual death.<sup>39</sup>

A similar example of state and Church parting ways is the case of the site of Staro Sajmište. This was a concentration camp on the bank of the River Sava, opposite central Belgrade, where 7000 Serbian Jews were murdered in early-1942 and over 30,000 other, mostly Serbian victims, were then imprisoned, with a third of them dying of maltreatment before being sent to other concentration or forced labour camps (Byford 2011). The site gained notoriety due to decades of neglect and insensitive development with first the Yugoslav and then the Serbian state failing to devise a proper memorialisation concept until recently. After many delays and disagreements, one

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36 "Svečani čin kanonizacije novojavljenih svetitelja Karlovačkog vladicanstva." Srpska Pravoslavna Crkva. 19 July 2023. <https://spc.rs/svecani-cin-kanonizacije-novojavljenih-svetitelja-karlovačkog-vladicanstva/> (accessed 4 August 2023).

37 For the petition of 53 Serbian intellectuals and activists against Bishop Jovan, see "Apel Srpskoj pravoslavnoj crkvi za odbranu Svetih Srpskih Novomučenika Jasenovačkih." *Stanje Stvari*. 18 October 2019. <https://stanjestvari.com/2019/10/18/apel-spc-za-odbranu-svetih-srpskih-novomučenika-jasenovačkih/> (accessed 4 August 2023). For the previous campaign against Bishop Jovan by various associations of the descendants of victims, see "Reagovanje Međunarodne komisije za istinu o Jasenovcu na izjavu Episkopa Jovana Ćulibrka za 'Nedeljnik'." *Jadovno '41*. 29 August 2015. <https://jadovno.com/reagovanje-medjunarodne-komisije-za-istinu-o-jasenovcu-na-izjavu-episkopa-jovana-culibrka-za-nedeljnik/#.Y5IziC-l1pQ> (accessed 4 August 2023).

38 "V. Krestić: Šta se to dešava u Srbiji kad je reč o genocidu u NDH?" *Novi Standard*. 26 January 2022. <https://standard.rs/2022/01/26/v-krestic-sta-se-to-desava-u-srbiji-kad-je-rec-o-genocidu-u-ndh/> (accessed 4 August 2023).

39 "Vučić odlikovao Vasilija Krestića: Evo šta je istoričar rekao povodom zaslužene Karađorđeve zvezde i stepena." *Alo!*. 28 June 2022. <https://www.alo.rs/vesti/politika/645464/vucic-odlikovao-vasilija-krestica/vest> (accessed 4 August 2023).

commission of experts was dissolved and, in 2019, the authorities appointed Bishop Jovan to head the new commission. The aims of state and Church to turn Staro Sajmište into a site commemorating Serbian victimhood in the Second World War, with an emphasis on the suffering at the hands of Croatian Ustaša, seemed in unison and the state administration prepared a draft law to reflect their intention. Yet, after international pressure, including a visit by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) delegation to the Serbian president, the state abandoned the idea of turning Staro Sajmište into a site commemorating primarily Serbian victims in Jasenovac and elsewhere in Croatia, and agreed to turn it into a Holocaust memorial (Hofmeisterová 2022, 125–50). Despite both sides seemingly having a common commemorative agenda, the two examples above suggest their relationship is tenuous and fragile.

## Opposition to LGBT Rights

Although the differences in mnemonic practices and discourses between the state and the Church are often concealed, their disagreements over what position to adopt on homosexuality and LGBT rights has been publicly simmering for decades. It is one of the rare issues that attracts wider attention to Serbia from outside due to the violence that has disrupted several attempts to organise a pride parade in Belgrade. Pride in Serbia has effectively become a key security challenge (Stakić 2015). Similar to the situation in neighbouring Orthodox countries such as Romania or Greece, the Serbian Church has been spearheading the resistance to legalising LGBT rights, which the government has presented as part and parcel of the EU accession process (Jovanović 2013; Mikuš 2011; Pavasović Trošt and Sloomaeckers 2015; Sloomaeckers 2021). Here, too, there was no change with the new patriarch in charge. In August 2022, as Belgrade was preparing to host Europride, a pan-European international event dedicated to LGBT rights, Bishop Nikanor of Banat anathematised its organisers and participants, calling people to arms to prevent the event from happening.<sup>40</sup> In a vicious tirade, he cursed the openly lesbian Serbian prime minister Ana Brnabić, alleging that her ancestors were Ustaša because of her partial Croatian descent. President Vučić condemned the bishop, stating that “he insulted himself and humiliated the Serbian Church he represents”.<sup>41</sup> Yet, there have been no

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40 “Vladika Nikanor Banatski javno prozivao premijerku Brnabić zbog održavanja evroprajda u Beogradu.” *Iod11 miliona*, 13 August 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VBJrxsPL3zo> (accessed 4 August 2023).

41 “Predsednik Srbije: Nikanor je uvredio sebe i unizio Srpsku pravoslavnu crkvu.” *N1*. 12 August 2022. <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/predsednik-srbije-nikanor-je-uvredio-sebe-i-unizio-srpsku-pravoslavnu-crkvu/> (accessed 4 August 2023).



comments from the patriarch or the Holy Synod, nor reactions from the state prosecutor, even though the bishop violated several laws.

That being said, moments after President Vučić cancelled the Europride march, the Holy Synod of the SOC issued a statement to the media congratulating the president on this decision, condemning the promotion of LGBT “ideology” and even insinuating that the march would act as a “fifth column” in the struggle for survival of the Serbian people in Kosovo.<sup>42</sup> On the same day, many clergy attended the procession against the parade, where Bishop Nikanor was one of the speakers, and in his speech invoked Russian President Vladimir Putin as a saviour.<sup>43</sup> A couple of weeks later, the patriarch himself led a prayer procession, condemning in his speech what he referred to as LGBT and gender ideology that had been forcefully imposed on the Serbian people.<sup>44</sup> Whether a coincidence or not, on the same day, Bishop Irinej presided over awarding the notorious Serbian far-right leader and condemned hate preacher Vojislav Šešelj with a Church decoration.<sup>45</sup>

While not a major reversion to previous views on gay parades and rights from within Church ranks, the liberal public was shocked by the tough stance from a patriarch, initially expected to be more tolerant, but who now seemed to embrace a discourse promoted by religious conservatives, with close links to the US religious right. Moreover, under his leadership, Patriarch Porfirije has foregrounded resistance to gender ideology as a central issue for the Church alongside that of Kosovo, by ordering special prayers for the sanctity of marriage and the family to be added to all services in Churches and monasteries under his jurisdiction.<sup>46</sup> Such a move is without precedent, if one disregards exceptional instances, such as natural disasters or the situation in Kosovo. In addition, the patriarch demanded that the Ministry of

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42 “Saopštenje za javnost.” Srpska Pravoslavna Crkva. 27 August 2022. <https://spc.rs/saopstenje-za-javnost-13/> (accessed 4 August 2023).

43 The speech is available here: “Govor Vladike Nikanora na litiji u Beogradu 28.8.2022. godine.” *Pravoslavlje* 888. 29 August 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63oYf-WccYw> (accessed 4 August 2023).

44 “Desetine hiljada vernih na svenarodnom molebanu za svetinju braka i porodice, slogu i mir u našem narodu.” Srpska Pravoslavna Crkva. 11 September 2022. <https://spc.rs/tv-hram-uzivo-svenarodni-moleban-za-svetinju-braka-i-porodice-slogu-i-mir-u-nasem-narodu/> (accessed 4 August 2023).

45 “The Serbian Orthodox Church Awarded Radical Seselj Again – after Filaret and Amfilohije, the Order was Also Awarded by Irinej.” *The Geopost*. 12 September 2022. <https://thegeopost.com/en/news/the-serbian-orthodox-church-awarded-seseljagain-after-filaret-and-amfilohi-the-order-was-also-awarded-by-irinei/> (accessed 4 August 2023).

46 “Patrijarh odlučio: Na svim bogoslužjenjima Molitva za svetinju braka i porodice, slogu i mir u našem narodu.” Srpska Pravoslavna Crkva. 12 September 2022. <https://spc.rs/patrijarh-odlucio-na-svim-bogosluzenjima-molitva-za-svetinju-braka-i-porodice-slogu-i-mir-u-nasem-narodu/> (accessed 4 August 2023).

Education immediately withdraw all textbooks (mostly in biology) that “spread gender ideology”. His intervention was followed by the minister’s order to re-examine the books despite the fact that they had previously been approved by all scientific bodies.<sup>47</sup>

On the other hand, critics pointed out that there was never a similar outcry over issues such as domestic violence, low birth rate, depopulation and lack of support for child rearing, which also affect marriage and the family. One meme which circulated on social media featured the image of the friendly Barney the Dinosaur character, representing Porfirije as the Zagreb Metropolitan, only to be transformed into Godzilla, as the Serbian Patriarch. The meme neatly illustrates the consternation of the liberal media and public in Serbia. Some observers attempted to explain the patriarch’s stance with the need to maintain unity within the Church. Indeed, ever since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, many extreme nationalist and Russophile clergy and believers have expressed dismay at the position of their Church’s head and criticised the lacklustre, ambiguous stance of the patriarch and some bishops towards Russia, as shown above. If this is the case, the patriarch’s anti-LGBT display seems more opportune than expressing any potentially divisive position regarding other, more sensitive issues such as Kosovo or Ukraine. The patriarch, just like President Vučić on many other occasions, sided with the nationalists and the hard right at the expense of LGBT rights. Nevertheless, the Church’s harsh stance on LGBT issues has inevitably led it into conflict with a state which is keen to make tactical concessions to the EU—and whose prime minister and President Vučić’s closest ally is, after all, a lesbian.

## Open Conflict over Religious Education and Gender-Sensitive Language

Last but not least, under the new patriarch, the SOC continues to insist on a confessional model of religious education (RE) with exclusive rights in schooling, appointing and disciplining its teachers. As RE shares its elective status with civic education, schools often find themselves struggling to pull together sufficiently large classes to teach these two subjects. The SOC, supported by other recognised religious communities with the right to conduct RE, demands that every class have an RE group regardless of student numbers, which is a financial burden (state) schools

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47 “Patrijarh kao cenzor školskih udžbenika.” *Vreme*. 13 September 2022. <https://www.vreme.com/vesti/patrijarh-kao-cenzor-skolskih-udzbenika-pumpanje-nacionalnog-sentimenta/> (accessed 4 August 2023).

cannot afford.<sup>48</sup> The SOC demands permanent job contracts for over 2000 of its RE teachers, which is financially tenuous, given that they often teach in several schools and have only a limited number of classes. Finally, it stipulates that students do not choose between the two subjects every year but only at the beginning of their primary (in this case parents make the selection) and secondary education. Ignored by the state, the patriarch escalated the issue by threatening to publish a list of school heads who “discourage” students from selecting RE, a sort of list of shame, which backfired.<sup>49</sup> The problem remains and is only pushed aside by more pressing and much bigger political issues.

The issue of religious education, however, continues to be the state’s most powerful financial leverage against the SOC. The regular state financing of over 2000 RE teachers is the backbone of SOC finances. While only a minority of RE teachers are currently priests, many others eventually become clergy. Apart from priests, other RE teachers perform equally important administrative and pastoral roles, lead choirs, edit and produce Church publications, contributing to unprecedented institutional strengthening of the SOC over the last two decades. Furthermore, the regular and stable employment and financing of RE teachers in state schools has allowed the SOC’s only institution of higher education in Serbia, the Theological Faculty of the University of Belgrade, to expand and assert its theological and pastoral authority. Finally, RE is the only reliable career path for female theology graduates. Still far from resolved, the case of RE highlights the tensions described in this article because it is an example of the Church struggling to assert its authority within the confines of a secular state institution.

However, it was not in the context of RE, but rather another issue where the new patriarch decided to test his powers in relation to the state. As part of the EU accession process, in May 2021, the Serbian Parliament adopted a law on gender equality—a law which entailed the legal enforcement of gender-sensitive language despite the fierce opposition of institutions in charge of the preservation and care of the Serbian language and culture.<sup>50</sup> The Church vehemently opposed the bill from

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48 The SOC’s demands were formulated at a conference organised on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the introduction of RE in Serbia in November 2021. See “Saopštenje za javnost predstavnika tradicionalnih Crkava i verskih zajednica u Republici Srbiji.” Srpska Pravoslavna Crkva. 5 November 2021. [http://arhiva.spc.rs/sr/saopshenje\\_za\\_javnost\\_62.html](http://arhiva.spc.rs/sr/saopshenje_za_javnost_62.html) (accessed 4 August 2023). For an in-depth analysis of the RE issue, see Aleksov 2017.

49 “Patrijarh razočaran ponašanjem direktora koji odvrćaju decu od veronauke.” *Politika*. 27 June 2022. <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/510616/Patrijarh-razocaran-ponasanjem-direktora-koji-odvracaju-decu-od-veronauke> (accessed 4 August 2023).

50 The Law on Gender Equality envisages a legal obligation to use gender-sensitive language in education, media and all public communication. The full text of the law is available here: “Zakon o rodnoj ravnopravnosti. ‘Sl. glasnik RS’, br. 52/2021” *Paragraf. Pravna i ekonomska izdanja za uspešno*

the time it was proposed, but recently the patriarch designated it unconstitutional and launched an out of character, uncompromisingly harsh attack on the law’s proponents.<sup>51</sup> Instead of protecting women, he claimed, this law was imposing a “(trans)gender” ideology on the Serbian people. His words provoked outrage, as the speech took place shortly after two mass murders in Belgrade in May 2023, which the liberal elite blamed on Serbia’s culture of gender-based violence and discrimination popularised by the media and the Vučić regime.<sup>52</sup> Amidst the shock and outcry, Vučić’s regime seemed weaker than ever. In view of the critical opposition, the patriarch took the side of Vučić and those deemed instigators of violence. However, we would argue that this was an example of the patriarch’s clever political manoeuvring, taking a hit for an embattled Vučić, knowing that in the long run he would be rewarded for standing up for Orthodox Christian values. The story of this law is not yet over, and the patriarch’s intervention may have set the tone for the new relationship between the Church and the state, one where the Church is much more active and powerful.

## Conclusion

Much like some of the political scientists and analysts cited in the introduction, the SOC and the state in Serbia present their relationship as harmonious, almost idyllic. Yet, as our article has demonstrated, while the domination of President Vučić and his regime over the previous patriarch was clear, with the new patriarch sparks of conflict have regularly been witnessed. Whilst both institutions seemed to act in unison on Montenegro, Macedonia or in their muted response to the war against Ukraine, other areas of conflict recently emerged, such as the issue of religious

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*i zakonito poslovanje.* <https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon-o-rodnoj-ravnopravnosti.html> (accessed 4 August 2023).

51 For the stance of the Church leadership, see “The Communique of the Holy Assembly of Bishops.” Srpska Pravoslavna Crkva. 31 May 2021. [http://arhiva.spc.rs/eng/communique\\_holy\\_assembly\\_bishops\\_3.html](http://arhiva.spc.rs/eng/communique_holy_assembly_bishops_3.html) (accessed 4 August 2023). See also the patriarch’s Easter Epistle of 2023: “The Serbian Orthodox Church to Her Spiritual Children at Pascha, 2023.” Srpska Pravoslavna Crkva. 15 April 2023. <https://spc.rs/en/the-serbian-orthodox-church-to-her-spiritual-children-at-pascha-2023/> (accessed 4 August 2023).

52 The patriarch issued several statements in this regard and became involved in many media debates. See “Posebna izjava Patrijarha srpskog g. Porfirija.” Srpska Pravoslavna Crkva. 23 May 2023. <https://spc.rs/posebna-izjava-patrijarha-srpskog-g-porfirija/>; “Nova originalna srpska serija ‘Dobar dan, dobra ženo!’” Srpska Pravoslavna Crkva. 15 May 2023. <https://spc.rs/nova-originalna-srpska-serija-dobar-dan-dobra-zeno/>; “Patrijarh Porfirije: Nemojte da proterujete veru iz škola.” Srpska Pravoslavna Crkva. 13 May 2023. <https://spc.rs/patrijarh-porfirije-nemojte-da-proterujete-veru-iz-skola/> (all accessed 4 August 2023).

education in state schools, Covid-19 restrictions, LGBT policies and gender-sensitive language. It seems that, in some instances, the Vučić regime is keen to let the SOC and its patriarch bear the brunt of popular outrage and criticism, which might otherwise be directed at the regime itself. At one level, ordinary people, and especially practising believers, do not necessarily want spiritual and political actors to be entwined and are rather wary of state intervention in Church affairs. At another level, we must recognise that Church and state (in Serbia and elsewhere) are operating within different temporal regimes. The state is guided by *realpolitik*, especially under rulers who seek complete control over society. The Church, however, besides everyday pastoral issues, works towards eschatological ends. Given the history and current relationship between Church and state in Serbia, one can only expect still more entanglement and more conflict.

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