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A SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH'S CONTRIBUTION TO SERBIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY CREATION AND MAINTENANCE

Abstract: *The essay analyses the intricate processes that have contributed to the formation of Serbian ethnic and national identity over the past two centuries, focusing on its association with religion. The evolution of Serbian national identity has been a multifaceted and lengthy process. The essay examines the development of Serbian national identity during periods of independence and nation-building, as well as in the Kingdom of SHS/Yugoslavia, communist Yugoslavia, and the post-socialist era. Central to this examination is the pivotal role played by the Serbian Orthodox Church.*

Keywords: Serbian national identity, religion, Serbian Orthodox Church, Yugoslavia, Yugoslavism

This article investigates the underlying processes that shaped Serbian ethnic and national identity during the preceding two centuries, focusing on the link with religion.[1] The Serbian national identity evolved over centuries through a complex

[1] The literature on ethnic and national identity that approaches from different ideological perspectives is numerous. The scholarly apparatus lists only the works directly related to the text. Frederik Barth (Ed.), "Introduction," *Ethnic Groups and Ethnic Boundaries* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969), 10–11; Nathan Glazer, and Daniel P. Moynihan (Eds.), *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1975), 1; Ernst Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 132–133; Thomas H. Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives,* London: Pluto Press, 1993, 3–4; Geoff Eley, and Ronald G. Suny (Eds.), *Becoming National. A Reader* (New York, Oxford: OUP, 1996), 106–130; Anthony D. Smith, and John Hutchinson (Eds.), *Ethnicity* (Oxford: OUP, 1996), 17; Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 14; Arthur L. Greil, and Lynn Davidman. "Religion and Identity," in: *The Sage Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, eds. James A. Beckford, and Jay Demerath (Los Angeles: Sage, 2007), 549–565; David M. Barry, "Popular Perceptions of the Relationship between Religious and Ethnic Identities: A Comparative Study of Ethnodoxy in Contemporary Russia and Beyond." 2012. Dissertations. 52, 20–47; Angreliki Sotiropoulou, "The role of ethnicity in ethnic conflicts: The case of Yugoslavia." (2004), 1–11, https://www.fi-

and diversified process. The development of Serbian national identity throughout independence and nation-building, as well as developments in the Kingdom of SHS/Yugoslavia, communist Yugoslavia, and the post-socialist era, are covered. All the transformations that Serbian national identity underwent required a lesser or higher degree of re-socialization of the people, i.e., processes of partial or complete breakdown and reassembly of socially constituted identities. It entails the adoption of new norms, values, and behaviours through overt or covert tactics. The primary question is: What role did the Serbian Orthodox Church (further: SPC) play?

A nation is usually defined as a social construct that emerges from a combination of factors such as a collective name, mythological narratives, historical recollections, cultural traditions, attachment to a specific territory, solidarity among significant parts of the population, a common economy, and the legal rights and obligations of all members.[2] Nation-building implies the creation of

les.ethz.ch/isn/26506/PN04.02.pdf; Natalya M. Morozova, Svetlana A. Kolobova, Dmitry S. Korshunov, Miladin Mitrović, and Anna V. Zhiganova, "Serbian Orthodox Church and Serbian National Identity," in: *Freedom and Responsibility in Pivotal Times*, ed. I. Savchenko, 125 (European Proceedings of Social and Behavioral Sciences, European Publisher, 2022), 675–683.

[2] Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (London: Penguin, 1991), 19–42, 61–68, 92–122; Anthony D. Smith, *Nations and Nationalism in a Global Era* (Polity Press, 2000), 796; A. Smith, *Nationalism: Theory,* 10; Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 6–7, 44; G. Eley, R. Suny, *op. cit.*, 106–130; David Archard. "Myths, Lies and Historical Truth: A Defence of Nationalism," *Political Studies*, 43, (1995), 472–481; Dejan Jovanović, „Dualna priroda srpskog nacionalnog identiteta", in: *Politički identitet Srbije u globalnom i regionalnom kontekst*u, ed. V. Knežević–Predić (Beograd: Službeni glasnik, 2015), 51–60; Ernst Gellner, *Nationalism* (New York: NYU Press, 1996), 5–13, 90–101; Eric Hobsbawm, *Introduction: Inventing Traditions*, eds. Eric Hobsbawm, and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: CUP, 1992), 1–14; Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780. Program, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: CUP, 1990), 46–79; George Schöpflin, *Nations, Identity, Power* (London: Hurst & Company, 2000), 80–95; Goran Tepšić, "Nacionalni identitet i (zlo)upotreba „drugog"," *Glasnik FPN*, 6, no. 8, (2012), 69–90; Gordana Uzelac, "Kad nastaje nacija? Konstitutivni elementi i procesi na primeru Hrvatske", *Geopolitics*, 7, no. 2, (2002), 33–52; John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 1–5, 54–59; John Hutchinson, *Nations as Zones of Conflict* (London: SAGE, 2005), 5–7, 9–46, 74–75; Michael Man, "A Political Theory of Nationalism and its Excesses," in: *Notions of Nationalism*, ed. Sukumar Periwal (Budapest: CEU University Press, 1995), 44–64; Pål Kolstø, "Assessing the Role of Historical Myths in Modern Society," in: *Myths and Boundaries in South Eastern Europe*, ed. Pål Kolstø (London: Hurst & Company, 2005), 1–35; Stefan Berger, "On the Role of Myths and History in the Construction of National Identity in Modern Europe," *European History Quarterly*, 39, no. 3, (2009), 490–502; Siniša Malešević, *Nation States and Nationalisms: Organization, Ideology, and Solidarity* (London: Polity Press, 2013), 74–81; Umut Ozkırımlı, "The Nation as an Artichoke? A Critique of Ethnosymbolist Interpretation of Nationalism," *Nations and Nationalism,* 9, no. 3, (2003), 339–355; Andreas Wimmer, *Nationalist Exclusion and Ethnic Conflict: Shadows of Modernity* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), 19–41.

narratives that assign different social groups a direct role in the nation. These narratives contribute to the formation of national identity. National identity is a modern concept, an abstract category that unites people from different social groups into an imagined community, a nation. The pursuit of nation-building implies that the state constructs narratives that connect various social groups within the national community. National identity is dynamic and fluid, and not all social groups embrace it equally, resulting in conflict and instability. A state's principal function is to monitor the evolution of national identity and consistently construct complete narratives. Various academic fields tackle the topic of national identity from different perspectives, but there has been no agreement on its exact nature.[3] According to the constructivist viewpoint, national identity is viewed as a dynamic process rather than "a fixed feature embedded in people's souls."[4]

Nationalism evolved as a political idea in Western culture, replacing ethnic identity with a sense of national belonging.[5] This ideology is founded on loyalty to one's nation and seeks territorial unity or dominance over a certain group within the state. It developed slowly, peaking between 1918 and 1950. The emergence of nationalism was intricately linked to new modern states and the increasing professionalism of historical writing in the late 1800s. Among the three stages of national consciousness, Eric Hobsbawm agrees with Miroslaw Hroch's proposition: the first stage revolves around cultural and folklore elements; the second stage encompasses the emergence of early nationalists and leaders of national movements; and the third stage includes the wide adoption of the national concept.[6] Ethnic myths, which include stories about a heroic nation, a cherished historical age, and a deep connection to a holy homeland, help explain countries' origins and strengthen their collective identity.[7]

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3 A. Smith, *National Identity*, 27; A. Smith, *Nations and Nationalism,* 798; Anthony D. Smith, *Chosen Peoples* (Oxford: OUP, 2003), 41.

4 Victor Roudometof, *Collective Memory, National Identity, and Ethnic Conflict: Greece, Bulgaria, and the Macedonian Question* (Praeger, 2002), 102.

5 Umut Ozkirimli, *Theories of Nationalism: A Critical Introduction* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 72.

6 Miroslav Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe: A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups Among the Smaller European Nations* (Columbia University Press, 2000).

7 Josep R. Llobera, "Recent Theories of Nationalism'", *Institut de Ciències Polítiques i Socials*, WP núm. 164, (Barcelona, 1999), 1–26; Robert L. Montgomery, "The Spread of Religions and Macrosocial Relations," *Sociological Analysis,* 52, no. 1, (1991), 37–53; Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), 19; Gila Stopler, "National Identity and Religion —State Relations: Israel in Comparative Perspective,"

Religion plays a significant role in nation formation and the emergence of nationalism, shaping a society's identity through its customs, beliefs, symbols, and traditions.[8] Emile Durkheim, a French sociologist, was among the first to emphasize the importance of religion in human society. He argued that religion forms a culturally established system that empowers the entire community.[9] On the other hand, Max Weber viewed religion as a universal human impulse that can manifest in various forms depending on the historical and cultural context.[10] In the past, before the emergence of nationalism in the late 18th century, religion held sway over European politics and culture. Nationalism gradually developed by incorporating religious symbols and narratives, implementing confessionalization, and promoting state-led cultural homogenization.[11] Alongside religion, language is a crucial symbol of national identity, fostering national unity and acting as a "gatekeeper".[12] The fusion of religious and ethnic identities can result in the privileged status of one religion while perceiving other religious groups as potential threats. In contemporary times, mass nationalism often intertwines with religion, uniting diverse groups under a single national identity. This phenomenon establishes clear boundaries, prevents dilution of the national identity, and adds a "sacred dimension" to ethnic identities.[13]

The term secularization emerged in the 1950s and 1960s to explain the decline of religious influence in Western cultures due to modernization. Factors such as increased literacy, mass communication, and education played a role in diminis-

in: *Israeli Constitutional Law at a Crossroads*, eds. G. Sapir, D. Barak-Erez, and A. Barak (Hart Publishing 2013), 503–516; D. Barry, *Popular Perceptions*, 113–126.

8 Hans Mol, "The identity model of religion: How it compares with nine other theories of religion and how it might apply to Japan", *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies,* 6, no. 1–2, (1979), 11–38; Daphne Halikiopoulou, *The Changing Dynamics of Religion and National Identity: Greece and Ireland in a Comparative Perspective*, (PhD thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2007), 14–16.

9 Leon Miller, and Gordon L. Anderson, "Religion's Role in Creating National Unity [With Comment and Rejoinder]," *International Journal on World Peace*, 26, no. 1, (2009), 91–138.

10 Max Weber, "Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions," in: *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology,* eds. H. H. Gerth, and C. W. Mills (Routledge, 1948).

11 B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities,* 12–3; E. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism*, 67–8; T. Eriksen, *op. cit.,* 107; A. Hastings, *The Construction,* 187–8; Ina Merdjanova, "In Search of Identity: Nationalism and Religion in Eastern Europe," *Religion, State & Society*, 28, no. 3, (2000), 233–263; D. Halikiopoulou, *op. cit.,* 54–60.

12 A. Smith, *Nations and Nationalism,* 796.

13 Vyacheslav Karpov, Elena Lisovskaya, and David Barry, "Ethnodoxy: How Popular Ideologies Fuse Religious and Ethnic Identities," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 51, no. 4, (2012), 638–655.

hing the social significance of religion, leading to a rise in intellectual diversity, social fragmentation, and individualism that challenged traditional religious frameworks.[14] However, in recent decades, religion has been resurgent. [15] This trend has been particularly notable in Eastern and Central Europe following the collapse of communism, where religion has taken on a new importance in shaping national identity and fostering social cohesion. The theory of secularization needed to be updated. [16] The revision introduces Ethnodoxy, a concept emphasizing the role of religion in preserving ethnic and national identities, particularly in cultures where religiosity is closely tied to national identity and less to religious practice. [17]

The Emergence of Serbian National Identity

Scholars hold differing perspectives on the church's role in sustaining Serbian identity. Some feel it maintained the Serbian identity[18], while others say it fostered a

[14] Grace Davie, *Religion in Modern Europe. A Memory Mutates* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 26; Pippa Norris, and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and secular. Religion and Politics Worldwide* (New York: CUP, 2004), 3; Constantin Schifirneț, "Orthodoxy, Church, State, and National Identity in the Context of Tendential Modernity," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, 12, no. 34, (2013), 173–208.

[15] Jonathan Fox, "World Separation of Religion and State into the 21st Century," *Comparative Political Studies*, 39, no. 5, (2006), 537–569, 538; C. Schifirneț, *op. cit.,*173–208.

[16] Bryan R. Wilson, *Religion in a Secular Society: A Sociological Comment* (London: Watts, 1966); David A. Martin, *General Theory of Secularisation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), 2–3; Mark Juergensmeyer, *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 3; Gilles Kepel, *The Revenge of God: The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity and Judaism in the Modern World* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 4, 11; Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 97–98; Peter L. Berger, 'The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview,' in: *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion in World Politics*, ed. L. Berger (Ethics and Public Policy Center Washington DC, 1999), 1–18, 10; Steve Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularisation in the Wes*t (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 200; Yannis Stavrakakis, *Religion and Populism: Reflections on the 'politicised' discourse of the Greek Church* (The Hellenic Observatory. The European Institute, LSE & Political Science, 2002), 8–49, https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/93788.pdf; D. Halikiopoulou, *op. cit.,* 50; Rebecca Y. Kim, "Religion and Ethnicity: Theoretical Connections," *Religions,* 2, (2011), 312–329.

[17] V. Karpov, E. Lisovskaya, D. Barry, *op. cit.,* 638–655; D. Barry, *op. cit.,* 52–68, 259–275.

[18] Some Serbian authors argue that the roots of the Serbian nation can be traced back for many centuries. They believe that the Serbian language and alphabet, along with the Orthodox faith in its *svetosavlje* manifestation, play a crucial role in shaping the national identity. Additionally, they emphasize the importance of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which has historically safeguarded the nation's identity, as well as the mythology surrounding Kosovo, the notion of self-governance at a national level, and the existence of the Serbian national state, all of which are

proto-national mindset while preserving medieval sovereignty memories. Some academics argue that Serb national identity is twofold, comprising religious and linguistic-ethnic components.[19] Another claim is that the proto-national spirit of Serbs before the turn of the nineteenth century was founded on the memory of the empire lost to the Turks, which was perpetuated via Serbian church poetry, epic legends, and daily rituals. Finally, some claim that the Church has maintained a Christian collective identity that was purely religious and deeply rooted in cultural traditions long before the acquisition of statehood and that was not "national in content and expression."[20]

During the Byzantine period in the Orthodox East, the church and state had a close relationship, known as a "symphony." The church was subordinate to the emperor (*caesaropapism*), maintaining its status as the state church. However, the emperors could appoint and remove patriarchs at their will.[21] The fall of Constantinople in 1453 marked the end of the Byzantine Empire and the Orthodox Church's surrender to Ottoman control. The Church became an Ottoman governmental organ, focusing on the millet system, which granted non-Muslims autonomy and created social barriers. The Patriarchate of Constantinople became part of the political and religious authority.[22]

essential components in the construction of the Serbian national identity. Milovan Mitrović, "Fenomenologija i dijalektika nacionalnog identiteta i srpskog identiteta Srbije," in: *Identitetski preobražaj Srbije*, ed. N. Kršaljanin (Beograd: Pravni fakultet, 2016), 47–75; Momčilo Subotić, "O psihičkim svojstvima, mentalitetu i identitetu Srba Dinaraca," *Politička revija*, XVI, 53, no. 3, (2017), 25–43.

19 D. Jovanović, *op. cit.,* 51–60; John R. Gillis, "Introduction: Memory and Identity: The History of a Relationship," in: *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, ed. J. R. Gillis (Princeton University Press, 1994), 3–24.

20 Paschalis Kitromilides, *Enlightenment, Nationalism, Orthodoxy. Studies in the Culture and Political Thought of South-Eastern Europe* (Variorum, 1994), 178; Branimir Anzulovic, *Heavenly Serbia: From Myth to Genocide* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1999), 33; Katrin Bozeva-Abazi, *The Shaping of Bulgarian and Serbian National Identities, 1800s–1900s* (PhD thesis, McGill University, Montreal, Canada, 2003), 128; Đuro Bodrožić, "Srpski nacionalni identitet: izvori i osnovi," *Nacionalni interes*, 13, no. 1, (2012), 111–129.

21 James E. Wood, Jr., "Religion and National Identity in Historical Perspective," in: *Nacionalismo en Europa. Nacionalismo en Galicia. La religión como elemento impulsor de la ideología nacionalista* (A Coruña: Universidade, 1998), 13–21; Lucian N. Leustean, "Orthodoxy and Political Myths in Balkan," *National Identities,* 10, no. 4, (2008), 421–432; Sergej Flere, "Basic Forms of Territorialization of Religious Life in Europe," in: *Religion, Religious and Folk Customs on the Border*, eds. D. B. Djordjevic, D. Gavrilovic, and D. Todorovic (Niš: JUNIR, 2012), 9–18; Kristen Ghodsee, "Symphonic Secularism: Eastern Orthodoxy, Ethnic Identity, and Religious Freedoms in Contemporary Bulgaria," *AEER*, 27, no. 2, (2009), 227–252.

22 Wayne Vucinich, "The Nature of Balkan Society under Ottoman Rule," *Slavic Review,* 21, no. 4, (1962), 597–616; Steven Runciman, *The Great Church in Captivity. A Study of the Patriarc-*

After the fall of the Despotate in 1459, the Serbian Patriarchate was abolished in 1463 and re-established in 1557. It covered a large area, including Serbia, Bosnia, Croatia, Slavonia, Dalmatia, northern Vardar Macedonia, Southwestern Bulgaria, and Hungary. The Patriarchate of Peć took over the former Serbian government, retaining the spiritual authority and prerogatives of medieval Serbian kings.[23] It played a crucial role in preventing the Hellenization of the Serbian Orthodox community.[24] When the Patriarchate of Peć was abolished in 1766, the Patriarch of Constantinople led thirteen million Orthodox Christians. Serbs in

hate of Constantinople from the Eve of the Turkish Conquest to the Greek War of Independence (London: CUP, 1968), 166, 167, 179; Alexander Kazhdan, "Ethnarch," *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, II (New York: OUP, 1991), 734; Vasiliki Georgiadou, "Greek Orthodoxy and the Politics of Nationalism," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 9, no. 2, (1995), 295-315; Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York: OUP, 1997), 12; John Allcock, *Explaining Yugoslavia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 148; Lefteris S. Stavrianos, *The Balkans since 1453* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 105; Mark Mazower, *The Balkans: A Short History* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 47–67; Victor Roudometof, *Nationalism, Globalization, and Orthodoxy: The Social Origins of Ethnic Conflict in the Balkans* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2001), 230–240; Richard Clogg, *A Concise History of Greece* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), 10; K. Bozeva-Abazi, *op. cit.,* 128, 149; Dimitris Stamatopoulos, "From Millets to Minorities in the 19th-Century Ottoman Empire: An Ambiguous Modernization," in: *Citizenship in Historical Perspective,* eds. S. G. Ellis et al. (Pisa: Pisa University Press, 2006), 253–273; D. Halikiopoulou, *op.cit.,* 73–76; Cathie Carmichael, "Was Religion Important in the Destruction of Ancient Communities in the Balkans, Anatolia, and Black Sea Regions, c. 1870–1923?" *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies,* 7, no. 3, (2007), 357–371; G. Stopler, *op. cit.,* 503-516; Slobodan G. Markovich. "Patterns of National Identity Development among the Balkan Orthodox Christians during the Nineteenth Century," *Balcanica*, XLIV, (2013), 209–254; Gordon N. Bardos, *Ethnoconfessional Nationalism in the Balkans: Analysis, Manifestations, and Management* (Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Columbia University, 2013), 33–34, 37–38; Fatih Öztürk, "The Ottoman Millet System," *Güneydoğu Avrupa Araştırmaları Dergisi*, sy. 16, (2014), 71–86; Benjamin Braude (Ed.), "Introduction," in: *Christians & Jews in the Ottoman Empire* (Boulder (Colo.): Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2014), 1–50; Siniša Malešević, *Grounded Nationalisms*: *A Sociological Analysis* (Cambridge: CUP, 2019), 58–59; David B. Kanin, "Faith, Nation, and Structure: The Diachronic Durability of Orthodox Churches in the Balkans," in: *Orthodox Churches and Politics in Southeastern Europe: Nationalism, Conservativism, and Intolerance,* ed. S. Ramet (Palgrave Studies in Religion, Politics, and Policy, 2019), 15–40; François Gauthier, "Religious change in Orthodox-majority Eastern Europe: from Nation-State to Global-Market," *Theor. Soc* 51, (2022), 177–210.

[23] Charles Jelavich, "Some Aspects of Serbian Religious Development in the Eighteenth Century," *Church History,* 23, no. 2, (1954), 144–152, 144; Ivo Banac, *The National Question in Yugoslavia: Origins, History, Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 64–65; G. Bardos, *op. cit.,* 35.

[24] I. Banac, *op.cit.,* 27, 171; L. Stavrianos, *op.cit.,* 840; G. Bardos, *op.cit.,* 93–95; S. Markovich, *op.cit.,* 209–254.

the Ottoman Empire began becoming Hellenized. However, the Karlovac archbishopric, the Austro-Ottoman War of 1788–91, and the Serbs' privileges in the Belgrade Pashaluk slowed this development. The Ottoman administration reorganized politically and militarily, leading to Muslim and Orthodox Christian provincial administrative elites. This context influenced the Serbian and Greek revolutions, as local Christian priests joined the peasantry in revolts. [25]

The Tanzimat reforms of the 1830s failed to create a single Ottoman identity for ethno-confessional groups due to the millets' entrenched mindset. Over centuries, ethnic and religious identities in the Balkans have solidified. The 19th century brought freedom and equality, but based on ethno-confessional groups. [26] Protected communities (millets) evolved into proto-national entities, laying the framework for modern nationalism.

After the dissolution of the Patriarchate of Peć, the Metropolitanate of Karlovac (elevated to the Patriarchate in 1848) became the only Orthodox Church institution within the Habsburg Monarchy. It had ecclesiastical jurisdiction over historic Hungary and Croatia, while other regions under Habsburg rule established their jurisdiction. The Metropolitanate was founded according to the privileges granted by Emperor Leopold I after the arrival of Orthodox Serbs from the Ottoman Empire. His privileges defined the Serbian ethnic community, similar to the Ottoman millet, with Orthodox hierarchs as leaders.[27] During the 18th century, Serbs in the Karlovac Metropolitanate intensified their religious and cultural endeavours, founded schools, published magazines, and improved their education.[28] However, they also grappled with the threat of assimilation and the rise of Catholicism, risking the loss of their distinct identity within the Catholic empire. Serbian bishops established ties with Russia, which led to cultural exchange and the establishment of the first Cyrillic printing press in Venice in 1758. [29] The Teresian and Josephine reforms strengthened imperial control over the Orthodox Church but also reduced its powers. Enlightenment ideas in the Habsburg Empire hel-

[25] V. Roudometof, *Nationalism*, 230–240; R. Clogg, *op. cit.,* 10; K. Bozeva-Abazi, *op. cit.,*129; S. Markovich, *op. cit.,* 209–254.

[26] M. Todorova, *op. cit.,*163; M. Mazower, *op. cit.,* 68; G. Bardos, *op. cit.,* 38–41.

[27] Bojan Aleksov. *Nazareni među Srbima. Verska trvenja u južnoj Ugarskoj i Srbiji od 1850. do 1914.* (Beograd: Zavod za udžbenike, 2010), 46–70; G. Bardos, *op. cit.,* 34; S. Markovich, *op. cit.,* 209–254.

28 Vladimir M. Simić, *Zaharija Orfelin (1726–1785)* (PhD, Univerzitet u Beogradu, Filozofski fakultet, 2013); K. Bozeva-Abazi, *op. cit.,* 149.

[29] Radoslav Grujić, *Srpske škole 1718–1739. Prilog kulturnoj istoriji srpskoga naroda* (Novi Sad: Matica srpska; Beograd: RTS, 2013), 51, 56; Teodora Miličević, "O ruskim učiteljima među Srbima u 18. veku," *Slovansko jezikovno in literarno povezovanje ter zgodovinski kontekst [Elektronski vir]: Mednarodni študentski simpozij Slovan Slovanu Slovan* (Ljubljana, 2020), 158–163.

ped Serbs gain some religious and educational independence in 1779, defining their distinctive character and encouraging progress in education.[30] However, the conflict between the church hierarchy and the emerging secular intelligence was widening. The dispute between the church and the reformers in the Karlovac Metropolitanate deepened when Vuk Karadžić advocated the use of the Serbian vernacular, the translation of the New Testament, and the creation of a new spelling. In the Church, it was seen as an attack on the Church-Slavic liturgical language and the reputation of the church as the most powerful political and social institution of the Serbs.[31] Advocates of rationalism argued for modern education and language as symbols of national identity. Learned Serbs from the Serbian Voivodeship began to establish national cultural institutions, encouraging cultural exchange. In the beginning, intellectual mobilization was extremely difficult due to high illiteracy and a sufficient audience interested in their cultural and literary activities.[32] After the Revolution of 1848–49, the Serbian secular intelligentsia openly challenged church dominance, but the Orthodox bishops of the Habsburg Empire continued to play an influential role in preserving ethnic identity.[33] Ethnic identity has been preserved as part of religious identity, whereby Serbs and Croats are often equated with Orthodox and Catholics.

Siniša Malešević argues that the Balkan uprisings in the 19th century were not a national liberation revolution but rather a result of internal turmoil within the Ottoman Empire. The Serbian uprisings were led by illiterate peasants who organized their way of life according to the Ottomans. Cultural and religious elites in the Habsburg Empire supported the uprisings but did not expect the formation of an independent Serbian state.[34] The Serbian civil elite from the Habsburg Monarchy influenced the construction of civil society in Serbia through trade contacts, family ties, and stays in Serbia. [35] The Vojvodina intelligentsia colla-

[30] Slobodan Marković, „Nacionalni identitet Srba u XIX veku i početkom XX veka", *Zbornik Matice srpske za društvene nauke*, 120 (2006), 235–252.

[31] B. Aleksov, *Nazareni*, 46–70; Bojan Aleksov, "The Serbian Orthodox Church," in: *Orthodox Christianity and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Southeastern Europe*, ed. L. N. Leustean (Fordham University Press, 2014), 65–100.

[32] Dimitrije Djordjević, "The Tradition of Kosovo in the Formation of Modern Statehood in the Nineteenth Century," in: *Kosovo: Legacy of a Medieval Battle*, eds. W. S. Vucinich, and T. Emmert (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 309–330.

[33] John-Paul Himka, *Religion and Nationality in Western Ukraine. The Greek Catholic Church and the Ruthenian National Movement* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999), 25.

[34] S. Malešević, *Grounded Nationalisms,* 176–178.

[35] *Privatni život kod Srba u devetnaestom veku*, eds. Ana Stolić, and Nenad Makuljević (Beograd: Clio, 2006), 34.

borated with the Belgrade and Cetinje governments to promote Serbian nationalism through visual propaganda, literature, and educational activities.[36]

The consolidation of ethnic Serbs into one state led to a national revival and its transformation into a modern secular national identity.[37] The first step was the establishment of an Orthodox church organization in the Principality, which received political autonomy in 1830 and autocephaly in 1878. This enabled the redeployment of Orthodoxy as an integral part of Serbian identity.[38] And that did not happen only in the Serbian case. Orthodoxy was associated with different languages and cultures in the Balkans even before it was integrated into ethnic identities. The young Balkan states established Orthodox Christianity as their official religion, subjecting the Church to state control.[39] Government interference in church affairs and the primacy of state interests over canonical principles continued. The Belgrade Metropolitanate organized and regulated the lives of the people and the church according to the demands of Serbian rulers or ruling parties.[40]

Before the 1830s, Serbia and Montenegro had limited administrative capacity for nation-building. Between the 1830s and 1860s, institutions were established to communicate the nationalist agenda to the laity, with non-state cultural societies relying on government support. The state's contribution became more powerful after 1870, influencing the Orthodox Church.[41] The Serbian Church played a significant role in creating the national pantheon, and Saint Sava became the father of the nation and a holy icon of the nineteenth century. In 1895, the Society for Building the Church of St. Sava was founded in Belgrade, and the

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36 D. Djordjević, "The Tradition of Kosovo", 319–321.

37 Victor Roudometof, "Invented Traditions, Symbolic Boundaries, and National Identity in Southeastern Europe: Greece and Serbia in Comparative Historical Perspective (1830–1880)", *East European Quarterly*, 32, no. 4, (1999), 429–468.

38 V. Roudometof, *Nationalism,* 230–240; *Privatni život*, 275; B. Aleksov, "The Serbian Orthodox Church," 65–100.

39 V. Georgiadou, *op.cit.,* 295–315; V. Roudometof, "Invented Traditions", 429–468; V. Roudometof, *Nationalism*, 230–240; R. Clogg, *op. cit.,* 10; K. Bozeva-Abazi, *op. cit.,* 129; D. Halikiopoulou, *op. cit.,* 73–76; N. S. Markovich, *op. cit.,* 209–254; F. Gauthier, *op. cit.,* 177–210.

40 Zoran Ranković, and Miroslav Lazić (Eds.). *Uredbe i propisi Mitropolije beogradske 1835–1856* (Požarevac: Eparhija braničevska), 2010–2011.

41 Milenko Karanovich, "Higher Education in Serbia During the Constitutionalist Regime 1838–1858," *Balkan Studies*, 28, no. 1, (1987), 125–50; Natalija Jovanović. „Prosveta u Kneževini Srbiji kao faktor kulturnog i nacionalnog identiteta," in: *Kulturni i etnički identiteti u procesu globalizacije i regionalizacije Balkana*, eds. Ljubiša Mitrović, Dragoljub B. Đorđević, and Dragan Todorović (Niš: Filozofski fakultet – Univerzitet u Nišu, Institut za sociologiju, 2005), 63–77; S. Markovich, *op. cit.,* 209–254; S. Malešević, *Grounded Nationalisms,* 118–120, 179–182, 188–212.

Church in Serbia "raised the Sava's flag" to awaken and gather Serbs scattered in four countries and under different church jurisdictions.[42]

At the end of the 19th century, national propaganda reached its peak with the establishment of a constitutional monarchy, primary education, a bureaucratic structure, and a national mythology based on medieval history. The state used public symbols, monuments, and religious celebrations to maintain historical memory. The Kosovo myth became the central narrative of Serbian nationalism, promoted by elites and transmitted by institutions. After the Berlin Congress, the Kosovo myth became increasingly prominent in Serbian history, textbooks, dramas, and paintings.[43]

During the 1880s, some church hierarchs still opposed Vidovdan becoming a national holiday with large celebrations. However, by the 500th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo in 1889, the Church began participating in the celebrations, spreading the Kosovo myth. Vidovdan became an official church holiday in 1892, and schools began ending the year on June 28 with patriotic songs, commemorations, and discussions about Kosovo. From the mid-19th century, Dušan's empire gained prominence, and Peter II Petrović Njegoš's poetic drama "Gorski vijenac" reconciled national mission with Christian morality, creating an emblem of Serbian identity and culture. [44]

In the late 19th century, nationalism in the Balkans weakened the Orthodox Christian community's unity due to territorial differences. The Patriarchate of Constantinople opposed using national identity as a basis for religious division, deeming it "philetism" in 1872.[45] Conflicts between Greek, Bulgarian, and Serbian church leaders aimed to obtain charters to appoint local bishops in mixed-popu-

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42 Radoslav Grujić, "Kult Sv. Save u Karlovačkoj mitropoliji XVIII i XIX veka," *Bogoslovlje,* 10, no. 2–3 (1935), 143; B. Aleksov, "The Serbian Orthodox Church," 65–100.

43 Dimitrije Djordjevic, "The Role of St. Vitus in Modern Serbian History," Serbian Studies, 5, no. 3, (1990), 34–35; Thomas A. Emmert, *Serbian Golgotha: Kosovo 1389* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 1990), 105–123; D. Djordjevic, "The Tradition of Kosovo," 309–330; Milorad Ekmečić, "The Emergence of St. Vitus Day as the Principal National Holiday of the Serbs," in: Kosovo: Legacy of a Medieval Battle, eds. W. S. Vucinich, and T. Emmert (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 335; Ivan Čolović, *Smrt na Kosovu Polju: Istorija kosovskog mita* (Beograd: Biblioteka XX vek, 2016), 160, 169, 175–182, 189, 195–208.

44 Miodrag Popović, *Vidovdan i časni krst: ogled iz književne arheologije* (Beograd: Čigoja štampa, 1998), 158–160; V. Roudometof, *Nationalism*, 231; S. Malešević, *Grounded Nationalism,* 104–108; Andrew B. Wachtel, "How to Use a Classic: Petar Petrović Njegoš in the Twentieth Century," in: *Ideologies and National Identities: The Case of Twentieth-Century Southeastern Europe*, eds. John Lampe, and Mark Mazower (Budapest: CEU Press, 2004), 131–153; S. Markovich, *op. cit.,* 209–254.

45 B. Aleksov, *Nazareni,* 46–70; D. Kanin, *op. cit.,* 15–41.

lation dioceses. The newly independent Balkan states saw the Orthodox Church as a unifying force for their nation and a patriotic agent. Political disputes in the early 20th century focused mainly on nationalism, with religion expressing national uniqueness.[46]

In the Kingdom of Serbia, Nikola Pašić and the People's Radical Party shifted the position of the Orthodox Church, considering it not only as a political tool but also emphasizing a special relationship between Orthodoxy and Serbianism. Serbian Orthodoxy was established as a part of national identity, highlighting its historical significance. In 1903, Orthodoxy was officially recognized as the state religion, but secular ideas diminished its influence, leading the intelligentsia to view the church primarily as a political institution.[47]

In the early 1900s, Balkans people connected their religious beliefs to national identity, creating boundaries for belonging.[48] Religious organizations upheld these boundaries, symbolizing national discourse. Post-Balkan Wars, the connection between religion and nationalism intensified, leading to division between different groups.[49] Belonging to the Serbian identity necessitated allegiance to the Orthodox faith, and persons with the same nationality but different religious convictions were gradually alienated from the social fabric.

During the 19th century, churches in the Balkans became increasingly divided due to differences in religious, educational, and political goals. This would later hinder the formation of a unified Yugoslav nation. The Serbian Church played a significant role in fostering and advancing Serbian identity, making it less vulnerable to competing identities. South Slavic religious organizations developed a national character in the 19th and 20th centuries, shaping culture within

46 B. Aleksov, "The Serbian Orthodox Church," 65–100.

47 Chedo Mijatovic, *Servia of the Servians* (London: I. Pitman, 1911), 28, 36, 37, 38; Tadija Kostić, *Na tuđem poslu* (Beograd: G. Kon, 1924); Mihailo I. Popović, *Istorijska uloga Srpske Crkve u čuvanju narodnosti i stvaranju države* (Beograd, 1933), 33, 101, 104; B. Ž. Petrić, „Kako da približimo narod crkvi," *Pravoslavlje,* 9–10, (1937); Jean Mousset, *La Serbie et son Église (1830–1904)* (Paris: Droz, 1938), 494; Predrag Puzović, *Srpska pravoslavna crkva – Prilozi za istoriju 2* (Beograd: PBF, 2000), 257; V. Roudometof, *Nationalism*, 230– 240; N. B. Aleksov, "The Serbian Orthodox Church," 65–100.

48 G. Stopler, *op. cit.,* 503-516; Gregory J. Goalwin, "'Religion and Nation are One': Social Identity Complexity and the Roots of Religious Intolerance in Turkish Nationalism," *Social Science History*, 42, no. 2, (2018), 161–182.

49 E. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism,* 75–76; B. Anzulovic, *op. cit.,* 34; K. Bozeva-Abazi, *op. cit.,* 148; Ljubiša Despotović, "Srpski nacionalni identitet." (Kulturni centar Novog Sada, 2019), https://www.kcns.org.rs/agora/srpski–nacionalni– identitet/; G. Bardos, *op. cit.,* 92; S. Markovich, *op.cit.,* 209–254.

the framework of a specific religion or church. The Church embraced national ideology developed by secular intellectuals and the first Serbian political parties, resulting in a fusion of nationalism and religious features, with religion assuming a secondary role. Some authors argue that Serbs view religion as an essential element of their national identity, with the church serving as a symbolic reservoir.[50]

Yugoslav Identity

In the 19th century, the concept of uniting the South Slavic peoples arose in response to liberal revolutionary changes. This idea gained traction among the Serbian population, particularly in regions beyond Serbia. The connection between Serbians and Croatians, which originated in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, was a practical reaction to Hungarian and Austrian imperialism. Yugoslavism embodied the idea of "national unity" within a specific territorial area shared by Serbs, Slovenes, and Croats.[51] The influence of the "Illyrian movement" on Serbian intellectuals was limited, as they considered Catholics and Muslims to be Serbs without emphasizing the need for their return to their "true origin." They believed that religious affiliation did not play a role in awakening national consciousness and that other factors such as language, customs, or shared ancestry could override this. Despite this, the concept of three faiths within the Serbian population could not stop the emergence of the South Slavic peoples. The prevailing idea in Serbia was to unite all Serbs into a larger Serbian state before 1914. The Niš Declaration of 1914 represented Serbia's initial formalization of the shift from an exclusively Serbian unification policy to the creation of a South Slavic state. During the First World War, Serbian propaganda promoted South Slavic unity and the concept of "three nations." The idea of South Slavic unity was ultimately realized with the establishment of the Kingdom of SHS under the Serbian dynasty in 1918, based on the idea of a three-named nation, overlooking other essential aspects of identity such as the distinct histories, aspirations, and religious affiliations of the South Slavs. This was a significant flaw in the state's formati-

[50] Milorad Ekmečić, *Stvaranje Jugoslavije 1790–1918*, I–II (Beograd: Prosveta, 1989), I/5; Bojan Aleksov, "Adamant and Treacherous: Serbian Historians on Religious Conversions," in: *Myths and Boundaries in South–Eastern Europe*, ed. Pal Kolsto (London: Hurst & Co., 2005), 158–190; B. Aleksov, *Nazareni*, 24–27, 46–70, 264–301.

[51] Marko Bulatović, "Struggling with Yugoslavism: Dilemmas of Interwar Serb Political Thought," in: Ideologies and National Identities. The Case of Twentieth-Century Southeastern Europe, eds. John Lampe, and Mark Mazower (Budapest: CEU, 2004), 254–276; S. Marković, op. cit., 235–252.

on, as it failed to accommodate the diverse ethnic identities of its constituent groups or to establish a system that would assimilate them.[52]

The establishment of the South Slavic kingdom influenced the development of the Yugoslav national ideology, known as Yugoslavism. This ideology promoted the idea of a distinct "Yugoslav nation." The elites used existing cultural traditions, particularly those that resisted foreign influence, to build the Yugoslav state.[53] The goal was for the Yugoslav unification model to eventually supersede any allegiance to the sovereignty of individual national groups over time. Scholars and political elites believed that shared language and cultural traditions could unite the South Slavs, regardless of whether one identified as Slovenian, Croat, or Serb.

After the First World War, Serbia became part of Yugoslavia, losing all aspects of its sovereignty except its name. Thus, it ceased to exist as an internationally recognized state, losing everything it had gained during the struggle for independence.[54] The Yugoslav monarchy was seen as a natural continuation of the Serbian state tradition. This was also the first time Serbs found themselves in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country where they comprised less than half of the population. The "first Yugoslav generation" elites accepted Serbian cultural and linguistic customs to a certain extent as Yugoslav cultural norms. The formal name, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, represented the equality of the three ethnic groups. For these reasons, the generation of Serbian political elites generally did not see Yugoslavism as contradictory to Serbia. However, Yugoslav enthusiasm was not widely accepted in interwar Yugoslavia, not just by non-Serbs. Some Serbian political parties advocated the complete integration of Croats and Slovenes into Serbian society and institutions and imposed their political will on compatriots from the defeated Habsburg Empire. These politicians are accused of encouraging extreme centralization and monopolies of power.[55]

The Yugoslav national idea fell into disrepute because of how it was formulated and adopted by the ruling elite. This led to an increasing polarization of national ideas in the country.[56] Despite Yugoslavism having a prominent position in educational policy, during the 1920s, no significant reforms were carried out

52 A. Sotiropoulou, *op. cit.,* 1–11.

53 Dalila Bikić, "Making Serbness: The Mapping of Nationhood and Reimagining Yougoslavia, 1918–1992," *Strata*, Colloque Pierre Savard, 7 (2018), 159–174.

54 Dejan Jović, „Srbija i Jugoslavija: od najveće pobjede do najvećeg gubitka," *Nedeljnik*, January 18, 2024, 38–45.

55 D. Bikić, *op. cit.,* 159–174.

56 Pieter Troch, "Yugoslavism between the World Wars: Indecisive Nation-Building," *Nationalities Papers*, 38, no. 2, (2010), 227–244.

to create a unique Yugoslav cultural space. During the royal dictatorship, measures were taken to Yugoslavianize the education system, but the regime's authoritarianism quickly caused animosity towards Yugoslavism.[57] Though there were controversial views on Yugoslavism in the political arena, the Yugoslav national idea was successful in some aspects of everyday life, especially in culture. Serbian intellectuals and writers advocated cultural cooperation and were willing to communicate with their Croatian and Slovenian colleagues. Some Serbian writers published works in which they argued for a comprehensive supranational multicultural Yugoslav culture to ensure the stability of the unified state.[58]

The deep internal tensions and antagonisms grew stronger over time. The Croats accused the Serbs of hegemony, while the Serbs emphasized their sacrifices to create a new state. Disputes between the country's various communities undermined efforts to establish a functional and universally legitimate state.[59] In the Yugoslav national concept, three different peoples offered opposing viewpoints. The interwar kingdom united Serbs into a single entity, viewing Yugoslavism as a natural extension of their national identity, as Serbia became a home for all Serbs.[60]

In 1929, King Aleksandar Karadjordjević declared a dictatorship and tried to instil a new political identity and create an "integral" Yugoslav consciousness. However, these efforts were not well-founded, and people still mainly identified their ethnicity as Croatian or Serbian. The concept of Yugoslav identity gradually lost support, and the assassination of King Aleksandar in 1934 further weakened it. Despite their close ties to the interwar state, the Serbs never fully developed a new unified political or cultural identity. Concurrently, Yugoslavism lost popularity as a state and national philosophy beyond the Serbian community. This led to the reopening of the Serbian question, with some feeling that Yugoslavism overshadowed Serbian identity. Internal Serbian conflicts over "national space" were as prevalent as conflicts between Serbs and Croats. The inconsistent ideology of the interwar Serbian elite revealed their inability to solidify unification as a stable and sustainable political doctrine. The Yugoslav national idea became associated with conservatism, centralism, authoritarianism, and Serbian dominance, while other national ideas gained significance as alternative options.[61]

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57 Ibid.

58 Andrew B. Wachtel, *Making a Nation, Breaking a Nation. Literature and Cultural Politics in Yugoslavia (Cultural Memory in the Present)* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 79.

59 Stella Alexander, "Religion and National Identity in Yugoslavia," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, 3, no. 1, (1983), 1–19; D. Kanin, *op. cit.,* 15–41.

60 D. Bikić, *op. cit.,* 159–174.

61 P. Troch, *op. cit.,* 227–44.

Even though the elites tried to promote a secular Yugoslavia, a significant portion of the population still strongly associated religion with national identity; consequently, religious factors continued to impact society despite efforts to modernize. Long after their expected obsolescence, the early modern concepts of religious, ethnic, and national identity remained powerful in shaping ideas about the nation.[62]

Yugoslavs initially aspired to multi-confessional unity, but this proved challenging due to the complex social structures and traditions of social reality.[63] The unification of the church was necessary for spiritual, political, and economic unity. After the First World War, the Serbian Orthodox Church was founded, bringing the Orthodox Serbs under a single patriarchate. Previously, since the abolition of the Patriarchate of Peć, Orthodox Serbs lived under six different church jurisdictions. Although they were united in dogmatic matters, their practices and administrative systems differed. [64] In the context of the modernization of society, the church is not separated from the state. Instead, its prerogatives are established by the secular government, making the church an institution deeply integrated into the modernization process led by the state.[65]

The SPC initially focused on unification and internal organization, emphasizing the sacrifice of the Serbian people for the common cause and the preservation of Orthodoxy as a central feature of Serbian national identity. However, by the end of the 1920s, optimism regarding national unification began to fade, and the political discourse of the SPC changed significantly. The Church transitioned to considering Yugoslavia as a challenge and threat to the Orthodox Church. The key issues for the church included its institutional position in Yugoslavia, the relationship between the church and the state, and the "Serbian question." There was a growing emphasis on the strong ties between Serbianness and Orthodoxy, particularly with the rise of interethnic and interreligious tensions. The connection between nation and religion among Serbs and Croats was solidified in interwar Yugoslavia, with far-reaching consequences. Religion played an increasingly important role in defining national identity in the Kingdom of SHS/Yugoslavia, and those who went beyond the boundaries of the religious group faced exclusion from the national community.[66] The Kosovo myth became a central part of the church's ideology, known as *svetosavlje*, which emphasized the Orthodox Church's role as

62 G. J. Goalwin, *op. cit.,* 161–182.

63 S. Marković, *op. cit.,* 235–252.

64 B. Aleksov, "The Serbian Orthodox Church," 65–100.

65 C. Schifirneț, *op. cit.,* 173–208.

66 G. J. Goalwin, *op. cit.,* 161–182.

the primary guardian of the national spirit against Western moral corruption.[67] This doctrine, championed by Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović and Archimandrite Justin Popović, highlighted the mystical unity of the collective and the individual in the Serbian people. It was later filled with hostility towards Islam, Catholicism, Western culture, and atheism, which were seen as enemies that the Serbian people must stand united against.[68] Politically, Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović embraced the ideals of liberalism, parliamentarianism, and democratization and supported a progressive form of monarchism. He advocated for the liberating potential of Serbian-South Slavic unification. However, events during the First World War and the Concordat crisis in 1937 diminished his South Slavic optimism.[69] Trust in Yugoslavia as a political-ideological creation was gradually shaken, leading the episcopate of the SPC to emphasize "national" themes. The unity of the Orthodox faith and the church with the people was represented by the strengthening of antagonism towards perceived foreigners or enemies, including members of various religious sects, socialists, and propagators of modern ideas.[70]

An endeavour to construct a "supra-ethnic" Yugoslav identity

After 1945, Serbian society went through rapid urbanization, leading to changes in social cohesion. Furthermore, the Yugoslav communist ideology aimed to establish a transnational society and promote changes in national identity. The communists were open to ethnic identities as long as they were aligned with pro-Yugoslav sentiments. The second Yugoslavia was founded on the principles of brotherhood and unity, focusing on efforts to minimize ethnic divisions by promoting the concept of "Yugoslavism," which aimed to transcend specific ethnic identities.[71] The communist leadership sought to create a Yugoslav identity based on "supra-ethnic" characteristics. The development of Serbianism and Yugoslavism were not mutually exclusive. The Yugoslav nation was primarily based on territory and citizenship, although there were also parallel expressions of nationality, and different

[67] Mitja Velikonja, *Religious Separation and Political Intolerance in Bosnia-Herzegovina* (Texas A&M University Press, 2003), 100.

[68] B. Aleksov, *Nazareni,* 264–301.

[69] Bogdan Lubardić, „Nikolaj Velimirović 1903–1914," in: *Srbi 1903–1914 Istorija ideja*, ed. Miloš Ković (Beograd: Clio, 2015), 328–357.

[70] Saša Nedeljković, „Mit, religija i nacionalni identitet: Mitologizacija u Srbiji u periodu nacionalne krize," *Etnoantropološki problemi,* 1, (2006), 155–179; B. Aleksov, *Nazareni,* 264–301.

[71] Andrei Simic, "Nationalism, Marxism, and Western Popular Culture in Yugoslavia: Ideologies, Genuine and Spurious," *Anthropology of East Europe Review*, 20, no. 2, (2002), 135–144; A. Sotiropoulou, *op. cit.,* 1–11.

ethnic groups did not share common historical memories.[72] During the post-war period in communist Yugoslavia, the most significant threat stemmed from strong nationalist movements, which were supported by powerful religious institutions and were based on old cultural ideologies. In this era, the only permitted "religion" was atheistic ideology, as it was considered not to be a threat to the new confederation.[73] Even though Marxist ideology aimed to establish a classless society, in practice, in Yugoslavia and other communist countries, societies and collective identities were established based on national values and principles.[74]

The indoctrination campaign targeted primarily young people through the education system but also other segments of the population. It aimed to replace traditional belief systems with propaganda messages conveyed through various media. The school system was the most effective tool in creating a unified identity, but the communists failed to link respect for individual history with a shared Yugoslav identity. Since the 1960s, Yugoslav education has evolved from focusing on unity and brotherhood to cultural particularism. This shift resulted in an increasingly noticeable division of Yugoslav society along ethno-religious lines. Therefore, a gap in the historical memory of each group emerged, with myths and prejudices replacing the values of respect and loyalty necessary for the peaceful coexistence of different ethnic groups in a multi-ethnic society.[75]

Following World War II, Serbs helped to establish a multi-ethnic state. Traditional Serbian institutions, including the monarchy, the SPC, and officially backed cultural and literary organizations, were diminished or eliminated. Serbia established new borders and stayed with the other Serbs but without Macedonia and Montenegro. Socialist Yugoslavia "practically annulled" the Balkan war victories and the statement of the Podgorica Assembly, leaving only Serbia with two provinces and raising over time the "Serbian question."[76]

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72 A. Sotiropoulou, *op. cit.,* 1–11.

73 Dijana Gaćeša, "Fundamentalist Tendencies of Serbian Orthodox Christianity," *Western Balkans Security Observer*, 7–8, (2007), 65–81.

74 Zdzislaw Mach, „Religija i identitet u Srednjoj i Istočnoj Europi," *Polit. misao*, XXXIV, no. 4, (1997), 129–143.

75 Richard E. Dawson, and Kenneth Perwitt, *Political Sociaiizarion* (Boston: Litlle, Btown and So, 1969), 6; Duško Sekulic, Garth Massey, and Randy Hodson, "Who were the Yugoslavs? Failed sources of a common identity in the former Yugoslavia," *American Sociological Review,* 59, no. 1, (1994), 86–87; Audrey H. Budding, "Yugoslavs into Serbs: Serbian National Identity, 1961–1971," *Nationalities Papers,* 25, no. 3, (1997), 411; Dejan Jović, "Communist Yugoslavia and its "Others," in: *Ideologies and National Identities*, eds. John Lampe, and Mark Mazower (Budapest: CEU, 2004), 277–302; A. Sotiropoulou, *op. cit.,* 1–11.

76 D. Jović, „Srbija i Jugoslavija," 38–45.

The 1963 Constitution of Yugoslavia increased the power of the republics, causing political elites to distance themselves from Yugoslav national politics. Yugoslav nationalism evolved in the 1960s and 1970s,[77] leading to the concept of a decentralized Yugoslavia and a more diverse and inclusive identity.[78] This affected the attitudes of Serbs towards post-war Titoist ideas. Some Serbian political leaders started seeking recognition for their Serbian nationality within Yugoslavia. By the late 1960s, the Serbian public began to hear that the four most important "pillars" of Serbianism were the SPC, the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, the newspaper *Politika*, and the football club *Crvena zvezda*. The issue of nationalism, which the Communists thought would disappear, did not fade away, and nationalist feelings resurfaced.

After World War II, the SPC underwent significant changes, including the separation of church from state and school from church, as well as the severance of historically close relations with the political elite. The church faced the challenge of reconstruction in a new political and ideological framework, with a destroyed material base, thinned-out personnel, and a lack of a leader in the country. The state and party leadership initially avoided conflicts with religious communities to achieve internal consolidation and international recognition of Yugoslavia. Still, the KPJ saw religion as a political problem and churches as competitors in the struggle for influence, which led to the persecution and repression of the church. The first Constitution of the FNRJ guaranteed religious freedom and the practice of religion, but this was mostly ignored in the first years.[79] The measures that were implemented were not only the result of communist doctrine. The French Revolution marked a break in the traditional relationship between church and state, leading to secularization and the removal of religion from European society.[80]

During communism, church institutions retained some autonomy and credibility, as well as their traditional role as guardians of national identity. At first, they cultivated this identity as a form of resistance, but as nationalism grew, they more and more openly returned to their traditional role as "guardians of the soul of the nation."[81] The widespread idea that the Serbian people identify with the Orthodox faith (although this did not primarily mean religiosity or church commitment but a traditional attitude towards the "faith of the fathers") receded

77 D. Bikić, *op. cit.,* 159–174.

78 A. Wachtel, *op. cit.,* 74.

79 Radmila Radić, *Država i verske zajednice 1945–1970*, I–II (Beograd: INIS, 2005).

80 Rene Remon, *Religija i društvo u Evropi. Sekularizacija u XIX i XX veku 1789–2000.* (Novi Sad: Akademska knjiga, 2017).

81 S. Alexander, *op. cit.,* 1–19; D. Gaćeša, *op. cit.,* 65–81.

into the framework of the SPC as an institution but never completely disappeared.[82] The Church played a crucial role in the political and cultural opposition in Yugoslav society, providing legitimacy to a part of the nationally oriented intelligentsia. It nurtured national continuity, the cult of national and religious greatness, the Cyrillic alphabet, traditional customs and values, and emphasized Orthodoxy for the cultural and national uniqueness of the Serbian people.[83]

The crisis in Yugoslav society led to a return of trust in faith and the Church, despite attempts to prevent it with ideological attacks and the return of conservative party cadres to the scene. The process of atheization, which had profound consequences in traditionally Orthodox areas, turned in the opposite direction. As the importance of the church began to be recognized, the focus shifted from traditional disagreements with the authorities over the construction and restoration of temples to discussions "about the conflict between Orthodoxy and imported materialism." Voices about the "tragic position of the Serbian people in Yugoslavia" were heard more and more often.[84] The Serbian political establishment openly flirted with church representatives from the beginning of the 1980s, which deepened with the arrival of a new group headed by Slobodan Milošević. Despite the strong anti-communist sentiments in the SPC and the belief that the Yugoslav state was a "dungeon for the Serbian people," ambivalence was felt because that state provided the Serbs with national unity.[85]

The communist regime in Yugoslavia failed to establish political institutions to regulate intergroup relations and create civic identity, leading to a weak central government and ethnic divisions.[86] Centre-right national movements received significant support from Catholic, Islamic, and Orthodox religious organizations. Marxism in Yugoslavia was not deeply internalized, which led to disillusionment with the utopian promises of social justice, egalitarianism, and material well-being. The collapse of Yugoslav Marxism created an ideological vacuum, which was quickly filled by a more enduring and deeply rooted ethos of nationa-

[82] Tatjana Peric, "On Being Agents of God's Peace: Relationship and Roles of the Roman Catholic Church in Croatia and the Serbian Orthodox Church in Ethnic Conflicts in Former Yugoslavia," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, 18, no. 1, https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol18/iss1/3.

[83] Radmila Radić, "Srpska pravoslavna crkva tokom 90–ih," *Poznanskie studia Slawistyczne*, 10, (2016), 257–268.

[84] "Povratak bogova," *Duga*, April 1986, 4–9.

[85] Radmila Radić, "Srpska pravoslavna crkva u poratnim i ratnim godinama (1980–1995). Crkva i „srpsko pitanje," *Republika*, 121–122, (1995), I–XXIV.

[86] A. Sotiropoulou, *op. cit.,* 1–11.

lism.[87] Ethnic groups turned to historical reminiscences and conflicts as tools of national emancipation.[88] After 50 years of socialism, a national consciousness emerged, revitalizing national mythologies. Serbian national myths became more pronounced at the end of the eighties, and the economic crisis of the Yugoslav state worsened the situation.[89] Until the beginning of the 1990s, the Serbian population believed that it belonged to the Yugoslav state, but the Yugoslav state-building project was losing its appeal.[90] The Serbian elite believed that the decisions of the communist leadership on the territorial borders of the federal units hindered the realization of Serbian sovereignty, especially in the republics outside of Serbia. They claimed that the Yugoslav state does not serve Serbian interests and that continued Serbian attachment to Yugoslavia would threaten the national identity and integrity of the Serbian people. Since 1985, the question of Serbian political and cultural unification has been raised again, and persistent efforts have been made to reconsider the past.[91] Ethnicity has become a key factor in political mobilization, especially in achieving renewed territorial demands.[92]

Religion played a key role in legitimizing national aspirations and strengthening national identity in Yugoslavia. After the failed "atheization process" under communist rule, religion returned to the public arena, serving as spiritual and emotional compensation for the collapse of the social system.[93] The return to Orthodoxy coincided with the rise of nationalism, with a strong connection between religion and national identity. The church became a relevant factor in Serbian society, performing

87 A. Simic, *op. cit.,* 135–144.

88 Danijela Gavrilović, Miloš Jovanović, and Dragan Todorović, "Reconsidering Ethnicity and Dominant Religion in Serbia," *Godišnjak za sociologiju,* XII, no. 16, (2016), 7–29.

89 S. Nedeljković, *op. cit.,* 155–179; Paul Moon, "Reconstructions of Serbian National Identity in the Post–Yugoslav Era: A Thematic Survey," *Etnoantropološki problemi*, 13, no. 4, (2018), 1069–1089.

90 Jasna Milošević-Đorđević, "Primordialistic concept of national identity in Serbia," *Psihologija*, 40, no. 3, (2007), 385–397; P. Moon, *op. cit.,* 1069–1089.

91 Aleksandar Pavković, "From Yugoslavism to Serbism: The Serb National Idea, 1986–1996," *Nations and Nationalism,* 4, no. 4, (1998), 512–513; V. Roudometof, "Invented Traditions," 429–468; Veljko Vujačić, *Nationalism, Myth, and the State in Russia and Serbia. Antecedents of the Dissolution of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia* (New York: CUP, 2015), 314–321.

92 A. Sotiropoulou, *op. cit.,* 1–11; V. Roudometof, G. Flora, and G. Szilagyi, "Religion and national identity in post–communist Romania," *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*, 7, no. 1, (2005), 35–55.

93 Mirko Blagojević, "Vezanost ljudi za religiju i crkvu na pravoslavno-homogenim prostorima," in: *Religija, rat, mir*, ed. Dragoljub Djordjević (Niš; JUNIR, 1994), 207–221; Alexander Agadjanian, "Public Religion and the Quest for National Ideology: Russia's Media Discourse," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion,* 40, no. 3, (2001), 351–365; D. Kanin, *op.cit.,* 15–41; F. Gauthier, *op. cit.,* 177–210.

the functions of homogenization and ethnic mobilization. The revitalization of religion led to a significant increase in professed believers and a change in SPC policy.[94] Its anti-Western wing supported monarchism, while the clergy and bishops became more nationalistic and patriotic, treating concepts such as democracy, liberalism, freedom of conscience, and Western culture as negative and anti-Orthodox.[95]

Slobodan Milošević ruled Serbia for over a decade, combining extreme nationalism with socialist ideology. Milošević presented his policy as simultaneously aiming to protect the Serbian people and save Yugoslavia, manipulating patriotism and nationalism, and appealing to traumatic historical memories. To a certain extent, the Church got involved in this political agenda, giving religious legitimacy to Milošević's actions. During this time, national myths were revived and used to mobilize the Serbian people again, focusing on the founding Nemanjić dynasty, with the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 as a significant historical reference point. Traditional Serbian folk myths depict the sacrifice of Lazar Hrebeljanović, while political mythologies revolve around themes such as "heavenly Serbia," the warrior ideal, martyrdom, betrayal, conspiracy, salvation, and charismatic saviours.[96] The theme of an independent nation resisting external aggression has been prominent in the reconstruction of Serbian national identity since the 1990s. The Serbian Church took a specific position on the Balkan conflict, using rhetoric and traditional mythic-historical narratives to support its authority.[97]

The breakup of Yugoslavia forced Serbia to reconstruct its national identity again, moving towards a hybridized identity that balances traditional values

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[94] In the wake of the revitalization of religion, there was a huge increase in the number of declared believers. According to empirical research, the declaration of religiosity in Serbia has changed since the mid-1990s and in the last two and a half decades, especially among Serbs who, during the one-party system, were separated from both institutional religiosity and spiritual narratives. (Slaviša Raković, and Mirko Blagojević, "Od narodnog ka popularnom, političkom i doktrinarnom pravoslavlju: dinamika razumevanja 'pravoslavnosti' u Srbiji," in: *Zbornik radova „Etnos," religija i identitet: Naučni skup u čast Dušana Bandića,* eds. L. B. Radulović, and I. Erdei (Beograd: Filozofski fakultet, 2014), 149–159) An individual's sense of belonging to a religion is not always associated with religiosity. Although they have similarities, religiosity refers to joining religious groups and attending religious events, while religious identification refers to belonging to religious groups without engaging in spiritual activities. John B. Taylor, "Religious Ideology and National Identity in the Balkans," *Islamic Studies*, 36, no. 2/3, (1997), 429–438.

[95] Radmila Radić, „The Church and the "Serbian Question," in: *The Road to War in Serbia-Trauma and Catharsis,* ed. Nebojša Popov (Budapest: CEU Press, 2000), 247–274; Vjekoslav Perica, *Balkan Idols. Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States* (New York: OUP, 2002), 162; D. Gaćeša, *op. cit.,* 65–81.

[96] A. Simic, *op. cit.,* 135–144; D. Gaćeša, *op. cit.,* 65–81; V. Vujačić, *op. cit.,* 131, 133.

[97] A. Sotiropoulou, *op. cit.,* 1–11; Moon, *op. cit.,* 1069–1089.

with global reality.[98] The Orthodox Church is becoming central to this ongoing process of redefining Serbian identity, with the maxim "To be a Serb is to be Orthodox, and vice versa" once again in use.

Reaffirmation of Serbian National Identity

After removing the Milošević regime in 2000, Serbia sought to establish a new image through negotiations on "Europeanism" and emphasizing European and Western cultural values. The symbolic practice of preserving Serbian national identity after 2000 aimed to achieve national reconciliation.[99] New/old symbols (anthem, national holidays, flag, and coat of arms), iconography, and features were introduced to create a new basis for Serbian national identity. Socialist symbols and holidays were excluded because of their controversy and ideological weight.[100] The nineteenth century, the period of the Serbian struggle for independence from Ottoman rule, provided abundant material for new symbolism of Serbian statehood. February 15, 2002, was chosen as the Statehood Day of the Republic of Serbia, showing Serbia's modernist and European character in the 19th century. Sretenje (the feast of the Presentation of the Lord), a religious holiday celebrated on the same day, emphasizes the symbiotic relationship between religion and nation, maintaining the historical link between identity and religious affiliation.[101]

After October 5, 2000, there was an increasingly noticeable revitalization of religion, whereby religious studies returned to schools as an optional subject in 2001, and the Faculty of Orthodox Theology became part of the University of Belgrade in 2004. The Law on Churches and Religious Communities from 2006[102] changed the legal status of religious communities, and the SPC began to receive regular and occasional subsidies from the state. It is also exempt from paying taxes on its core activity and property.[103] Health and social insurance have been paid from the budget of the Republic of Serbia for SOC insured persons since 2012. Religious buildings are rapidly being renovated, and new ones are being

98 D. Gaćeša, *op. cit.,* 65–81; P. Moon, *op. cit.,* 1069–1089.

99 Tanja Petrović, "Serbia's Quest for the Usable Past: The Legacy of the 19th Century in the Context of the EU Accession," in: *Changing Identities in South Eastern Europe: Between Europeanisation, Globalisation, and Nationalism*, ed. H. Scheck (Vienna: ZSI: ASO Ljubljana, 2012), 92–105.

100 Ana Russell-Omaljev, *Divided We Stand: Discourses on Identity in 'First' and 'Other' Serbia Social Construction of the Self and the Other* (ibidem-Verlag Stuttgart, 2016), 98–99.

101 T. Petrović, *op. cit.,* 92–105.

102 „Zakon o crkvama i verskim zajednicama", *Službeni glasnik RS,* 36/2006.

103 „Zakon o vraćanju (restituciji) imovine crkvama i verskim zajednicama", *Službeni glasnik RS,* 46/2006.

built. The construction of the Church of St. Sava has continued since 2000. The SPC has taken its place in the state and private media and has its own radio and TV stations. The Law on the Return (Restitution) of Property to Churches and Religious Communities from 2006 gradually returned the nationalized property confiscated after 1945, and by 2017, 70% of the property had been returned.

Research conducted in 2006 showed that there was a slight increase in the level of importance attributed to faith compared to previous periods. Most of the studies on the concept of national identity conducted until 2007 also showed the nation's increasing importance. Before the 1990s and the outbreak of ethnic hostilities, the majority of the population of the former Yugoslavia did not place the nation among their priorities. According to these studies, the most common conceptions of national identity among Serbs were primordialistic, with language, writing, religion, and origin grouped. There was no real redefinition of the understanding of national identity, where state characteristics and civic interest would have precedence over origin and feelings.[104]

The SPC has become an important institution in Serbia's political and cultural life, providing religious solutions to national issues and serving as an alternative ideology to the state authorities. Under the government of Zoran Đinđić, SPC was legally allowed to participate in providing the ideological framework and value system for Serbian state institutions. According to various polls from that time, the SPC was seen as the most trusted institution in Serbia, which reflected the ambivalent mix of traditional values and the pro-European liberal orientation of the Serbian government. The reconstruction of the Serbian national identity was based on a narrative about the political past and the struggle for a "new" Serbian identity. The SPC believed that Serbia needed a change in the economic and legal system and a cultural model based on the Orthodox faith to enter the European Union as an equal and enrich Europe with true Serbian values. The relationship between the SPC and the Serbian state is often ambiguous, yet this intersection strengthens both institutions and positions the SPC as the single largest and most influential non-governmental institution in the country.[105] The philosophy of the SPC advocates more collectivism than individualism, believing that the organic unity between the state, the church, and the nation is the most suitable solution for progress.[106]

J. Milošević-Đorđević, *op. cit.,* 385–397.

[105] M. Moon, *op. cit.,* 1069–1089.

[106] V. Roudometof, G. Flora, and G. Szilagyi, *op. cit.,* 35–55; Irena Ristić, "Serbian Identity and the Concept of Europeanness," *Panoeconomicus*, 54, no. 2, (2007), 185–195; Z. Mach, *op. cit.,* 129–143.

The present is also a public manifestation of an "imagined and politically-socially constructed collective identity," which leads to Serbian national Orthodoxy in the political and social sphere (from the presence of clergy at non-church events to party Orthodox celebrations, consecration of public buildings, etc.). In secular Serbian society, Orthodox narratives are legitimized and popularized, whereby the Church actively participates in publishing, religious schools, and the media, propagating Orthodox spiritual culture and tradition. The mission of the SPC contributed to the "churching" of nominal members and bringing former non-believers closer together. Orthodox narratives are used for political goals such as ethnic homogeneity and establishing an ideology that sees Orthodoxy as the solution for Serbian society. A positive definition of belonging for Orthodox Christians includes celebrating significant religious holidays. However, there is a political difference between those who see Orthodoxy as a universal truth and those who adopt political ideologies based on Orthodoxy.[107] SPC is involved in public affairs at all levels of state politics, lobbying state authorities for local and national politics, education, culture, and birth rate. It has a prominent role in contemporary Serbian culture and education, actively propagating Orthodox spiritual culture and tradition.[108] The official policy of the SPC leans towards radical nationalist poles, traditionalism, and conservatism, with some prominent church figures showing a favourable or rehabilitative attitude towards far-right nationalist ideas.

Since the Serbian Progressive Party took over the government in 2012, the SPC has gained even more significant influence in society and is receiving increasing financial support from the authorities. Religious figures participate in politics, supporting certain political leaders and parties. President Aleksandar Vučić regularly consults with the Church on political issues, and in May 2022, he met with the episcopate to discuss sanctions against Russia due to the war in Ukraine. The SPC shares close ties with the Russian Orthodox Church to oppose the liberal and secular perception of the Western world, and embrace the concept of a "Serbian world." This idea reinforces the boundaries between religious and national identities and is similar to Putin's idea of a "Russian world."[109] The new national myths are based on selective truths, and the ruling party is trying to cre-

[107] S. Raković, and M. Blagojević, *op. cit.,* 149–159.

[108] D. Gaćeša, *op. cit.,* 65–81.

[109] M. Moon, *op. cit.,* 1069–1089; Svein Mønnesland, "Religious Leaders and Nationalist Propaganda: The Serbian Orthodox Church," in: *Religion, Hateful Expression and Violence*, eds. Morten Bergsmo, and Kishan Manocha (Publication Series No. 41, Torkel Opsahl Academic EPublisher Brussels, 2023), 325–383.

ate a negative view of Yugoslavia in the emerging national identity.[110] In addition, the phrase "Kosovo is Serbia" represents a form that not only means a refusal to recognize Kosovo as an independent state but also challenges Western hegemony (although it advocates for EU entry).[111]

The development of Serbia's national identity is hampered by internal and external factors such as the East-West polarity and globalization, which have led to xenophobia and stereotypes. Contemporary Serbian identity is multidimensional and reflects the intricate dynamics of Serbian culture and society. The process of identity reconstruction is still ongoing, and while some aspects remain consistent, redefinition will become the norm as internal and external influences continue to shape Serbian culture and society.[112]

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The case of Serbia shows the strong interaction between religion, national identity, and political power during a turbulent period of almost two centuries. This period of Serbian history shows how religion can be instrumentalized for political purposes, especially in times of social and political turmoil.

Serbian identity has always been defined by a contradictory relationship with both the East and the West, never fully attaching itself to either. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Balkan population integrated religion with national identification, limiting national groupings, and religious communities defended borders, symbolizing national discourse. After the Balkan wars, religious identities gained political importance, and non-Orthodox individuals were considered outsiders. In parallel, the political goal of uniting all Serbs into a single nation was developing. This was achieved by the establishment of the Yugoslav state, but it proved to be unsatisfactory for its people and unsustainable for several reasons. Both the First and Second Yugoslavia tried to establish new national identities that would overcome the divisions, but these efforts failed, and the state and the communist regime collapsed in 1991, re-establishing the dichotomy within Serbian national identity. Serbian society progressed through successive stages of modernization as a result of a combination of external orders and the realization of the unique interests of internal social layers. Serbs identified themselves not only with their ethnic history but also with the state framework, the Kingdom of SHS, which united and significantly expanded the Serbian ethnic area. As

[110] D. Jović, „Srbija i Jugoslavija," 38–45.

[111] M. Moon, *op. cit.,* 1069–1089.

[112] Ibid.

a result, Yugoslav ideology "expanded" the still embryonic Serbian national identity, which lacked a strong citizenry and a more numerous intelligentsia. Yugoslavia was unable to eradicate or suppress ethnic-national disparities, despite significant political efforts. Serbian national identity became divided between ethnic, confessional Serbianness and civil and atheistic Yugoslavism.[113]

Serbia's efforts to develop a new image after the overthrow of the Milošević regime in 2000 are mostly connected with the rapprochement with the EU and the traditionalist national values promoted since the mid-1980s. The symbolic practices of negotiating and maintaining Serbian national identity after 2000 have a conciliatory tone. One could notice simultaneous efforts, on the one hand, to "reconcile" Serbia with "Europe," and on the other, to "reconcile" different elements of the Serbian political elites and population regarding the recent history of the twentieth century. In these processes, contemporary European discourses and ideals played an important role. They enable the engagement of very different, often conflicting ideas about national identity within Serbia.[114]

In Serbia, the church was and remains subordinate to the state, but it has shown the ability to adapt to the demands of the secular government. This adaptability, a remnant of the Byzantine tradition of church-state relations, enabled the church to better adapt to changes and pressures. Confrontations between the Church and the state were few and mostly limited to cases directly threatening the perceived connection between the Church and the Serbian national identity. The SPC has successfully linked its discourse to the issue of national identity, as external threats stemming from the country's geopolitical environment, unresolved territorial issues, instability in the Balkan region, and a perceived sense of isolation from the rest of the EU are still high. There is a consensus that Serbs and their national identity are still under threat. The survival of the Serbian nation is still presented as dependent on its connection with Orthodoxy, one of the main determinants of its national identity. This perception is institutionalized in the educational system, official historiography, the media, and influential church intelligence. In Serbia, the defence of the Church's position does not stem from appeals to the vision of a moral and pious society, but almost exclusively from the mobilization of national feelings, "reminding" people of the close ties between Serbia and Orthodoxy and the danger that threatens their future and the state itself if that bond is severed.

[113] Vladimir N. Cvetković, "Nacionalni identitet i (re) konstrukcija institucija u Srbiji (ideologije, obrazovanje, mediji)," *Filozofija i društvo,* XIX–XX (2002), 51–75.

[114] T. Petrović, *op. cit.,* 92–105.

Over time, the Serbian people have redefined their national identity, moving between different ideologies and values to reach the point where they have neither a national identity built on consensus nor a defined nation or national state.[115] In order to overcome this, the ruling structures in the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Srpska, with the support of the Serbian Orthodox Church, adopted the program "Declaration on the Protection of National and Political Rights and the Common Future of the Serbian People," adopted at the All-Serbian Parliament in Belgrade on June 8, 2024. The document articulates the elements of Serbian national identity and the key directions of Serbian national policy. The "historical role of the Serbian people in bringing freedom to all Balkan peoples by sacrificing their own people" is highlighted. It was declared that the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Srpska should be the backbone of the Serbian gathering, emphasizing concern for compatriots living in other countries of the region. The Serbian people represent a unique entity, and the name of the nation cannot be changed. The SPC is seen as an essential aspect of the national, cultural, and spiritual identity of the Serbian people, advocating for closer cooperation between church and state authorities in important issues such as the preservation of traditional Christian values and the sanctity of marriage and family. The Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Srpska will jointly mark September 15 as the Day of Serbian Unity, Freedom, and the National Flag in commemoration of the breakthrough of the Thessaloniki Front in the First World War. The hymn "God's Justice" is the national anthem of Serbia, and the double-headed eagle of Nemanjić is the national coat of arms of Serbia. In order to preserve and nurture Serbian culture and national identity, measures such as unique programs for studying the Serbian language, Cyrillic alphabet, literature, culture, and history and preserving historical memory are proposed.[116] The declaration places us in the historical framework that precedes the formation of the Yugoslav state. It seems to indicate a conscious effort to encircle the Serbian national space. Nevertheless, there are still uncertainties regarding the realization of this agenda because the feasibility of such a project has never depended exclusively on the Serbian element, so this is not the case even now.

[115] I. Ristić, *op. cit.,* 185–195.

[116] Predsednik Republike Srbije, 08.06.2024., 15:22, Deklaracija o zaštiti nacionalnih i političkih prava i zajedničkoj budućnosti srpskog naroda. https://www.predsednik.rs/lat/pres-centar/saopstenja/deklaracija-o-zastiti-nacionalnih-i-politickih-prava-i-zajednickoj-buducnosti-srpskog-naroda.