

**FaR 2021****International Forum “Freedom and responsibility in pivotal times”****SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH AND SERBIAN NATIONAL  
IDENTITY**

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**Abstract**

The article attempts to define the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the formation and preservation of the Serbian national identity. Religion is a significant factor of human self-identification that influences the formation of the national identity. However, scholarly and public debate continues about how and why it happens and to what extent influential social actors can control and direct these processes. The Serbian Orthodox Church has been criticized for its conservatism, privileged standing, and insufficient attention to real social problems. Nevertheless, at the same time, it remains one of the most respected Serbian social institutions, and its political activity and influence occasionally increase. This study analyses the activity of the Serbian Orthodox Church at the present stage and in different periods of the history of the Serbian nation (the Nemanjić dynasty rule, the Ottoman conquest, Austro-Hungarian occupation, the national liberation movement and independence, World War II and communist Yugoslavia). Special interest in the Serbian “case” is driven by the historically prominent role of religion in the Balkan region and the influence of external forces on regional processes, which was bound to leave a profound imprint on the self-determination of the nations, inhabiting the area. Drawing on scientific research, the speeches of political figures, surveys and archival documents, we argue that the most significant areas of activity of the Serbian Orthodox Church for national self-awareness are strengthening historical memory, cultural and religious activity, building constructive relations with state authorities based on the principle of “symphony”, and church diplomacy.

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*Keywords:* National identity, religion, Serbia, Serbian Orthodox Church



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## 1. Introduction

At the end of the 20th – beginning of 21st centuries, the role of religion in socio-political and international processes in the world has increased. It manifested itself in the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, ethno-confessional conflicts at the end of 20th century, the rise of religious fundamentalism, the “Arab spring” and other processes. As a result, social scientists started paying closer attention to the factor of religion and the importance of religious organizations in the modern world (Fox & Sandler, 2004; Korshunov, 2014).

Today, religion is a significant factor in human self-identification that influences the formation of the national identity. However, scholarly and public debate continues about how and why it happens and to what extent influential social actors can control and direct these processes. This study attempts to define the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) in the formation of the national identity of Serbian people. Special interest in the Serbian “case” is driven by the historically prominent role of religion in the Balkan region and the influence of external forces on regional processes, which was bound to leave a profound imprint on the self-determination of the nations, inhabiting the area. In modern Serbia there are multiple components of the national identity – pro-European, anti-European, Balkanist, religious, and ethnic (Wygnańska, 2021, p. 59). The role of the religious elements of the Serbian national identity and the activity of the SOC aimed at strengthening them are the focus of this article.

## 2. Problem Statement

Classical social theories (the theories of modernization, secularization, and rational choice) proclaim a vicarious character of religion in the modern world. However, research in the regions of Central and Eastern Europe and in the Balkans demonstrates that religion plays an extremely important role in people’s self-identification, being a crucial factor in social and political life, and must therefore be taken into consideration (Naletova, 2009, p. 375). The studies devoted to the role of Orthodox religion and the SOC in modern Serbia are often critical, which highlights their controversial influence on socio-political processes, making it hard for Serbia to choose a future-proof political course (Privileged majority church, 2013; Subotić, 2019). At the same time, opinion polls regularly show that the SOC is the most credible institution in Serbia (Hofmeisterová, 2019, p. 505), and even critical publications recognize the role of religion as a historical force in the Balkans (Iveković, 2002, p. 523). A relatively recent sociological study in Belgrade illustrates that the national identity is dominant, and European identity (despite the pro-European course of the Serbian state) is less significant, while Yugoslavian identity is rather weak (Tournois & Djerić, 2021). Identifying the reasons for such a state of things is a major scientific challenge.

## 3. Research Questions

The central research question of the article is identifying the role of the SOC in the formation and preservation of the Serbian national identity. In order to answer this question, it is necessary to determine the role that the church has played in Serbian national history and which stance and course of action the SOC is taking in this area today.

## 4. Purpose of the Study

The factors contributing to the formation and preservation of the national identity (illustrated by the example of Serbia) and causing its transformation determine the specific objective of this study. Identifying these areas will make it possible to more accurately define the role of the national identity in political processes and to understand deeper the contemporary state and prospects of the development of socio-political processes in the Balkans.

## 5. Research Methods

This study employs the combination of methods of historical, comparative, and systematic analysis. This methodology approach makes it possible to: 1) trace the role of the SOC in the life of Serbian society at different stages of its historical path, 2) find out the specificity and similarities of the processes connected with Serbian national self-identification in different historical epochs (asynchronous comparison), 3) determine the main areas of activity of the SOC aimed at the preservation of the Serbian national identity at present. This study draws on the analysis of a wide range of sources – documents, speeches and declarations of public figures, opinion polls, and archival documents.

## 6. Findings

The national identity is a person's self-identification as belonging to a particular nation. The national identification is based on the commonality of language, history, culture, religion, and statehood. Ethnic unity, the historical memory of Serbian people, and religion (Orthodoxy) constitute the basis of the Serbian national identity. The religious component has repeatedly come to the fore in history, having a major impact both on relations between the Balkan peoples and external forces.

### 6.1. The Serbian Orthodox Church in the history of Serbia

The role of the SOC in the formation of Serbian national identity has revealed itself at all the key stages of the evolution of Serbian people: the Nemanjić dynasty rule, the Ottoman conquest, Austro-Hungarian occupation, the national liberation movement and independence, World War II and communist Yugoslavia.

A major element of the historical memory of the Serbian nation is the period of the Nemanjić dynasty rule (12th – 14th centuries) – “the golden age” of Serbian statehood. At the end of the 12th century, the founder of the dynasty Štěpán Nemanja laid the foundation for a unified Serbian state and paved the way for the establishment of an independent Serbian Church, which decreased Byzantium's influence and increased the significance of Serbian national culture (as cited in Feryancic, 1989, p. 27). One of the major components of Serbian national identity is the concept of “svetosavlje”, which is the synthesis of orthodoxy and the sense of national identity formulated by Saint Sava, the founder of the autocephalous SOC (Wygnańska, 2021, p. 59). Such an approach reinforced in the national consciousness the idea that a Serb should at the same time be an Orthodox Christian.

A key element of Serbian historical memory, the Battle of Kosovo against the Ottoman Turks in 1389, is actively used by the SOC as a symbol of Serbian martyrdom. In the 19th century, during the rise of national movements in the Balkans (and Serbian in particular) this image of the Old Serbia became part of the Serbian national program (Timofeev, 2007, p. 38).

The following periods of Serbian history were accompanied by blurring Serbian identity boundaries caused by the influence of external forces and religious confessions or ideological projects sustained by them. The adopted political methods were also quite often similar – the combination of granting privileges to the voluntary participants of alternative national projects (for example, the reduction of the tax burden and broader rights and freedoms) with reprisals against those who resisted them. The transformation of identity was carried out through conversion to other religions (Islam, Catholicism), reprisals against the Serbian intellectual elite and the church as a guardian of national historical memory, as well as by creating new administrative and territorial units (for example, Macedonia and Montenegro) with subsequent attempts to strengthen their collective identities as a counterbalance to the Serbian one (Stepic, 2001). The policy of assimilation of the Serbian population (especially those who converted to Catholicism) was also implemented, for example, in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, where such a policy was pursued by Ivan Kukuljević Sakcinski. During World War II, the Independent State of Croatia took a course towards the physical elimination of Serbs (Nemacka obavestajna sluzba, 1956). According to various estimates, the war claimed the lives of 200 thousand – 1.5 million people (Proidakov & Suvorov, 2017).

The Yugoslavian and communist projects presupposed the formation of supranational communities with the corresponding transformation of Serbian national identity. The critical attitude of the SOC to such projects often led to the fact that nation-building processes in the Balkans involved the creation of their own Orthodox churches (for example, in Montenegro and Macedonia) and the cultivation of non-Serbian elements of national self-identification (Montenegro, 2019).

In the 90s, after the collapse of Yugoslavia, it became possible to speak about a kind of revival of Serbian spiritual and national identity. Thus, Serbian national and religious identity defined by the concept of an “Orthodox Serb” has become the cornerstone of the new Serbia and the leitmotif of the SOC activity (Subotić, 2019, p. 16).

## **6.2. The Serbian Orthodox Church and the preservation of historical memory**

The church in Serbia has always played an important role in keeping historical memory. Even in the periods of external domination, when the resources of the SOC were limited for obvious reasons, the religious symbols (monasteries, frescoes, and church relics) functioned as “the places of memory” for Serbian people (Mikhaylova, 2020). Church archives kept in the historical memory of Serbs the place of Kosovo as the foundation of the national sense of identity. The activity of the clergy, and first of all, the formation of the Serbian population, served as an important element of the development of national identity in the 19th century. In 1868, Metropolitan Mihailo initiated the creation of “The Committee for schools and teachers in the Old Serbia, Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina” with the purpose of developing the system of the Serbian population throughout the Old Serbia (Milosevic & Lukic, 2020, p. 141). The archives of the modern Republic of Srpska showed active involvement of the church in creating Serbian schools on other territories (in particular, within the territory of contemporary Bosnia and Herzegovina) (Archive of

Republic of Srpska..., 2021). The celebration of Saint Sava organized by the church was also of vital educational, cultural and historical importance. Moreover, the celebrations served as fundraising, bringing in finances for the educational process. In the late 20th – early 21st centuries, the SOC made an active and fruitful effort aimed at cultivating the historical memory of Serbian people and became the most significant expounder of Serbian national history (Hofmeisterová, 2019, p. 505). In 1982, the SOC proclaimed the day of the Battle of Kosovo a church holiday. For obvious reasons, the declaration of independence of Kosovo in 2008 was met with criticism both by the leadership of Serbia and the SOC. Boris Tadić, who was the president of Serbia at that time, considered Kosovo the place of Serbian national identity and the basis of Serbian history and culture (Interview with Tadić, 2007). Later, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić compared the loss of Serbia to the historical suicide of the Serbian nation and underlined that the EU had no right to expect such behavior from Belgrade. Despite regular statements about the need for a “compromise” on Kosovo, Vucic (2019) also highlights the importance of the Kosovo issue for Serbia, the determination to “fight for our people on Kosovo and Metohija”, and expresses gratitude to the countries that did not recognize the independence of Kosovo.

The SOC has demonstrated the ability to get involved in other projects of historical memory preservation, while strengthening Serbian national identity. In this regard, special attention should be paid to the activity of the Jasenovac Committee organized by the Holy Synod of the SOC, an institution of the SOC dedicated to the preservation of the historical memory of the events of World War II in Yugoslavia (Episkop Jovan) in maintaining the collective memory of the Holocaust. In this direction, the SOC gets actively involved in liturgical, educational (lectures, seminars, and conferences) and commemorative practices, as well as collaborates with national and, most importantly, international actors (Tomašević, 2019). That preserves the historical memory of the Holocaust– the Jewish Community of Serbia, the Centre for Holocaust Research and Education, the Museum of Genocide Victims, and the Simon Wiesenthal Center. Serbian and Jewish people are positioned as “brothers in suffering” in World War II (Hofmeisterová, 2019, p. 508). In 2015, the committee extended its activities to all the historical episodes of the suffering of the Serbian nation – the Turkish and Austro-Hungarian dominance, Yugoslavian communism, the Ustasha persecution of Serbs during World War II and the conflicts of 1990s (Radojković, 2019, p. 30). At the same time, the SOC has placed special emphasis on “addressing the past”, which is a highly important condition for preventing hatred outbursts against the perpetrators of this suffering and their descendants (Pilsel & Čulibrk, 2016).

Ecclesiastical, cultural, and historical values of the SOC sparked the interest of the representatives of culture, art, and academic community. This was especially noticeable at the celebrations of the anniversaries of medieval monasteries, accompanied by the publication of scientific papers and massive holiday festivities. Such work made it possible to shape in the eyes of a broad strata of the population the idea of a cultural and historical role of the church. Through a variety of events, the church has also strengthened ties with the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts and the Association of Writers of Serbia (Vecis & Vesna, 2020, p. 273).

### **6.3. Church-State relations: “Symphony”**

Since the national identity connects a person with the state, the actors involved in the process of its formation and maintenance, one way or another, enter into certain relations with state power. Church-state relations in Serbia were built on the principle of “symphony” taken from Byzantium. This principle is understood as cooperation, mutual support, and responsibility without interference in each other’s exclusive sphere of competence (Tsy-pin, 2003, p. 15).

The enhancement of the role of the church in the periods of external control over Serbia weakened the functions of secular power. Since ancient times, the church in Serbia has dealt not only with religious, but also with socio-political issues, which has further strengthened the unity of ethnic and religious factors in the national self-consciousness of Serbs. The secular role of the SOC naturally increased throughout the periods of external control over the country’s territory, which was accompanied by the weakening of the state structures as such. In these conditions, the SOC performed, on the one hand, diplomatic functions, and on the other – supported national self-consciousness with the help of its spiritual and educational mission (creating schools and seminaries) and provided assistance to the people (maintaining hospitals and organizing fundraising) and national liberation forces. Moreover, the SOC has always opposed Serbs’ conversion to other confessions. Thus, during World War II it was highly characteristic of the major representatives of the church to wish to distance themselves from any political actions carried out by the local secular authorities under the occupiers’ pressure (Srpska Crkva u Drugom svetskom ratu..., 1990).

The rise of the Serbian liberation movement in the 19th century also to a large extent based itself on the church. The leaders of the national forces in Serbia were connected to a greater degree with Europe, its education system and set of values and, accordingly, had no influence in the Serbian countryside. Peasants saw the clergy as the elite and the bearers of national identity, which ensured the union of the national and religious movements (Buchenau, 2014) that became the major conditions of the independence of Serbia in 1878.

In the 1980-1990s, during the crisis and disintegration of the socialist camp and communist ideology, the church considerably increased its role in Serbian national self-consciousness. The number of parishioners had multiplied, and the church leaders started to appear in influential media (Vecis & Vesna, 2020). In the 2000s, the SOC became a key element of Serbian nation building, compensating for the problems of state power (Jovanović, 2018): the attempts of S. Milošević’s government to implement a radical national project led to sanguinary wars, and, as a result, to the Hague tribunal. In the 2000s, the new Serbian government was actively cooperating with the SOC as a key social institution capable of supporting national unity. To the greatest extent, “symphony” of the SOC and the government was noticeable in the sphere of education and armed forces. In 2001, religious preparation got integrated into the general education system of Serbia (as cited in Hofmeisterová, 2019, p. 504). The subdivisions of Serbian armed forces had their own priests and patron saints like the majority of Serbian political parties.

### **6.4. Church Diplomacy**

It is important to keep in mind the diplomatic activity of the SOC and, first of all, the maintenance of ties with Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church. The SOC regularly demonstrates its attitude to Russia

as a “fraternal”, “Slavic” and “Orthodox” nation. The Russian Orthodox Church has rendered its assistance in the SOC significant projects, for example, the construction of the Saint Sava Memorial Temple. One must remember that historically, Russia has helped Serbian Orthodoxy and the Serbian state, which has also ensured similar approaches to various modern international issues – the assessment of the war in Yugoslavia in 1990s, and the critical attitude to the decision on the independence of Kosovo. The interaction of the SOC with the Republic of Srpska is the closest. The SOC undoubtedly supports the leadership of the Republic of Srpska, and the latter is actively working on increasing the role of the church in the life of society, supporting the idea of Serbs as a united nation, despite the fact that they live in various state entities (Guskova, 2012). The role of the SOC in the Parliament election in Montenegro in 2020 also turned out to be decisive when the government lost to the opposition, coming into conflict with the SOC, which, in turn, managed to unite the opposition, having offered a new political platform and a promising leader – Zdravko Krivokapić (Kandel, 2021, p. 47). The example of Montenegro is quite illustrative, since the orthodox population of the country has always identified themselves as Serbs (Kandel, 2021, p. 45): the concept of a “Montenegrin” was more of a geographical feature – that was the name of the Serbs living in this region. A recent opinion poll has shown that 47% of Montenegrins are sure that only the SOC should exist in the country, as almost half of the nation’s population (47.8%) demonstrates trust in it. Only 22% believe that two churches – the SOC and the Montenegrin Orthodox Church should function in the country. The latter, however, remains rather small in number and is quite unpopular: only 16% of the population trust it (Jovanović et al., 2019). Nevertheless, in the 20th century the political elites relied on the formation of a distinctive Montenegrin identity and their own statehood, because it facilitated integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. However, it is important to acknowledge that the orthodox world in the Balkans is rather fragmented today, and there are a lot of problems in relations with other churches (for example, the Macedonian one).

The SOC has also resumed communication with the Serbian diaspora in the USA and Canada, which was actually broken off in the 1960s under the influence of anti-communist sentiments. It is noteworthy that in this case the SOC demonstrated the ability to establish and maintain relations with representatives of culture and art. The restoration of ties with the diaspora began with a long tour of the Orthodox Student Choir of Belgrade across the US and Canada. The SOC has also organized events aimed at the promotion of the Saint Sava Memorial Temple project (Vecis & Vesna, 2020).

## **7. Conclusion**

Religion and the SOC have been important factors in the formation and maintenance of Serbian national identity both historically and at the present stage. The renaissance of religiosity of the end of the 20th century and the crisis of communist ideology determined the increase in the role of religion in the national consciousness of Serbs. At the same time, the church was making a deliberate effort to preserve Serbian national identity. The following areas of activity of the SOC deserve special attention. First, the preservation of historical memory that focuses on a few extremely crucial episodes of Serbian history: the Battle of Kosovo, foreign invasions, World War II and crimes against Serbian people. Second, the cultural and religious activity of the SOC is aimed at the popularization of Serbia’s cultural and religious heritage. Third, the political activity of the SOC that has found its expression in “symphony” of the church and the

state and an increasing role of the church in public life, as well as in church diplomacy designed to develop and strengthen relations with Orthodox Serbs who live on other countries' territories, and with Russia.

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