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**SERBIAN  
ORTHODOX  
CHURCH – POLITICS,  
ACTORS, AND ACTIVITIES**



# Nationalist Spiritual Vertical



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**HELSINKI COMMITTEE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN SERBIA**

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**Author:**  
Svetozar Obradović

**Editor:**  
Izabela Kisić

**Translated by:**  
Vera Gligorijević

**Typesetting:**  
Ivan Hrašovec

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*The Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) is one of the most significant political figures in the post-Yugoslav space over the past four decades. This study exposes the ideology and mechanisms of the SPC's actions that question peace efforts in the region and the secular character of Serbia. The analysis is based solely on open sources and provides deeper insight into the Church's political stances (Serb unification, relativization of state borders of post-Yugoslav countries, opposition to Serbia's EU integration, advocacy of anti-liberal values, etc.). It examines the connections of the SPC with institutions and other actors in Serbia, as well as with the Russian Orthodox Church, especially in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Key actors of the SPC, relationships, and centers of power within it, are also the subject of this research and analysis. The SPC's ties with criminal groups in the region that have not been sufficiently investigated raises the question of whether there are centers within the Church that would support violent groups, not only ideologically but also logistically. Parts of the study were published in the report of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia "Serbia: Geopolitical and Value-Based Orientation" (2024), but due to the political influence that the SPC has in the region, we are publishing the study in its entirety as a separate edition.*

## SUMMARY

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

Although he was announced as a "man of the people" and modernist, recognizable for his communication skills, the first Patriarch with an

official profile on social media and a hierarch who cites regional music stars, Porfirije is the follower of his spiritual father, Bishop of Bačka Irinej Bulović who belongs to the group of the most powerful theological figures within the Serbian Orthodox Church, namely the followers of Justin Popović. The circle of "Justinians" also included Amfilohije Radović, Atanasije Jevtić and Artemije Radosavljević, the most influential theologians and Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church at the time of the post-socialist transformation of Serbian society.

Theologian and Archimandrite Dr Justin Popović (1894–1979), was a fierce opponent of Western culture, united Europe, individualism, democracy, liberalism, human rights, antifascist tradition and ecumenism in Orthodoxy, calling it "omniheresy". The ideology of Serbian unification and the relativization of the state borders in the region has persisted within the SPC for decades. Patriarch Porfirije himself has relativized the existing borders in his public addresses, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina. He actively participates in the census campaign in Montenegro, which aims to change the national structure

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

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

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

This report also points to the financial power of the SPC due to the diverse sources of finance, including several lines from the state budget, while its cash flows are not transparent. The law exempts religious communities from submitting the annual report, so that it is not possible to have the precise details of the SPC’s transactions.

## SOC AGAINST GENDER EQUALITY

When in mid-May 2023, on social media, there appeared an amateur video from a festivity at which, in his speech, Patriarch Porfirije refers to the draft law on gender-sensitive language, his narrative provoked a fierce reaction from one part of the public, especially if one takes into account what was pointed out by sociologist Ratko Božović: “Patriarch Porfirije was known for always being a gentleman”.<sup>1</sup> During his speech, the Patriarch emphasized that this law has nothing to do with women. Instead, it is about “the essence of our existence, about the essence of our being”. Then he continued to react strongly to the criticism to which he was exposed: “I would cry, I would scream out in anguish when I see a poor thing who changes her theses and says ‘why didn’t they care about women, women are endangered’. Well, they are endangered, we all are endangered by you, wretch.”<sup>2</sup>

Reacting to the Patriarch’s statement, which leaked to the public, the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, Brankica Janković, wrote on her Facebook profile: “The words ‘wretches’ and ‘poor things’, which were used for women and appeared in the public space, are deeply humiliating and disturbing, especially because they were said by the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church” at this time which is

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

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

“extremely difficult for our society when we were faced with two great tragedies and when the most vulnerable ones in society – children and women were killed.” The Commissioner pointed to a very significant context in which the Patriarch announced himself in this debatable way: “In times of sorrow and pain when we have the eighteenth woman who is a victim of domestic violence and when women are exposed to various forms of discrimination, violence and aggression, the least that is expected from all of us is to be aware of the weight of spoken words and the responsibility for them”.<sup>3</sup>

In a sermon after the liturgy in the Church of St Basil of Ostrog in Bežanijska kosa, Patriarch Porfirije said among other things: “We hear that the Church is also guilty of violence against women. Do not do that because we will respond to you. You will not feel well if we respond, because all will see that you have manipulated and that you have lied. So far, we have not responded, because we also pray to God for you who accuse.”<sup>4</sup> This harshness and threatening tone of the Patriarch’s statement is his reaction to criticism by certain media and nongovernmental organizations after the Patriarch presented his views in the Easter epistle about the need to stop the violence against the Serbian language and abolish the provisions of the law that impose such violence under the law that imposes the so-called gender-sensitive language: “We appeal for the standardization of the use of the Cyrillic alphabet in the public space as well as for stopping violence against the Serbian language and abolishing the provisions of the law which

impose it, especially through the unconstitutional law that imposes the so-called gender-sensitive language, which conceals the fight against marriage and family as the Bog-ordained sanctities and natural forms of man’s personal and conciliar life”.

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

<sup>3</sup> “Poverenica o izjavi patrijarha: Duboko ponižavajuće i uznemiravajuće reči”, N1, 13 May 2023, <https://n1info.rs/vesti/poverenica-o-izjavi-patrijarha-duboko-ponizavajuce-i-uznemiravajuce-reci/>

<sup>4</sup> “Patrijarh Porfirije: Neće vam biti dobro, ako vam odgovorimo”, Vreme, 16 May 2023, <https://www.vreme.com/vesti/patrijarh-porfirije-nece-vam-biti-dobro-ako-vam-odgovorimo/>

pointed out that the Serbian Orthodox Church “will not and cannot give up the demand that the Law on Gender Equality be repealed”.<sup>5</sup>

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

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

Balašević, Konstrakta ... As the Patriarch, he celebrated his first Easter with the homeless and sick children at the University Children’s Clinic, which largely obscured the fact that this Patriarch is a spiritual child of Bishop Irinej (Bulović) of Bačka, one of the “Justinians” and one of the most influential hierarchs of the Serbian Orthodox Church over the last few decades.

## JUSTINIANS

At the time when the current Patriarch Porfirije studied at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Belgrade and became a monk or, more precisely, during the 1980s, three young and distinguished monastic theologians, professors at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, who were called Justinians, Amfilohije Radović, Irinej Bulović, and Atanasije Jevtić and Artemije Radosavljević distinguished themselves for their activities. The latter became somewhat more active during the 1990s.<sup>6</sup> All four of them were the students of the famous Serbian theologian, Archimandrite Dr Justin Popović, who was expelled from the University of Belgrade by the communist authorities and sent to the Ćelije Monastery near Valjevo, where he was kept in some kind of captivity. These increasingly more respected theologians soon became the most influential Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church at the time of the post-socialist transformation of Serbian society.

At the extraordinary session of the Holy Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Church in December 1990 at which Patriarch Pavle was elected, Vicar Bishop Irinej (Bulović) of Moravica, was elected Bishop

6 Thanks to their open anticommunist and nationalist position, three of them were admitted to the Association of Writers of Serbia in January 1985 (Tomanić, p. 11)

of Bačka, while Bishop Amfilohije (Radović) of Banat was elected Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral. A year later, in May 1991, the two remaining students of Father Justin Popović. were also elected Bishops at the regular session of the Holy Assembly: Archimandrite Artemije Radosavljević, Abbot of Crna Reka Monastery, was elected Bishop of Raška and Prizren, succeeding Patriarch Pavle, while Archimandrite Atanasije Jevtić, the Dean of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Belgrade, was elected Bishop of Banat, succeeding Metropolitan Amfilohije in that position. Consequently, at the beginning of the last decade of the 20th century, all four students of Justin Popović, in addition to Patriarch Pavle, became the dignitaries, recognized authorities and theological basis of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

6 | More specifically, Irinej Bulović himself was ordained a monk by Archimandrite Justin Popović. Irinej Bulović. Later on, Bishop Pavle of Raška and Prizren (the future Patriarch), who was also Justin's student, ordained Irinej to the rank of Hieromonk. Justin himself appointed Bishop Pavle as a spiritual father to Hieromonk Irinej, who spent more than a decade as the personal secretary and right hand of Bishop Pavle of Raška and Prizren. With the election of Bishop Pavle as Patriarch, Hieromonk Irinej became the Vicar (assistant) of the Serbian Patriarch and not long after Porfirije Perić became a priest, Bishop Pavle of Raška and Prizren also ordained him to the rank of Hieromonk like his spiritual teacher Irinej in the past. Finally, after the election of Irinej as the Bishop of Bačka, Abbot Porfirije became an assistant to the Bishop of Bačka, that is, the Vicar Bishop of Jegar.

Justin of Ćelije or Justin Popović, a canonized Serbian saint, was the Archimandrite of the Ćelije Monastery, theologian, expert on the work of Dostoevsky, professor at the University of Belgrade and spiritual

father. As a professor at the Bitola Theological Seminary, he was in constant contact with Bishop Nikolaj and St John of Shangai with whom he became lifelong friends, and in 1934 he was elected professor at the Belgrade University Faculty of Orthodox Theology. Justin was a fierce opponent of Western culture, united Europe, individualism, democracy, liberalism, human rights, antifascist tradition and ecumenism in Orthodoxy calling it "omniheresy". He expressed his opinion about it in his book *Pravoslavna crkva i ekumenizam* (The Orthodox Church and Ecumenism). On 2 May 2010, pursuant to the decision of the Holy Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Justin Popović was canonized as Venerable Justin of Ćelije,<sup>7</sup> while four years later his relics were transferred to the Ćelije Monastery church. In church literature there are Justin Popović's quotes about Holy Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović whom he calls "the thirteenth apostle", "the holy Serbian evangelist" and "the greatest Serb after Saint Sava".<sup>8</sup>

The rehabilitation of Nikolaj Velimirović began just at the time when the mentioned "Justinians" were becoming increasingly influential in the Serbian Orthodox Church, that is, in the mid-1980s.<sup>9</sup> The rehabilitation was initiated by Bishop Jovan (Velimirović) of Šabac and

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

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

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

Valjevo, who was Nikolaj's nephew. Together with his deakon Ljubomir Ranković, he founded the magazine *Glas crkve* in Valjevo, which published Velimirović's texts and the texts of the "Justinians", Atanasije Jevtić and Amfilohije Radović, in which Nikolaj was presented as the greatest Serbian philosopher, the unsurpassed Serbian poet, the most important saint after Saint Sava and so on. In March 1987, Bishop Amfilohije of Banat informally canonized Nikolaj at a commemorative ceremony and then, two years later, the chapel dedicated to Nikolaj in his native Lelić near Valjevo was consecrated, while Artemije Radosavljević became the author of the first affirmative biography of Nikolaj Velimirović.<sup>10</sup> The zenith of this galloping glorification and future canonization of Nikolaj Velimirović was the return of his relics to Serbia from the United States, which was organized and massively and pompously seen off in May 1991.

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

In the opinion of Father Justin Popović, one of the most respected Serbian and Orthodox theologians in general, Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović was the greatest Serb after Saint Sava; Radovan Bigović, a professor at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, calls him a "God seer" and "seer of secret"; for him "Nikolaj is always young and new. Never the same. Always current and temporary." Bishop Lavrentije believed that he was

<sup>10</sup> The official hagiography of Nikolaj Velimirović, published by the SPC on the occasion of his canonization, is based on the mentioned edition.

"the second Jesus", while in Metropolitan Amfilohije's opinion Nikolaj was "the Serbian Chrysostom". The most restrained vis-à-vis Bishop Nikolaj was Patriarch Pavle who only said that he was "a great associate of God".<sup>11</sup>

Following the example of his spiritual father, a Justinian, Patriarch Porfirije continued with the glorification of the image and work of Holy Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović. The Patriarch led a great spiritual and cultural ceremony on the occasion of the triple jubilee of Holy Bishop Nikolaj of Ohrid and Žiča: the 140th anniversary of his birth, 65th anniversary of his repose in the Lord and the 30th anniversary of the transfer of his relics from Libertyville to his native Lelić. In his sermon, the Patriarch has emphasized that the life and work of Bishop Nikolaj are still relevant and that we can refer young generations to him as their measure and beacon in life. Pointing out that Bishop Nikolaj's value system is "cruciform love", the Patriarch advises us that "when someone asks us what we think about a topic, we will not speak out of ourselves, out of our mind; we will speak using the language of Holy Bishop Nikolaj, we will speak out of the mind of Christ".<sup>12</sup> In an interview, Patriarch Porfirije has pointed out that Holy Justin of Ćelije, along with Saint Nikolaj of Ohrid and Žiča and Bishop Atanasije, is the most significant Serbian theologian in the world.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Tomanić, Milorad (2001) *Srpska crkva u ratu i ratovi u njoj*, Belgrade, Medijska knjižara Krug, p. 11

<sup>12</sup> "Akademija u čast Svetog vladike Nikolaja", TV Hram, 29 June.2022. <https://www.tvhram.rs/vesti/vesti-iz-crkve/4285/akademija-cast-svetog-vladike-nikolaja-patrijarh-porfirije-vladici-nikolaju-mera-bio-hristos-njegovo-jevand-jelje-foto-video>

<sup>13</sup> "Patrijarh Porfirije o episkopu Atanasiju: "I kada smo sa njim igrali fudbal i kada nas je vodio na Svetu Goru bio je tamo gde i sveti oci", *Nedeljnik*, 6.March 2021, <https://www.nedeljnik.rs/patrijarh-porfirije-o-episkopu-atanasiju-i->

According to the Information Service of the Serbian Orthodox Church, the marking of the Ascension Day in 2023, namely the Patron Saint Day of the City of Belgrade or, more precisely, the procession led by Patriarch Porfirije represented the “the largest prayer gathering in the history of Belgrade”. Namely, “over a hundred thousand people gathered around the reliquary of Saint Bishop Nikolaj of Serbia, filling the central streets of the Serbian capital”. In his address, the Patriarch emphasized: “Our Saint-Savian people has experienced all difficulties, crucifixions, martyr’s deaths, unimaginable Golgothas and sufferings not because it has had powerful, educated and wise individuals, technology, skills and knowledge, but primarily because it has believed in God, had evangelical faith and lived in accordance with the evangelical values, as was said by the Saint lying in front of us. (...) Because he has known that our neighbours, family, home and homeland are the sanctity and especially because he has known that Gračanica, the Patriarchate of Peć, Dečani, Sopoćani, Žiča, Mileševa, Krušedol, Studenica, Morača, Krka, all our sanctuaries and this holy temple in front of which we are standing today and which bears the name of Saint Sava. This is our identity card, our name and surname. By going down into our hearts, let us honestly ask ourselves whether we know this today or we would prefer to be someone different or someone else, to renounce ourselves, our code, our identity and our Christian Orthodox values, and to adopt a foreign value system and become someone that we are not.”<sup>14</sup>

*kada-smo-sa-njim-igrali-fudbal-i-kada-nas-je-vodio-na-svetu-goru-bio-je-tamo-gde-i-sveti-oci/*

<sup>14</sup> “Spasovdanska beseda patrijarha Porfirija”, SPC, 26 May.2023, <https://spc.rs/spasovdanska-beseda-patrijarha-porfirija/#>

## THE SYMPHONY JUSTIN, IRINEJ

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

The different approach of Justin’s students to viewing the desired relations between the state and the majority church came especially to the fore in May 2013 when, at the Square of the Republic in Belgrade, the rally “We Stay in Serbia” was organized. While officiating a prayer for Kosovo and Metohija, Metropolitan Amfilohije also prayed for the repose of the Serbian Government and Parliament, as well as for those killed in Kosovo and Metohija. In addition to Metropolitan Amfilohije of Montenegro and the Littoral, the retired Bishop Atanasije of Zahumlje and Herzegovina<sup>15</sup> also appeared on the stage. While speaking about Serbia’s state leadership he said that “this trio in power represents the traitor who believes in NATO guarantees.” However, his next statement was much more problematic: “Dačić says that he prefers earthly politics; he is not interested in heavenly one, This is what Djindjić used to say and let God judge how he ended up.” He stated that the authorities do not believe in God, but in the pernicious

<sup>15</sup> Apart from the aforementioned Archbishops, the presidents of the municipalities in northern Kosovo, musician Bora Djordjević, the former basketball national team member and then Vice-President of the Basketball Federation of Serbia, Dejan Tomašević, as well as law professor Kosta Čavoški were also present. The participants also included the leader of the Democratic Party of Serbia, Vojislav Koštunica and his party officials and MPs due to which they did not attend a session of the Serbian Parliament. The members of the Dveri movement and Obraz organization were also present.



mythology of the European Union. He also pointed out that “there is no earthly Serbia without the heavenly one.”

In early July 2013, the retired Bishop Atanasije Jevtić sent a letter to Bishop Irinej of Bačka in which he warned him and “several others” who monopolized the Church that they do not see “the voluntary betrayal of Serbian Kosovo and Metohija by the trio in power.” The letter states the following: “Dear Bishop, I cannot understand that you and those whom you represent and on whose behalf you speak – supposedly in the name of our Church (as if it has been monopolized by a few of you, including even Patriarch Irinej and the Holy Synod) – do not see the voluntary betrayal of Serbian Kosovo and Metohija by the trio in power.”<sup>16</sup> Commenting on the media writing about the accusations by the retired Bishop Atanasije, Bishop Irinej of Bačka stated that “Bishop Atanasije accuses only the state leadership of treason, while the ‘church leadership’ – whatever this term means – is accused of collaborative relationship and general support to the state triumvirate, while at the same time – according to Bishop Atanasije – abstracting its traitorous role.”<sup>17</sup>

Over the last ten years of the political domination of the Serbian Progressive Party, the relationship between the current political elite, led by President Aleksandar Vučić, and the majority church in Serbia has progressed from the initial mutual criticism and spontaneously ignoring each other to multidimensional cooperation and symphonic synchronization. Over time, their disagreements have been overcome and

regular and intensive communication has been established, including financial, institutional, ideological and diplomatic support, as well as understanding and reconciliation between the secular and the spiritual authorities.

In May 2013, the First Deputy Prime Minister of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, accepted the Archbishops’ invitation to attend the May session of the Holy Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The meeting followed after a very sharp criticism of the Serbian Government by some Bishops due to the signing of the Brussels Agreement. Apart from expressing his understanding for the Bishops’ concern about the Serbian people, the First Deputy Prime Minister emphasized the following: “I will never accept that I am a traitor, neither I nor the Government; we fight for the people and do our best for our people”. At the Holy Assembly it was agreed that the state and the church would work together in the interest of Serbian citizens. As for the protection of Serbian religious, cultural and historical monuments in Kosovo and Metohija they reached an “absolute agreement”. Bishop Irinej of Bačka stated that the Church and the Serbian Government agreed on the essential issues, namely there will be no recognition of Kosovo’s independence and that everything should be done so that the Serbian people remains in the province.<sup>18</sup> It was also agreed that the majority church would be included in the resumption of the Belgrade-Priština negotiations, when the status of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo and Metohija comes onto the agenda.<sup>19</sup>

16 “Ti i patrijarh ste monopolizovali srpsku crkvu!”, Naše novine, 7 July 2013.

17 “Vladika Atanasije kaže, pa se pokaje”, Danas, 14 July 2013, [http://www.danas.rs/danasrs/drustvo/vladika\\_atanasije\\_kaze\\_pa\\_se\\_pokaje.55.html?news\\_id=264356](http://www.danas.rs/danasrs/drustvo/vladika_atanasije_kaze_pa_se_pokaje.55.html?news_id=264356)

18 “Vučić vladikama: Nisam izdajnik”, Kurir, 31 May 2013., <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/drustvo/817737/vucic-na-saboru-spc>

19 “Vučić razgovarao sa članovima Sabora SPC”, Novosti, 31 May 2013, <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/politika/aktuelno.289.html:436598-Vucic-razgovarao-sa-clanovima-Sabora-SPC>

There followed an increasingly intensive cooperation between the state and the church, while the representatives of the secular authorities increasingly emphasized the significance of a symphonic relationship. Thus, for example, Justice Minister Nikola Selaković, together with the colleagues from the Administration for Cooperation with Churches and Religious Communities, held a reception for the members of the Holy Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Church at the beginning of the May 2015 session. On this occasion, he pointed to the importance of the unity of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which is an extremely significant factor in the preservation of the spiritual being of the Serbian people. Emphasizing that the state of Serbia supports and will continue to support the Serbian Orthodox Church and its unity, the Minister also pointed out that this was not only the wish, but also the state's obligation from the time of Saint Sava and Saint Simeon onward and that he who failed to respect this obligation mostly did not fare well. The Minister emphasized that "the Serbian state has its name, its identity, its roots and its future only together with the Serbian Orthodox Church". Patriarch Irinej thanked the Government for its involvement in solving the restitution problem, its help concerning the payment of pension and health insurance for priests and religious officials, as well as its help in the building of churches based on the budget programmes. The Patriarch emphasized that "the state and the Church, like two heads of the eagle on our coat-of-arms, should unite their efforts to preserve our soul and spiritual identity as a nation".<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> The reception was held on 27 May 2015. "Selaković sa saradnicima priredio prijem za članove Svetog Arhijerejskog Sabora Srpske pravoslavne crkve", Administration for Cooperation with Churches and Religious Communities, 28 May 2015, <http://www.vero.gov.rs/cir/Newsview.asp?ID=394>.

There followed one more wave of criticism from Metropolitan Amfilohije, but in the the communiqué issued by the Holy Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Church at the end of its extraordinary session in November 2018, it is repeated that "its firm and unique position expressed at this year's regular May session that the full sovereignty and identity of Serbia in Kosovo and Metohija must not be brought into question at any cost". It turned out, however, that this session represented the turning point in the relations between Serbia's most powerful secular and spiritual authorities. Namely, there followed a tactical regrouping of influences and changes or, better said, a more intensive rapprochement and harmonization of the initially distant positions. As we will see, this very quickly resulted not only in the softening of criticism, but also in the mutual glorification of the struggle for national interests.

In May 2019, at the invitation of Patriarch Irinej, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić – together with the Chairman of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Milorad Dodik – attended the session of the Holy Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Church where they discussed the important issues concerning the survival of the Serbian people and the reconciliation of the views between the state and the Church. The Serbian President said: "The Church has the right to have its views, although they are not always the same as ours, but it is important to hear them here, because the Church helped our people wherever it was threatened, like in Kosovo." He added that the meeting lasted more than two and a half hours and that the Holy Assembly informed him about its concerns and views on certain issues.<sup>21</sup> Just

<sup>21</sup> "Vučić na Saboru SPC: Izneo sam sve svoje brige, patrijarh me je razumeo", Ekspres, 14 May 2019, <https://www.ekspres.net/vesti/vucic-na-saboru-spc-izneo-sam-sve-svoje-brige-patrijarh-me-je-razumeo>

before the session of the Holy Assembly, the President confirmed that there were some Bishops who were seriously against his policy, stating that he would answer all those who sought “his anathema and said the worst things about him” with the truth and the facts”.<sup>22</sup> As it turned out, this visit inaugurated the regular practice of visiting each other during the session.

According to some Podgorica media, during the session of the Holy Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Church, one of the most respected and most influential archbishops, Metropolitan Amfilohije of Montenegro and the Littoral polemicized with President Aleksandar Vučić about the accusations that he participated in the creation of a “coup d’etat” scandal together with Montenegrin President Milo Đukanović, and that he was responsible that the leaders of the Democratic Front, Andrija Mandić and Milan Knežević, were each sentenced to five years in prison. On the other hand, the President allegedly blamed the Metropolitan for his bad relationship with the Montenegrin President.<sup>23</sup>

There was an information in the media that Metropolitan Amfilohije led the revolt against the presence of the Serbian President at the Holy Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which was advocated by Patriarch Irinej. In addition, there was mention of the petition regarding the impossibility of his addressing the Holy Assembly session and that a compromise was found – the President will come to the Red

<sup>22</sup> “Vučić na Saboru SPC”, RTS, 13 May 2019, <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/3520015/vucic-na-saboru-spc.html>

<sup>23</sup> “‘Vijesti’: Oštar sukob Amfilohija i Vučića na Saboru; Nikola Selaković: To su najbrutalnije laži i neistine”, Nedeljnik, 18 May.2019, <https://www.nedeljnik.rs/vijesti-ostar-sukob-amfilohija-i-vucica-na-saboru-nikola-selakovic-to-su-najbrutalnije-lazi-i-neistine/>

Room in the Patriarchal Palace, but not during the session.<sup>24</sup> After the session of the Holy Assembly, due to its official final notification issued by Bishop Irinej of Bačka, several Archbishops led by Metropolitan Amfilohije sent a letter to the Patriarch dissociating themselves from the content of the mentioned notification. As stated in this letter, a group of bishops is disappointed because the author of the notification, Bishop Irinej of Bačka, “tendentiously presented and overemphasized the importance of the visit of the regional political leaders, Aleksandar Vučić and Milorad Dodik”.<sup>25</sup>

A lack of consensus in the Holy Assembly was also evident at the presentation of the highest Church decoration to the Serbian President as part of the solemn ceremony marking the 800th anniversary of the autocephaly of the Serbian Orthodox Church at the Sava Centre in October 2019. According to media reports, as an act of protest against the Holy Synod’s decision to present this decoration, most of the Serbian Bishops gathered at the central celebration of this anniversary did not attend the ceremony. There were about 15 Bishops, including the five-member Holy Synod, at the gathering at the Sava Centre. This is almost one third of the active Holy Assembly body, without including the retired Bishops. According to the media, the demand for holding an extraordinary Holy Assembly session was increasingly articulated due to the deteriorating situation in the Serbian Orthodox Church. At the

<sup>24</sup> “Ručak na Dedinju: Vučić časti Arhijerejski sabor SPC”, AntenaM, 27 May 2021, <https://www.antenam.net/drustvo/religija/201208-rucak-na-dedinju-vucic-casti-arhijerejski-sabor-spc>

<sup>25</sup> “Grupa vladika ograđuje se od saopštenja Sabora SPC”, Danas, 27 May 2019. As stated in the letter, a group of Bishops is disappointed because the author of the notification, Bishop Irinej of Bačka, “tendentiously presented and overemphasized the significance of the visit of the regional political leaders, Aleksandar Vučić and Milorad Dodika.

Patriarchate of Peć, after Metropolitan Amfilohije of Montenegro and the Littoral, the retired Bishop Atanasije (Jevtić) also stood out against the decoration given to the Serbian President. He also stated that “a good many of the Serbian Archbishops are not satisfied with it”.<sup>26</sup>

In February 2021, the session of the Electoral Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Church also passed, inter alia, in the sign of polemics over the influence of “secular” institutions on the internal issues of the majority religious community. In this case, it was a question of the autonomous election of the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Allegedly due to epidemiological measures, it was proposed (and realized) to hold the session of the Holy Assembly in the crypt of the Church of Saint Sava and not in the Patriarchate building as was done before. As the reason for the relocation was not officially given, there was a lot of room for various speculations, including the “intention to control the entire process”. In the media one can find the testimonies of the anonymous Holy Assembly members, such as that “the crypt is completely covered by cameras, so that it is possible that an outsider can also monitor what is going on there. Everything is done in

<sup>26</sup> In addition to the boycott by Bishops, Milo Lompar literary historian, professor at the University of Belgrade and President of the Miloš Crnjanski Foundation, also gave up being the main speaker at the ceremony. Academician Matija Bečković also refused to speak at this ceremony at the Monastery of Žiča. Some religious authorities also expressed their views. Thus, Bishop Grigorije of Düsseldorf and All Germany stated that “de jure, the Holy Synod can award the Order of Saint Sava to whoever it wants, but this award actually belongs to Milo Lomparu and Matija Bečković”. “Irinej uručio Vučiću orden Svetog Save, većina vladika bojkotovala svečanost”, *Danas*, 8 October 2019, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/vucicu-orden-spc-za-borbu-za-ocuvanje-kosova-u-sastavu-srbije/>

agreement with the authorities and this proposal is the result of the regime’s pressure on some Bishops”.<sup>27</sup>

The analysis of the Parisian newspaper *Le Figaro* is interesting. According to it, the election of the new Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church is held in the context of deep internal pressures from the highest state officials. It is further stated that “due to the Church’s influence, it is crucial for Aleksandar Vučić that the 46th Patriarch is obedient. The flexibility (of the new Patriarch) is of utmost importance for the approach to (solving) the Kosovo issue”. It is further pointed out that Vučić “does not hide his support for the partition of the territory and land swap, but such an idea was dismissed by the Holy Synod in 2018”. It is also noted that since the mentioned year the Serbian President has been enjoying the support of Patriarch Irinej and many Bishops who now accept the ideas of the authorities. In the analysis it is also stated: “In order to ensure continuous support (by the Church), Vučić has personally led a campaign by visiting the dioceses and through the controlled tabloid newspapers in which the ‘traitors in the service of the Western powers’ are criticized”. According to *Figaro*, one of the “favourite targets” of tabloid newspapers is Bishop Grigorije of Düsseldorf and All Germany, who openly criticizes the current regime, advocates ecumenical dialogue and also has support beyond the ranks of believers. On the other side, according to *Le Figaro*, the group led by Bishop Irinej of Bačka is widely promoted. “Suspected of financial fraud and known for his regressive views on many issues, he is assisted by his student Metropolitan Porfirije of Ljubljana and Zagreb.”<sup>28</sup> This

<sup>27</sup> “SPC rijaliti pod rediteljskom palicom SNS-a se nastavlja inicijativom da se patrijarh bira pred kamerama”, *Luftika*, 2 February 2021, <https://luftika.rs/spc-sns-izbor-patrijarha/>

<sup>28</sup> “Figaro: Politički izbor patrijarha SPC, Vučić lično vodio kampanju”, *AntenaM*,

analysis especially gains in importance if one takes into account that the last mentioned Archbishop became the 46th Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

During the first session of the Holy Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Church headed by the newly elected Patriarch Porfirije in May 2021, the Serbian President hosted a lunch for all Archbishops at the Club of Representatives in Dedinje. This was certainly an innovation in the ritualization of a symphony between the state and the majority church. The Serbian President did a similar thing pretending to establish a (new) tradition a year later when he played host to the Archbishops at Andrićev venac during the May session. The critics did not miss the fact that not all Bishops accepted the invitation. Namely, Bishop Grigorije of Düsseldorf and All Germany and Bishop Maksim of Western America were not present at the President's lunch.<sup>29</sup>

Two months later, in mid-July 2022, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić met with Patriarch Porfirije and the Serb member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Milorad Dodik, in Belgrade. The President announced on social media that he informed Patriarch Porfirije, the members of the Holy Synod and the Serb member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina about the talks that are held under the auspices of the European Union on Kosovo and Metohija, the situation in the Serb enclaves in the southern Serbian province, the economic and social situation in Serbia and its international position.<sup>30</sup>

18 February 2021, <https://www.antenam.net/svijet/region/189641-figaro-politicki-izbor-patrijarha-spc-vucic-licno-vodio-kampanju>

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

30 "Vučić sa patrijarhom SPC i Dodikom, među glavnim temama Kosovo i Metohija",

In early November 2022, there was a meeting between the Serbian President and the Patriarch on which occasion the President shared "his concern over the challenges and pressures facing our people in Kosovo and Metohija and the Serbian state". On his Instagram profile, as an epilogue of the meeting, the President wrote: "We are determined to strongly and jointly defend our vital national and state interests". The closed door meeting was also attended by the elected President of the Republic of Srpska, Milorad Dodik, Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivica Dačić and members of the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The President previously also met with the Ambassadors of China and the Russian Federation to Serbia whom he informed about the fulfilment of the obligations agreed upon in the Brussels Dialogue and pointed out that Belgrade did everything, while Pristina did not and refuses to fulfil the assumed obligations.<sup>31</sup>

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

Blic, 16 July 2022, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-sa-patrijarhom-spc-i-dodikom-medu-glavnim-temama-kosovo-i-metohija/m1dyg8s>

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

would provide 80%, while the rest would be provided by the Republic of Srpska.<sup>32</sup>

When it comes to the (state) financing of the Serbian Orthodox Church, it is necessary to briefly recall that the Accounting and Auditing Law exempts churches and religious communities from the obligation to submit the annual financial report. Therefore, it is impossible to determine the precise details about the spending of the state money that is transferred to the accounts of religious organizations. In addition to the funds coming to it through the Administration for Cooperation with Churches and Religious Communities, the Serbian Orthodox Church also receives significant funds that are earmarked for nongovernmental organizations through the so-called budget line 481. The majority church also receives the funds collected by the Ministry of Justice on the basis of the postponement of criminal prosecution (the opportunity principle). As for the Church of Saint Sava, the Serbian Orthodox Church also receives the funds from the periodical sale of mandatory additional postage stamps, prescribed by the government decree. The funds given regularly to religious communities through the Administration for Cooperation with Churches and Religious Communities are controlled. However, donations, especially those from the budget reserves, remain in the grey zone, namely it remains unclear as to whether and who controls them. The public has no insight into the income of the organizational units of churches and religious communities, as well as the Serbian Orthodox Church. The Administration for Cooperation with Churches and Religious

<sup>32</sup> "Srbija će graditi memorijalni centar za žrtve Jasenovca, ali u BiH", Al Jazeera, 10 September 2021, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2021/9/10/susret-vucica-i-patrijarha-porfirija-srbija-ce-u-bih-graditi-memorijalni-centar-u-znak-sjecanja-na-zrtve-jasenovca>

Communities is responsible for financing the contributions for old-age pension and disability insurance for priests and church employees, which has exceeded two million euros on an annual basis over the last few years. Since the coming of the Serbian Progressive Party to power, the state has given record-breaking funds for various reconstruction and construction projects of the Serbian Orthodox Church, while the largest expenditure, at least declaratively, accounted for the completion of the Church of Saint Sava. This is also evidenced by the statement given by President Aleksandar Vučić in mid-2020 according to which the state of Serbia invested 43 million euros in the construction of the Church of Saint Sava in Belgrade during the past three and a half years, which is the largest amount for the last 50 years.<sup>33</sup> In a Helsinki Committee report it has already been written about the state's very generous financial support to the majority church in Serbia,<sup>34</sup> but Patriarch Porfirije's statement made after the consecration of the Church of Saint Sava in Foča in late November 2023, is also very indicative: "I believe that I will not sin and make a mistake if I say that, after the period of the Nemanjić dynasty, there was no other period during which so many shrines shot up among our people. This also applies to Serbia regardless of how I see the current political administration."<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> "Vučić: U Hram Svetog Save država uložila 43 miliona evra", Nova, 20 August 2020, <https://nova.rs/vesti/drustvo/vucic-u-hram-svetog-save-drzava-ulozila-43-miliona-evra/>

<sup>34</sup> Srbija zarobljeno društvo, <http://helsinki.org.rs/serbian/doc/izvestaj%202022.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> "Patrijarh Porfirije: Posle Nemanjića ne postoji period u kojem je toliko svetinja nicalo", Tanjug, 26 November 2023, <https://www.tanjug.rs/region/drustvo/61403/patrijarh-porfirije-posle-nemanjica-ne-postoji-period-u-kojem-je-toliko-svetinja-nicalo/vest>

## CHALLENGING STATE SOVEREIGNTY

The recently published communiqué of the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church concerning the revisionist campaign about the number of victims of the Jasenovac concentration and death camp confirms continuity in the treatment of certain topics and the rhetoric of the officials of Serbia's majority church. Without trying to justify the argumentation, it is illustrative to cite how the Serbian Orthodox Church treats certain entities in its official address to the media: "... launched a certain Sarajevo portal, which was immediately accepted by tens of news media, primarily in Croatia, the so-called Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Montenegrin circles functioning as Anti-Serbia, as well as the inevitable CNN affiliate group with its followers in Belgrade, so tutti quanti. (...) The historical truth that genocide was committed against the Serbian Orthodox people in the Independent State of Croatia (NDH), as well as against our brothers Jews and Gypsies cannot be denied by any lie, no matter who tells it, using syllogisms and slandering his own people and their states, Serbia and the Republic of Srpska."<sup>36</sup> Lest the reader does not think that this is a historical forgery in which the rhetoric that dominated in the 1990s intersects with more recent concepts, such as the aforementioned "affiliate group", we point out that the aforementioned communiqué was published in mid-September 2023 when the head of the Church and its highest executive body was Patriarch Porfirije, while its other member and editor of the Information Service of the Serbian Orthodox Church was Bishop Irinej

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

of Bačka. In short, in the communiqué it is pointed out that certain media in the "so-called Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina" and "Anti-Serbia", as well as a concrete "group" in the capital city slender, on their own soil, slander the Serbian people "and its states, Serbia and the Republic of Srpska".

The glorification of the "Serbian Piedmont" and relativization of the state entities has been intensively over the decades. The mentioned relativization also adorns the rhetoric of the current Patriarch. In September 2022, at the beginning of the construction of a section of the Rača-Bijeljina highway, in the presence of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and the Serb member of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Milorad Dodik, Patriarch Porfirije said to those present that state borders are a "variable category": "We all know that throughout history the borders of the states and habitats of our people kept changing and we are not sure that some time in history, where everything is relative, they will not change".<sup>37</sup> Immediately after his election, Patriarch Porfirije continued his very intensive cooperation with the political leadership of the Republic of Srpska. So, at the Patriarchate in Belgrade in April 2021, the Patriarch hosted the Easter reception for the Serb member and Chairman of the Presidency of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Milorad Dodik, and the leadership of the Republic of Srpska, President Željka Cvijanović and Prime Minister Radovan Višković. On that occasion, Milorad Dodik stated that "they in the Republic of Srpska respect what the Serbian Orthodox Church is and what it is doing for the Serbian people and that it represents the strong element of Serbian

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

identity". He also pointed out that "the Church strongly protects the Serbian people and preserves its language and culture where there is no Serbian state." Patriarch Porfirije stated that the Republic of Srpska and Bosnia and Herzegovina are a unique common area that carries plenty of affirmed good things within itself, but are also the area that has brought a lot of misunderstanding, and that he personally cherishes special emotions towards the Republic of Srpska. "That national identity will be correct if it is based on spiritual spheres", the Patriarch said and added that "as a rule, the brother Bishops from Bosnia and Herzegovina express their gratitude, above all else, to the institutions of the Republic of Srpska, because they understand the needs of the Church in every respect and try to help to the extent it is necessary".<sup>38</sup>

In September 2021, at the Ceremonial Academy in Banjaluka marking the Day of Serb Unity, Freedom and National Flag, Milorad Dodik, the Serb member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, said that there was never greater unity between the Republic of Srpska, Serbia and the Serbian Orthodox Church than today. Dodik also pointed to the indisputable importance of the majority church for the preservation of Serbian identity in the following words: "Our alphabet was necessary to preserve our identity. One pillar of our people, the Serbian Orthodox Church, did everything to preserve our language, alphabet, Patron Saint Day and identity. If it had not been for the Serbian Orthodox Church and its struggle, we would have lost our identity during the Ottoman Empire". In continuation, Dodik pointed out that "the Serbian people is proud today because the Serbian Orthodox Church acts in unison and does not want anything more than others. However, it does not want to be obstructed in Montenegro or satanized in Croatia.

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

There are also some here who try to object to it". He added that he is proud "to belong to the team of the politicians who, together with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, enabled this day and chose 15 September which is marked and celebrated".<sup>39</sup>

In the same month, but this time at the National Theatre in Belgrade, during the Days of Srpska in Serbia, Patriarch Porfirije repeated the words of his predecessor and said that "the creation, existence and progress of the Republic of Srpska" are the work of righteousness as well as international law and consensus, and that something considered by Christians as righteous is based on truth". In the presence of the officials of Serbia and the Republic of Srpska, the Patriarch offered prayers for all residents of the Republic of Srpska and reminded those present of Patriarch Irinej "who cherished a special love for the Republic of Srpska and the Serbian people wherever it is". Evoking memories, Patriarch Porfirije said: "I have talked to him many times about the importance of preserving the progress and prosperity of the Republic of Srpska and its cooperation with Serbia and other neighbouring countries as well as cooperation between the Republic of Srpska and Russia, Greece, Croatia, Montenegro and all countries of the Western world with which we share the Christian and general civilizational values".<sup>40</sup>

Let us recall that, in his interview given in May 2014, Patriarch Irinej said that the Republic of Srpska should join Serbia because "there are

39 "Dodik: 'Nikada veće jedinstvo između Republike Srpske, Srbije i Srpske pravoslavne crkve'", *Argumenti*, 14 September 2021, <https://www.argumenti.rs/dodik-nikada-vece-jedinstvo-izmedju-republike-srpske-srbije-i-srpske-pravoslavne-crkve/>

40 "Politika SPC-a, gdje stadoše Pavle i Irinej, Porfirije produži: RS je djelo pravde", *Faktor*, 23 September 2021, <https://faktor.ba/vijest/politika-spc-a-gdje-stadose-pavle-i-irinej-porfirije-produzi-rs-je-djelo-pravde/138761>



many reasons” for that.<sup>41</sup> He also stated that he would not be surprised if a referendum on secession from Bosnia and Herzegovina would be held in the Republic of Srpska and if the Republic of Srpska would join Serbia: “It is a process that has already started. If Kosovo could separate itself from Serbia, why the Republic of Srpska cannot separate itself from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and join Serbia? We have many more reasons for something like this because, after the seizure of Kosovo, two Albanian states were created, while Serbia and the Republic of Srpska would be a single Serbian state as it used to be for centuries”.<sup>42</sup> On the occasion of the opening of the Days of Srpska in Serbia event in Novi Sad in October 2015, Patriarch Irinej stated that the Republic of Srpska is “a Serbian state created in our time”. On that occasion, Bishop Irinej of Bačka said that the Drina river does not separate, but “unites the Serbian people from both banks of the river”. He added that it could be said that the Republic of Srpska and Serbia are a single entity and represent “substantial unity and common organic belonging to the entire Orthodox world”.<sup>43</sup>

On 9 January 2016, after the liturgy held at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Banjaluka on the occasion of the Day and Patron Saint Day of the Republic of Srpska – Stephen the Protomartyr and Archdeakon – Patriarch Irinej said: “The Republic of Srpska, founded on the truth of God, the justice of God, celebrates its birthday. It is a great day not only for you, brothers and sisters, but also for the entire Serbian

41 “Patrijarh: Republika Srpska da se pripoji Srbiji, Vučić da podigne posrnulu naciju!”, *Telegraf*, 13 May 2014.

42 “Patrijarh Irinej: RS da se pripoji Srbiji”, *Naše novine*, 16 May 2014.

43 “Patrijarh Irinej: Republika Srpska je srpska država”, *Blic*, 19 October 2015, <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/patrijarh-irinej-republika-srpska-je-srpska-drzava/112kzfz>.

people. The Republic was founded on the blood of holy martyrs, on the bones of holy martyrs, and everything that was founded on justice, on truth, on the blood spilled for justice and the name of God, is eternal and imperishable.” In this connection, the Archbishop of Vrhbosna, Cardinal Vinko Puljić, sent a letter on behalf of all Bishops in Bosnia and Herzegovina to Patriarch Irinej in which he expressed the IR “disbelief” over the Patriarch’s words: “Hundreds of thousands of people have experienced horrible crimes – from the shelling of Sarajevo, through murders, persecutions and looting to Banjaluka, Prijedor, Derвента”.<sup>44</sup> At the Book Fair in Belgrade in 2017, Patriarch Irinej said: “We love our homeland; Serbia is wherever Serbs live, no matter whether they are in Bosnia, Montenegro or elsewhere. I say to the brothers in the Republic of Srpska – protect the Republic of Srpska and the one who is leading the people of Srpska today; that is the way for Serbdom to survive.”<sup>45</sup>

The Serbian Orthodox Church does not recognize the Montenegrin nation. Patriarch Porfirije joined the population census campaign in Montenegro, calling on its citizens to identify themselves as members of the Serbian nation, SPC believers who speak the Serbian language<sup>46</sup>. Pro-Serbian and pro-Russian forces and media are also

44 “Puljić Irineju: Progoni i ubistva nisu Božja pravda”, *RFSE*, 16 February 2016., <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/puljic-irineju-progoni-i-ubistva-nisu-bozja-pravda/27555698.html>

45 “Patrijarh Irinej: Gde god žive Srbi, to je Srbija, braća iz Republike Srpske da čuvaju RS i onog koji danas vodi narod Srpske”, *NSPM*, 25 October 2017, <http://www.nspm.rs/hronika/patrijarh-irinej-gde-god-zive-srbi-to-je-srbija-braca-iz-republike-srpske-da-cuvaju-rs-i-onog-koji-danas-vodi-narod-srpske.h?ml?alphabet=l>

46 RFE: “Ispoljite svoj identitet kao Srbi”, poručio u Podgorici patrijarh SPC Porfirije, 15 October 2023, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/podgorica-patrijarh-spc-porfirije/32636176.html>

included in the campaign and share the same views. The pro-European civil sector and the opposition in Montenegro consider such a campaign as an attempt at ethnic engineering and perceive Porfirije as the emissary of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, because he has repeatedly emphasized the importance of the census in order to determine the number of Serbs in Montenegro. There is a fear that an increase in the percentage of Serbs in Montenegro will lead to a change of the country's constitutional system<sup>47</sup>.

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

According to political analyst Boško Jakšić, the events in Cetinje, the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church and, through it, the role of

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

Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić in them represented a "peculiar gift" for Russia, because the door for its influence on Montenegro was reopened. When the enthronement was finished, the international community expressed serious concern due to the conflict and ethnic divisions in Montenegro, while Serbia and Russia sent their congratulations for a job well done. According to Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, Russia considers it important for resolving the situation concerning the canonical rights of the Serbian Orthodox Church and its believers. Moscow also fully supports the statements by Patriarch Porfirije and Metropolitan Joanikije aiming to ease tensions. Jakšić holds that the Kremlin's congratulation on the enthronement of Joanikije and support to the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro show that official Moscow was indirectly involved in the mentioned events in Cetinje through Belgrade and the Church. According to Internal Affairs Minister Aleksandar Vulin, the events in Cetinje clearly show how important it is for all Serbs to be united and always act as a single political nation. Montenegrin Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapić denied Serbia's interference in the mentioned events: "Someone can always try something, but there was no outside influence. This is the project carried out solely by the Montenegrin people, by us who wanted to preserve peace and order and achieve stability. And no one helped us"<sup>48</sup>.

At the beginning of 2023, in one of his traditional interviews, Bishop Irinej of Bačka spoke about the "spiritual awakening and healing of the people in Montenegro after almost eight decades of violence caused by its rulers". He also stated that harsh engineering in "Serbian Sparta"

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

caused that “not a small number of them claim to be what they are not what and that they are not what they are, although their immediate and distant ancestors put their heads on the block for what they were”. Irinej pointed to the importance of the decision that Patriarch Porfirije and Metropolitan Joanikije “do not succumb to brutal pressures and dangerous threats (or even to the ‘well-intentioned’ suggestions by ‘friends’)” that the Metropolitan’s enthronement ‘should take place in Podgorica and not at the Cetinje Monastery. “They announced themselves from Cetinje and Podgorica, as well as from Belgrade’s “Circle of Two”, then from Sarajevo but, behold, the greatest anger and poisonous hatred towards Patriarch Porfirije and Metropolitan Joanikije, due to their manly resoluteness, came from Zagreb.”<sup>49</sup>

In early August 2022, the Government of Montenegro and the Serbian Orthodox Church, that is, Montenegrin Prime Minister Dritan Abazović and Patriarch Porfirije signed the Basic Agreement.<sup>50</sup> Under this Agreement, Montenegro recognizes the continuity of the legal subjectivity of the Serbian Orthodox Church since 1219 and guarantees the inviolability of its ownership over monasteries, churches, buildings and other immovable properties and premises. The state guarantees

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

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

the Serbian Orthodox Church that the state authorities cannot implement security measures in its facilities without the prior approval of the competent church authorities; the Church is granted public legal powers and there is also the possibility of introducing religious education into public educational institutions. The coming of a new era in the relations between the state and the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro is evidenced by the data that since February 2021, when he was elected head of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Porfirije has visited Montenegro at least five times, while his predecessor, Patriarch Irinej, went there once in the last year of his service.<sup>51</sup> Since the signing of the Basic Agreement, various forms of cooperation between state institutions and the Serbian Orthodox Church as well as between various business entities have been intensified. So, for example, in early August 2022, the Laković Supermarket Chain and the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral submitted a request to the Montenegrin Ministry of Urban Planning for the construction of a business-residential building in Budva. According to some media reports, business premises and apartments will be built on the land that belongs to the Serbian Orthodox Church. In late September 2022, the Government of Montenegro approved 900,000 euros for financing two private secondary schools “Sveti Sava” in Podgorica and “Mitropolit hadži Sava Kosanović” in Nikšić. Although some Ministers and one part of the nongovernmental sector expressed skepticism over the validity of licencing two schools of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which have not yet been opened, the Government’s decision was final. The media reported on the state and municipal land

51 An illustrative example is the visit of Patriarch Porfirije to Herceg Novi in late August 2000 when the following text was written on one of the banners: “The proud Serbian Boka is now being warmed by the sun of happiness – Welcome Saint Father Porfirije among the people of Novi.”

infrastructure investments of the Serbian Orthodox Church. In Žabljak, the local authorities unanimously decided to cede a plot of 600 sq.m for the construction of a cathedral church without compensation. The Church will also carry out construction work near Captain's Lake, a part of the unspoiled nature in the Municipality of Kolašin where Metropolitan Joanikije consecrated the foundations of the future Church of Saint Lazar of Kosovo on state land.<sup>52</sup>

The statement that largely confirms the suspicions about the ties of Moscow, Belgrade and Podgorica, if not concrete then certainly symbolic and ideological, is the statement of Metropolitan Joanikije of Montenegro and the Littoral at the Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ in Podgorica in mid-March 2022: "Naturally, many world schemers saw their own interest there. As you can see, there are too many lies. We must sympathize with the Orthodox people in Ukraine and, above all else, pray to God for those people who unfortunately found themselves at loggerheads. And that does not seem unknown to us: there are also many divisions and quarrels. And Montenegro was meant to be a small Ukraine". Analyzing the current situation in Ukraine, the Metropolitan said that it is especially difficult for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church headed by Metropolitan Onufriy, the canonical church "which is in unity with the Moscow Patriarchate and all other Orthodox Churches in the world." And then, syndromically, the support to Russia is strengthened by anti-European and

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

anti-Western "arguments": "the long struggle of Orthodoxy against iconoclasts resembles the struggle of Orthodoxy against atheism, communism and godless ideologies of our times in many ways. And this struggle has been going on for more than a hundred years, since the coming of that evil of godlessness, atheism and communism to us from Europe, Protestant Europe. And this struggle continues and so far it has taken many lives. Just imagine how many in Russia and, unfortunately, in our country. And among all Slavic nations".<sup>53</sup>

The Charge d'Affaires of Ukraine in Montenegro, Natalia Fiialka, condemned the Metropolitan's statements pointing out that "the situation is not such that Russia protects Orthodox Christians. Orthodox Russians kill Orthodox Ukrainians whom they call 'their brothers'". Nela Savković Vukčević, an official of the strongest opposition party in Montenegro, the Democratic Party of Socialists, also reacted: "Metropolitan, the divisions in Montenegro have been created by Greater Serbian politics and the Church that you represent. By saying that Montenegro has been predicted to become 'a small Ukraine' and supporting Putin, you are calling for war in our state". Before giving the latest statement, Metropolitan Joanikije called for peace and an end to war, without taking sides in the conflict. Nevertheless, the organizations close to the Serbian Orthodox Church in Nikšić and Podgorica organized rallies in support of Russia and Putin, whom they called at the last rally "to do the job in Ukraine to the end and destroy NATO".<sup>54</sup>

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

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

In the opinion of historian Miloš Vukanović, Metropolitan Joanikije has said what the highest church dignitaries in Serbia think and that the story about the “neutrality” of the Serbian Orthodox Church vis-à-vis the war in Ukraine is the screen behind which the hiding the ideological goals: “The Serbian Orthodox Church is conditioned by Aleksandar Vučić’s policy and is neutral in this story as much as is ordered by President Vučić,” According to this historian, the ideology of the Serbian Orthodox Church is, in every message, in compliance with the Moscow Patriarchate’s ideology where, in essence, we have no religious policy. This is a paranatnal policy, namely the doctrine used by Putin to attack Ukraine: “It is a question of the doctrine that they (Ukrainians) are an artificial nation and that Ukraine should not exist, because it is an integral part of Russia, using fabricated and semi-fantasy historical narratives”. Therefore, Vukanović holds that Joanikije’s parallel between Montenegro and Ukraine is extremely dangerous: “If you plan Montenegro in such a way, then you believe that it should not be an independent state, that the Montenegrin nation should not exist and that it is the state cultural and historical area of another nation.” The Montenegrin Pen Centre previously called on the international community to condemn Joanikije’s statement “as an act against everything that the European Union and NATO stand for”. They announced that “since Joanikije views Montenegro as a small Ukraine, a similar Russian or Serbian aggression against it will be justified due to the ‘ungodly’ Montenegrin aspiration to realize its right to have a state, culture, language and church”.<sup>55</sup>

55 “Opasne paralele Crne Gore i Ukrajine”, RFE, 14 March 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/mitropolit-joanikije-paralele-crna-gora-ukrajina/31752731.html>

The case of the litany honouring the Patron Saint Day of the city of Danilovgrad, which was organized on 9 October 2022, is also symbolic. It was led by Bishop Metodije of Budimlje and Nikšić together with individuals in unconventional uniforms who allegedly belong to the “Russian Cossack Army”. Those present at the ceremony in Danilovgrad also included the Ambassador of the Russian Federation to Montenegro, Vladislav Maslennikov, and the Charge d’Affaires of the Embassy of the Republic of Serbia in Montenegro, Jelisaveta Čolanović.<sup>56</sup>

## WEAPONS AND THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

There have been the indications of the potential storage of weapons in the facilities of the Serbian Orthodox Church for a long time. However, this issue was actualized after weapons and military equipment were found in the courtyard of the Banjska Monastery in northern Kosovo. The monastery was used by an armed group that clashed with the Kosovo police on 24 September, when police officer Afrim Bunjaku was killed. The Diocese of Raška and Prizren, which has jurisdiction over the monastery, announced that these weapons and military equipment “were thrown away by the people leaving the monastery”.<sup>57</sup>

A few months before Banjska, Alicia Kearns, chair of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee, warned the international public that Serbian weapons were being smuggled into Kosovo in ambulances and “stored” in

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

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

the facilities of the Serbian Orthodox Church. KFOR confirmed that the event refers to 2022 when the Royal Fusilier Battalion was deployed in northern Kosovo as support to KFOR, but no evidence was found. The Diocese of Raška and Prizren responded that it was a “very dangerous accusation that criminalizes the Serbian Orthodox Church” and requested that the accusations made by Alicia Karns be urgently investigated. The British politician came under attack from the Serbian authorities, including Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić who demanded that an investigation be carried out against Alicia Kearns<sup>58</sup>.

The Serbian Orthodox Church has also been brought into connection with weapons and criminal groups in Montenegro. The media published transcripts of a conversation between two alleged members of the “Škaljarci” criminal clan, in which the SPC is mentioned as the financier of “100 Kalashnikovs” before the parliamentary elections in 2020. The transcripts were downloaded from the Sky application. The case is in the Special Prosecutor’s Office of Montenegro.<sup>59</sup> On the eve of the enthronement of Metropolitan Joanikije Mićović at the Cetinje Monastery (September 2021) and also during the ceremony, several armed civilians were seen in the monastery, which is why activist Aleksandar Zeković filed a report with the Police Directorate and the State Prosecutor’s Office. He asked them to check whether there are unknown persons “who possess firearms and other means suitable for committing various crimes” in it<sup>60</sup>. The police and the prosecutor’s

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

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

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

office did not respond whether these allegations were verified. On the photos from the event, along with heavily armed police officers and priests of the Serbian Orthodox Church, there are armed civilians<sup>61</sup>. During the enthronement, citizens organized a protest and blocked approaches to the city. They demanded that the enthronement should not take place in Cetinje, which is the symbol of Montenegrin state sovereignty, but also the seat of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro.

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

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

## THE BULWARK OF CHRISTIANITY

Bishop Irinej of Bačka was awarded the Middle Cross of the Hungarian Order of Merit because, as stated in the letter of Hungarian President Janos Ader which was read at the ceremony in the Patriarchate, he

[ustolice/32621479.html](https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/manastrir-naoruzanje-spc-ustolice/32621479.html))

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

significantly contributed to the strengthening of mutual confidence and advancement of relations between the two nations. On that occasion, Bishop Irinej stated that “today we should emphasize more and keep in mind those blessed moments in our history when Serbs and Hungarians fought together to preserve their Christian identity and, due to their geographical position, were the so-called *antemurale christianitatis* for northern and western Europe”. Then he sharpened his rhetoric: “Faced with the onslaught of extreme secularism, which is, unfortunately, only a euphemism for the atheization of now mostly post-Christian Europe, we must join forces to bear witness to our faith, our soil, our conscience, our identity and thus repeat the feat that was once achieved on the battlefield, but today it should be achieved in the spiritual field, in the field of culture and civilization”. There followed the glorification of the personality and deeds of the Prime Minister of our northern neighbour: “Modern Hungary and its President, as well as its Prime Minister Orbán serve as an obvious example and a lesson for the whole of Europe and our entire cultural circle in which we live and exist as the Churches, as the nations, as the states”.<sup>62</sup>

The same values, based on the image and work of Nikolaj Velimirović, were emphasized by Patriarch Porfirije in Budapest, in early September 2022, when he presented the Order of Saint Sava of the first grade to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the seat of the Hungarian Government in the presence of Bishop Irinej of Bačka and Bishop Lukijan of Buda. The highest decoration was awarded “as the sign of gratitude for the promotion of traditional Christian values, selfless support to the Diocese of Buda of the Serbian Orthodox Church and

62 “Mađarska odlikovala episkopa Irineja, on poručio: Orbán daje primer Evropi”, N1, 28 November 2021, <https://n1.informer.rs/ Vesti/madarska-odlikovala-episkopa-irineja-poboljsao-polozej-madjara-u-srbiji/>

exceptional personal contribution to the strengthening of friendship between our two neighbouring nations.” The Patriarch said that we all knew that each individual and each community live in accordance with their value systems: “On the basis of these values they organize private, social and cultural life, form public morals, set the priorities and standards, build relations with others and those who are different and, in a word, build and cherish their authentic identity. Today, however, we are faced with the waves of new value systems that are often aggressively imposed on a global scale with an aim to destroy every existing natural and civilizational order and establish a new paradigm”. In this maelstrom, the Patriarch continues, the intention is to destroy the foundations of identity and the pillars of individuals and communities and make everything relative, fragile and fluid: “However, you advocate the Christian value system originating from the the Gospel that was established by God. Those values shaped both the Hungarian and the Serbian people, the values that shaped the Europe we knew until yesterday and lived in it until yesterday. That is why we are the same; there is no difference between us.”<sup>63</sup>

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

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

bureaucrats taken together, put God back in the Constitution of the new, genuine, Christian and Orthodox Russia.”<sup>64</sup>

## THE SERBIAN PATRIARCHATE BETWEEN THE SECOND AND THIRD ROME

During the traditional Christmas interview, at the beginning of January 2023, after the statement of Milorad Vučelić, the editor-in-chief of the pro-Russian newspaper *Večernje novosti*, that “the plan to destroy Orthodoxy has been devised in certain centres of power”, Bishop Irinej of Bačka was asked to comment on the “events in Ukraine” which confirm that the plan is underway. The Bishop condemned the key role of the Patriarchate of Constantinople in the noncanonical creation of “its quasi-ecclesiastical yet nonecclesiastical parastructure in Ukraine”. Bishop Irinej pointed out that the mentioned Patriarchate “knew all along that the post-Maidan Ukrainian government, planned as the most radical anti-Russian team in the direct service of NATO and the political ‘West’, is not only interested in the transformation of schismatic groups into a state Church, but is also extremely active in the persecution of the real canonic Church.” Irinej finished his analysis in which he discussed the “Anti-Russia Project, state persecution of everything Russian in Ukraine, especially the Church, Russian language and culture, perennial terror against Russians and Russian-speakers in Donbas, NATO’s refusal to make Ukraine a neutral buffer zone and its intention to reach the Russian borders and so on”, namely his unilateral preference for the arguments of exclusively one party to the conflict, with the conviction

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

that “we all, in all Orthodox Churches, should feel the same co-suffering love for each other and constantly pray that the God of Peace restores peace among the brothers as soon as possible and that we by no means participate in the propaganda of the forces that are declaratively for peace, but “promote” it by sending more and more weapons to Ukraine, thus making the war last as long as possible....”<sup>65</sup>

The recognizable rhetoric of a “righteous war”, which used to have a very strong institutionalized theological base among the “Justinians” was reactivated in the case of the war in Ukraine. Commenting on the current events in the Kyiv-Pechensk Lavra, Bishop Irinej of Bačka said that no matter whether we consider this war to be more just or entirely just from Russia’s side which is, as he pointed out, the prevailing opinion among Orthodox Christians, and was not sought by Russia but by the West, we cannot say, due to such a viewpoint, ‘Let the Ukrainians suffer.’<sup>66</sup>

It is interesting to point to the reaction of some Orthodox authorities to the letter sent by Patriarch Porfirije to world and church leaders in July 2023, asking them to use their worldwide reputation to stand up for the release of Metropolitan Pavel of Vyshgorod and Chernobyl and the Abbot of the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra from custody in Ukraine. In the Patriarch’s opinion, the decision of the Ukrainian judiciary is, on one side, “the product of a tense atmosphere in Ukraine, which is engulfed in the

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

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



flames of war” and, on the other side, “the result of the current government’s intention to take over the Kyiv-Pechensk Lavra (monastery)”. Namely, Patriarch Theodore II of Alexandria and All Africa replied to the letter of Serbian Patriarch Porfirije in which he reprimanded him for his selective sensitivity to the current events in the Orthodox world, including primarily Russia’s interference in Africa and its invasion of Ukraine. In his answer, the Patriarch of Alexandria “reminds” the Serbian Patriarch that he has not shown the same sensibility towards thousands of African Orthodox Christians whom the “Moscow Patriarchate has spiritually poisoned by its redatory and brazen invasion of a parish that is geographically, pastorally and spiritually under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Alexandria”. (...) “We regret that you do not show the same sensitivity to this completely unjust, anti-Church and anti-canonical act as in the case of Russia-backed Metropolitan Pavel of Vyshgorod. You remain silent despite my repeated appeals concerning not only one person, but thousands of African Orthodox Christians”, added the Patriarch of Alexandria, expressing the expectations that the Serbian Patriarch will show the same feeling he has shown toward Metropolitan Pavel and condemn the anti-canonical and anti-Christian actions of the Russian Church.<sup>67</sup>

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

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

Bishop Irinej (Bulović) of Bačka, the long-time head of the Information Service of the Serbian Orthodox Church, initiated the procedure for banning priests from communicating through social media unless they have the blessing of the competent hierarch. The proposal, which did not surprise anyone, was later formalized by the decision of the Holy Synod and Patriarch Porfirije. At the session held on 31 August 2021, the Holy Synod made the decision concerning the “increasingly frequent practice of some priests to appear in various discussions and video clips on social media. (...) Any public appearance, including one’s appearance and activity on social media, is not allowed without our blessing.” According to anonymous patriarchal sources, published by some Belgrade media, “the reason for this decision was the public appearance of some priests who not only criticized some bishops, but also criticized the authorities on social media. It is an open secret that the Bishop of Bačka maintains close relations with the Serbian regime and that he has been the transmitter of their influence on decision making in the Serbian Orthodox Church. He has been the most influential member of the Holy Synod for years and we also see that this body still implements the decisions coinciding with his ideas”<sup>68</sup> The ban on the public appearance of priests, that is, making it conditional upon the blessing of the relevant bishop, is not something new or surprising. For example, Bishop Jovan (Mladenović) of Šumadija – as the Administrator of the Archbishopric of Belgrade and Karlovac, the position he assumed after the death of Patriarch Irinej – made the

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

decision to ban public appearance, which was legitimized by making reference to the Holy Synod's decisions of 2003 and 2017.

The Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church has already distanced itself from the statements of some bishops, especially if they have been directed against the current political elite. They have most often distanced themselves from the statements of Bishop Grigorije of Düsseldorf and All Germany. As is emphasized by the Holy Synod, "they are exclusively of a political and even party character and have no common ground with the mission of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Therefore, the Holy Synod informs all those who somehow attribute one's political statements to the SPC or connect them to it that this is exclusively a question of the personal view and involvement of an individual – not in the capacity of a bishop, but exclusively in the capacity of a citizen. The extent to which the political or state legal activity of bishops and clerics is approved and blessed is autonomously and independently determined by the Church on the basis of its canonical order".<sup>69</sup> It is assumed that the text authored by Bishop Grigorije of Düsseldorf and All Germany and published in a Belgrade weekly,<sup>70</sup> in which he publicly supported an opposition presidential candidate, was the reason for the imposition of new, stricter and more precise bans within the church hierarchy.

On the other hand, for example, in his address to the public after the completion of "The Road of Mother Serbia", which connects the Medina Monastery "with the rest of the civilized world", Archbishop Sergije

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

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

of Bihać and Petrovac pointed to the significance of the Serbian President's image and deeds as well as to the harmfulness of opposition activities. The Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church not only failed to react, but even published this laudatory address on the official website of the majority church. In the text posted on 23 September 2021, one can read, among other things, the following words of the aforementioned Archbishop: "... I understand and I do not hesitate to say that, thanks to Aleksandar Vučić's statesmanlike vision, the Serbian people is experiencing a great renewal for which we have been waiting for at least eight decades. (...) Zagreb does not forgive Vučić because the Serbian Army is the strongest in the region, Sarajevo is upset because Vučić supports Srpska through plenty of projects in every local community, Pristina is upset because Vučić is alive at all, while one part of the Podgorica public finds it unforgivable that Vučić takes care of local Serbs and the SPC on a daily basis. On the other hand, the Other Serb political and media elite, aware of Serbia's strong step forward, does not forgive him because Serbia and Serbs are better off; the deserters have never forgiven the warriors their victories." The eulogy for Aleksandar Vučić ends with the following statement: "That is why it is important not to be in opposition to Serbia, its daily progress and the efforts of the current government to turn Serbs back to themselves, their spiritual values and economic progress."<sup>71</sup>

In February 2022, only a few days after the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church sent a letter to the Bishops stating that they are

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

banned from “interfering in secular affairs” and supporting political parties and politicians. The appearance of the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the propaganda pre-election video of the Serbian Progressive Party provoked numerous public reactions. In order to prevent “confusion and discouragement among the faithful people” it is specifically pointed out in the letter that “it is inadmissible to participate in inter-party competition and make public statements in favour of or against political parties or candidates in election processes and outside of them”.<sup>72</sup> In the pre-election video of the ruling party, next to Patriarch Porfirije there appears Bishop Pahomije of Vranje, filmed while receiving a decoration from Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić. According to Professor Rodoljub Kubat, the Patriarch was expected to speak out and publicly distance himself from the video of the Serbian Progressive Party and ask it to remove the controversial content. However, this did not happen.

Let us remind ourselves that a similar situation occurred five years earlier when, during a pre-election campaign, the presidential candidate Vuk Jeremić used the shots from a forum at which the then Metropolitan Porfirije of Zagreb and Ljubljana also participated. The Metropolitan reacted harshly, stating that he had been abused and asked that the shots capturing him be removed, which Jeremić did. At that time, Metropolitan Porfirije reacted very decisively and clearly: “I have an obligation to inform the public that I did not even assume that my participation in a religious gathering, to which I was invited as a guest, could be (mis)used for political promotion in anyone’s presidential

<sup>72</sup> “Ništa im nije sveto: Vučić ubacio Porfirija u spot SNS, a on zabranio vladikama da govore o politici”, *Direktno*, 22 February 2022, <https://direktno.rs/izbori-2022/399322/patrijarh-porfirije-spc-vladike-politika-aleksandar-vucic-sns-spot.html>

or any other campaign”. Metropolitan Porfirije also stated that his encounter with Jeremić was “tendentiously used in various forms in the presidential campaign” and pointed out that his permission was not sought. He added that even if it had been sought it would not have been granted. The then Metropolitan and current Patriarch clearly explained: “The role of a priest is to unite and not to separate. I have never publicly opted for politicians or political parties before and I do not intend to do that in the future.”

In the midst of the presidential election campaign in the Republic of Srpska, in October 2022, when the President of the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) and its candidate at the upcoming elections, Milorad Dodik, met with Patriarch Porfirije in Belgrade. Milorad Dodik wrote on his Instagram profile that he and Porfirije discussed the current situation in the Republic of Srpska and other important issues for its people.<sup>73</sup> This time, Porfirije did not dissociate himself from the media, that is, the political-propaganda exploitation of the image and work of the highest Orthodox religious authority.

The previous Patriarch Irinej also used to find the ways to avoid the responsibility for his political activities. Here we can cite an example from March 2019. Namely, the office of Patriarch Irinej was allegedly acquainted with the content of the letter from the opposition Alliance for Serbia, which was published in the media and in which it protested because during his speech in Niš marking the anniversary of NATO bombing, the Patriarch said that protests give “strength to our enemies”. On that occasion, he also said that opposition politicians “cannot come (to power) in this way nor can they harm (the government),

<sup>73</sup> “Dodik se sastao sa patrijarhom Porfirijem”, *N1*, 19 October 2022, <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/dodik-se-sastao-sa-patrijarhom-porfirijem/>

but they can harm their people and their country". In an open letter to the Patriarch, signed by the part of the opposition supporting months-long anti-government protests, it is written: "Your negative public assessment of the protests means direct interference in daily political issues and open siding with the authorities, which someone in your position should never do, because the Serbian Orthodox Church is not owned by the Serbian Progressive Party and you are the Head of our whole Church that is comprised of believers of different political affiliations".<sup>74</sup>

The political preference of religious leaders is not a novelty. Immediately after the introduction of multi-party system there were bishops who openly supported either the government or the opposition. However, there were only sporadic calls to support a certain candidate in elections, which was usually sanctioned in the church circles themselves. Bishop Filaret of Mileševa, for example, had to publicly repent and apologize to the Bishops for showing his support for Slobodan Milošević in the 2000 presidential elections. In 2013, Patriarch Irinej called on Serbs to vote in Kosovo, but the statement of the Serbian Orthodox Church soon followed, explaining that the Patriarch did that in his own name and not in the name of the Church. The only call for voting, which was generally accepted, was the call of Patriarch Pavle urging Serbian citizens to vote in the referendum on a new Constitution in 2006.

As of late, the Bishops have frequently issued the statements referring to the socio-political situation, but it is evident that those who defend President Aleksandar Vučić comparing him even with Jesus Christ are

<sup>74</sup> "Savez za Srbiju: Patrijarh Irinej stao uz vlast", RFE, 25 March 2019, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/29841089.html>

not reprimanded for their statements. On the other side, for example, Bishop Grigorije of Düsseldorf and All Germany, who has been openly criticizing the current regime for years, is always reprimanded for his views. The connoisseurs of church affairs believe that the decision of the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church to ban commenting on the election campaign was brought precisely because of Grigorije's support for an opposition candidate.<sup>75</sup> The ties between the church and the political structures has also been pointed out by Rada Trajković, President of the European Movement of Serbs from Kosovo and Metohija. According to her, prior to the election of Patriarch Porfirije, the Serbian Orthodox Church acted as the main support for Serbs, but now there are doubts about that institution which is "more involved in politics as a branch of the SNS than is the place and roof for all people who are its believers".<sup>76</sup>

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

<sup>75</sup> "Porfirije mora da se izjasni oko spota SNS", *Danas*, 23 February 2022, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/porfirije-mora-da-se-izjasni-oko-spota-sns/>

<sup>76</sup> "Rada Trajković: SPC se ponaša kao ogranak SNS, do Porfirija bila oslonac Srbima," N1, 20 July 2022, <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/rada-trajkovic-spc-se-ponasa-kao-ogranak-sns-do-porfirija-bila-oslonac-srbima/>

knowing about the cases of pedophilia and pimping for many years. However, all investigations have ended up in a cover-up. In his latest book "Ispovest kako smo ubili Boga" (The Confession of How We Killed God), which was published by the NGO Montenegro International, the former Deakon Bojan Jovanović accused Bishop Joanikije of covering up the cases of pedophilia. The mentioned nongovernmental organization reminds us that in 2012 the commission of the Serbian Orthodox Church headed by Bishop Joanikije of Budimlja and Nikšić launched an investigation into three cases of pedophilia at the Cetinje Monastery, but it never got an epilogue. On 9 May 2021, Montenegro International brought the criminal charges against the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral and Bishop Joanikije due to covering up the cases of pedophilia and alleged minor pimping at the Cetinje and Dajbabe Monasteries before the Special State Prosecutor's Office. The cases of pedophilia that have especially shaken the Serbian Orthodox Church are the cases of Bishops Kačavenda and Pahomije.<sup>77</sup>

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

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

Irinej of Bačka reacted very harshly. He criticized the bereaved woman for asking him for her son's belongings at all, for hiring lawyers and for taking over the family apartment after the grant of probate was issued. In his letter, the Bishop points out that the way she has acted so far "is not acceptable for the Church" and that it is best for her to "accept the Church's views". According to the testimony of the bereaved woman, the Diocese of Bačka has not even given her the list of her son's personal belongings left in the Kovilj Monastery where he served and lived, nor has she been allowed to see them.<sup>78</sup>

## FROM THE PURGE TO THE CHALLENGE OF AUTONOMY

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

In late 2019, the Faculty of Orthodox Theology was torn by internal conflicts and the names of the actors involved in them – Metropolitan

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

Porfirije of Zagreb and Ljubljana and Bishop Irinej of Bačka among others – appeared in public. Namely, after the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church denied a blessing to the Dean, Bishop Ignjatije, to carry out this duty because he was against the decision to remove two lecturers from teaching, the Rectorate of the University of Belgrade reacted because the Church's interference in the work of the Faculty that is part of the University. The conflicts were intensified to such an extent that the employed reported the threats by Metropolitan Porfirije, who is the head of the Faculty Council, whose legality has been called into question.

The controversial letter that arrived in the Dean's Office of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, due to which the messenger was threatened, was the memo from the Rector's Office, that is, the fourth warning by Rector Ivanka Popović that the Council of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology was not legally elected and that its decisions, including the acceptance of the resignation of the Dean, Bishop Ignjatije, and the election of the new leadership – would not be legal. Messenger Ljubomir Grčić submitted a report to the Faculty Secretariat in which he stated that he was receiving threats that he would “blown away”, that “he should not play with fire” and that “he should use his brain”.

Apart from the messenger, two professors at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Vladan Perišić and Rodoljub Kubat, also addressed the employed at that faculty for the same reason. In an e-mail to their colleagues, they mentioned Metropolitan Porfirije's threats to some other employees at the Faculty: “Before the session of the Teaching-Scientific Council in the evening, on 12 November 2019, Metropolitan Porfirije called his colleague Dr Drago Sanda and told him: “The Patriarch has a message for you – if you don't vote for the removal of the Dean, your

neck will be on the block”. Let us remember that this Metropolitan had a very unpleasant conversation with a young assistant professor in which, among other things, he threatened that, if the Faculty does not act according to the instructions of the Holy Synod “Bishop Irinej and he will go to Vučić and detach the Faculty from the University”. As for complaints for threats, Metropolitan Porfirije told the media that it was about lies and slander and that he did not know the reason for them. The complaints for threats in circular e-mails were also rejected by some professors at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology who stood in the Metropolitan's protection.

Some experts pointed to cooperation between the Church and the state authorities in the violation of the Constitution and law, as well as the Statute of the oldest state university. According to the sociologist of religion, Professor Milan Vukomanović, “the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church went so far in the dispute over the Faculty of Orthodox Theology that it completely ignored the warnings from the Rectorate. Moreover, the Serbian Government, as the founder of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, came to the aid of the Holy Synod by appointing eight representatives to the Faculty Council, including one Bishop, a member of the Holy Synod, Irinej Bulović, who complemented the illegally elected Council as a state representative just before the election of a new dean.”<sup>79</sup>

The Rector of the University of Belgrade, Ivanka Popović, has stated that the University is concerned because the reputation of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology is called into question due to the influence

79 “Jedan dopis stvorio probleme – ‘igra moći’ na Bogoslovskom fakultetu,” N1, 17 December 2010, <https://n1info.rs/vesti/a553305-jedan-dopis-tvorio-probleme-igra-moci-na-bogoslovskom-fakultetu/>

coming from outside the academic community, thus jeopardizing the legally guaranteed autonomy of the Faculty. In her opinion, the pressure on students and the employed is possible through the misuse of blessing, which appears in several articles of the Statute of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology. According to the Committee on Statutory Issues, these articles have not been harmonized with the University Statute. “Due to an active implementation of these articles of the Statute, the Faculty of Orthodox Theology has put its staff members in an unequal position vis-à-vis other members of the academic community of the University,” Popović has said and then added that she expects the Faculty’s documents to be harmonized with the University.<sup>80</sup>

The problem soon became more complicated by the announced dismissals from the mentioned religious institution of higher education. In mid-October 2020, Professor Rodoljub Kubat announced that he received a dismissal notice from the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in which it was stated that, pursuant to the executive decision of the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Faculty of Orthodox Theology brought the decision to ban Kubat from teaching at that Faculty. As was stated, “Pursuant to this decision, the Dean of the Faculty will promptly bring the appropriate decision on the termination of the Professor’s employment at the Faculty”. Kubat is convinced that Bishop Irinej of Bačka – “the shadow Patriarch”, who makes decisions on behalf of Patriarch Irinej and, frequently, the Holy Synod itself” – is behind his dismissal. According to some media, the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church made the decision on the professor’s dismissal and handed in the notice to him through the Dean of the

<sup>80</sup> “Popović: Univerzitet zabrinut zbog uticaja na Bogoslovski fakultet”, N1, 4 June 2020, <https://n1info.rs/vesti/a606489-popovic-univerzitet-zabrinut-zbog-uticaja-na-bogoslovski-fakultet/>

Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Zoran Ranković, which is allegedly contrary to the Law on Higher Education and the Statute of the University of Belgrade. It was recalled that Kubat insisted before the Scientific and Teaching Council of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology on several occasions that the scandals involving Vice-Dean Vladimir Vukašinović and Vicar Bishop Stefan Šarić, faced by his Faculty for years, should be clarified and not “swept under the carpet”: “I asked the Faculty to appeal to the prosecutor’s office and the relevant institutions to process these cases as soon as possible and set up a Faculty commission that would deal with those scandals. We all suffer because of this. Both the Faculty and the Church are smeared and dragged through the media day after day. If they are not guilty, let the story end. If they are guilty, they should be held accountable. Procrastination does not suit anyone.”<sup>81</sup>

One part of the public expressed its condemnation and assessed that the autonomy of the University and scientific research, as well as the principle of secularism proclaimed by the Serbian Constitution were called into question in a “most cruel way” because the Administration of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology “unquestionably” carried out the decision of the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church by handing over a dismissal notice to the mentioned professor. Metropolitan Porfirije of Zagreb and Ljubljana reacted to the condemnation stating that in the case of the fired Professor Rodoljub Kubat “individuals see the base and chance for the elimination” of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology from the academic community. He also stated that one “cannot dispute the legality and democracy of Kubat’s treatment”.

<sup>81</sup> “Kubat dobio otkaz na Bogoslovskom fakultetu, kaže da iza toga stoji Irinej bački”, N1, 14 October 2020, <https://n1info.rs/vesti/a660548-profesoru-bogoslovskog-fakulteta-rodoljubu-kubatu-uruceno-resenje-o-otkazu/>

Metropolitan Porfirije, who is the President of the Council of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, continued his reasoning: “The Holy Synod of Bishops has the legitimate right to grant and withdraw the approval for teaching at the highest theological institution which has originated from the bosom of the Serbian Orthodox Church and, as a founder and full-fledged member of the University of Belgrade, also fully participates in the life of this institution.” Emphasizing that the decision of the Holy Synod “was not unfounded”, the Metropolitan explained it in the following way: “According to the conclusion of this body, it was preceded by Dr Kubat’s perennial anti-church and anti-faculty activities which, through social, print and electronic media, as well as in other direct and indirect ways, caused irreversible damage to the most important institutions and the reputation of the Serbian Orthodox Church.” Reacting to the statement of the Rector’s Board of the University of Belgrade, which disputes the legality and legitimacy of the decision of the Dean of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Professor Kubat has stated that things are moving in a very wrong direction if the Faculty of Orthodox Theology “persists in its intention to fire him” even after the the statement of the Rector’s Board. Kubat claims that “much more serious problems in the Church and at the Faculty” are covered up” by his dismissal.<sup>82</sup>

Soon afterwards, Professor Bishop Maksim Vasiljević was also dismissed from the same faculty in an almost identical way, after the Holy Synod did not give him its blessing for the teaching position. In this case, the recently fired Professor Kubat recognizes the systematic persecution of the unfit, while the message of university professors that

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

a blessing at a state university cannot be a criterion is more and more often articulated. In addition to Professors Kubat and Bishop Maksim, Assistant Professor Marko Vilotić was also left without a blessing at the beginning of the year. Even then, the Church did not give any explanation, while Bishop Irinej of Bačka stated that it was of a theological nature and would not be comprehensible to the public.<sup>83</sup>

In the end, the Ministry of Education did not accept the objections of the University of Belgrade that giving consent (blessing) by the Serbian Orthodox Church for the employment and dismissal of teachers at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, as well as for the enrolment of students would violate the University’s autonomy and produce harmful consequences. In the Draft Amendments to the Law on Higher Education, which was adopted by the Serbian Government in mid-2021, there remained the identical provisions as those in the Draft Amendments to the Law to which both the University and several faculties expressed their objections during the discussion. The attempts to find a compromise solution for the University and the Faculty of Orthodox Theology did not bear fruit, so that the state decided to resolve the dispute by amending the Law on Higher Education. It is worth mentioning the observation made by Ognjen Radonjić, a professor at the Faculty of Philosophy, that it was clear from the very beginning that the Draft Amendments to the Law on Higher Education were put up for discussion just to fulfil the form. He assumes that the agreement on the introduction of a blessing into this law was reached with the leaders of the Church, which is why the Ministry of Education was not interested in the opinion of academics from the outset. In this

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



case, Professor Radonjić pointed to a very important fact: “It must be admitted, however, that even the academic community did not react to it when it was the subject of discussion. (...) Apart from a few lonely voices, the University Administration as well as the Senate have decided to solve this problem, which has been present since 2019, by doing nothing. And the price had to be paid: the autonomy of the University was thrown into the dustbin, because a non-university body was allowed to decide on university issues, while the Serbian Orthodox Church is neither the owner nor the employer nor the founder of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology. It has been shown that the University is not up to the situation we are in and the only thing left for me is to express my regret.”<sup>84</sup>

## THE CONTINUATION OF DISCRIMINATION

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

<sup>84</sup> “Izmene Zakona o visokom obrazovanju”, Paragraf, 8 June 2021, <https://paragrafco.co.rs/dnevne-vesti/100621/100621-vest8.html>

is inappropriate, especially nowadays when for us the Serbs, both in Serbia and everywhere in the world, there is the topic of topics, that is, the topic of Kosovo and Metohija”. Naturally, even on this occasion, the opportunity was not missed to mention “our state leadership headed by the Serbian President” who is “uncompromisingly and unyieldingly fighting for the preservation of our primeval southern province within Serbia, for the salvation of our greatest sanctuaries, (...) as well as for the survival and stay of the Serbian people on their centuries-old hearths.”<sup>85</sup>

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

<sup>85</sup> “SPC pozdravlja otkazivanje Europrajda”, Politika, 27 August 2022, <http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/515318/SPC-pozdravlja-otkazivanje-Europrajda>

Whose children, whose children are they? We will stand up against it, me first. I'm getting up at this moment, I've already gotten up. And at this moment today, I stand up and curse, I will curse and anathemize all those who organize and participate in something like that. I can do so much, if I had a weapon, I would use it, but I've not. And probably no one will give it to me even if I ask for it now when they hear that I would go out with a weapon. And I would go out..."<sup>86</sup>

In late July 2022, in his address after the liturgy in Pelagićevo, Bishop Fotije of Zvornik and Tuzla said that the preparation of the so-called Pride Parade "violates all family values and all moral values of our Serbian Orthodox people. The preservation of the family and true moral values is something that is primary and necessary". Criticizing the yielding to foreign influences, the Bishop continued: "Unfortunately, it seems that there will be gay parades throughout Serbia during one week in September. And when I saw the programme of the announced gay parades, they should visit all cultural institutions, church institutions, monasteries, the Seminary and the High School in Sremski Karlovci, where they won't be?! You can imagine what that week will look like! And why the one who signed that didn't think with his head and compromise his people, ethics, morals, conscience, history, belief? And now people come to us from the hundredth value system, from the hundredth belief system – wich is not accepted in our Serbian Orthodox tradition and culture!"<sup>87</sup>

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

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

While serving "a prayer for the sanctity of marriage and family, harmony and peace among our people in front of the Church of Saint Sava in Belgrade on 11 September 2022 and while addressing the "endless lines of pious people", Patriarch Porfirije pointed to the importance of "Orthodox Christian identity and Gospel values" in the formation of "our public morality", our national identity that is, as traditionally emphasized, based on the historical and value-oriented pivotal role of the Serbian Orthodox Church for all Serbs "wherever we live, regardless of the state and political borders". Here we will single out a long yet very illustrative quote: "...we do not impose our way of life on anyone, but we also do not want anyone, from any part of the world, to come and impose his values, his view of the world, his way of life. (...) We do not want anyone to tell us what we should be. For us, our measure and criterion are the word of Christ, the word of God. Today, however, we are faced with waves, with a tsunami, with the invasion of numerous new value systems, which are imposed violently, aggressively or with soft power and invisible works under the radar, aiming to destroy any existing natural or civilizational order, establish a new paradigm, new rules. (...) The epilogue of these ideologies of posthumanist society is not only that we lose the idea of what is male and what is female, what is marriage but that, in the end (...), we cannot even say with certainty what a man is."

The Patriarch tried to remedy and mitigate the possible consequences of Bishop Nikanor's destructive rhetoric. However, he retained essentially his stance and demanded the review of textbooks and the withdrawal of the lectures "which promote gender ideology": "(...) let me immediately emphasize that we are also against any kind of violence, that we are against contempt, hatred, persecution and labelling of those who share such ideas, especially if violence is committed in the name

of God, in the name of Christ. (...) We do not judge them, we do not accuse them and we do not condemn them. (...) We do not interfere in how someone organizes his life. It is not a question of personal relationship with anyone in particular. It is about the fact that we cannot accept anyone's weaknesses, preferences and choices wif they are not in compliance with the order established by God, but are promoted and imposed as a new social norm and rule. (...) We cannot allow this ideology to change the model of the society where our people has been living ever since. We are already faced with the fruits of the silent engineering of that LGBT ideology. Lest anyone say that we exaggerate, that we are distrustful, that I exaggerate: we have recently found out that in our primary and secondary school textbooks, away from the public eye, there are lessons which promote gender ideology. Who has done that? Has anyone asked you, whose children go to school, about it? Do you agree? If you have not been asked and I know you have not, we call on the competent authorities to immediately withdraw all textbooks, handbooks and teaching aids from secondary and elementary schools, as well as preschool institutions where there are such lessons.”<sup>88</sup>

It can only be said so much about “we do not impose on anyone”. This topic requires a special review and analysis, but now it is certainly appropriate to ask the Patriarch (former Metropolitan of Zagreb and Ljubljana) whether Serbian citizens were asked this question and “we know they did not” when the mandatory additional postage stamp was issued to finance the construction of the Church of Saint Sava, when the money from the budget of the Republic of Serbia was allocated for

<sup>88</sup> “Desetine hiljada vernih na svenarodnom molebanu za svetinju braka i porodice, slogu i mir u našem narodu”, SPC, 11 September 2022, <https://spc.rs/tv-hram-uzivo-svenarodni-moleban-za-svetinju-braka-i-porodice-slogu-i-mir-u-nasem-narodu/>

the health and social insurance of the clergy, when the property tax exemption and the right to a VAT refund were introduced, when enormous funds from the state budget were allocated for the construction of the Church or the mere introduction of religious education into the education system which, on top of everything, was done beyond law and public debate.

The mentioned rhetoric represents the continuation of a wide range of condemnations, indignations and discontents of the church dignitaries due to the organization of the events pointing to the unfavourable position of LGBT people. It was just the spiritual father of the current Patriarch, spokesman of the Serbian Orthodox Church and permanent (current and then) member of the Holy Synod, Bishop Irinej of Bačka, who stated on the official website of the majority church on 18 September 2009 that “the Serbian Orthodox Church and traditional churches and religious communities oppose the right to a public expression of sexual orientation or any other inclination, especially if it offends the citizens’ rights to privacy and family life, religious beliefs and inviolable right to personal dignity”. The representatives of traditional religious communities also referred to this official position during the subsequent years.

For more than a decade, numerous church dignitaries, especially the loud-mouthed Metropolitan Amfilohije of Montenegro and the Littoral, have called pride parades, both in Serbia and Montenegro, as “violent propaganda”, “endangerment to public morals”, “eternal symbolism of Sodom and Gomorrah”; LGBT people have been called “the stench of Sodom”, characterized as “ungodly and perverse” and “the plague and pestilence of Sodom”, and that all this has been the reflection of “the moral state not only of our society but of the entire Euro-American civilization”. The late Patriarch Irinej has demanded that

the “parade of shame” not take place, because “we are tired of being humiliated and fulfilling foreign wishes”. Due to the decision to ban the Pride Parade in Belgrade, Bishop Filaret of Mileševa has presented a decoration to the Minister of Internal Affairs, Ivica Dačić, because he “brought honour to Serbia these days” when “some democrats” tried to put it in a pillory and spill the Serbian blood in the streets of Belgrade”. Anti-European and pro-Russian messages could also be heard. Thus, Bishop Filaret said that no one would turn Serbia and Russia on each other: “Europe, Europe, and it has taken away our heart – Kosovo and Metohija!” and exclaimed “We want Russia, long live Russia!”<sup>89</sup>

Apart from the mentioned permanent rhetoric, one should also recall one attempt of church interventionism in 2009,<sup>90</sup> namely the demonstration of a strong political influence of the majority church on the secular legislative state bodies. It is about the joint action of traditional churches and religious communities in Serbia, led by the majority church, aiming to prevent the adoption of the Draft Anti-Discrimination Law in the National Assembly, as well as requesting the deletion of the articles dealing with the right of an individual to freely practice his or her religion or conviction, as well as gender equality, that is, sexual freedom. The deletion of the terms “sexual orientation” and “gender equality” was also demanded and the objections were raised with respect to the article about misdemeanour liability in the case of discrimination.

89 “Patrijarh: Irinej: Hvala majci Rusiji”, Kurir, 7 October 2011.

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

## RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

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

The religious authorities propose that “religious education regains the status of a subject, that is, the status of a mandatory elective subject, that teaching is organized at the class level, not at the group level, regardless of the number of registered students...; that the choice between religious education and an alternative subject should be made at the beginning of the first and the beginning of the fifth grade of primary education, as well as at the beginning of the first grade of secondary education ...; to legally regulate the employment status of 2100 religion teachers and anticipate their employment for an indefinite period; that churches and religious communities can exercise an independent supervision over religious teaching...”. It is interesting to

note that in this case, unlike most others, the experience and authority of the European Union (Schola Europaea) was completely used as an argument for proving the correctness, justification, that is, legality and legitimacy of the presented demands and proposed measures.

The periodical topic that reactualizes the status of religious teaching in the education system of the Republic of Serbia came into the public spotlight much more seriously in mid-June 2022, when Patriarch Porfirije announced the following on his Instagram profile: "I am very disappointed with the information that the principals of a number of elementary and secondary schools in Serbia knowingly discourage and, I would say, even prevent students and parents from opting for religious education. I will consult with my brother Archbishops and representatives of other churches and religious communities about whether we should announce their names and the names of the schools that discriminate against their own students. In any case, we will also send an official response to the competent state authorities." The meeting of the highest secular and spiritual authorities and Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić with Patriarch Porfirije and the members of the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church was held soon. In the press release issued after this meeting it is emphasized in one sentence that the church representatives "expressed their concern about the position of religious education in the Serbian education system and asked support from the Serbian President so that the state's position on this issue would be changed".<sup>91</sup>

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

## CURIOSITY

Hardly anyone could assume that Patriarch Porfirije would also be mentioned in seemingly peripheral sports news, but this case can be very indicative in an analysis of the relationship between secular and spiritual spheres and competences, limits and responsibilities. Namely, after several weeks of negotiations with the management of the Partizan Basketball Club, Nikola Mirotić, the Spanish basketball player of Montenegrin origin and one of the best European basketball players, addressed the public with a letter in which he announced that, due to constant threats, he would not continue his career in the aforementioned club. In the official statement of KK Partizan, it was said that, parallel to the official negotiations, "there was a lot of information that certain people were threatening Nikola Mirotić, so that there is a fear for his safety if he becomes a Partizan basketball player". In further text it is also stated that KK Partizan "firmly believes that Nikola Mirotić's reasons for not signing a contract have nothing to do with threats, but with some other issues".<sup>92</sup>

During his appearance at a TV station, the former and most trophy coach of KK Partizan, Duško Vujošević, mentioned Patriarch Porfirije in connection with the Mirotić case: "There are rumours that the Patriarch also called on him, relying on his religiosity, to choose another club which he also supports. If this is really true, and I doubt it, then he is not a patriarch, but is a member of some lobby". Patriarch Porfirije's answer came two days later: "I share at least two loves with Mr Duško Vujošević. I love basketball and sports in general, and I also love the Bay of Boka and, in particular, Herceg Novi. It is clear that he did

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

not replace Škver and Savina beaches for Belgrade at more than 40°C without immediate need. Therefore, I can somewhat understand his carelessness, because he included me as the possible protagonist in a bizarre, absurd and utterly unbelievable fabrication about me and basketball player Mirotić.”<sup>93</sup> In a written response sent to a sports editorial board, Vujošević refers to the Patriarch’s comment: “I am glad that with your statement you confirmed my doubts about the truth of the rumours that you have been involved in in the Mirotić case, relying on his religiosity. I have instantly and very clearly expressed my doubts. And this can easily be confirmed on the available video of my guest appearance in the morning programme ... (...) I do not see how all this has anything to do with where I spend the summer, but since you also brought up this question, I will be glad to answer. It is true that I often spend my summer in the Bay of Kotor, but when I am there, I stay in an apartment and not in the luxury Lazaro Hotel.” In continuation, Vujošević refers to a hardly naive fact: “I am glad that you understand the importance of sports and treat them in the right way. In this context, it is good that you do not use your influence to divide the Serbian people into Crvena zvezda and Partizan fans because, due to your function, you should be above such harmful divisions. In that sense, I hope you agree that such divisions are emphasized if the reception of the Crvena Zvezda basketball players is organized, but is not followed by the rejection of Partizan basketball players.”<sup>94</sup> Here the

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

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

coach alludes to the case when, in early October 2021, the day after the victory in the ABA League Derby, the Crvena Zvezda basketball players paid a visit to the Patriarchate, that is, Patriarch Porfirije. A complete delegation of the KK Crvena Zvezda (men’s and women’s selection, management and President Nebojša Čović). On that occasion, KK Crvena Zvezda issued the following statement: “The Club has also sent an official invitation to our Patriarch, who himself has never hidden that he is a Zvezdaš and a great fan of sports and basketball, to be the guest of KK Crvena Zvezda in the season that has just started”.<sup>95</sup>

Less than three months after the discussion between the former KK Partizan coach and Patriarch Porfirije, in an interview for a Belgrade weekly, the current coach of KK Partizan, Željko Obradović, reflected on what was happening regarding the negotiations with Mirotić, which were progressing as desired, but the circumstances suddenly changed: “Less than two weeks after such negotiations, he called me and said that he could not come. When I asked him why, he answered that this was due to pressure. (...) Then he told me that there were several calls and that he was forced to give up. I will tell you exactly what Mirotić told me. He did not mention any name, but he told me that the calls ‘came from politicians’ and ‘from the church’”.<sup>96</sup>

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

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

