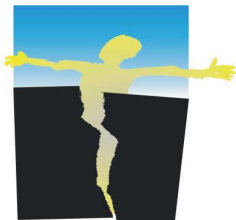


# HELSINKI Bulletin



*Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia*

Rige od Fere str. #20, 11000 Belgrade, Serbia  
tel./fax +381 11 30 32 408; e-mail office@helsinki.org.rs  
www.helsinki.org.rs

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## **New Patriarch – No Basic Changes**

A change at the throne of the Serb Orthodox Church /SPC/ will effectuate no major changes in the SPC structure, organization and functioning or, for that matter, in its secular ambitions. In this context, newly elected Patriarch Irinej (Gavrilovic), former bishop of Nis, guarantees continuity.



In other words, SPC will be trying to safeguard the space it has occupied at Serbia's public scene over the past ten years, strengthen its position and further expand its influence on governmental policies.

As a markedly conservative institution, SPC manifests considerable animosity for other religious communities – and not only for the Catholic Church but also for smaller religious entities. Religious communities in Serbia are mostly ethnic in character. And yet, Patriarch Irinej hints at some

changes in SPC attitude towards the Catholic Church.

SPC recognizes not the new reality in the region – the realities in Republika Srpska, Montenegro and Macedonia. SPC denies Kosovo's independence. Patriarch Irinej sticks to these stands, too. In his inaugural address, he said, "One of the Church's most important and holiest tasks is to safeguard the tormented Kosovo and help the state that does its best to defend it from those planning to snatch it away from us." For him, Kosovo is a Serb Jerusalem – Serbia cannot be without Kosovo. What also marked his inaugural address is the emphasis he placed on the Church's obligation to "bring together and maintain the unity of the people scattered at all the continents, which has always been its primordial duty." With its big influence on Republika Srpska, aggressiveness against Montenegro and denial of autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, SPC continues fostering the deadly nationalistic mythology.

Milorad Tomanic, historian and author of the book "Serbian Church in the War and the Wars in It," says relations between Eastern Orthodox churches in the region will not significantly change as



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Metropolitan Amfilohije will continue to largely influence SPC. SPC will manifest readiness for dialogue with Catholics, though a dialogue resembling the one that has been on since mid-11<sup>th</sup> century producing no concrete results.

### **Profile of the newly elected Patriarch**

To all appearances, Irinej, the newly elected Patriarch, will be following this “major trend.” However, observers take that his indisputable personal traits may contribute to SPC’s gradual movement in a positive direction.



By comparison with other bishops and church dignitaries, he is a modest man (like his mentor and ideal the late patriarch Pavle), church connoisseurs emphasize. They all agree that Irinej is a “tolerant,” “wise” and “reasonable” person and “a man of compromise.” Though he belongs to the SPC “conservative wing” – against its alleged division into “conservatives” and “reformers” – he manifests no hostility for “reformers” and refuses not a dialogue with them.

In his inaugural address, new Patriarch Irinej makes no reference whatsoever to the Church’s self-examination vis-à-vis most delicate topics marking its “comeback” (after “communist expulsion,” as its dignitaries usually put it) as a major social actor. This primarily refers to its infamous legacy of the 1990s wars in the territory of ex-Yugoslavia: from the role it had in “national

awakening” to the wartime actions (blessing of military and para-military units and commanders, belligerent propaganda, logistic support, participation in military and political rallies, armed priests partaking in military operations, etc.). In this context, the SCP has not yet commented on President Boris Tadic’s initiative for adoption of a resolution on Srebrenica by the People’s Assembly. The initiative itself has triggered off a debate in political circles and beyond them.

Even with a new patriarch at its helm, SPC will be leaning on nationalism in the first place: nationalism remains the backbone of its identity and “spiritual” activism in the Serb national corps.

On January 26, 2009 in Nis, Irinej said, “We are rather familiar with the philosophy and psychology of Islam. When in minority, they /Muslims/ behave themselves and behave correctly. When equal in numbers, they raise their heads against the rest. And when in majority, they pressurize others either to move out or to join them. That’s the philosophy of Islam.”<sup>1</sup> Both Islamic communities in Serbia promptly protested against this statement.

He didn’t miss the opportunity to claim that Serbs and Montenegrins were the same nation. “Division between Montenegro and Serbia is senseless and irrational as we are the same people with same roots,” he said.<sup>2</sup> This indicates that his attitude towards the Montenegrin church will be negative. He called it “a casual community unfortunately supported by a state /Montenegro/.”<sup>3</sup>

The fact that the process of his election took a couple of hours only despite two years of internal turmoil and the rivalry among bishops during sick Patriarch Pavle’s long absence justifies the thesis by many that Irinej is “the only proper solution for peace at home.”

<sup>1</sup> Blic, January 27, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Kurir, January 27, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Blic, January 27, 2010.

The most important progress SPC could make under his leadership relates to improved relations with the Roman Catholic Church and Vatican. Irinej has already publicly manifested his ecumenical tendency towards by advocating the Pope's visit to Serbia in three years from now (2013) for the ceremony marking the 1700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Edict of Milan in Nis, Emperor Constantine's birthplace.

### **Election campaign**

The campaign for the election of a new patriarch was actually going on for almost two years – throughout sick Patriarch Pavle absence from active life. Though the campaign was only logically staged behind the scenes, information about internal conflicts – occasionally bordering on scandals – the rivalry between several lobbies and currents, as well as about possible favorites of some interest groups within the Church and beyond it reached the public through various channels.

In the week before the election the campaign became public. A plan for neutralizing or disabling the "Bosnian current" led by Bishop of Zvornik-Tuzla Vasilije (Kacavenda) was obvious. So, some media – tabloids the same as serious papers – were trying to discredit Vasilije by bringing to public notice his luxurious residence in Bijeljina and his biographical picanteries such as decades-long work for the State Security Service.

Metropolitan Amfilohije (Radovic) had been seen as the main claimant to the patriarchal throne. As "the first among equals" he was acting on behalf of sick Patriarch Pavle and was elected "guardian of the throne" when Pavle died. His ambition rested on his reputation among church dignitaries inasmuch as on the support he seemed to have from Russian and Greek Eastern Orthodox churches. However, on the eve of the election he was criticized in public for allegedly having usurped the rights invested in the Patriarch

only and, in particular, for his ideological affiliation (closeness to rightist nationalistic circles, politically embodied in the Democratic Party of Serbia).

According to unofficial sources, the Belgrade regime not only wanted to have the Bosnian lobby neutralized but to see a person from Serbia proper at the patriarchal throne. Bishop of Backa Irinej was the most serious candidate in this regard.

### **How the vote was taken by Holly Synod**

The vote taken by forty-five members of the SPC electoral assembly on January 22, 2009 only testified of the authenticity of the guesses about the balance of power in the ranks of church dignitaries. Namely, in the first round more than fifty percent of votes went to Metropolitan Amfilohije only, whereas in the second round to Bishop of Nis Irinej. The vote on the two candidates with most votes – Bishop of Banjaluka Jefrem and Bishop of Backa Irinej – was taken in the next two rounds, and Bishop of Backa eventually won.

By SPC rules, notes with names of three candidates with most votes are separated in three sealed envelope and an authorized person (Archimandrite Gavriilo of the Lepavina Monastery in Croatia in this specific case) draws the one with the name of a future patriarch.

The entire procedure was over in a couple of hours only.

### **Irinej, a man of compromise**

Bishop of Nis Irinej was hardly mentioned by anyone making guesses about the outcome of the vote. It was only on the eve of the meeting of the electoral assembly that the Bishop of Nis begun giving interviews – mostly



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dealing with the procedure of the election of a new patriarch. The very timing of his promotion in the media is rather indicative – for it was him rather than SPC official spokesman, Bishop of Backa Irinej, who was addressing the press. Besides, his prognoses turned to be to the point. “I don’t think the rounds of vote will be so many to adjourn the procedure to the next day. We know each other fairly well, we know what kind of person any of us is and how much he could contribute to the life of the Church,” he said.

Patriarch Irinej (80) is surely among the dignitaries of high repute. During his long monkhood career he was a close associate of Patriarch Pavle. And he has a reputation of a most active representative of church diplomacy. In this capacity, his involvement was crucial for overcoming the schism in SPC in America (he traveled to the US more than twenty times). In 2002, he led SPC delegation in the negotiations with the Macedonian Orthodox Church: the negotiations seemed to be successful and leading to the end of the years-long dispute between the two churches. However, the relations became chilly again because of SPC’s inflexibility.

Patriarch Irinej was born in Serbia (in a village nearby Cacak). “Even if he hadn’t been its candidate, the state must have sighed with relief after his election,” says journalist Jovan Janjic, adding that the state got “a reliable persons for a patriarch, one who will readily cooperate with it.”

Other church connoisseurs such as Zivica Tucic or Mirko Djordjevic also pinpoint the Patriarch’s sobriety and tactfulness, and his readiness for dialogue with various currents within SPC (confronted over liturgy, calendar, ecumenism, etc.) and for compromise. They also speak highly of his readiness for dialogue with

other religious communities in Serbia and beyond it.

### **What is to be expected from new Patriarch?**

Most important changes the new Patriarch may introduce relate to “an ecumenical breakthrough.”



While still a bishop, Patriarch Irinej began preparing the ceremony to mark a major day of Christianity, 1700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Edict of Milan. The plan is to have the central celebration staged in Nis, Emperor Constantine’s birthplace, and assemble major leaders of Christianity from all over the world, including the Pope. “That would secure Serbia a place of honor, as Serbia would actually host the first meeting of the highest representatives of Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches since the schism of 1054,” says Irinej. Adding that Serbia would welcome the Pope’s visit, he also says, “That would be an opportunity not only for an ecumenical meeting but also for dialogue. And, probably, a ‘golden opportunity’ for broaching reunification.” That was not the first time Irinej brought up the subject. *Politika* reminds that in an interview with the paper in 2008 he said, “There is no reason to be afraid or ashamed of a meeting with the Pope...Such a meeting and dialogue are necessary.”

Addressing the press for the first time in his capacity as the Patriarch, Irinej also insisted on the dialogue. “An event and meeting as



such precondition settlement of the accumulated problems that have distanced us from each other too much,” he said.



No doubt that such stance of “the first among equals” will meet huge obstacles because of SPC’s unyielding attitude towards Vatican. Asked about it, Bishop of Backa Irinej avoided a direct answer – however, his answer leads to the conclusion that he opposes such a U-turn. So far only Bishop Irinej (Dobrijevic) sided with the Patriarch in this matter.

**Developments in the country and crucial decision-making are largely influenced by the Church and there is no doubt about it. It is still too early to know what attitude Patriarch Irinej will have, the more so since he has never voiced his stands on governmental and national matters up to now. However, church connoisseurs feel optimistic. So, Zivica Tucic says, “The Church claims it stands for the voice of people. If that’s true, it should demonstrate it in its public activity...If 65 percent of citizens of Serbia are in favor of the country’s membership of the European Union, the Church’s ‘voice’ shall be the same.”**



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