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Item Type	Book chapter
Authors	Golijanin, Vedran;Šoljević, Saša;Jovanović, Olivera
DOI	10.58863/20.500.12424/4291182
Publisher	Globethics Publications;Conference of European Churches
Rights	2023 Globethics Publications & CEC;Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International
Download date	2026-07-05 16:05:31
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Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/4291182

NATIONALIST POPULISM IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH'S PERSPECTIVE

*Vedran Golijanin, Saša Šoljević, Olivera Jovanović**

Understanding the social, political and religious context of Bosnia and Herzegovina is not an easy task, not only due to differences between the three dominant ethnic groups (Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks) but also due to their staggering similarities. While Yugoslavia was drawing its dying breath, war broke out between these three peoples who share quite similar (or almost identical) languages and cultures - a fact that begs the question: what pushed these similar peoples into such an atrocious conflict? The answers are many, and most of them reflect various political goals of both local and international importance. One of these answers is reminiscent of Huntington's idea of a "clash of civilizations": Serbs are mostly Orthodox, Croats are mostly Catholic, and Bosniaks are mostly Muslim; therefore, it was religion that motivated these peoples to engage in mortal combat. This explanation might also be

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reinforced by a dominant trait of Bosnian populism since the breakup of Yugoslavia, and that is strong reliance on national and religious identity of Bosnia's ethnicities. However, a careful and objective observer of Bosnian political and religious life would probably not draw such a simplistic conclusion. There is indeed an obvious connection between three peoples and their respective religions, but there is also a fact, often overlooked by authors who study Bosnian political-religious dynamics, that these three religions are universal and not merely national. That puts Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Islam at odds with political ideologies and methodologies that try to reduce them to tribal cults, which means that they are fundamentally opposed to nationalist populism. Nevertheless, nationalist politicians in Bosnia and Herzegovina, while formally embracing secular values, rarely miss a chance to point out, directly or indirectly, that their politics are in harmony with the religious identity of their people. That means that the understanding of Bosnian populism is conditioned by the understanding of Bosnian religions and nationalisms.

The populist reduction of religion to a political tool in Bosnia and Herzegovina did receive some scholarly attention, mostly in the fields of sociology and peace studies. Theological interpretations (especially those of Orthodox Christian theologians) on the same issue, however, are quite rare. Thus, our paper is an attempt to review and interpret, from an Orthodox point of view, several major themes related to populism in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Some of these issues, such as finding the best definition for Bosnian populism, or interpreting the connection between the Serbian Orthodox Church and populist nationalism, have already been touched upon by both domestic and foreign experts. Other issues, most notably the effect of populist discourse of right-wing parties in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina on the Serbian Orthodox Church, did not receive much attention, neither in domestic nor in foreign studies of Bosnian populism. This is somewhat surprising, since the (continually

obstructed) process of restitution of Church property in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, seized by the communist regime and currently denied to the Church by Bosniak authorities, is a prime example of religious discrimination fueled and justified by nationalist populist discourse. Drawing attention to the problem of restitution of Church property in Bosnia and presenting the Orthodox Christian view of populism, in general, and Bosnian populism, in particular, is, therefore, intended to be our small contribution to an ongoing global debate on this issue.

Peculiarity of Bosnian Populism

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a post-socialist, post-war country with a complex political system, consisting of two entities with a certain degree of autonomy, as well as common tripartite Presidency with Serbian, Croatian and Bosniak members. Political complexity and deeply rooted ethnic divisions, combined with domestic and foreign political interests that deepen these divisions even further, create a perfect environment for the thriving of populism. Indeed, populist discourse in Bosnia dominates political life and there is an “impending sense of political crisis that is omnipresent among ordinary citizens”.¹ Since religious identities obviously play a certain role in generating this continuous, “omnipresent” crisis, it is necessary to describe Bosnian populism in order to understand what makes it so dependent on religion.

One often quoted definition of populism, originally proposed by Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde, states that populism is a “thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the

¹ Bojanić, Maja Savić / Nikšić, Valida Repovac, ”How We Understand Populism? Popular Responses to Populist Politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina”, in: *Sociological Problems* 51 (*Special Issue*), 2019, 300.

corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people”.² Although many authors have noted that Mudde’s definition does not completely correspond to Bosnian reality, e.g. Savić Bojanić and Repovac Nikšić,³ one can still recognise this kind of populism in the discourse of opposition parties: ruling politicians comprise of corrupt elite that essentially work against the (economic) wellbeing of the people. However, this populism is trumped by another kind of populist discourse that is utilised by the ruling elite in Bosnia, and it is precisely this kind of populism that cannot be contained by Mudde’s definition. The problem is not so much in the notions of “pure people” and “general will” as it is in the notion of the “corrupt elite”, which is practically absent from ruling parties’ populist vocabulary; yet, in spite of the absence of this crucial element, their political discourse is obviously populist. Mudde’s definition assumes that in a certain society a strong feeling of enmity should exist between two different social groups in order for populism to arise and thrive. Since all societies are different, one can assume, along with Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, that “both ‘the corrupt elite’ and ‘the pure people’ are essentially empty vessels which are framed in very different ways in past and present manifestations of populism”.⁴ In the Bosnian context, two opposing sides might be termed as “good people” and “bad people”, and since there is not some corrupt elite but only the entire people, that should be opposed, Bosnian populism naturally allies itself with nationalism. Ernesto Laclau sees this as a typical trait of Eastern European politics in

² Mudde, Cas/ Kaltwasser, Critobál Rovira, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, 6.

³ Bojanić, Maja Savić / Nikšić, Valida Repovac, op.cit., 292.

⁴ Kaltwasser, Cristóbal Rovira, “Reflections on a Contested Concept and its (Mis)Use in the Social Sciences”, in: Fitzi, Gregor/ Mackert, Jürgen / Turner, Bryan S. (eds.): *Populism and the Crisis of Democracy, Volume 1: Concepts and Theory*, London, New York: Routledge, 2019, 66.

a post-communist era, and thus terms it “ethnic populism”: it is a “specificity of a locally defined cultural group, which tends to exclude or drastically diminish the rights of other ethnic minorities”.⁵ Similarly, Savić Bojanić and Repovac Nikšić define Bosnian populism as “ethno-nationalist”.⁶

Mudde states that “the core goal of the nationalist is to achieve a monocultural state”.⁷ If one understands that, for the people of former Yugoslavia, culture is rooted in religion, it becomes clear why the Bosnian conflict had such a strong religious undertone. National and religious identities were repressed under communist regime, so it is not surprising that the fall of communism and their reemergence coincided. However, this “new” nationalism quickly transformed into what Mudde calls “nativism”. According to his definition, nativism is “an ideology, which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (‘the nation’) and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state”.⁸ Even after the war, politicians with nativist agendas continued their divisive populist rhetoric in order to retain power. Bakir Izetbegović, leader of a right-wing Bosniak SDA (Stranka demokratske akcije, Party of Democratic Action) and the most vocal ‘prophet’ of a new war in Bosnia, usually equates the Serbian nation with genocide,⁹ and has

⁵ Laclau, Ernesto, *On Populist Reason*, London, New York: Verso, 2005, 193.

⁶ Bojanić, Maja Savić / Nikšić, Valida Repovac, op. cit., 293.

⁷ Mudde, Cas, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 16.

⁸ Mudde, Cas, op. cit., 19.

⁹ Nezavisne novine (2021) ‘Izetbegović: Radije bih umro nego dopustio da genocidaši zavladaju dijelom BiH’,

<https://www.nezavisne.com/novosti/bih/Izetbegovic-Radije-bih-umro-nego-dopustio-da-genocidasi-zavladaju-dijelom-BiH/657686> (accessed 16 June 2021).

This Izetbegović’s statement resembles a similar statement by Husein Kavazović, leader of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, who in 2016 visited Bosniaks in Switzerland and urged them to vote in the elections in

recently called Serbs “bad people” and Serbian priests “primitive” for consecrating school buildings in Republika Srpska.¹⁰ This kind of rhetoric achieves the two goals of populism as described by Paul Taggart: “Firstly, it rallies support for those sharing a grievance against the demonized groups. In other words, it brings more support to the populist fold. Secondly, it reinforces (or even creates) a sense of solidarity among those who demonize the groups.”¹¹ Since the Serbian Orthodox Church is a single canonical religious institution that unifies all Orthodox Serbs and other Orthodox people on the territory of former Yugoslavia, the populists’ claims that it serves as an organ of Serbian political influence are not surprising.¹²

order to prevent “Vlah” from ruling Srebrenica. This was shocking, not just because *Vlah* is an offensive term for Orthodox Serbs, but also because one of the highest ranking leaders of Islamic Community was openly engaged in a political campaign. RTS (2016), “Kavazović: Ne dopustite da ‘Vlah’ vlada Srebrenicom”, <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/11/region/2329403/kavazovic-ne-dopustite-da-vlah-vlada-srebrenicom.html> (accessed 16 June 2021).

¹⁰ FTV (2021), “Dnevnik D, 21. 01. 2021”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1bQKaqjveJI> (accessed 26 June 2021).

¹¹ Taggart, Paul, *Populism*, Buckingham, Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2000, 94.

¹² SOC has received a lot of (negative) media attention in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina for standing up against the attempts of Montenegrin President Milo Đukanović to, against the will of the Church and the vast majority of Orthodox believers in Montenegro, confiscate Church’s property. Peaceful prayer walks or processions (*litije*) were organized by the Church in 2019 and 2020, with massive attendance of both Serbian and Montenegrin believers. Nevertheless, a group of politicians and public figures from Bosnia and several other former Yugoslav states had signed the petition of support for Đukanović, dismissing Church’s protests as a “mantra about the endangerment of Serbian people”. Komarčević, Dužan / Karabegović, Dženana / Loxha, Amra Zejneli / Zebić, Enis (2019) “Potpisnici o apelu podrške Crnoj Gori”, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/zasto-smo-potpisali-apel-podrske-crnj-gori/30354028.html>, (accessed 23 June 2021).

Of course, it is not only Bosniak, but also Croatian and Serbian politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina that are dominated by populism. Mudde puts all nationalist parties in Bosnia, i.e. SDA, HDZ (Hrvatska demokratska zajednica, Croatian Democratic Union) and SDS (Srpska demokratska stranka, Serbian Democratic Party), in the same populist radical right group.¹³ While SDS lost parliamentary majority in Republika Srpska in 2006, SDA and HDZ are still in power in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. SNSD (Stranka nezavisnih socijaldemokrata, Alliance of Independent Social Democrats), a party that currently enjoys the greatest popular support in Republika Srpska, was quite moderate at first, but has since adopted nationalist and populist traits. The leader of SNSD, and current Serbian member of tripartite Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Milorad Dodik, is usually criticized for his populist discourse, e.g. in the survey of Bosnian populism by Nedžma Džananović and Mía Karamehić. According to these authors, Dodik and Fahrudin Radončić (leader of SBB – Savez za bolju budućnost BiH, Union for a Better Future of BiH) are prime examples of nationalist populism in Bosnia and Herzegovina; however, they are not so critical of the populist politics of HDZ and SDA, and only mention that SDA based their campaign in 2014 on the “personal charisma” of Bakir Izetbegović.¹⁴ Mudde, on the other hand, claims that HDZ was a populist right-wing party from the beginning, and that the Bosnian branch of the party is even more radical than the one in Croatia.¹⁵ Franjo Tuđman, founder of HDZ, attempted to rehabilitate the Ustaše – Croatian fascists who, in the Second World War, committed

¹³ Mudde, Cas, op. cit., 305.

¹⁴ Džananović, Nedžma /Karamehić, Mía, ”Bosnia and Herzegovina: Populism in Transition”, in: Aalberg, Tori / Esser, Frank / Reinemann, Carsten / Strömbäck, Jesper / Vreese, Claeas H. de (eds.), *Populist Political Communication in Europe*, New York, London: Routledge, 2017, 270–271.

¹⁵ Mudde, Cas, op. cit., 54–55.

genocide against Orthodox Serbs in the Independent State of Croatia.¹⁶ This tendency was never abandoned by Croatian nationalists. The SDA has, since 1990, split ways with its secular and liberal members who then founded MBO (Muslimanska bošnjačka organizacija, Muslim Bosniak Organization), while the majority supported the openly religious and nationalist agenda of Alija Izetbegović.¹⁷ It is very important to acknowledge these facts in order to fully comprehend the political situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina: all three peoples, and not just one, lean toward nationalism and religious exclusivity, and all three nationalist ideologies are inclined towards the majority religions of their respective peoples.

Another important trait of Bosnian populism is clientelism. According to Herbert Kitschelt and Steven Wilkinson, clientelism denotes “a transaction, the direct exchange of a citizen’s vote in return for direct payments or continuing access to employment, goods and services”.¹⁸ We might safely assume that it is precisely clientelism, and not merely nationalism, that is the most effective tool of the ruling parties for retaining power. Since clientelism is usually associated with Latin American politics, there were not many non-Bosnian authors who paid enough attention to its manifestations in Bosnia. On the other hand, some objective analyses by local researchers point at the devastating effect of ruling parties’ clientelism on Bosnian society: “By plundering and destroying public goods belonging to the citizens of our country, by

¹⁶ Sofos, Spyros A. “Culture, Politics and Identity in Former Yugoslavia”, in: Jenkins, Brian/ Sofos, Spyros A. (eds.), *Nation & Identity in Contemporary Europe*, London, New York: Routledge, 1996, 250–251.

¹⁷ Sofos, Spyros A., *op. cit.*, 254–255.

¹⁸ Kitschelt, Herbert / Wilkinson, Steven, “Citizen-Politician Linkages: An Introduction” in: Kitschelt, Herbert / Wilinon, Steven (eds.), *Patrons, Clients, and Policies: Patterns of Democratic Accountability and Political Competition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 2. See Mudde, Cas / Kaltwasser, Cristóbal, *op. cit.*, 8.

degrading and undoing the inherited system of social values, they grew into something that can easily be called ‘political cartels’.¹⁹ Ruling parties are usually against all concrete attempts to prevent clientelism and nepotism in Bosnia and Herzegovina,²⁰ which is mostly why up to 40% of highly educated people and 57% of young people under the age of 30 want to leave the country.²¹ These alarming facts are usually pushed aside by causing new tensions among ethnic groups, which is why one might conclude that politicians’ nationalist rhetoric is actually a cover for much bigger problems in Bosnian society.

In the interviews conducted by Savić Bojanić & Repovac Nikšić, one correspondent described Bosnian populism in the following words: “In these societies, societies with unconsolidated democracy, politicians often engage in populist behavior and voters are still not politically mature to recognize the damage caused by their political favorites, be it because of emotional ties due to lack of education, lack of information, or simple ignorance... experienced democratic societies recognize populism and very easily overcome it.”²² The fact is that the people of former Yugoslavia have never had real democracy. Communist political cadres have simply changed their designations from communist to

¹⁹ Bojanić, Maja Savić / Nikšić, Valida Repovac, op.cit., 295.

²⁰ Some recent attempts at passing laws against clientelism in both entities of Bosnia and Herzegovina were either opposed or strongly criticized by ruling parties. BUKA magazine (2021), “‘Traže da se usvoji zakon koji bi zaustavio stranačko zapošljavanje! Vlada stopirala proces’”, <https://www.6yka.com/novosti/traze-da-se-usvoji-zakon-koji-bi-zaustavio-stranacko-zaposljavanje-vlada-stopirala-proces> (accessed 25 June 2021). Bahtanović, Berina (2021), “Šta donosi Nacrt zakona protiv nepotizma i stranačkog zapošljavanja u Sarajevu”, <https://ba.n1info.com/vijesti/sta-donosi-nacrt-zakona-protiv-nepotizma-i-stranackog-zaposljavanja-u-sarajevu/> (accessed 25 June 2021).

²¹ Sarajevo Times (2020), “Alarming Number of People Leaving Bosnia and Herzegovina Every Day”, <https://www.sarajevotimes.com/alarming-number-of-people-leaving-bosnia-and-herzegovina-every-day/> (accessed 25 June 2021).

²² Bojanić, Maja Savić / Nikšić, Valida Repovac, op. cit., 306–307.

democrat, while the overall mentality of both politicians and people have remained unchanged. In communist Yugoslavia, one had to be a member of the Communist Party in order to find decent employment or to progress in a career. In post-communist Bosnia, the situation is still the same: employment mostly depends on belonging to one of the powerful political parties. In that situation, people who are still unfamiliar with the ways of democracy tend to believe in eschatological promises of populist rulers that life will somehow be better if the other is silenced, removed, or converted.

Serbian Orthodox Church and Serbian Nationalism

In the previous section, we showed that Bosnian populism is inseparable from both nationalism and clientelism, and that the prominent religious trait of the former Yugoslav peoples' cultures also gave a religious undertone to the Bosnian conflict. That is why the religions of Bosnia's people are sometimes accused of fuelling, or even causing, the 1992–1995 war. However, a conclusion that is, in our opinion, much closer to the truth is simply that religions were used by political leaders during the war to emphasise separate national identities, similar to how populist politicians use religion today. Janine Natalya Clark rightfully states: "It was a politically motivated conflict fought to gain control of territory."²³ Religion was, and still is, the populists' tool for appealing to the deepest feelings of the people, and then using those feelings not to reconcile but to divide. Savić Bojanić and Repovac Nikšić describe this strategy of Bosnian populists as the "misuse of

²³ Clark, Janine Natalya, "The Cross, the Crescent, and the War in Bosnia: The Legacy of Religious Involvement", in: Ramet, Sabrina (ed.), *Religion and Politics in Post-Socialist Central and Southeastern Europe*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 156.

religion and of the religious sentiments”,²⁴ and most Orthodox believers in Bosnia see the populist flirting with religion precisely in those terms.

The question of the supposed nationalism of the Serbian Orthodox Church is often raised in discussions about Yugoslav wars, including the Bosnian war. The common assumption that the Serbian Orthodox Church is nationalist by its very nature²⁵ might lead to a wrong conclusion that it is natural for the Orthodox to ally themselves with nationalist populists. This assumption, however, contradicts the teachings of the Orthodox Church, e.g. the New Testament teaching on the primacy of Christian universality over nationhood (Galatians 3:28). It also contradicts the Church’s condemnation of ethnophyletism (identification of Church and nationality) as heresy. As for Serbian right-wing populist parties and organisations, the Serbian Orthodox Church has never officially sided with any of them, even though individual priests and even some bishops occasionally expressed sympathies towards them. Some of these Church officials were retired and relieved of their ecclesiastical duties, while the radical factions separated from the Church because of its presumed ecumenist (i.e. non-nationalist) stances, such as artemijevci or starokalendarci. On the other hand, the Serbian Orthodox Church preaches Gospel and insists on the purity of faith, untainted by all worldly ideologies (including nationalism). Rosario Forlenza noted that, for the right-wing populists and nationalists, religion is more about belonging than about believing,²⁶ which is identical to the Orthodox view on the same issue. That is why

²⁴ Bojanić, Maja Savić / Nikšić, Valida Repovac, op. cit., 296.

²⁵ Sabrina Ramet states that Serbian Orthodox Church is “nationalist institution”. Ramet, Sabrina, *Balkan Babel: The Disintegration of Yugoslavia from the Death of Tito to the Fall of Milošević*, Boulder: Westview Press, 2002, 112.

²⁶ Forlenza, Rosario, “‘Abendland in Christian Hands’: Religion and Populism in Contemporary European Politics”, in: Fitzi, Gregor / Mackert, Jürgen/ Turner, Bryan S. (eds.), *Populism and the Crisis of Democracy, Volume 3: Migration, Gender and Religion*, London, New York: Routledge, 2019, 142.

the Serbian Orthodox Church, by its very nature, cannot support nationalism, nativism, and especially not populism.

Nevertheless, there are authors who perceive the Serbian Orthodox Church as extremely nationalist. For Sabrina Ramet, the Serbian Orthodox Church is a “nationalist institution”²⁷ that “views itself as identical with the Serbian nation, since it considers that religion is the foundation of nationality”.²⁸ If one takes this caricature of the Church and of its theology of culture seriously, then one might also conclude that the Church did not merely support nationalist populists but that its preaching and pastoral activity are themselves essentially nationalist and populist. In other words, it turns out that the Church is the main carrier of nationalist populist discourse that politicians merely adopt. Ramet certainly embraces this idea when stating that, “in the case of Yugoslavia, the Serbian Orthodox Church certainly deserves credit for having done much to embitter Serbs against Albanians, and subsequently against Croats”.²⁹ It is curious that the author draws such a conclusion after admitting that great atrocities were committed against Orthodox Serbs and the Serbian Orthodox Church in Second World War.

Evidence for the Church’s apparent nationalism and hatred toward other Yugoslav peoples are, nonetheless, not so convincing. In the collection *Orthodox Churches and Politics in Southeastern Europe* edited by Ramet (with the telling subtitle *Nationalism, Conservatism, and Intolerance*), Jelena Subotić mentions an article from the journal *Glas Crkve*, published in 1991, which apparently states that one cannot be Serbian without being Orthodox.³⁰ Even though Subotić claims that

²⁷ Ramet, Sabrina, op. cit., 112.

²⁸ Ramet, Sabrina, op. cit., 114.

²⁹ Ramet, Sabrina, op. cit., 203.

³⁰ J Subotić, Jelena, “The Church, the Nation, and the State: The Serbian Orthodox Church after Communism”, in: Ramet, Sabrina (ed.), *Orthodox*

Glas Crkve is an official Church's publication, it was actually a journal of Bishopric of Šabac, i.e. not an official publication of the entire Serbian Orthodox Church, and thus not a platform for publishing official Church's stances on important issues. The author of said article criticised the communist repression of national and religious identities, claiming that Serbs need to go back to their "Byzantine and Russian sources of civilization and spirituality".³¹ Subotić also claims that in 1996 the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church "asserted its authority over all Serbs", which she interprets in following words: "The SOC clearly understood its role to extend far beyond the pastoral care of the Orthodox population within Serbia."³² Subotić's understanding that this was somehow invasive or expansive clearly indicates the lack of knowledge of history, canon law and organisation of the Orthodox Church. The actual text of the Synod's declaration reads: "Regardless of the breakup of Versailles Treaty Yugoslavia, i.e. Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, jurisdiction of Serbian Orthodox Church still encompasses all Orthodox believers on that territory."³³ Therefore, it was not the assertion of authority over all Serbs but a confirmation of an already existing jurisdiction over all Orthodox believers in former Yugoslavia.

Churches and Politics in Southeastern Europe: Nationalism, Conservatism, and Intolerance, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 88.

³¹ М. Радвановић, 'О потреби моралне и духовне обнове', *Глас Цркве*, бр. 1–4 (1991), 46. The author was not a cleric and was merely individual expressing opinions that were not rare at the time, e.g. that the Vatican was a mastermind behind the destruction of Serbian national identity. Surely, this was never an official stance of SOC, which means that the opinion of this author should be treated precisely as such – the opinion of an individual.

³² Subotić, Jelena, op. cit., 89.

³³ 'Одлука Светог Архијерејског Синода Српске Православне Цркве' (Син. бр. 1121/зап. 726 од 6. јула 1996), *Гласник, службени лист Српске Православне Цркве*, година LXXVII, бр. 6 (јун 1996), 87.

These arguments that supposedly prove the Church's nationalism and, therefore, its support for populism, are gross misrepresentations of the being and message. None of these authors cite relevant pastoral theologians who are actual theorists of the Church's pastoral activity, e.g. Radovan Bigović and Ljubivoje Stojanović. On the contrary, they somehow deduce that opinions of individual authors and citations from very contextual Church documents somehow definitively prove that the Serbian Orthodox Church is a purely nationalist institution. While it is true that Serbian people do view Orthodoxy as an integral part of its identity, this connection would be better understood if interpreted according to relevant theological studies of Christianity and culture, e.g. Tillich's *Theology of Culture* or Florovsky's *Christianity and Culture*. Without considering the Church's own understanding of its relationship with culture, researchers simply cannot remain objective.

Restitution of Church Property in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina

As a consequence of nationalist populist discourse in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Serbian Orthodox Church experiences true systemic discrimination. This discrimination, however, is not new; its origins can be traced back to periods of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian occupation, but it was during the communist regime that it received full ideological justification. As the late philosopher Zagorka Golubović noticed, the Socialist Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina was a great example of an authoritarian-bureaucratic political system: a level of political culture was very low, freedom of expression was non-existent, and the bureaucratisation had a devastating effect on societal conscience.³⁴ In communist Bosnia, the Serbian Orthodox Church was

³⁴ Golubović, Zagorka, *Kriza identiteta u savremenom jugoslovenskom društvu*, Beograd: Filip Višnjić, 1988, 290.

the only religious institution whose nationalised school buildings were not returned, and it received far smaller financial aid from the Republic's budget than the Catholic Church and Islamic Community.³⁵ Nationalist Marxists of the Muslim (Bosniak) origin have played a very important role in the discrimination against the Orthodox Church in Bosnia. Their goal was to attribute the entire cultural and historical tradition of Bosnia and Herzegovina exclusively to Muslims (Bosniaks), supposed sole descendants of medieval Bosnian Bogomil heretics. Muhamed Filipović, high ranking communist official who later became one of the main ideologues of nationalist SDA, claimed that both Serbian and Croatian culture and literature in Bosnia were actually factors that broke supposed single Bosnian identity into separate national identities.³⁶ Communist authorities were actively propagating theories of "Bosnian spirit" and of Bosniaks as a single autochthonic element and carriers of Bosnia's statehood, thus strengthening animosities and divisions among peoples. At the same time, nationalist Marxists in Sarajevo put great efforts into diminishing the role of Orthodox Serbs in the history of Bosnia and Herzegovina and ignored the fact that the dioceses of Archbishopric of Žiča (later Patriarchate of Peć and now Serbian Orthodox Church) have existed on the territory of Bosnia since 1219.³⁷

³⁵ In 1975, Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina received 2000000 dinars; Catholic Church received 1610000, while SOC received only 800000 dinars. 'Izveštaj Komisije za odnose sa vjerskim zajednicama od 15. januara 1976. godine', *ABiH*, 1975, KVP, Sjednice, izvještaji.

³⁶ Тутњевећ, Станиша, *Размеђа књижевних токова на словенском југу*, Београд: Службени гласник, 2011, 454. For more information, see English translation of Filipović's article, originally published in journal *Život* in 1967: Filipović, Muhamed, "The Bosnian Spirit in Literature – What is it?"; *Spirit of Bosnia 1 (1), 2006*, <http://www.spiritofbosnia.org/volume-1-no-1-2006-january/the-bosnian-spirit-in-literature-what-is-it/> (accessed 27 June 2021).

³⁷ Even some Croatian Catholic theologians in Bosnia adopt similar ideas. Bishop Tomo Vukšić claims that Orthodoxy did not exist on the territory of

One of the best examples of communist discrimination against Serbian Orthodox Church in Bosnia was the confiscation of its property, namely the building of the Orthodox Seminary in downtown Sarajevo. This building was damaged during the Second World War and the Church that suffered great losses did not have enough resources for renovation. According to the contract that was signed with People's Committee of Sarajevo, the building was given to the City for the period of fifteen years without rent, on the condition that People's Committee should renovate the building.³⁸ However, the law on nationalisation was soon implemented and, in January 1960, the Seminary building was nationalised. Authorities formally decided to compensate the Church with 3,258,000 dinars in the following fifty years, which they did not do. The Church's complaints were dismissed because, as the authorities declared, it was not religious but a "business building".³⁹ New Metropolitan of Dabar-Bosnia Vladislav Mitrović contacted the Republic Commission for religious matters in 1970 and pleaded for the return of the confiscated building, since the buildings of Gazi Husrevbeg Madrasa and Vrhbosna Seminary in Sarajevo were, at that time, returned to the Islamic Community and Catholic Church respectively. The president of the Commission declared that "it would not be fitting to associate the opening of Orthodox Seminary in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia before the coming of Ottomans, and probably not before 1557. Vukšić, Tomo, *Mi i oni: Siguran identitet pretpostavka susretanja*, Sarajevo: Vrhbosanska katolička teologija, 2000, 31–32. These ideas are not based on serious historical research, or on archaeological evidence, but on nationalist propaganda of controversial Franciscan author Dominik Mandić whose goal was to represent Bosnia as a traditionally Catholic and Croatian land.

³⁸ 'Уговор између Српске православне црквене општине у Сарајеву и Градског народног одбора у Сарајеву о закупу зграде у улици Васе Мискина бр. 1', 29. мај 1948. године, *Архив Црквене општине у Сарајеву*.

³⁹ 'Rješenje Komisije za nacionalizaciju Narodnog odbora Opštine Stari Grad', br. 182/13, 21. januar 1960. godine.

with the solution for Gazi Husrev-beg Madrasa or with opening of Catholic seminaries, for it might reflect negatively on relations among religions and peoples in Bosnia and Herzegovina".⁴⁰ In May 1977, the Bishops' Council of the Serbian Orthodox Church declared that the Theological Academy should be opened in Sarajevo as a successor to the Sarajevo Seminary (1882–1941), so Metropolitan Vladislav once again contacted the authorities regarding the return of the old Seminary building. In 1977, the Bosnian communist authorities helped the Islamic Community open the Faculty of Islamic Sciences in the building of Gazi Husrev-beg Madrasa, while the Catholic Archdiocese of Vrhbosna reopened the Catholic Theology in a non-nationalised part of its building in downtown Sarajevo in 1969 and was soon allowed to buy a nationalised part of the same building. After the initial decision of the Republic Executive Council that the Serbian Orthodox Church should also get appropriate space in Sarajevo for education purposes, it was finally decided that the return of a part of nationalised Seminary building to the Church was not acceptable for Republic authorities, since the construction of a new building for the Faculty of Economy, which was and still is occupying the Church's building, was not planned at that time.⁴¹ It was not before 1990 that the Executive Council decided that the building of Seminary in Sarajevo should be returned to the SOC in a way similar to the return of nationalised objects to the Catholic Church and Islamic Community.⁴² In January 1992, the Faculty of Economy was willing to return a part of the old Seminary building that included

⁴⁰ 'Informacija Republičke komisije za vjerska pitanja', br. 1, februar 1970. godine, *ABiH*, KVP, 1970, Š-25.

⁴¹ 'Informacija o nekim pitanjima vezanim za rad škola za pripremanje vjerskih službenika u SR BiH', Str. pov. Br. 612-33/78, 23. jun 1978. godine, *ABiH*, KVP, K. 1978 – Informacije, zapisnici.

⁴² В. Јовановић, 'Сарајевска богословија – Кратак преглед догађаја' (Архив Митрополије дабробосанске, 2004), 7.

classrooms, offices and some additional rooms, but this process came to complete halt when the war broke out.

The Orthodox theological institution of higher learning was finally opened on the territory of Bosnia in 1994, albeit not in Sarajevo but in a small town of Foča in eastern Republika Srpska. The efforts to move the Theological Academy of Saint Vasilije Ostroški (now Faculty of Orthodox Theology) to Sarajevo were not successful, and the Serbian Orthodox Church remains the only religious institution in Bosnia that does not have its schools in the state's capital. The late Metropolitan Nikolaj Mrdja had three meetings in September and October of 2001 with representatives of the Faculty of Economy and Municipality of Stari Grad (part of Sarajevo where the Seminary building is located), and also with representatives of the OHR (Office of the High Representative) Anvar Azimov and Morris Power. The city's representatives claimed that the Municipality owns neither the building of Faculty of Economy, nor the business premises on the ground floor, while representatives of the Faculty denied possession of the business premises in question. When asked to show documentation that would clarify the issue of right of disposition, both representatives of Municipality and Faculty refused, claiming that the Metropolitanate of Dabar-Bosnia does not have legal rights to ask for such documents. It was only when the Metropolitanate brought in its lawyer that necessary documents were provided, and they revealed that in February of 1992 the Municipality of Stari Grad became the holder of the right of disposition for the building of the Faculty of Economy. However, a contract was signed on 25 March 1998 between the Municipality and Faculty of Economy, according to which the Faculty became the holder of the right of disposition, under the condition that the premises can only be used for education purposes. Despite this condition, the ground floor was rented to a third person who used it for private business. The Metropolitanate of Dabar-Bosnia requested that the transfer of the right

of disposal be annulled and that the Metropolitanate be informed when, by what decision, and to whom the approval for private business was given. This question has not been answered.⁴³

In June of 2013, the Faculty of Economy decided to return one part of the old Seminary building to SOC, i.e. to the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, so that planned Institute for the Study of Interreligious Dialogue might be placed there. Even the U.S. Ambassador Patrick Moon was advocating for the return of the Church's property.⁴⁴ It is very important to emphasise that even this process, initiated through the American Embassy, was absolutely inexplicable from the point of view of property rights. It was agreed that a hundred square meters on the ground floor of the building should be returned, but only for the needs of the planned Institute, the establishment of which was signed by the deans of the theological faculties – Faculty of Islamic Sciences, Faculty of Catholic Theology from Sarajevo and Faculty of Orthodox Theology from Foča. As expected, after Patrick Moon left Bosnia, the decision of Faculty of Economy was not implemented. Following contacts between the administrations of Faculty of Economy and Faculty of Orthodox Theology regarding the return of at least one part of the Seminary building were futile.

Discrimination against the Serbian Orthodox Church in Bosnia and Herzegovina, or at least in one of its entities, is as real today as it was during the communist regime. All former Yugoslav republics have passed the laws on restitution of nationalised property except for Bosnia and Herzegovina, even though the implementation of that law is one of the conditions for joining the European Union. The law on the freedom of religion and the legal position of churches and religious communities,

⁴³ Јовановић, 'Сарајевска богословија', 9-11.

⁴⁴ Telegraph (2013), "Istorijski: SPC vraćen deo imovine u Sarajevu", <https://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/778756-istorijski-spc-vracen-deo-imovine-u-sarajevu> (accessed 28 June 2021).

passed in 2004, implies the restitution of religious institutions' property in the whole of Bosnia and Herzegovina, without discrimination. However, the property of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, including the Seminary building, residential and business buildings (more than ten buildings in downtown Sarajevo) is still unreturned. In Sarajevo, the Council of Ministers building, Parliamentary Assembly building, Zetra Olympic Hall, Koševo City Stadium, as well as many private and commercial buildings, were built on land that belongs to the Serbian Orthodox Church. Only a couple of business premises that were nationalised were given to the Church for use but under the condition of payment of rent to the Municipality of Stari Grad. This situation is a clear violation of Article 10 of the fundamental agreement between Bosnia and Herzegovina and the SOC from 2008. While state and local authorities continually refuse or obstruct the return of property to the Serbian Orthodox Church, with the case of Seminary building as the obvious example of violation of rights, the Islamic Community and Catholic Church in Sarajevo have a normal process of education in their returned buildings. These facts indicate that the Serbian Orthodox Church in Bosnia and Herzegovina experiences true religious discrimination.

Conclusion

Decades long discrimination against SOC in Sarajevo and other parts of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, illustrated by just one example of intentionally obstructed restitution of Church property, indicates the existence of a particularly malignant nationalism that is usually overlooked or toned down in most studies on the Bosnian political situation. Based on the idea that Bosniaks are the only autochthonic people in Bosnia, this nationalism naturally tends to negate not only the importance but also the very existence of Serbs and Orthodox Christians in Bosnia until very recent times. Thus, Serbian and

Orthodox elements are understood as something foreign and invasive, which is why the Bosnian War is usually termed “Serbian aggression” and not “civil war” in the public discourse of Sarajevo-based nationalist populists. While the negation of the historical presence of Orthodox Serbs in Bosnia is by itself very offensive, the frequent dehumanisation of Serbian victims in the Bosnian War⁴⁵ brings the very future of Bosnian society into question. There also lies a reason for preventing the Serbian Orthodox Church to return its most important school in Bosnia to Sarajevo, for such an event would mean that Bosnian society admits equal status to the Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church, and the Islamic Community. In reality, the rights of the Serbian Orthodox Church are constantly violated and it is clearly not considered equal to the other two religious communities, a conclusion based on both the theory and practice of Bosniak nationalist ideology. The role of enemy and invader, imposed upon Serbs and the Serbian Orthodox Church, fits perfectly into a greater picture painted by populist politicians from Sarajevo.

One recent example proves this point, namely the demolition of the Serbian church in Konjević Polje, Republika Srpska, which was partially built on the land of a Bosniak woman named Fata Orlović. This event was celebrated as a victory of justice, since the church was nicknamed

⁴⁵ When Janine Natalya Clark was conducting interviews with clerics of Bosnia’s religious communities, several Muslim imams stated that Serbian victims cannot be considered equal to Bosniak victims. Clark, Natalya, *op. cit.*, 167. This kind of attitude, which became a necessary part of Bosniak nationalism and the right-wing ideology of SDA, is usually followed by attempts to reduce the number of murdered Serbian civilians. Bakir Izetbegović has recently stated that the number of killed Serbs during the entire war is far less than the number of Bosniaks killed in Srebrenica in only one day. N1 (2020), “Izetbegović: Tokom rata u BiH nije bilo masovnih zločina nad Srbima”, <https://rs.n1info.com/region/a563224-izetbegovic-tokom-rata-u-bih-nije-bilo-masovnih-zlocina-nad-srbima/> (accessed 28 June 2021).

“the church of injustice”,⁴⁶ and the lawyer of Fata Orlović optimistically concluded that now “there is a possibility for citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina to truly believe in the legal protection that the state should guarantee”.⁴⁷ Of course, one can easily see the irony of this statement when considering the injustice that the Serbian Orthodox Church suffers in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In addition to the controversy over the Seminary building, there are almost regular desecrations of churches in Sarajevo and surrounding areas that are rarely processed as hate crimes, as well as many cases of Muslim mosques built on the lands of Serbian families, e.g. in Zdena near Sanski Most, in the village Križeviči near Olovo, in the village of Noćajevci near Kladanj, in Rakovica near Sarajevo, as well as in Alipašino Polje in Sarajevo, where two mosques and one Catholic cathedral were built on the land that belonged to Serbian family Mladen.⁴⁸ One can only hope that the words of Fata Orlović’s lawyer will come true and that Bosnia and Herzegovina will provide legal protection and equal rights to all its citizens and religions, without discrimination.

⁴⁶ Sekulić, Marinko (2021), “Konačno srušena crkva nepravde”, <https://www.dw.com/hr/kona%C4%8Dno-sru%C5%A1ena-crkva-nepravde/a-57791523> (accessed 28 June 2021).

⁴⁷ Al Jazeera (2021) “Video: Srušena crkva u dvorištu Fate Orlović”, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2021/6/5/pocelo-uklanjanje-crkve-iz-dvorista-fate-orlovic>(accessed 28 June 2021).

⁴⁸ Момић, Дарко (2021), “Цамије на српској земљи нико неће да руши”, <https://www.glassrpske.com/cir/plus/teme/dzamije-na-srpskoj-zemlji-niko-nece-da-rusi/365081>(accessed 28 June 2021).