

Helsinki *bulletin*



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SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH ON THE BRINK OF SCHISM



The Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) is a bastion of Serbian nationalism. Its ideology is drawn from the radical right and it is very close to groups at the rightist end of the political spectrum. With this ideology, the Church played a very important role in mobilisation and the prelude to war and, to this day, has made no attempt to distance itself from this role. Part of

the Church continues to promote Serbian national interests in exactly the same way. The head of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Irinej, does not yet see the River Drina as a border but rather a bridge which “brings together” the Serbian nation: “Although, in some way, we are together now, God willing we shall be truly one in the near future. And of course

I also mean that in the formal sense of those words¹.”

This legacy brings with it the extreme-right mass organisations popular with the young, such as *Obraz* and *1389*. These groups exploit this essentially anti-modern and anti-European orientation constantly to recruit new members and operate virtually under the ideological umbrella of the para-Church organisation *Dveri*.

Since 2000, the Church has occupied the media limelight and thus become an important factor in all relevant public developments in Serbia. This sits comfortably with its traditional ambition to be the “state” religion. At the same time, given the Church’s standing in the society, it has been very important for political leaders to have the SPC as a reliable partner and ally at important and crucial moments. This is of particular significance at a time when the authorities are steering a change of course towards Euro-Atlantic integration, a policy which has traditionally come under fire from the conservative bloc.

It is in this context that the current turmoil in the SPC, which has brought it to the brink of open schism, should be seen. At the beginning of 2010, Patriarch Irinej was elected to succeed the Church’s wartime leader, Patriarch Pavle. In many ways Irinej represents a continuity in the Church’s operations, both spiritual and secular. From the time of his election, however, church commentators saw in him the potential (“sensible”, “wise”, “a man of compromise”) to contribute to gradual but positive progress².

As a conservative church which draws heavily on the Russian Orthodox Church, the SPC’s

1 Interview with Banjaluka daily *Fokus*, carried by *Danas*, November 17, 2010

2 Bulletin 55 of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, January 2010

foundations rest on nationalism. However the past year has seen some encouraging new trends in the Church’s leadership. Almost from the day of his election, the Patriarch himself has advocated an easing of the tough stance on the Catholic Church and the Vatican. He is backing a visit by the Pope to Serbia in 2013, ostensibly to commemorate the 1007th anniversary of the Edict of Milan in Niš, birthplace of the Emperor Constantine.

There is no doubt that the greatest challenge for the SPC at the moment is the state’s shift in policy on Euro-Atlantic integration. A breakthrough was made in this direction with the application for EU membership and the state’s joint resolution with the EU on Kosovo in the United Nations, leading to a softening of attitude on the choice being put before Serbia: Kosovo or Europe.

The ruling coalition enjoys discreet support from the Church leadership, drawing heavy fire from the conservative and pro-Russia bloc. The conflict within the SPC over this is most apparent in the case of Bishop Artemije, who has been making waves within the Church for more than a year. This came to a head during the November Synod when this former head of the Raška-Prizren Diocese and his followers attempted to seize monasteries in northern Kosovo by force.

THE CASE OF BISHOP ARTEMIJE

The long-serving Bishop Artemije of Raška-Prizren first clashed with the church leadership several years ago. Following the riots of 2004, the international community (UNMIK and the European Union) undertook to make good the damage which had been wreaked on many churches and monasteries. Bishop Artemije, however, declined to sign the formal agreement with the Kosovo institutions which were



to implement the works. This triggered the first disagreements and misunderstandings within the church, both in and out of Kosovo. The long, simmering conflict, stoked by numerous incidents among church dignitaries in Kosovo, escalated at the beginning of 2010. Patriarch Irinej, as soon as he took office, set about resolving this thorny issue.

The unravelling of the conflict began with an investigation into the situation in the Raška-Prizren diocese. A Church financial commission uncovered a series of cases of property and financial embezzlement which led to charges being laid against two of Bishop Artemije's closest associates.

First the bishop himself was suspended from his function as head of the Raška-Prizren diocese. A few months later the Church Synod pensioned him off, directing him to retire to the Šišatovac Monastery in Srem. Several

months after that, the patriarch also barred him from celebrating the liturgy.

Bishop Artemije's isolation triggered the revolt of a small number of loyal monks who left Kosovo with him in protest. This was followed by demonstrations and a number of incidents carrying a message of open disagreement with the decisions of Church bodies.

All attempts by the Church authorities and Patriarch Irinej personally to calm the passions surrounding the case proved futile. An incident during the November Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church made it clear that the SPC leaders must take decisive action to define the essence of the conflicts in its ranks: Artemije stormed into the Duboki Potok Monastery near Zubin Potok in Kosovo. His supporters in this illegal entry included Milan Ivanović, one of the most radical Serbian political leaders from northern Kosovska Mitrovica.

The unsuccessful attempt to occupy monasteries in northern Kosovo³, the intervention of the Kosovo Police Service (Serbian officers only) and the decisive response from the SPC Synod led to Serbian political leaders in northern Kosovo distancing themselves from him. However it is still unclear whether or not the thwarting of this attempted coup has permanently calmed the passions and disputes within the Church.

BISHOP AS POLITICIAN

The case of Bishop Artemije is not, as Patriarch Irinej has pointed out, just an “embarrassment for the Church⁴”. His rebellion against the Church hierarchy and the patriarch enjoyed unreserved support from the conservative political bloc, now epitomized by the circle around Vojislav Koštunica.

An open letter to the Synod from a group of public figures defending Bishop Artemije was based on the argument that, after the crushing of all institutions, “the Church has also come under attack from anti-Serb international policy⁵”. As well as Kosovo Serb leaders Milan Ivanović and Marko Jakšić, the signatories also included Kosta Čavoški, Kosta Dimitrijević, Zoran Avramović and Branko Radun.

*Pečat*⁶ editor Milorad Vučelić accuses the SPC of failing to take a stand “on major and important national and social issues”. The Church, he says “is obediently following the authorities on their path of no alternative”. Vučelić also claims

that “not within living memory has there been such unity of regime and Church⁷”.

The destructiveness of Bishop Artemije’s behaviour was best seen in his policy on Kosovo, which undermined Belgrade’s position in Brussels. Patriarch Irinej observed that Artemije “sees the plight of Kosovo as a personal problem which he must solve in whichever way he deems most appropriate⁸”.

It was certainly not appropriate for him to advocate the idea of inviting Russia to establish a military presence in Serbia, nor to appeal for the closing of the administrative border with Kosovo. Daily *Blic* published a portrait of Bishop Artemije as stubborn and spiteful, a man who “not infrequently involves himself in politics”. Artemije was in favour of Serbia “refusing to sign any kind of pact or agreement with the European Union or any country which is prepared to jeopardise the sovereignty of Serbia¹⁰”. He ascribes his removal from the diocese of Raška-Prizren to “a directive from the Pentagon ... in the interests of an independent Kosovo¹¹”.

RUSSIAN CONNECTION

Despite his retirement, Bishop Artemije was invited, at the beginning of October, to address an international conference in Russia on genocide against Serbs. However Patriarch Irinej forbade the bishop to attend¹².

Russian daily *Kommersant* described the decision of the Holy Synod of Bishops as “a major political scandal”. Noting that the bishop and his associates are suspected of stealing millions

3 As well as Duboki Potok, Artemije’s supporters attempted to use force to take over another two monasteries

4 Interview, *Tanjug*, September 29, 2010

5 *Pečat*, no. 140, November 12, 2010

6 This weekly is the leading voice of this faction, not only in the Church but also in the political arena.

7 Ibid.

8 *Tanjug*, September 29, 2010

9 *Blic*, February 20, 2010

10 *Radio Free Europe*, February 11, 2010

11 Ibid.

12 *Vesti online*, October 3, 2010

of euros under the slogan “for a Serbian Kosovo”, the Russian daily claims that the Artemije scandal could have important political consequences for Serbia. It also pointed out that “his exposure delivers a blow to one of the most radical Serbian bishops and his allies among Serbian nationalists”. This, writes the daily, could mean “preparing the public for a softening of Belgrade’s position on Kosovo¹³”.

There are some indications that the “Russian factor” was also involved in the violent occupation of monasteries in northern Kosovo. This is supported by the statement of a prominent Serb representative in Kosovo, Radmila Trajković, who claimed to have information that there were representatives of “other Orthodox churches” among Bishop Artemije’s “companions”¹⁴.

The Russian ambassador to Belgrade, Aleksandr Konuzin, also displayed particular interest in this entire case. Before the “occupation” of the monasteries in northern Kosovo, he visited Bishop Artemije at the Šišatovac Monastery and, two days after Artemije was defrocked, received him in Belgrade, citing his interest in “recent events in the Raška-Prizren diocese¹⁵”.

ATTACK ON PATRIARCH IRINEJ’S ECUMENISM

Ecumenism has been a problem within the SPC for decades. Because of this the ecumenism espoused by Patriarch Irinej is a thorn in the side of conservative circles both within the Church and outside it. The attitude of the SPC to the Catholic Church and the Vatican is one of its most rigid and is the reason no pope has ever visited Serbia. The argument most often used by the SPC is the alleged role of the

Catholic Church in the second world war, that it distanced itself from the genocide in Jasenovac. This is also connected to the alleged responsibility of the archbishop of Zagreb, Alojzije Stepinac.

Pečat claims that a papal visit would introduce new and unnecessary divisions among Serbs and the SPC faithful¹⁶.

The hard line on the Catholic Church and the Vatican is also traditionally maintained by the Russian Orthodox Church (Russia has never had a papal visit), which is essentially working to prevent the Pope visiting Serbia. Russian theologian Vladimir Vasilik maintains that the Orthodox churches and the Catholic Church have no values in common¹⁷. He “reminds” the SPC and its patriarch that ecumenism is not part of their spiritual legacy. Neither ecumenism nor pacifism, he underlines, are found in the legacy of St Sava. St Sava did everything in his power to protect the SPC from Catholicism and served the Serbian nation and state for whom pacifism was tantamount to suicide¹⁸.

CONSERVATIVE OFFENSIVE

Right-wing organisations in Serbia, including their extreme, pro-Fascist champions, base their policies and activities on “serbdom”, “orthodoxy” and the cult of St Sava. This demonstrates just how close they are to influential circles of senior SPC clerics who share the same “value system”.

This implies agreement on a broad range of social issues: the defence of Serbian national interests, the Pride Parade, intolerance, xenophobia and anti-Europeanism. It should not be forgotten that, in 2009, the Serbian Orthodox

13 *Kommersant*, quoted by *Beta*, February 16, 2010

14 *RTVB92* News broadcast, November 22, 2010

15 *Danas*, November 23, 2010

16 *Pečat*, no. 140, November 12, 2010

17 *Pečat*, no. 141, November 19, 2010

18 *Ibid.*

Church attempted to block adoption of the Discrimination Act in the Parliament of the Republic of Serbia. The dramatic effects of this combination of Church “ideology” and right-wing “action” were demonstrated most convincingly in the streets of Belgrade on October 10, 2010, in the clashes between police and demonstrators opposing the Pride Parade.

This connection, which in some cases is also formal (the Dveri Srbske organization) was exposed in Brankica Stanković’s RTV B92 documentary series *Insider*, broadcast in two parts on November 15 and November 22, 2010. A campaign was launched in conservative circles, in the tabloids, in the blogs of right-wing organisations and, leading the print media attack, *Pečat*, accusing RTV B92 of being a “media

traitor” and of carrying “anti-Serb hysteria”. The key figures supposedly targeted by this “hysteria” are Vojislav Koštunica and Amfilohije Radović, in other words the Democratic Party of Serbia and the Serbian Orthodox Church. *Pečat* underlined that both of these, “thanks to such brazen attacks, now represent the last line of defence of Serbdom¹⁹”.

Although known for his hard-line conservative and anti-European attitudes, Bishop Amfilohije Radović did not take the side of Bishop Artemije in this most delicate moment for the Church. From all the evidence it appears that Bishop Amfilohije aligned himself with the Church leadership, saying that “the oath of a bishop and the nature of a bishop’s duties require respect for and obedience to the Synod²⁰”.

19 Ibid.

20 *Danas*, November 23, 2010

CONCLUSION

As in all other institutions, the pro-reform and anti-reform lines are being drawn up within the SPC. This process leaves the entire political spectrum fragile and lacking the agility to respond to the real challenges of reform and transition.

Without strong support from the West the forces for reform would be exposed to much more serious attack and it is doubtful whether they would manage to hold out. The anti-West forces rely on local rightist groups as well as on the Russian right wing, including the Russian Orthodox Church. The churches in both countries share a common position on ecumenism and relations with the Vatican.

The Serbian Orthodox Church, however, has always supported communication with the Vatican and enjoyed its assistance. There is a faction in the SPC, and Amfilohije Radović is part of it, whose doors have always been open to the Vatican.

The state has played an active role in preventing a schism within the Church, at least for the time being. In this sense, Patriarch Irinej showed resolve when the unity of the Church was called into question, as he has on the issues of ecumenism and the Pope’s proposed visit to Serbia in 2013. By his response to the recent Kosovo-related incidents in the Church, Patriarch Irinej has proved his support for the state leadership in the shift of policy on the EU.